



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of BOB BANKA

Born February 16, 1939 Modeler since 1944
AMA #71175



Written & Submitted by BB (10/2002); Transcribed & Edited by SS (10/2002), Reformatted by JS (06/2009)

Career:

- Took a model building class at the age of seven or eight from Stan Day
- Competed in a combat contest at age 16 and almost beat the 35-year-old champion
- As a high school senior began teaching a model airplane class to seventh and eighth graders; continued this for a couple of years until leaving for college
- 1969: Moved to California and took a 10-year hiatus from flying; eventually returned to model aviation after moving to Orange County, California where he joined the California Scale Squadron
- Placed in the top 10 at a scale contest with a Top Flite J-3, which he wrote a product review of for Model Builder magazine
- Designed aircraft and wrote reviews and articles while running his own after-school reading program
- October 1983: Got involved with starting Scale Model Research; this evolved into a worldwide documentation business with the largest commercial collection of aircraft documentation in the world
- Has attended numerous trade shows since starting his business
- Became a Scale Masters craftsmanship judge and is pursuing FAI judging status (2002)
- 2000: Changed business name to Bob's Aircraft Documentation

I was born in Regina Saskatchewan, Canada, where the winters were long and cold, and summers short with mosquitoes big enough to carry you to the next province and with an average wind that exceeded even Chicago's reputation.

This does not seem to be an auspicious start to a lifelong modeling hobby/career. My father was a Polish immigrant and I can remember at the age of five, I was teaching him to read English (I don't remember why I could read at that age) and he was teaching me to read Polish. The word that I remember coming up was "somolat," which means "airplane" in Polish. That was the start of my modeling experience!

I bought five and 10-cent kits as a kid, which were nothing more than a 3/4-inch square balsa with printed balsa for wings. These were about a six-inch wingspan, but I was happy and probably proud enough. I'm sure they looked anything but perfect.

At about the age of seven or eight, the city recreation department offered a class in model building. Stan Day, a cigar-chomping provincial champ with a gruff voice and demeanor, taught us the "right" way to build. Boy, did you ever learn the concept of reading plans because he wasn't about to tell you the answer if it was on that sheet of paper (truly one of the most valuable lessons learned along with if you drop it, let it fall, it will do less damage than trying the catch

[crunch] it). We were building Thermic 18-inch gliders and Jasco Rise-off-Ground models (ROGs) and they flew, thanks to our instructor. We had distance, endurance, and spot landing contests. I can't remember how I did, but it was fun.

With this kind of success, I bought a large (30-inch) Comet kit and proceeded to pour my heart and soul into it. Remember, I doubt if I was 10 at the time and worked my paper route to pay for all this and our prices were 50% more than in the good old U.S. Upon completion, I admired my work and my dog, Peanuts, ran over the fuselage, crushing my spirits as well as the plane. They do make great fires, don't they?

The time came to purchase my first engine – a Cub 049B. I assembled the engine and flipped for days trying to get it to run for more than a few seconds until – ta da! I read the instructions and connected the fuel line to the tank (dummy!), but this was not the last foolish act in my experiences. I flew U-Control for a number of years and even designed some obviously small planes, some of which even flew decently. In the meantime, I built a Thermic B and Jasco (I think) Thermic 50X gliders and also a Fubar 36 with a really hot Atwood 049 with timer tank. I think by now I was thoroughly bitten by this hobby and ready to take the next serious step.

Can you imagine the thrill of having a big engine for the first time – one that when it whacked your careless fingers you really felt it? Well, the Forester 29 rear venturi, converted to glow, was a whole new ball game. Ringmasters using wires instead of thread, props that were easily broken unless you used the nylon Sullivans and performance far exceeding that little 049. It didn't take long for my buddies and I to attach streamers and go for combat. It was fun and, of course, expensive, but it was all part of the learning curve. I found that shortening the nose and tail moment arms that the Ringmaster was even more fun, and when you put in a new Fox 35, even more. This led to a Dmeco Sportwing with a Torp 35 and it went like stink! Supposedly clocked at over 100 mile-per-hour (mph), I was in hog heaven.

So, I decided to go to a combat contest. There I was, a 16-year-old kid, flying against our provincial champ who was 35 and he could not get me. He did what any frustrated adult with no morals would do – he proceeded to knock the handle out of my hand on purpose and win the contest. That Sportwing must have flown with line dangling for almost a minute before landing in the adjacent river. Thank goodness, I was a good swimmer, not realizing at the time, that he had cheated. Oh, well. We learn from these experiences, don't we?

