
Biography of HENRY A. THOMAS

Modeler since 1926

Birth Date: May 25, 1914

AMA Number: 2004

Information submitted by HAT (3/03)

Transcribed & Edited by SS (3/03)

Career:

- Produced model designs for Testor Chemical Company
- Covered the AMA Nationals for Air Trails magazine
- Contributed to modeling magazines for more than 20 years
- Air Trails magazine ran his monthly "Sketchbook" feature for 20 years
- Was the first to propose flaps as control surfaces by coupling wing flaps and elevator; this idea is still relied upon in Control Line stunt models
- Illustrated several modeling books written by Bill Winter as well as others
- Worked as full-sized plane private and commercial pilot as well as an air show wing walker/parachute jumper
- Served in the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II
- Built his first gas model of his own design in 1934, sparking interest in gas models in his lifelong hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas
- His designs include the Edsel, Henry T., Spitfire and Pacemaker
- His Challenger, a Free Flight model, was kitted by the Ben Buckle Company of Great Britain

Honors:

- 1988 – AMA Hall of Fame
- 2002 – Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame

Henry submitted the following information through a form provided by the AMA History Program at the age of 88 in 2003. Unfortunately three strokes have affected Henry's memory and is no longer able to hear.

Henry started modeling at age 12. He took the initiative himself as there were no model kits available at the time. He designed and built his own models, having to build everything from scratch. He did get involved with a modeling club in Little Rock, Arkansas. Early on Henry was affiliated with the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) before the AMA was formed.

Having started out building his own models, it was only natural that Henry would continue to design his own models and frequently experimented with the designs, eventually producing model designs for Testor Chemical Company.

He also competed in the AMA Nationals, but due to memory loss from a stroke he is unable to recall when he participated. Aside from competing he also covered several of the Nationals for Air Trails magazine through writing and drawing sketches.

Henry found success in the publishing world. Along with covering the Nationals, Henry contributed for more than 20 years to Air Trails magazine, Model Airplane News magazines and other modeling magazine. He prepared a "Sketchbook" feature for Air Trails magazine for 20 years.

One of Henry's articles (*which is in his file in the National Model Aviation Museum Archives*) was the first proposal to recognize flaps as control surfaces. It also provided the linkage to

couple flaps and elevators. The idea became accepted throughout the United States and other countries and is still practiced for Control Line stunt models.

Henry also got involved a bit with book publishing. He helped illustrate several model books written by Bill Winter.

The following information comes from a press release dated November 21, 2002 after Henry was inducted into the Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame. It was written by Paul Fleming and submitted to the AMA History Program by Red Scholefield.

Arkansas Honors AMA Hall of Fame Member

By Paul Fleming

A distinguished model aviation personality has been instilled in the Arkansas Aviation Hall of Fame. In November 2002, Henry A. Thomas, a lifetime Little Rock native was recognized by the Arkansas Aviation Historical Society for his contributions to general aviation. Known to a worldwide population of model aviation enthusiasts as a great mentor and innovative pioneers, few are aware of his early experiences as a private and commercial pilot and air show wing walker/parachute jumper. Many of Arkansas' private, commercial and military pilots bear the imprint Henry left on them as youngsters. Henry was inducted into the AMA Hall of Fame in 1988.

Henry's early exposure to aviation may have started on the steps of the Arkansas State Capitol when he saw Charles Lindbergh after the solo flight to Paris, France. A few years later, in 1934 at the age of 19, he soloed an Aeronca C-3 after 45 minutes of dual instruction. This was soon followed by parachute jumping from a CommandAir bi-plane then manufactured in Little Rock. The teenaged dare devil was popular at county fairs and similar events. In World War II he served with the United States Army Air Force as a pilot instructor and a photo interpreter for a P-38 recon squadron. Interest in model aviation was never far behind. In fact, it stayed abreast of his role in real aviation. In the winter of 1934 he built his first gas model of his own design. It flew very well, he says. This kicked off great interest in gas model activity in his hometown of Little Rock. With Henry's guidance, the young flyers pioneered low-wing gas models before moving into speed and stunt Control Line flying. It was Control Line stunt that germinated in Henry's mind the idea of coupling wing flaps and elevators. An article published in the February 1948 issue of Model Airplane News magazine presented full details of his control coupling ideas. The practice continues worldwide today.

When marriage and children distracted his attention from general aviation, Henry opened an advertising agency. His natural skills as draftsman, designer, writer and craftsman were of finest quality. These attributes were threaded into his love for model airplanes. In a short time he caught the attention of several model airplane magazines. Construction articles on his original designs and his photo coverage of national contests became features. He provided illustrations for many books published by such companies as Scribners, Fawcett, Street & Smith and T.Y. Crowell.

Air Trails magazine ran his popular "Sketchbook" page for 20 years. Each month the magazine sent Henry a mailbag of letters containing ideas and suggestions from readers. Henry selected those he thought were useful. These he rendered into a sketch and short comment. The typical Sketchbook page contained eight or 10 suggestions.

He has been a proficient and prolific designer, builder and flyer of model airplanes ranging from solid scale, rubber power, Control Line, Free Flight gas and Radio Control (RC). His current interest is indoor rubber Free Flight. Many of Henry's designs are listed in catalogs and magazines. These include his Edsel, Henry T. and Spitfire. His Challenger, another Free Flight trophy winner, was kitted by the Ben Buckle Company of Great Britain. His favorite, the low-wing Free Flight, Pacemaker, appeared as a construction article in a 1940 issue of Air Trails magazine.

His many accomplishments in model aviation seem to overshadow his long-term involvement in general aviation. The Arkansas Aviation Historical Society believes his contribution has been a positive but transparent influence on young people who have pursued successful careers in aviation.

Henry is a consummate gentleman. A modest man, he is not shy, but politely reserved. He is not vain, but generously gives recognition and praise where he feels it due. It is little wonder why he is held in such high esteem by close and distant friends. He has devoted himself in a most unselfish manner to helping other people for more than 70 years. The list of aeromodelers who owe their current interests and skills to Henry A. Thomas is impressive. He is still active in local clubs where he goes out of his way to make people feel welcome. Perhaps his good friend, Bill Winter, said it best when he wrote, "No one I have ever known has, in the evidence of my continued experience, done more than this man."

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