
Biography of RUSSELL W. NICHOLS

Transcribed & Edited by SS (8/02)

Career:

- Worked at the AMA from 1942 to 1963; much of that time was spent as AMA executive director
 - AMA Leader Member
 - Served as chairman of AMA's education committee
 - Served as president of the Washington, D.C. Association of Model Airplane Clubs
 - Conducted radio programs on model aviation
 - Part of his AMA duties including serving as editor of the AMA's Model Aviation magazine
 - Elected AMA secretary/treasurer in 1943
-

The following memoriam ran after Russell Nichols' death in 1971. It most likely ran in Model Aviation magazine.

A special chapter in AMA's history was closed last May with the news that Russell W. Nichols has passed away. The news came eight years after he left the Academy, in 1963, a relatively quiet period following 20 very turbulent and progressive years during which Nichols was AMA's top man in the Washington, D.C., headquarters office.

Most of those 20 years Nichols had the title of AMA Executive Director, the highest salaried position in the Academy. But in the earlier years he had various titles and seldom much salary. Even after 20 years, the pay wasn't much; financial success was slow in coming to the AMA.

Russ Nichols' AMA career began in 1942, immediately following Pear Harbor. In those days, the Academy served as the technical section of the Air Youth Division of the National Aeronautic Association (the NAA). In early 1942 Nichols was appointed acting director of the NAA Air Youth Division and also headquarters director of the AMA. It was a confusing mixture of duties and responsibilities, which typified the interrelationship of AMA and NAA at the time.

But it was the beginning of a long period of meritorious service for Nichols. It followed 12 years of being a modeler, AMA Leader member, Chairman of the AMA's education committee and president of the D.C. Association of Model Airplane Clubs. He had also conducted radio programs on model aviation.

In the early days at Headquarters, Russ had many duties and little help. Included was the position of editor of the AMA publication, Model Aviation. On top of everything else he was named to be secretary-treasurer in AMA's election of officers for 1943.

It wasn't until after the war, in 1946, that Nichols got a more clearly designed job and took on the title of AMA executive director, which he retained until retirement. Those early postwar years also saw the emergence of AMA as a more independently operating division of NAA, with its own offices and staff.

Despite limited personnel and facilities, great progress in model aviation was achieved in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Those were the years of the great air youth meets sponsored by the Plymouth Corporation, more than a decade of Navy-hosted National Model Airplane Championships, 14 years of PAA (Pan American Airways) sponsored Payload and Cargo competitions and regular participation by U.S. teams in World Championship events.

It was a period of sponsorships by national organizations. Besides those mentioned, there was major support by the American Legion and the National Exchange Club. A major club achievement was the 1954 sponsorship, by the Convair division of General Dynamics, of the Free Flight World Championships at Suffolk County Air Force Base on Long Island, New York. During this period there were also the Air Youth State Championships sponsored by the Hobby Industry Association of America.

With all this activity the Academy growth was rapid, with over 22,000 members by the early 1960s. But this apparent success turned out to be only a step away from bankruptcy. The earlier years with plentiful sponsorships hid a need for a better financial base. Dues were too low for services rendered and expenses depended upon outside support. When the era of plush sponsorships faded in the late 1950s, the real problems and needs of the AMA came to light. Nichols was caught in a crossfire of internal politics resulting from a basic change in AMA decision-making. AMA members had previously voted directly on all major issues, but this gave way to representation by an elected board of directors, which became known as the Executive Council. In the transition many confusing demands and policy decisions were produced, which made life hectic for the still tiny Headquarters staff.

After 20 years of service and great progress, Nichols saw the organization floundering into the 1960s. What was previously an organization dominated by youth participation had turned into a largely adult activity. Many of the former programs and policies proved to be obsolete in this new atmosphere and there was much searching for solutions to the growth problems. The total impact of all this took its toll on Russ' spirit and ability to keep up.

He grew tired and discouraged. He also had health problems, compounded by a physical disability. There were also personal difficulties at home. Finally, in early 1963, it all came to a head and Nichols ended up in a hospital and stayed there for several months. When he left, he retired from the Academy in order to seek a quieter and less demanding position. He finally went to work for the federal government in Washington, and little more was heard from him until the news of his passing last May.

Because he left AMA during a crisis period, Nichols did not get the recognition to which he was entitled for 20 years of service. The timing simply wasn't appropriate. Since that time the Academy has revived and gone on to new spectacular achievements. During this period of new progress the past was left behind and the old AMA was largely forgotten.

But those who remember the old days know that what AMA is today it owes to what was done during Russ Nichols' 20 years of service. Much of what has been recently accomplished is a result of the lessons learned from the past. Nichols is gone, but not likely to be forgotten by

those who knew him best. His early efforts are constantly recalled to guide and influence the decision-making of today's AMA officers.

AMA today reflects what Russ Nichols contributed before. That in itself is a lasting memorial and tribute. Russ has paid his dues. His friends now wish him the calm he didn't have to enjoy while in the hot seat of AMA Headquarters. His was a turbulent tenure, but it is fitting that his time is remembered best for what was accomplished rather than the problems involved. Russ Nichols deserves our thanks and the chance to rest in peace.

- End -