



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of THOMAS (TOM) COPE

September 20, 1925 – January 8, 2020



Written by TC (2004); Edited by JS (11/2006); Updated by JS (02/2020)

Tom Cope wrote the following autobiography in 2004

Tom Cope Autobiography

Growing up in eastern South Dakota during the Depression did not present many choices for fun, but no one told us that, so we went ahead and enjoyed ourselves anyhow. Of course, one of our greatest inspirations was Charles A. Lindbergh.

My first models were the usual solid balsa scale and small rubber powered models. One of these was a scale *Puss Moth* that flew pretty well. When it was pretty well worn out, I decided to give it a glorious end. After winding, I dribbled kerosene over it, stood on top of the kerosene barrel (!?!), lit the model on fire and threw it. This was one of several times my guardian angel looked after me.

I discovered gas engines and was forever hooked. I spent \$4.95 for a kit to build a GHQ engine, put it together, and (believe it or not) IT RAN! This was my first (and maybe only) claim to fame. Needing a plane for it, I built a \$1 kit of a 54" span Comet *Aeronca K* rubber model. Man, I would like to see that engine installation now. After completion, I decided to run the engine while sitting in our driveway. A backfire soon turned into a conflagration, and before I could get the water hose to work, the Q was sitting in a pile of black ashes. Fortunately, it was not hurt.

That incident got me acquainted with a passerby who became interested in models and was to become a lifetime friend. Frenchy was older than I was, married and the engineer for the local radio station. He lived in a small building at the base of the station-transmitting tower on the outskirts of town. We flew many gas models there over the years and had surprisingly few problems with the tower or guy wires. Frenchy was a lot of help, especially with electrical problems.

Next, I scratch-built a *Red Ripper*, which had just appeared in the *Flying Aces* magazine (in 1940, I believe.) My wonderful Godmother, who lived in Fargo, North Dakota, bought everything I needed after I sent her a bill for the materials, including a beautiful hand-carved prop. I still have what is left of it. As always, I could get the Q to start and run, but it never put out enough power to do any more than make a powered glide.

I worked many years as a paperboy, and several times, I earned trips to the "Twin Cities" (Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota.) On one of these trips, during my usual visit to Walt Billett's Hobby Shop, I heard there was a contest going on at one of the frozen lakes in Minneapolis. This, of course, was in the middle of the winter. Therefore, I rode a trolley out to the contest. I

remember two outstanding models. One was the big pusher model on a trike gear with twin booms that I am sure everyone remembers from ads in the magazines. I think it was called a *RC-1*. It used a Forster 99 engine.

The other was the most popular model there, the Modelcraft *Spook*. The sky was full of *Spooks*. Therefore, I went home and built one. The only engine I could afford was a second hand Madewell 14. I used to scrounge clear dope from the mechanic at our local airport. However, I wanted to color the *Spook*, so got the bright idea of mixing lamp black (everyone remembers that stuff?) in the dope. It turned out to be a good black model. As it was still winter, I made skis for it. For some reason we always ROG-ed (Rise-off-ground) our gas models. I can still remember giving the *Spook* a shove and watching my first successful gas-powered flight, including a smooth landing on the snow. I was so excited I yelled and jumped around like an idiot, which thoroughly amused my friends.

I next “powered up” the *Spook* to a Syncro B-30, which I subsequently supercharged, just like the article in the magazine. I installed a celluloid funnel under the engine in the front of the fuselage with the big end pointing forward. The small end of the funnel was then connected with a rubber tube to the intake on the *B-30*. I cannot really remember any great surge in power after that.

I think my next model was a *Simplex*, powered with a second-hand Gwin Aero that was loose, rattled, shook and spewed oil everywhere but would always run. The *Simplex* ended its short career trying to fly through a farmer’s woven wire fence. I remember we always used a piece of a wooden match to prop up the plunger on the Austin timers, and would flick it away when launching the model.

At about that time, World War II came along and messed up my modeling. Graduating at age 17 and not yet going into the military, I worked for a while as the Airport Clearance Officer at our little small town airport. Any flights into or out of the field had to first receive my approval. Most flights were to and from the big USAAF B-17 base on the other side of town. Then Uncle Sam sent me to the Southwest Pacific with a couple of years in the Army.

