

Cecil Hess AND HIS AIRPLANE

Miss Fortune's previous owner was a colorful character

As originally published in the May/June 2002 issue of *Waco World News*,
the official publication of the American Waco Club.

BOB HOWIE

Cecil Hess was born in 1902 and came to Reedsburg, Wisconsin, in 1920, finishing high school shortly thereafter. He followed up with flying lessons in a Curtiss Jenny. Cecil was a machinist and mechanic and attended the Sweeney Automobile and Aviation School in Kansas City. Cecil worked nine years for others as a mechanic until he bought his own shop in Reedsburg in 1931. During this time he continued flying, deciding to buy his own airplane in 1928. He chose an OX-5 powered Waco Model Ten.

The Waco Ten, serial number 1214, was completed by Advance Aircraft Co. on November 12, 1927, and was delivered by rail to John P. Wood's Northern Airways at Wausau, Wisconsin, on January 5, 1928. John Wood was a well-known Advance Aircraft Co. dealer who went on to win the 1928 Ford Air Tour with his modified Waco Taperwing.

Cecil purchased the plane from Northern Airways in March 1928 for \$2,500. The Waco was assigned identification number 4779. After some familiarization with the airplane and completing the paperwork on April 20, Cecil flew his new Waco Ten home to Reedsburg on April 27. *The Reedsburg Free Press* reported that he covered the 115 miles from Wausau to Reedsburg in 50 minutes, apparently taking advantage of what must have been about a 65 mph tail wind. Cecil and his Waco Ten provided real encouragement to the local people who were promoting a Reedsburg airport when he built a hangar on land recently obtained by the city for an airport. Cecil proceeded to fly around the countryside barnstorming and doing air shows, landing in farmers' fields and carrying passengers for rates of a penny a pound (up to \$2.50) to \$10, depending on the crowds. Later in 1928 Cecil broke a wing and propeller because of a "bad landing."

In August 1928 John Wood sold Northwest Airways its first Waco, the Wright J-4 powered Model Ten, number C7446. The Northwest Air-

ways route map showed the Reedsburg Public Field just north of the Madison-La Crosse leg of the Chicago-Milwaukee-St. Paul route. Charles "Speed" Holman, Northwest's operating manager and a contemporary of Cecil's, flew Northwest's Waco Ten C7446, first as a straightwing and later as a taperwing, through the Reedsburg area. Cecil later recollected how during his barnstorming and air show times he flew with Speed Holman and other noted area fliers.

During an air show at Reedsburg in early July 1930, misfortune was present. A young aviatrix riding the wing of Cecil's Waco hundreds of feet above the ground stepped into the slipstream, leaving behind her the clatter of the OX-5. She expected to thrill the crowd with her gentle descent to the ground, but her parachute did not open. The girl was 19-year-old Mae Rox, who billed herself as "Peaches La Mar." Cecil, obviously through respectful remembrance, determined that ever after his Waco Ten would be named the gently appropriate, but curiously enigmatic *Miss Fortune*.

Early on, Cecil decided that he did not need to bother with mundane matters such as pilot certificates and aircraft licenses or the related baggage such as logbooks and inspections. He was a qualified mechanic and knew his airplane and how to fly it. The Waco had an ID number, 4779, from the government. What else



Kris and the Waco pause for a moment before taking to the air.

DON PARSONS

was needed? Besides, he had been protected by the “grandfather act.” Cecil, unencumbered by regulatory inconvenience, continued to fly *Miss Fortune*, by his accounts putting about 450 hours on her through the mid to late 1950s.

Our modern world eventually caught up to Cecil. After rebuilding the Waco in 1959, he continued to fly her. The old Waco had never received an airworthiness certificate, and Cecil somewhat innocently made an application for registration of the airplane in 1962. But, as Cecil lamented to a newspaper reporter in 1964, “They wanted me to comply with all the new regulations, registration, flyer’s license, log books, air frame certification, etc.” So he literally “hung it up,” dismantling the Waco, hanging the fuselage in his shop and putting the wings in storage at home.

Fifteen years later, Cecil decided to reassemble and fly *Miss Fortune* after 50 years of ownership. He was convinced it was a feat worthy of the Guinness World Records and that the “grandfather act” made him bulletproof. On March 30, 1978, the Reedsburg newspaper published an interview with Cecil wherein he announced his inten-

tions to again fly *Miss Fortune* including that he could “coax a few more barrel rolls out of her.” On July 23, 1978, 50 summers after purchasing the Waco Ten from John Wood, Cecil took her to the air again over Reedsburg. If this made the Guinness book is not known, nor is it known how many barrel rolls he coaxed out of her, but certainly an undeserved anonymity was protecting him.

But as they say, too much of a good thing...two months later, on

September 19, Cecil again pulled the propeller through, climbed into the cockpit, pushed the throttle forward, and rolled across the field. *Miss Fortune* skidded out of control and went up an embankment and into some trees, knocking off the propeller and busting a wing. Somehow, this caught the attention of those guys that Skeezix calls “The Federals Against Aviation” and what John Livesay would say is just a normal day at an out-of-the-way grass strip, and it was now a federal affair.



