**James Herman Banning,** Oklahoma African American aviation hero, was born on an Oklahoma homestead in 1899. Despite prejudice and lack of resources, he decided that one day he was going to fly an airplane. What he didn't know was that the only way he was going to be able to fly enough hours to earn a pilot’s license would be to **build his own plane**. Banning grew up, moved to Iowa, and applied to flight schools. No flight schools would take him. He found a pilot, a Lt. Fisher, who agreed to teach Banning to fly as long as their lessons were ‘on the sly.’ Lt. Fisher died in a plane crash just as Banning was ready to solo. Though Banning, who witnessed the fatal accident, was dejected, his determination to fly never declined. Banning refused to be stopped. He bought the engine from Fisher’s crashed plane and accumulated plane and auto scraps to build his first airplane. Flying his rickety homemade craft, he earned his solo flight hours and became the first African American to receive a pilot's license from the United States Department of Commerce. He had no intention of stopping there.

**The Historic Flight:**  Banning believed strongly that freedom in the sky would help create freedom on the ground. He heard about a $1,000 prize for the first African American to successfully fly coast-to-coast. He came up with an audacious plan to become the first African American to fly across the country. But it was the Great Depression and he had no money, no backers and owned a dilapidated Eaglerock biplane with a 14-year-old engine. When Banning went looking for supporters, he found a gifted mechanic named Thomas Cox Allen, who he persuaded to buy into the adventure for $200. Allen came up with the ingenious idea to fund their flight by soliciting small donations from people in each town they landed in, whether a warm meal, a place to sleep, or money for gas for the next leg of their journey. The donors would then inscribe their names on what Banning and Allen called “The Gold Book” — the wing of their biplane. In this way, each contributor would share in a piece of history. Twenty-four communities participated and sixty-five individuals inscribed their names on The Gold Book, as Banning and Allen made their way across America. The dreams of many flew with them.

Their adventures were numerous. Because they were black and had no money, Banning and Allen not only had to fly the “crate;” they had to service it as well. This added to the adventure greatly. At times, they had to replace or rebuild parts that had been destroyed during several “crack-ups” (forced landings), or had malfunctioned while they were still in the air. In one town, they crashed into a farm and the whole town worked to find the right car parts to send them on their way. In another city, Allen had to sell his suit for gas money. One night they slept in a haystack and came close to freezing to death. The following morning, a half-frozen Allen had to stand in front of the plane and guide Banning between a brush pile and a haystack for takeoff. Another time, in Pittsburgh, the Democratic Party paid for the last leg of their journey in exchange for Banning and Allen tossing 15,000 ‘Vote Roosevelt’ flyers out of the cockpit as they flew over farms and small towns on their way to New York. After an exhausting, adventure-filled twenty-one days of flight, Banning triumphantly circled the Statue of Liberty and put down at Valley Stream Airport, in the suburbs of New York City. On October 9, 1932 James Herman Banning became the first African American to fly coast-to-coast across the United States! Yet Banning’s triumph was not met by fanfare, or newspapermen.

Unfazed, Banning began the return flight to Los Angeles. The miles finally took their toll on the old biplane. Banning crash-landed in Pennsylvania. This time there would be no patching it together on the cheap. Leaving the plane behind, Banning, along with Allen, returned West in the back of a bus, where, unlike in the sky, segregation was still a way of life.

**Death:** Banning died in a plane crash at an Air Show (he was a passenger in the airplane) while trying to raise money by barnstorming to repair and recover his Eaglerock biplane. Later some of Banning’s friends tried to rescue his plane, they found it had been sold for scrap. The Gold Book, the physical record of the journey and all the donors, was destroyed. Banning’s story faded into obscurity.