



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of MIKE KEEDY



Written & Submitted by MK (10/2008); Edited by JS (10/2008), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

Mike Keedy submitted the following autobiographical recollections of Jimmy Allen in October of 2008.

JIMMIE ALLEN, REVISITED

By Mike Keedy

What a surprise! The year was 2004 and I had just entered the National Model Aviation Museum in Muncie, Indiana, when, in one of the prominent exhibits I saw a copy of the first model aircraft I had ever built. It was constructed a long time ago, but I remember it well.

That may be one of only a few things I remember well, because at the time of the visit I was 84 years old.

The exhibit to which I refer is one of the stars of the museum, featuring several model aircraft that were used back in the 1930s in a promotion by the Skelly Oil Company. That promotion included a daily radio program called “The Air Adventures of Jimmie Allen.”

Jimmie, a teenager, was a friend of an adult aviator called “Speed.” His last name escapes me,* but Speed took Jimmie with him on aviation adventure after adventure. These were Monday through Friday, fifteen minute radio episodes that kept my friends and me in suspense. They also kept us thinking about airplanes.

Listeners to that series of programs, mostly teenage boys, were encouraged to learn about aviation, even to the extent of building and flying models, and engaging in competition called the Jimmie Allen Air Races. Said competition was about the only kind of non-static competition we knew back then, rubber-powered free flight endurance. It was unique though, in that every contestant built the **same kind** of airplane. I feel sure that most contestants built it from a kit, purchasable from a hobby shop in Kansas City recommended by the radio program’s announcer.

For the first year of the Jimmie Allen Air Races, the model to be used was called the *Bluebird*. It was a high-wing monoplane (or a parasol, depending on your point of view) with a wingspan of about 38 inches. It had a huge propeller, to be carved from a balsa block. I just *had* to save up to buy a kit, even though I had never built a model of any kind before. That was not easy then because we were in the middle of the Great Depression, besides which my family was poor.

Lo, the centerpiece of the museum exhibit in front of me was that plane, Jimmie Allen’s *Bluebird*, the airplane that was built and flown by all contestants, including me! The airplane used in the second year of the Jimmie Allen Air Races, called the *Thunderbolt*,

*Speed's name was Robertson. Ed.

was hanging below it and to the left. A cabin model seemed to be “ear merging,” i.e., it seemed to be emerging from behind my ear. I did not recognize it but I guessed that it was probably the model used in the third year of the Jimmie Allen Air Races, a year when I did not compete.



2004: Mike Keedy in front of the Jimmie Allen Exhibit at the National Model Aviation Museum in Muncie, Indiana. Models on exhibit: (Top center) the *Bluebird* (according to his recollections, the Jimmie Allen Air Race’s first year competitor); (top left) Second year racer the *Thunderbolt*; (emerging from behind Mike’s ear) the *Sky Raider*

When I first opened my *Bluebird* kit, I had never seen a piece of balsa nor enjoyed the odor of banana oil or acetone. It was around 1933, and I was about thirteen years old. Airplane modelers were very scarce in the small town in which I lived: Auburn, Nebraska, population 3,000, situated 60 miles south of Omaha. Fortunately, I had a friend whose big brother knew something of the art of model building. He gave me some tutoring and he actually carved the big balsa propeller.

I was able to do a creditable job of finishing the building of the *Bluebird*, but was afraid to try to fly it. I knew nothing about making adjustments or launching, and besides, the model was beautiful. I loved just looking at it.

A newspaper headline *Keedy Enters Air Races*, to the surprise of my whole family, appeared in our local paper, the *Nemaha County Herald*. The story had clearly been sent to the paper by the Skelly Oil Company bunch. It explained that I was going to compete with my *Bluebird* (and there was a picture of it) on a certain date at the Omaha municipal airport.

Talk about a stimulus! My whole family thought that this was a wonderful idea, including an uncle who helped with expenses, and their names were all immediately entered on our calendar to watch and help me compete in the Jimmie Allen Air Races! ***And I had never flown the airplane!***

A trial launching really was in order, wouldn't you think? So did my dad! I tried one and crashed, so I rebuilt the fuselage and after that kept the *Bluebird* on the shelf.

The contest was held, as the article predicted, at the Omaha Municipal Airport. Each contestant was given three trials. One would wind up the rubber bands, walk to the starting line, and hand-launch the model while the official timer wielded the stopwatch. Those with the longest duration of flight would win. All contestants received a wristlet.

It was my turn. I walked to the starting position, released the propeller, and gave my plane a shove. It did a rolling dip and dived into the ground, smashing the fuselage. As I walked away, dejected, the timer said "well, you'll get a wristlet out of it anyway." And that was correct; that's all I got except the experience.

The next year, Skelly again scheduled the Jimmie Allen Air Races, this time with a new and smaller model called the *Thunderbolt*. By then I knew a lot more. I had built some other models during the year and knew how to adjust them, to tweak them to make them fly as one wanted them to. I bought a *Thunderbolt* kit, built the model, and worked on it to make it fly longer and longer. I even made a couple of non-disqualifying modifications to the design. One of those was a freewheeling propeller.

That year Omahans saw me take second place, with an endurance time of 1:30, while the first-place winner posted a time of 1:31. Yep, I missed first place by just one second! My picture appeared in the Omaha World Herald, where, as often happens, a reporter misspelled my name. My prize that year was a nice wristwatch, which, as the local paper said after interviewing me, I wore with pardonable pride.

I was now a model maker and I wanted a cabin model. The Jimmie Allen folks had not, as far as I knew, come up with any such thing, so I designed and built one of my own. It looked surprisingly like that model that I earlier described as "ear merging." That model turned out to be successful in competition. The model did not have a name, but won a grand prize at a competition sponsored by a college at Peru, Nebraska, which was near my home. There were four categories in the competition: endurance, altitude, distance, and speed. My model won all of them but Speed. Again, I made the newspaper with a picture of me and the model that I had designed and built.

That was about it for my career in model aeronautics. I did dabble a bit in the early stages of models with internal combustion engines, which I remember we called "gas models," but college came along, as did World War II, the pursuit of advanced college degrees and so on. I never lost my love of airplanes but I chose, or was chosen by, career objectives that demanded that I use my energy in other ways.

Today I am Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at Purdue University, living in Florida. During the intervening years, I fought in a war, obtained a degree in meteorology, became a flight instructor, owned, and flew a Cessna 175, two Comanches, and two Wacos. Today I occasionally do a bit of Radio Control model flying.



Mike Keedy and His Comanche 400



Mike Keedy and his Waco ZPF-6

Naturally, I am proud of a record like this. Would one suppose that Jimmie Allen and his crowd had any bearing on it? I don't know, what do you think?

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