



# The AMA History Project Presents: History of Balsa USA Since 1968



Written by JS (01/2011); Reformatted by JS (04/2011)

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*Jay Smith wrote the following, published in the About Us section of Model Aviation magazine, January 2011 issue.*

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## About Us: Balsa USA

Almost anyone who is interested in RC kits of World War I aircraft is probably familiar with Balsa USA. The company has been producing an expanded line of WWI models since the 1990s, but its story starts much longer ago.

Ron Busch founded Balsa USA. He was a lifelong modeler with a passion for CL. He also enjoyed sailing and built and repaired sailboats.

After leaving his job at Marinette Marine, Ron purchased Joy Products from Paul Schultz in 1968. At that time, the company was producing small CL models and metal stamped parts.

Production of non-model-related products was halted at the company in the early 1970s. It began cutting sheet and stick balsa for hobby shops and model builders, and model production was expanded to include RC.

Ron's first scale kit was a highly detailed Curtiss *JN-4 Jenny*, which was debuted at the Weak Signals Toledo R/C Expo in Toledo, Ohio. Soon following were the *Swizzle Stick*, which was designed to use scrap wood from other sport production models, the *Excalibur*, the *Moonraker*, and the *Smoothie*.

Setting his sights on bigger designs, Ron was one of the pioneers of giant-scale RC. His first release was a 1/4-scale Piper *J-3 Cub*, which he followed with a 1/3-scale Sopwith *Pup*.

At the time, in the mid-1970s, giant-scale models were practically unheard of, and engines and servos struggled to handle the increased loads put on them. The popularity of big reproductions grew, prompting support equipment to evolve.

The Sopwith *Pup* proved to be a huge success, and demand grew for additional WWI models. As a result, the *Taube* and the Bristol *M-1* were put into production.

Ron saw a demand for kits and wood, so he started a sister company – Balsa USA – as a mail-order hobby shop. In the late 1970s, the Joy Products name gave way to “Balsa USA” for the entire company. Production of giant-scale kits continued with the Aeronca *C-3*, Piper *L-4*, and Morane Saulnier *AI*.

The 1980s saw a big increase in the sale of kits, balsa, and other building supplies. Balsa USA expanded to approximately 15 employees; one of those was Mark Enderby.

Mark was involved in aeromodeling on and off throughout his childhood, thanks to his father who was a modeler and enjoyed FF. When Mark began building and flying RC airplanes in roughly 1980, he started with Balsa USA kits. The company was local to him, so he would stop by and talk modeling with Ron and other employees.

Mark's experience with the company's kits gave him the opportunity to assist Ron in rewriting instruction manuals. That relationship opened the door for Mark to become the shop manager.

Ron was eager to pass on his knowledge, and he set out to teach Mark everything he knew about the business. That included not only how to operate all pieces of machinery, but also how to maintain them.

Balsa USA's momentum continued to build in the 1990s. The *PR-17 Stearman* and *Eindecker 90* were released, and all instruction manuals were updated with photos to simplify construction.

Dave Lewis, who began modeling at age 8, was hired as a designer in 2000. When he is not designing, building, or writing manuals, he is answering all of the company's technical-support calls. He enjoys the opportunity to interact with customers and assist them in any way possible, to ensure that they enjoy and succeed with the products.

I asked Dave about the delicate balance of producing a WWI reproduction that is scale-like and flies well.

“Our design philosophy is we would rather have a nice-flying scale model in the air than a precision scale wreck at the end of the runway,” he said. “They need to be able to be flown by the average pilot.”

Having flown some Balsa USA airplanes, I agree with Dave. I appreciate the models' good manners on the ground and in the air.

Approximately five years ago, Ron transferred daily operations at Balsa USA to his daughter Ronae Busch and Mark. It was Ron's way of looking to the future and ensuring that the company he had built and loved would continue.

Ronae was the logical choice to become the company president – not because Ron was her father, but because of her knowledge and experience, having been involved with the company since she was 5 years old.

Wanting to spend more time with her father, Ronae's first job was picking up rubber bands that were used to bundle balsa off the shop floor. By the time she was 16, she had become a phone

operator who took company calls. Ronae subsequently moved on to work in the shipping department and later in bookkeeping.

She shared with me that she always wanted to work with her father and enjoyed the business and the customers, which she claims are the best customers in the world. It was clear during our phone conversation that she is passionate about the company her father built and has found it rewarding to see it continue to grow.

Ron passed away on Thursday, January 22, 2009, and he had worked all the way up to that day. Although his death left a void in the company, its staff was prepared to carry on his legacy; that is extremely important to everyone involved.

I interviewed both Mark and Dave for this article at one of several events that they attend each year. After talking with them, it became clear that they greatly enjoy what they do. The most important message that everyone at Balsa USA wanted to convey in this article is summed up in the following quote from Mark.

“We so appreciate our customers. Without them we wouldn’t be here and we can’t thank them enough.”

Balsa USA continues to look to the future, with a goal of producing 100 kits and keeping the company going for 150 years. With Ronae and Mark at the helm, I am confident that they can do it.

-Jay Smith

Sources:  
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