There were a couple of models aviation-related incidents in that time. Toward the end of basic training at Camp Hood, Texas, they lined our company up on the firing line with every weapon we had. Then they flew a Radio Control drone back and forth in front of us and we cut loose. I do not remember us ever hitting the drone. I figured this was poor shooting until I watched the Navy Armed Guard on our troopship try to hit some big balloons they released for target practice. They never hit one.

Later on, in Luzon, Philippines, a little *L-4* liaison plane crashed in our company area. We dragged the pilot out of the wreckage, unhurt, but as soon as we stood him up, he passed out.

After the war ended, we went to Japan as occupation troops where I transferred into an Army Air Force squadron of *P-51-D*’s equipped with cameras. As I recall, they were designated as *F-6*’s or *K-6*’s. We had one ship with the cockpit armor plate and fuselage tank removed, and the radios rearranged, so a small jump seat could be installed directly behind the pilot. I talked one of the

pilots into giving me a ride, but as we taxied out to the runway, he suddenly hit the brakes and pointed up into the sky. A couple of miles away, a *P-38* flew straight and level, streaming fire and smoke. Just then, the pilot rolled the *P-38* over to inverted and bailed out. Our field immediately closed, so we had to taxi back and park. We then grabbed a jeep and went to help find the pilot.

After getting home from the Pacific, I started college. One weekend, while visiting home, I had an attack of malaria. While in the hospital, I met Opie, my wife-to-be, who was a Registered Nurse at the hospital.

When I first got home after the war, I treated myself to a new O&R 60 Special and a Comet *Sailplane* kit. I finally finished it between college classes. It was always plagued with ignition problems when the chips were down. I still had the model until 1995. I gave it to Fred Griffith, who offered to restore it. I have since lost track of Fred.

I flew many Control Line models in college. I discovered that a drone diesel with a club of a prop, mounted on a stubby flying wing, would literally fly right through tree branches and hardly slow down. During this time, Opie bought me a new Arden as a birthday present. It survived several Free Flight and Control Line models and I still have it today. I still think the Arden was the best ignition engine made.

I used to sell hobby supplies to the club members in college, which paid for my stuff. One item I bought was a new Dynajet. I built a Control Line trainer-type model for it that used a Carnation condensed milk can for a fuel tank. One day, I was flying this model at the airport in my college town and a car driving by stopped to watch. Two men in the car came over to us and, by notes and hand signs, told us they were deaf. They could feel the vibrations of that Dynajet when it howled. I once tried to fly this model off a frozen lake. After losing my footing and falling down, the model continued sliding around on the ice in ever-decreasing circles as the lines wrapped around me, but it quit before it got to me.

I later sold this model to a young fellow who decided to modify it extensively. I offered to start and launch it for him on his first flight. When I hit the starting button that fired the Model T spark coil, you should have seen him start dancing wildly at the other end of the control lines! It turns out he had shorted something and received a good jolt when the starting system fired. He was afraid to let go because he thought I would launch the model.

After graduating in 1950, I went to Washington, D.C. to work for the CIA. We had a club there in Virginia called the Arlington Aeromodellers, a real active group. One of the things we started there was an annual 500-lap Control Line Team Race contest held on Memorial Day (while the Indianapolis 500 ran). It drew contestants from Virginia, Maryland and DC. One of our members was an electronics-type, so he designed a Radio Control receiver. Everyone in the club who wanted to build a receiver mainly used the government "bin" for parts. We only had a couple of transmitters, which we shared.

One time we decided to be the first to fly a Radio Control model across the Potomac River. Our plan was to have a crew with a transmitter on each side of the river. We launched the model from

the Virginia side and flew it halfway across. At that point, we made a 90-degree turn and flew the model parallel to the river. That was the signal to the crew on the other side to turn on their transmitter and take control, and it worked.

