

Women pilots put out BIG welcome mat at GP Airport

By Barbara Hahn
of the Daily Courier

The Grants Pass Airport has put out a huge welcome mat, courtesy of a group of women pilots who have been painting airport markings for decades.

A couple of months ago, members of the Ninety-Nines arrived in force at the Grants Pass Airport, located at 1441 Brookside Blvd., in Merlin, and lined out the 30-foot-tall lettering of the words "Grants Pass" on the asphalt ramp to the runway. The airport's elevation of 1,126 feet and radio frequency of 122.8 also were painted on the ramp.

"Most came from the Santa Clara (Calif.) area with some from local towns," said Bob Caravas of Aero Welding, located at the airport. While he admits to instigating the project, "credit goes to these Ninety-Nines gals ... They are sweethearts."

The Ninety-Nines is an international organization of licensed women pilots that was formed in 1929 at Curtiss Field in Valley Stream, N.Y. In 1931, famed aviator Amelia Earhart was elected the group's first president and the organization took

the name of the Ninety-Nines to honor the 99 charter members.

The Ninety-Nines have made airport marking a pet project. Each year, the group paints airport names and compass roses at airports throughout the U.S.

According to the Ninety-Nines' Web site, the program to identify airports initially began in 1934 as a government program called the National Air Marking Program. It was instituted at the prompting of Phoebe Omlie, the Special Assistant for Air Intelligence of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. Few pilots at the time had radios or flew on established airways, and so the



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30-foot tall letters spelling Grants Pass were painted at the Grants Pass Airport this summer by members of the Ninety-Nines, a nationwide flying club.

program was conceived of as a way to aid pilots navigating the landscape. Funded with Works Progress Administration money, the program employed people to paint markers such as

a town's name atop prominent buildings to aid air navigation.

By World War II, though, the government stopped marking airports, and due to security concerns, blacked out those considered to be enemy targets. After the war, though, the women pilots felt it was important to remark the airports and since then, the Ninety-Nines have continued to volunteer their time and raise funds for painting the markers.

Locally, Caravas raised more than \$800 for the work, which paid for paint and other materials, as well as the lunch which they served the volunteers. Much was donated by

local pilots, he said, and added that Evergreen Federal Bank made a significant contribution.

About a half dozen members of the local Experimental Aircraft Association chapter 725 also pitched in on the project.

"(The women) marked it out with a chalk line and then as soon as they were done with one letter, we were right behind them painting it," Caravas said. "It wasn't even a day, but a matter of three to four hours before we were done."

The marking isn't required by the Federal Aviation Administration, but it's a nice thing to have, Caravas said. "It's like a welcome mat."

Members of the Santa Clara Valley Chapter, the Mount Shasta Chapter Ninety-Nines and EAA chapter 725 airmarked Grants Pass OR Airport on July 30, 2005.