DON PARSONS

Kris Kortokrax levels out the Waco Ten for a “high speed” pass down the grass runway at Shelbyville, Illinois.



DON PARSONS

Tapockata, tapockata, tapockata...Now before you pick up your pen to scold us for publishing a picture of an airplane with no brakes, no chocks, and with the engine running and no one in the cockpit, I've been assured that Kris *is* in the cockpit, hunched over to stay out of sight. Honest!

Cecil was in trouble with the local judge, who threatened Cecil with jail time if he did not mend his ways.

The judge felt he could tell a threat to society when he saw one. Cecil had accumulated 2,000 hours flying time over 60 years but did not have a pilot certificate; he had put 450 hours on a Waco Ten that he had owned and maintained for 50 years but did not have a 3-by-5-inch piece of paper called a standard airworthiness certificate. Cecil never flew again and died a year or so later, truly a misfortune.

Cecil's earlier lamentations indicate that logbooks for 4779 never existed, and the FAA file for 4779 is thin, which tends to confirm this. The file has only five or so basic documents in it, all dated 1928, including bills of sale from Advance Aircraft Co. to Northern Airways and Northern's sale to Cecil Hess, as well as an application for identification number and license. In addition, the file contains Unlicensed Identification Assignments from 1930, 1935, 1936, 1937, and 1938, which now carry the notation

"Intentional Aerobatics Prohibited" which obviously, by Cecil's creative reading, did not preclude "coaxing a few more barrel rolls out of her."

Following his rebuilding the airplane in 1959, there is no mention of the work in the FAA file, but there is a 1962 "Application for Registration" and a 1972 revocation of registration letter from the FAA with a 1981 reinstatement note.

Dick Wagner, a friend of Cecil's, requested the registration reinstatement. Dick had worked with Cecil before Cecil died to assure that *Miss Fortune* would be properly preserved. Dick Wagner was the head of the Wagner Foundation, and the Foundation later purchased the Waco Ten from the estate of Cecil Hess and delivered it to the EAA AirVenture Museum,



COURTESY BOB HOWIE VIA THE AMERICAN WACO CLUB

The current owner of *Miss Fortune*, Bob Howie.

intending for it to be displayed in its original condition as rebuilt by Cecil in 1959. *Miss Fortune* in such unembellished state would have provided a rare window to aviation of the late 1920s. Cecil's 1959 rebuild was basic, consisting only of re-covering and mechanically refurbishing the Waco. Everything was left as it came from the Advance Aircraft Co. factory in Troy, Ohio, in November 1927 (that is, tailskid, wire wheels with no brakes, height gauge, water



DON PARSONS

The OX-5's radiator is mounted on the bottom of the wing center section. You'll know right away if you have a leak!

temperature, oil pressure, and no airspeed or compass) and this was all topped off with the original Curtiss OX-5 with no fancy modernizations like Millerized valves or dual magneto conversion. Cecil skillfully concealed the Narco Superhomer and its antenna on the shelf in his garage. Even the 1927 carbon steel streamlined wires

still had the original stamped brass MacWhyte identification tags wrapped around them.

At some point in time, Cecil conceded to the necessity of the moment and replaced the 18-inch clincher wheel rims and tires with 18-inch drop center rims with his personalized welded spoke hole reinforcements and automobile tires,

probably because clincher tires were no longer available. The clincher wheels Advance Aircraft Co. used on the Waco Nine and Ten were Curtiss Jenny "war to end all wars" surplus parts. During the 1920s, surplus Jenny hardware including wheels, nuts, bolts, turnbuckles, and cable was the industry standard for lightplane hardware.

Ultimately, it was in 1991 that the Wagner Foundation faithfully replicated Cecil's 1959 rebuild, taking Cecil's Waco Ten back to its first years at Reedsburg, flying the Wisconsin air show circuit and barnstorming as *Miss Fortune*, thereby preserving an otherwise irreplaceable part of aviation history.

Since then, Cecil's *Miss Fortune* has moved from Wisconsin, and its OX-5 is now clattering away from the Public Field at Shelbyville, Illinois, crossing paths with Speed Holman's Taperwing Waco 7446 that flies from the same summer grass and winter snow at Shelby County Airport.

The Waco Ten with the OX-5, tailskid and no brakes, is a fun flying airplane. Ground handling on the grass is simple and effective using rudder, elevator, and throttle for directional control. Paved surfaces can be exciting. Ground static rpm with the 104-inch propeller is 1375 rpm. Takeoff with little effort easily meets and can readily exceed 1400 rpm, which provides a comfortable rate of climb. Aviation magazines from the 1920s and 1930s indicate that the OX-5 engine operated well at the higher speeds, with classified ads commonly bragging of engines that would turn 1500 to 1600 rpm. Comfortable cruise is 1350 rpm, which provides very good control response and a ride that is solid. At 1250 rpm the ride is getting softer and control response slower. None of this matters much, since in any event, you won't get where you want very soon!

