
Autobiography of LOUIS G. VARGO

Modeler, Competitor, Designer

Modeler since 1935

Birth Date: July 5, 1925

AMA Number: 7098

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Modeling Career Highlights:

- * AMA record holder and Nationals winner, 1940
- * Worked at Midwest Model Supply for one year
- * Member of the Chicago Aeronauts
- * Evolved the Twin Gollywock design
- * Recipient of AMA Pioneer Award, 1998

"My professional career was built around the five university degrees I earned. Positions include both university professorships and aerospace research posts. (My bibliography includes about 30 published papers in four disciplines.) My early modeling efforts taught me to concentrate and work hard which greatly helped my entire career." - Louis G. Vargo (June 1997)

My earliest memories of modeling centered on a Comet Senior Dart kit I somehow acquired in 1936. The model was rubber-powered and the kit cost a quite large .50 cents. At age 11 and with no experience and little help (my father was from the sink-or-swim school of learning), the plane was difficult to build. I think it took me about a month or two to complete. I particularly remember that the wing-fuselage joining method was not clear to me at first from looking at the plans. Then a few days later, I figured it out. My Senior Dart flew like the full-sized racers it resembled – straight and fast.

Sometime in 1937, my parents bought me a Comet Curtis Robin (\$1) kit. Its 48-inch span seemed enormous at the time. After finishing it and hanging it in the living room, my mother was aghast. We had only three and a half rooms to work/live in and by this time, my year-younger brother had begun to chop balsa also. I don't remember any attempt to fly the Robin – perhaps because it was so fragile in the Chicago winds. Jumping ahead 58 years, a 1/2A Texaco flying scale came off the very same 1937 plans in 1997. It is now hanging in my living room.

About the early part of 1938, I discovered Model Airplane News (MAN) and was enticed by the ads to send off for a Bay Ridge Mike gas model kit and an Atwood Phantom engine. This sounds too easy. The \$3.95 and \$12.50 respectively did not come easily to my parents in those Depression days and without their help, my modeling career would have floundered many times. I taught myself to solder and got the old Phantom running somehow. While I was building the Mike, I read about the monster Torque for the first time in MAN. My Mike was not going to be defeated by old Torque, so I made the entire rear half of the rudder movable with an aluminum tube/wire hinge. About 30 degrees right deflection of the rudder should lick old Torque. It sure did and I ended up with the pieces of the Mike after the quickest right spiral in history.

The Mike experience somehow triggered my creativity. If they didn't design the kits strong enough, I would design one myself. Also, I would go to the local model shop and find the hardest and largest balsa strips they sold. The result was a three-pound missile of about 42-inch span with 1/4 inch square fuselage longerons, 1/8-inch diameter wire landing gear and a 1/4-inch

by ¾-inch wing spar! The Phantom was not up to keeping this bomb airborne, but to me the model represented freedom to design, build, and fly without constraints. I wish I had a snapshot of it.

I seem to recall a lull in modeling for me in 1939. I was just starting high school, had my first girlfriend, and was heavily into baseball. But I do remember seeing a contest for the first time and saying to myself that I'd like to compete. Also, I found out that the neighborhood retail hobby shops could be by-passed, since about three miles from my home was Midwest Model Supply where Wally Simmers and his elves actually made kits and cut balsa. I bought a Gollywock kit with the intention of flying in the 1940 AMA Nationals that MAN had informed me was to be held in Chicago in July. I sent in for my AMA License and started testing the Gollywock in about May. It flew well and, you guessed it, I lost it one week before the Nationals Mulvihill Stick event day. Could I build another in time? Well I did finish another the night before the contest. It flew right off the board and won Junior Mulvihill Stick when the granddaddy of all thermals snatched it on the third flight. My feet were not touching the carpet when I went to get my trophy at the Hotel Sherman banquet that evening. I got a call a few days later from someone who found the Gollywock about 20 miles away. I still have its rudder with the Midwest decal on it. My 1940 Nationals trophy is in the National Model Aviation Museum in Muncie, Indiana. The Nationals flights also gave me an AMA Record certificate, which came as a surprise in the mail around Christmas 1940.

