**Stories From the Skies**

No matter where you travel in South Dakota…no matter how you travel, you can’t help noticing the sky. On the **treeless** prairies, the sky looks immense. That’s why South Dakota artists have painted it big and colorful. The sky serves as a backdrop for our most inspiring buildings and monuments.

A holy man of the Oglala people, **Black Elk**, described meeting spirits from the sky. “…and these two men were coming from the clouds, head-first like arrows…each now carried a long spear, and from the points of these a jagged lightning flashed.”

In a similar way, South Dakota skies inspired the state’s earliest **authors**. Some said the sky here was so big and overpowering that it made people feel small and lonely. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the curve of a prairie sky is like the inside of a bowl.

And sometimes, in South Dakota, there’s good reason to run from the sky. Right up the middle of the United States is an area known as **Tornado Alley**, where tornadoes can happen most any time during summer months. South Dakota sits on the north end of Tornado Alley, and within our state, the Aberdeen area has seen the most storms of this type. Also called cyclones, or twisters, tornadoes usually develop along with thunderstorms.

But in every case, those places have bounced back. People decided to rebuild, always helped by **volunteers** from neighboring towns.

The 1930s were the state’s toughest years, and it seemed like all the problems started in the sky. First, no rain came. Farmlands dried up and turned to **dust**. Wind whipped all that dust into great, black clouds in the skies. Dust fell back to earth like snow, burying fences and roads. The sky filled with clouds of hungry **grasshoppers**.

In the year 1919 he traded two used cars for a small **airplane**. He made a name for himself at air shows across the country with stunts like walking on his plane’s wings as it flew, leaping from one plane to another in flight, or hanging from a rope ladder.

Clyde Ice started an early airline company that moved people and mail, and he often flew emergency flights in terrible weather, rescuing people stranded by blizzards, or dropping food to them. Despite taking risks few other pilots would consider, Ice never injured himself or a passenger in 62 years of flying. He lived to be 103 years old.

In 1935, two explorers won worldwide attention for a scientific flight aboard **Exploer II**, an Army Air Corps balloon. The balloon was launched from here, the Stratobowl, a huge natural hole in the ground near Rapid City. The Stratobowl shielded the balloon from winds as it was prepared for lift-off.

Six years later, the United States entered the **Second World War** and South Dakotans went into military service at a rate unequaled by any other state. Some fought the war in the sky. Special airfields for war planes and their pilots were built near Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Pierre, Mitchell and Watertown.

Flying planes during World War Two wasn’t just men’s work. Women were flight **instructors** at Black Hills Airport, outside Spearfish, and they prepared flyers for war missions. South Dakotan Violet Cowden flew new planes from factories to wherever they were needed for the war. She could fly 19 different types of planes.

In the early 1960s, the United States manned space program took off—picking up where Anderson and Stevens of Explorer II left things 25 years earlier. Only now it wasn’t balloons headed toward space.

Charles Gemar became the first South Dakotan in space on November 15, 1990. He was one of five **astronauts** aboard the Space Shuttle Atlantis that day, and he and his crew stayed in space for five days, circling the Earth 80 times. Gemar returned to space on other Shuttle missions, in 1991 and 1994.

But South Dakota skies don’t always bring danger and destruction. They are home to our national bird, the eagle. Have you ever wondered what our state looks like, from a bald eagle’s point of view? In stormy times or calm times, South Dakota skies can be as exciting as its people.