

Esther Combes Vance 1903-1983

by H. Glenn Buffington



THE INTERESTING FILE REGARDING Esther Combes Vance, which was acquired through interviews and correspondence, should be shared with the membership.

Esther was born August 19, 1903, at Clinton, Indiana. Her parents were William (Billy) and Dicy Combes, and she had a sister, Geneva, who was one year and five months older. The family moved and spent the winter of 1904-1905 at Denver, Colorado, where Billy worked at his trade as contractor and builder. They finally settled in Sidney, Montana, in the spring of 1906 and homesteaded two and a half miles W-SW of the town. Horse and buggy days were nearly a part of the past for Billy Combes, and he was sales agent for, and had progressed to, driving the latest model of touring cars.

In 1915, he became interested in flying when Otto Kimm of Kenmare, North Dakota, appeared with his airplane at the first Sidney Street Fair, and his aviation interest was handed down to his daughter, Esther, who had her first plane ride July 13, 1920, in an OX-5 Jenny, with pilot Jack Hesser.

A 1933 picture of Esther Vance and the KR-21 Fairchild NC206V at Pocatello, Idaho.
(Vance Album)

After high school graduation in Sidney, Esther attended the Washington University in Seattle and received her Bachelor of Science degree, with a physical education major, June 15, 1925. She then returned to eastern Montana and became reacquainted with Earl Talmadge Vance (License No. 1384), widely known as "Vance." He was Montana's best-known barnstormer and had flown in WWI. (Vance was born January 13, 1896, in Washington, Indiana.)

Esther and Vance were married August 28, 1925, and as one of the pioneering U.S. flying couples, they honeymooned and winged their way southeast, flying at fairs and carrying passengers at various points between Montana and Florida, in a Hispano Suiza-powered Standard. "We spent the winter of 1925-1926 in the Orlando, Florida area, and it was there that I took my first flying lessons. Acquiring an OX-5 Waco 9, we made arrangements for Frank Wiley to fly the Standard, and returned to Montana, locating at Great Falls. We established an

airport north of the city and engaged in barnstorming, passenger flights, and instruction. Vance also flew on Montana's first airmail route, which was between Great Falls and Salt Lake City, and later held government contracts for aerial surveys and mapping."

Esther became the business manager and treasurer of the Vance Air Service, and they had the Waco and Stinson agencies for the area. On one occasion, the Vances went to Detroit, Michigan, for the purpose of taking delivery on a Stinson *Detroiter*, and they were overnight guests of Eddie Stinson and his wife. "They had a beautiful home in the suburbs of the city, and I remember she had furnished each of the rooms in a style suitable to the countries they had visited. We were given lodgings in the Spanish room and, in addition to other features, the bed covering was an exquisite Spanish shawl."

Esther's first solo flight was at Great Falls, March 3, 1928, in an OX-5 Waco 10 (C1103, registry number). She acquired Private License No. 3180 June 17, 1928, and upgraded to a Limited Commercial License June 3, 1929. Regarding the Waco in which she first soloed, she reported, "A very fine little plane to fly, maroon color with silver wings. We called it the red Waco to distinguish it from the others of the same make."

She also wrote, "It really was interesting receiving the information on your first plane flight. Those were days when I kept my eyes on the skies and the sound of an airplane engine was music in my ears. Also, rather reminded me that my first pay passengers were two young boys, apparently bent on adventure, coming to the airport for their first ride and stating that they would go up with no one but 'that woman flyer.' My suspicions are that they looked upon flying as rather a risky venture in the first place, and having a woman pilot would only add to—well, you know what I mean—and they appeared to be fully satisfied with their trip aloft."

When the USA women pilots held their organizational meeting November 2, 1929, at Curtiss Field, Valley Stream, Long Island—finally named The Ninety-Nines in salute to the 99 charter members—there were only four charterites in the Northwest Section:

Esther Combes Vance, Great Falls, Montana (License No. 3180)

Edith Foltz, Portland, Oregon, (License No. 5600)

Florence Klingensmith, Fargo, North Dakota (License No. 7096)

Nellie Zabel Willhite, Sioux Falls, South Dakota (License No. 8242)

The Vance Air Service facilities were destroyed by fire in 1931, and Vance went to work as a pilot for the National Parks Airways. The NPA terminal at Great Falls was Gore Field, located south of the city. At times when Vance flew for NPA, he would start pilots off on their duties at Vance Airport, then Esther would ferry him over to Gore Field to make the run to Salt Lake City. There were subsequent moves in the Pacific Northwest and when the airmail contracts were canceled in 1932, the Vances bought a Pitcairn autogiro and barn-

stormed the west with it.

