ERNEST A. "Poss" KUHN (1895-1981)

Prescott, Ash Fork, Winslow and Needles

Ernest A. "Poss" Kuhn was a railroad man who loved to fly. Born in Missouri on March 14, 1895, he went to work for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway in 1911 at the age of 16. He spent the next *49 years* in the company's roundhouses and shops at Winslow, Ash Fork, Prescott, Needles and San Bernardino. "Poss" was short for possum, a nickname he embraced throughout his life. One can only speculate as to its origin.

Ernest met and married Ruth Baker, with whom he shared the rest of his life. Together they raised two boys and a girl – Robert, Richard and Mary.

Kuhn's working world was filled with locomotive steam, but he always had an eye on the sky. His interest in aviation was developed at some point early in life, though it isn't known exactly when or where he learned to fly. By 1920 he was working in the Santa Fe shops at Winslow. In 1924, the young roundhouse foreman was spending his free time assisting another Winslow aviator, Russell Hall, with local flying exhibitions. On October 17, 1924, it was reported in the *Winslow Mail* that "E. A. Kuhn, ex-aerial stunt performer, will do [...] wing-walking and perform capers in the air." A few months later, he purchased a surplus Thomas-Morse S-4 Scout, and with his mechanical know-how, began devising modifications intended to improve its performance. Powered by a WWI-era rotary engine, "Tommies" were prized by the stunt pilots of the day, but they were very demanding airplanes to fly.

In 1927, Kuhn and his family moved to Ash Fork, where he served as Santa Fe's division foreman. Fortunately for the small band of aviators trying to keep Ernest A. Love Field operating during the Depression, Kuhn was transferred to Prescott in 1932. As an avocational flier in Ash Fork, he was already familiar with Prescott's airport and he immediately began pitching-in to maintain and improve the field. In July 1933, it was reported that Kuhn had purchased a boxcar from his employer. He described it as "well-preserved," and in truth, he had the expertise and standing to obtain the best surplus boxcar available. He moved it to the airport where it was donated to the city for use as "an emergency bunk house and workshop for aviators." The boxcar, with windows and other extravagances installed by Kuhn and the other Prescott aviators, provided caretaker quarters and work space. It became, in every sense, Ernest A. Love Field's first administration building.

In 1938, Kuhn was transferred to the AT&SF shops at Needles, CA, to serve as division foreman. Once again his railroad family picked-up and moved. But not before he left his mark on Prescott's airport. Ernest Kuhn, along with Carl Hickerson, Louis Price and the other people profiled in this section, played a critical role in keeping the airport alive during the Depression years. They made the rounds speaking before Prescott's service clubs and civic

organizations, seizing every opportunity to advocate for the airport. Kuhn's sense of humor must have made his presentations particularly enjoyable. During those lean years, Prescott's pilots (and often their spouses and children) performed almost all of the maintenance at Ernest A. Love Field. They walked the runways, clearing rocks and brush and filling in the prairie dog holes.

Not surprisingly, within a few weeks after arriving in Needles, Ernest announced that he would build a hangar at Needles Airport "in the interests of stimulating flying activity" (*San Bernardino Sun,* 2/27/38). For the next decade, Kuhn worked at Needles and at the railroad's massive repair works in San Bernardino, CA. In 1949, he and Ruth returned to Prescott, where they continued to find ways to serve their church and community. Ernest remained an active pilot until at least the late 1950s.

It's remarkable that even with a half-dozen or more transfers, wherever Ernest and Ruth found themselves, they soon became involved in civic affairs, service organizations and community charities. Ernest even served on the school boards in Ash Fork and Needles. He was also active in the Kiwanis Club and Civil Air Patrol. He made frequent flights to the reservation lands of the Four Corners for his church, and later in life, he used his ingenuity and skills to make old toys and bicycles new again for the benefit of local children.

After an exemplary career, Ernest finally retired in 1960 at the age of 65. He passed away on June 13, 1981. Poss Kuhn, the young daredevil who was flying biplanes and wing walking in the 1920s, who survived at least one crash and worked for 49 years around hulking steam locomotives and railroad rolling stock, somehow managed to live to the age of 86.