From July 6, 1940 (the day of the Gollywock Nationals flights) to February 8, 1943 (the day I enlisted in the U.S. Navy and left for boot camp) was a period of only two and a half years. It seemed a long time then, but how fast two and a half years go by now. I would like to summarize my modeling activity during this period:

- Worked at Midwest Model Supply for about one year assembling kits, wrapping shipments and cutting balsa. Earned \$0.15 per hour cash, 15 cents per hour trade toward an Ohlsson 23 engine, which I still have. Wally Simmers was a good boss; we would go golfing if business were slow.
- Qualified for membership in the Chicago Aeronuts. Carl Goldberg was president of the club at this time. I learned to build and fly indoor rubber and HL glider through this association. Closest friends in the club were Bob DeBatty, Ed Lidgard, Nick Johnen and, of course, my brother Ed Vargo. We practiced indoor flying at the Purdue University field house (65 feet) and at Austin town hall (30 feet).
- Evolved the Twin Gollywock design with twin rudders and various one-bladed props (good airplane).
- Also built and flew the following: California Champ (great airplane); Playboy Sr.; Korda 1939 Wakefield; Nelder's Moffett Winner; Musketeer 54; Scientific Mercury; Good's Guff; about 10 original outdoor rubber models (stick and cabin); Huguelet B indoor stick; A/2 and "fly" indoor craze-models.

- Early Contest Record:

1st - 1940 US Nationals, Outdoor Stick Jr.

4th - 1941 US Nationals, Indoor Stick Jr.

2nd - 1941 Canadian Nationals, Outdoor Stick Sr.

2nd - 1941 Illinois State Champs, Outdoor Stick Sr.

2nd - 1941 Wisconsin State Champs, Outdoor Stick Jr.

9th - 1941 Mississippi Valley, St. Louis, Outdoor Stick Sr.

5th - 1941 Tri-Cities (Davenport) Outdoor Cabin Sr.

Several places (1st to 4th) - Chicago Park District Indoor Contests (stick and HLG)

I survived World War II after serving on an aircraft carrier in the Western Pacific and left active U.S. Navy service on February 7, 1946. Living in Oklahoma, I immediately began building and flying again. My design for Class B gas was called the Snarf and it took two first places in contests around Oklahoma City in the summer of 1946. I also went to the Wichita Nationals that year with a towline glider; got fourth place behind Korda in the 15 - 20 mph breeze.

Modeling was put on hold for me from late 1946 to 1954 because of full-time educational and work commitments. I got the Wakefield bug in 1954 and flew my design to first place in what were then called "eliminations." I did not do well in the semi-finals so I did not make the team for the finals on Long Island. I was going to MIT for a short course just after the finals, so I took some vacation time and accepted an invitation to fly proxy. I drew a Guatemalan model on the day of the infamous Long Island morning dew, which turned all models soggy. Did manage two maxes with it later in the day however.

Much of the four decades from 1954 to 1994 allowed little time for modeling. The small amount of building and flying I did was mainly to introduce my children to the activity. About ten years ago, I was retired and recuperated enough from illness to build some Old-Timers I always wanted to try. So along with a Gollywock, of course, I now fly a Yogi, an Ehling Flying Stick, Korda Speedsters (4 sizes), a Fubar, a Goldberg "C" Tractor (.02 version) and a 2/3 scale KG-2. At the 1995 U.S. Outdoor Championships, I won two fifth places. I am a current member of the Society of Antique Modelers, the National Free Flight Society, and the AMA.

Louis G. Vargo (6/97)

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For Prof. Vargo's bibliography listing his publications, book reviews, and presented papers please see: <http://members.cox.net/louisgvargo>