

# Ex-Erieite 'Powder-Puffer'

By CAROLE WEIGLE

"The last thing I ever wanted to do was learn how to fly," says Mrs. Ruth Wagner, four times an entrant in the cross-country Powder Puff Derby and proud possessor of an Amelia Earhart medal.

A resident of Sacramento, Calif., Mrs. Wagner left Erie today after a short visit with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Keller, of Evans road. Her father is recuperating from surgery in Hamot hospital.

The pilot, indicating the bracelet medal stamped with the likeness of the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, explained, "I got it because I'm international contest chairman of The Ninety-Nines, which is the international organization of licensed women pilots."

One of the big events sponsored by the Ninety-Nines is the annual Powder Puff derby which this year drew 98 entries. When the contest originated 15 years ago, only three planes participated.

"I don't even want to talk about what happened to us this summer," declared Mrs. Wagner. "We never even got off the ground because when we were lining up for take-off position we managed to hit a parked plane.

"It was an unavoidable accident but I never had to try so hard in



MRS. WAGNER

my life to keep from crying."

To keep the weight down in the small planes, luggage of the contestants is sent on ahead. "That was another sad part," said the pilot, "my luggage had already left the day before and my husband and son had gone on to Philadelphia to meet me. Besides I had spent months getting ready for the thing."

Object of the derby, which is held every July and usually involves a flight of about 2,600 miles, is promotion of safety and opportunities to meet other women interested in aviation. The flight takes from 2½ to four days and most planes carry a pilot and copilot.

Mrs. Wagner said she first became interested in flying in 1952. She returned to California after a visit to Erie and the first thing her husband, Dr. Alfred W. Wagner, showed her was a student pilot certificate.

"I firmly believe," she said, "that a woman should go along with her husband in these things if he wants her to. Only now I'm more interested in flying than he is."

The family owns a four-seater and son Greg, thirteen, is now beginning to think about taking his turn at the controls.

"In general, I think women are better pilots than men," said Mrs. Wagner, "since they're less likely to take chances or ignore weather reports. About 90 percent of all small plane accidents are a result of pilot failure, usually because people are in too much of a hurry to get some place.

"But it's still safer than driving."