Next, it was off to the Free Flight contest where the Fubar 36 made an incredible vertical climb, perfect transition and no dethermalizer with a 17-second engine run and that was all she wrote! Man, that was pretty, but with an engine over run, no score and before I got to my car it was heading toward the U.S and may still be up there for all I know. I flew my Thermic B hand-launched glider, but broke a wing tip off and in those days glue didn't set fast enough to get back into competition – not the best of weekends for a new competitor.

I thought, “There has got to be a better way,” and it came in the form of a Berkeley J-3 Cub covered in nylon with an E.D. 15 diesel. I purchased a used Berkeley Aerotrol radio for \$50 and, with the help of my friend John Moad – a Canadian Army lieutenant and the “radio expert” – we proceeded to fly Free Flight with occasional interruption of signal that made the rubber band escapement that kicked the rudder over and when it did, we went nuts. I hate to tell you how much time was spent tuning and fiddling to get that temporary moment of bliss. I think we were

the only two in our Province flying Radio Control (RC) at the time. The radio ended up in a Sterling Chris Craft Cruiser boat and was eventually sold for \$50, not that much of a loss, I guess.

During this period, my elementary school (I was a senior in high school at the time) was holding recreation classes on Friday evenings and asked me to teach a model airplane class to the seventh and eighth graders. Guess what? All the things I learned from cigar-chomping Stan were used in teaching and I did this for a couple of years with considerable success. I even learned to dance Swing (Jive), but that's another story!

High school graduation, girls, and a job curtailed my modeling activity until I got the best opportunity of my life and that was to go to college in Chicago to become a YMCA director. I spent four years, graduated, married, started a new job, and set up house with my bride. After a period of time I got back into U-Control and ended up going to Elmhurst Hobbies in Elmhurst, Illinois. It was there that good old Al Fuschen convinced me to buy my first proportional radio, an E.K. Logictrol. At the time, "reeds" were on their way out and this was a good choice, but to pay \$350 in 1966, well let me tell you, that was a lot of money! The radio worked well and I lucked out in that my first plane was a Fairchild PT-19 built by none other than that silver-throated Paul Harvey (of radio announcing fame) with a K&B 61. This was too much for me as a beginner so I traded for some non-descript trainer and proceeded to learn to fly at the Aerotelemechanics field, west of Chicago. As most of us did, I went through many models – a number of which were Lanier, Comets, Mustangs, etc. I foamed the tail cones and they were quite durable, flew well and I could now move to the next step, which was to be my greatest love – scale!

Graduate school entered the picture and while living in Flint, Michigan, for the winter program, I was flying a Goldberg Shoestring and some other 15-size trainer and lost both of them to radio problems (old 72 system), but spent my extra time building a Sterling Fokker D VII. Boy, was that a challenge. Construction was slow and complicated, but just time-consuming and not particularly difficult. I will admit to taking over one week of intense and concentrated time to "trammel" the surfaces (an Old-Timer term used in full-sized aircraft, especially bi-planes to ensure all the surfaces are correct in incidence, parallel, perpendicular and in correct correlation to the tail). I never did have much trouble covering models, all the way from using Japanese tissue, silk, nylon, Monokote or Super Coverite, which was my favorite and what I used on the Fokker.

I moved all the stuff I had along with my wife to California in 1969 and, of course, set up my workshop again. I finally gave up on the Logictrol after losing two more airplanes due to interference and took a hiatus for about 10 years due to having to travel so far to fly. After a divorce and moving in 1971 to Orange County, which is south of Los Angeles about 40 miles, I eventually got back into the build/fly mode since the infamous Mile Square was quite close. I joined the California Scale Squadron and really found out what scale was.

At that time, there were about a dozen guys who could produce a winner at any given time. I was rubbing elbows with the elite and learned a lot. I even entered a scale contest and placed in the top 10 with a Top Flite J-3, which I did a product review of for the now extinct Model Builder magazine. This J-3 was not the one you can get today, but had considerable complexity to its construction, which is possibly why it was discontinued and replaced with the simpler current

version. I would have to say that it was probably the best and most enjoyable kit I have ever built.