Vance instructed in the CPT program for Bob Johnson at Missoula prior to WWII and then was called back to active military duty, so Esther followed along as the base commander's wife at Walla Walla, Washington, Topeka, Kansas, and Alexandria, Louisiana. Another move took them to Colorado Springs, Headquarters 2nd Air Force, where Col. Earl Vance directed search and rescue in the Rocky Mountains area. It was here Vance met an untimely death with a heart attack in 1944; then Esther returned to Missoula, where she was employed in the registrar's office at the University of Montana.

In some of her spare time, Esther became a genealogist, tracing the family trees of both the Combes and Vance families. In 1974, she reported: "My research has developed into quite an extensive project, what with going out on various branches of the family tree. All the old skeletons have been removed from the

The Varices' Pitcairn autogiro, 1932, at North Montana State Fairgrounds. **Earl T. Vance**, pilot, and passenger, **Harold DePue**, Fair Manager. (Vance Album)



Esther M. and Earl T. Vance, by the National Parks Airways' Fokker Universal, suited up for winter operation in the Big Sky country. (Airwomen)





Esther Combes, University of Washington student. (Author's Collection)

closets only to make way for the new. Like the majority of old time ancestors ours were mainly farmers, a few school-teachers, a few veterans of wars, and the relatives point out a lawyer among them indicating, 'Now there was someone really to be proud of.' " She also displayed a good sense of humor when she signed one note, 'Esther, Kiwi No. 3180.'"

This gracious lady joined the eagles and soared to new horizons May 28, 1983.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. Glenn Buffington, AAHS Life Member No. 26, has written numerous *Journal* articles and for other publications. He has been associated with the Aero Industry for over 50 years. Since retirement in 1980, he has lived in Seattle, Memphis, San Diego, and currently resides at 2166 Southfield Road, El Dorado, Arkansas 71730-9202.

This picture was taken May 22, 1993, at Avenger Field, Sweetwater, Texas, site of the WASP's 50th anniversary reunion.



Addendum: From Esther's 1925-1926 Journal

Vance's Hispano-Suiza Standard airplane and Chrysler Coupe car below the rimrocks at Billings.

In the fall of 1925, in need of developing some semblance of a financial status, Vance with plane and Esther with car spent some weeks barnstorming the Billings, Lewistown and Scooby areas. Success depended somewhat upon good crops and prosperity of the countryside. Results of the trip that autumn were all that could be desired, and with the bountiful harvest there also came to mind the idea of an extended winter journey to the warmer climes of the south.

Earl and Esther Vance arrived Orlando, Florida, January 19, 1926, flying new OX-5 Waco 9.

Earl and Esther in the Standard, and Cecil Shupe, mechanic, of Stanley, North Dakota, driving the car, started south in the late fall of 1925, making stops at various places along the way to carry passengers, and were at Americus, Georgia, January 6, 1926.

On a morning when Vance was having some difficulty in getting the Hispano-Suiza engine started, Douglas Davis, sales agent for the Weaver Aircraft Company (Waco) of Troy, Ohio, and his wife Glenna Mae, came in with an OX-5 Waco 9, a plane of the very finest and most modern design.

Appealing as was his salesmanship and however alluring the prospect of owning an aircraft of that type appeared, Vance assured him that the reason for not making immediate purchase of such was solely an insufficiency of funds. Whereupon Doug informed Vance that there was a plane on the factory floor at Troy that he, Doug, was to take delivery on and that he would appreciate it if Vance would fly it down for him. Departing by train, Vance returned to Americus January 18 with the new Waco 9.



In the meantime, Doug and wife had flown to Florida, with no particular itinerary in mind, to do some advertising for the Curtiss Candy Company. This consisted of dropping Baby Ruth candy bars by small paper parachutes over various towns and communities. Not having heard from them, Earl and Esther continued on to

Orlando with the Waco 9, there meeting Cecil Shupe who had gone ahead with the car, and proceeded to establish a passenger-carrying business, also doing aerial photography with Dean Turner as cameraman, and were well able to purchase the plane by the time Doug and Glenna Mae flew in from Tampa several weeks later.