Sometimes, when a noted dignitary visited Washington, DC, the government would let employees off work to stand by Pennsylvania Avenue and create a big crowd. A modeling buddy at work and I would take these opportunities to drive to Haynes Point, get our Control Line models out of our car trunk and fly. We then went back to work and talked about what a great parade it was.

One other thing I got involved with while still in DC was the beginnings of the Control Line Navy Carrier event. One of my buddies was a whiz at Control Line, and we competed in the early days of this event. I still have a "thank you" certificate from the U.S. Navy for helping demonstrate the then-new event at the National Capitol Model Contest.

At one of the annual National Capitol meets, I flew a *Phoenix* powered by my Arden and experienced some of my first really good thermal flights. I remember that Woody Blanchard took home most of the trophies.

In 1955, I decided I wanted to get into aviation work. We moved to Seattle and settled in with Boeing. In those days, the Boeing Club met at the old cafeteria at Plant 2. One night, one of my sons launched his Walker *Ceiling Walker* inside the cafeteria and it proceeded to stick itself in the ceiling insulation. A friendly Boeing guard retrieved it for us.

Radio Control flying then was done at a small field located off the south end of Boeing field. Somewhere around the mid to late 1960s, Old Timer (OT) flying came into being. I remember going to Oregon for a contest. I scratch-built a *Zipper A* and powered it with a little DC Dart diesel. It flew very well and I finally lost it while testing a DT installation that I really needed. I also built a *Herald* powered by an O&R 23 that never flew very well. Bill Darkow recently put a small diesel on this model and lost it out of sight at Hart's Lake.

The only kit for an OT that I could locate then was for a *Buzzard Bombshell*. I built it with an O&R 60. It flew well, but I did not like the kit very well. I decided to start producing an OT kit. My first attempt was going to be the *Red Zephyr*, but John Pond talked me out of it. He convinced me the *New Ruler* was the one to kit. John was going to sell me copies of his plans, but they had so many errors that I made a deal with Joe Deadie, an accomplished modeler and draftsman, to draw up an entirely new plan. I then hired my old flying buddy, neighbor and master modeler, Bud Tamn, to cut the parts for me. A box company in Tukwila agreed to make 100 boxes for me to my design. That lovely lady of modeling, Hazel Sigenfuse, at that time running SIG, agreed to sell me good balsa at wholesale. Some features of my complete (not partial) kit were: rolled plans, four-foot balsa, really good cut and sanded parts, and a set of original Super Cyclone-stamped steel engine mounts. My price was \$29.95, direct from me to you (this was around 1971, or so.)

At about this same time, we started SAM Chapter Eight. I sold these kits all over the country and a few overseas. One east coast dealer tried very hard to buy several kits from me at a discount,

which I did not want to start. He bought several anyhow, raised the price and sold them all. After selling the 100, a few problems arose. The box company nearly doubled their price, balsa went up and state sales tax paperwork became complicated. I decided I had my fun and stopped production. I still have two kits. About the only credible criticism I remember was that I did not have a formed, bent landing gear. (The 5/32" wire was in the kit.)

Homer Smith, Don Dodd and I built the first three kits to proof the parts and plans. Don ended up promoting his *New Ruler* for years and did very well with it. Homer used an Atwood 60; Don and I started with Super Cykes, and then switched to Anderson Spitfires. Don's airplane is now in Gil Coughlin's Northwest Model Museum.

In following years, I flew a Megow *Ranger* with an Arden 19, a beautiful flying combination. I also flew a MKI *Comet Clipper*, which I still have. I powered it with a Brown, a Bunch Tiger and an Ohlsson 60. I have a GHQ, extensively reworked by Wayne Case, which is ready to go in it for test flying. A 1/2A Radio Control "Mike" provided many hours of flying, but my old eyes had trouble keeping it in sight. Small electric Old Timers were fun while living in Arizona.

During those years, I managed to solo a Taylorcraft and earn a private pilot's license, owned an *Ercoupe* and later a share in a Cessna 170B.

In recent years, I have become somewhat like a parrot; I do more talking than flying. I always felt that the engine was THE thing, more so than the model, and enjoy working on restoring, swapping, selling, and generally fooling around.

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