I was then self-employed running an after-school reading program and found I had much time on my hands, so I designed aircraft and wrote reviews and articles as well as built quite a bit of my time. I was single and living right on the beach where I flew some of my designs off the sand. One of these planes was the Sand Fli, a twin 049 biplane featured in Model Builder magazine as a construction article. It flew very well and was a lot of fun since it had a boat-type hull and I could land it in the sand.

This phase of creation and design led me to talking to an individual who was supposedly an expert on sailplanes to discuss the reasons behind differential on ailerons since I was redesigning a 100-inch floater. Well, as luck would have it, he pitched his small business of Scale Model Research at me and after checking the books and tax return decided I could handle it along with my reading business.

The thought in mind was that I would not show a profit for five years, write off my modeling as research and development, and continue as I was. This all occurred in October of 1983 when I received my first payment for product. Little did I know that I must have found my niche in life as I doubled my gross income in the first year, repeated it again in the second year and did it again in the third. The growth was phenomenal. Active modeling went out the window. I sold my reading business and was in hog heaven providing documentation to the masses. My catalog grew from 4 pages in 1983, representing about 500 Foto-Paks and about 1,000 drawings to a current 272-plus page tome representing 8,000 Foto-Paks and over 50,000 pages of three-views and information. It is now the largest commercial collection in the world and continues to grow.

I solicited dealers from 13 countries to distribute my product, learned how to use a camera and found out I was pretty decent at what I do. At the time of this writing (October 2002), I have traveled to Costa Rica, Chile, Argentina, Spain, Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany and England to shoot aircraft and meet with modelers and my dealers. It has been a wonderful experience and I still have about six more countries I want to visit, explore and record the contents of their museums and, hopefully, include air shows as I have in the past.

Since the beginning of my business, I have attended trade shows at Toledo, Ohio; WRAMS (New York), Pasadena, California; Seattle, Washington, Las Vegas, Nevada; Byron's; Top Gun, IMAA and Scale Masters along with local events. Many model manufacturers have used my products for developing their kits and plans and hardly a magazine – domestic or foreign – appears without showing an aircraft that has used my documentation. Due to my exposure to so many full-sized aircraft, I became a Scale Masters craftsmanship judge and have judged numerous events. I am now pursuing FAI judging status.

In the year 2000, I implemented a name change to Bob's Aircraft Documentation, because I was getting too many calls about "who had plans for this" or "who made a kit for that," which is not what my focus was. I also wanted to appeal to those who were restoring full-sized aircraft as well as those who were collectors of aircraft items. This transition will take some time as my previous business name had been around for a long time.

It appears that I have accumulated the largest commercial aircraft documentation collection in the world and have provided my products to Top Flite, Nick Zirolì, Don Smith, Jerry Bates, Century Jet, Dynafli, Arizona Models, Balsa USA, Airborne, Goldberg, Major Decals, Model Graphics, Pro-mark, Palmer Plans, Robart, Ron Weiss Plans, Vailly Aviation, as well as others that I cannot recall at this time.

The following is a list of articles that I have written:

Article	Magazine	Date
Top Flite J-3 product review	<i>Model Builder</i>	September 1983
Sand Fli construction article	<i>Model Builder</i>	September 1982
Shooting Documentation Photos	<i>RC Modeler</i>	June 1984
Totally Turbulent product review	<i>Scale RC Modeler</i>	August 1984
Modelers Love Aviation Too	<i>Pacific Flyer</i>	April 1987
Aircraft in Miniature	<i>Pacific Flyer</i>	March 1987
Scale Documentation	<i>Scale RC Modeler</i>	June 1987
Curtiss V-12 review	<i>RC Modeler</i>	May 1991
World War I Aerodrome Alabama Fly-in	<i>Pacific Flyer</i>	October 1994
QSAA Fly-in	<i>RC Report</i>	February 1998
QSAA Fly-in	<i>Flying Models</i>	May 1998
QSAA Fly-in	<i>RC Modeler</i>	May 1998
Full Size Aircraft	<i>High Flight</i>	Summer 1998
Shooting Documentation Photos	<i>Scale Model Research</i>	1993 to 2003
Using J-3 Interiors in Your P-51 Mustang	<i>Bob's Aircraft Documentation</i>	2002

That's it for now and I want to say that this has been a very enjoyable business and hobby. The vast majority of the people I have met and dealt with are the best in the world. They have helped to make me a better modeler and person. I love the business and will return to active modeling when I finally get to cataloging the 20,000 drawings I have in the next room.

*(signed) Bob Banka
October 2002*

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