
Biography of C.O. WRIGHT

Birth Date: April 28, 1895

Transcribed & Edited by SS (4/03)

Career:

- Taught hundreds of youngsters how to build model airplanes in his basement
- Started attending the Nationals in 1939 and continued to do so faithfully
- Placed well in contests from 1946 on; accumulated over 100 trophies
- Placed second in Free Flight scale and second in helicopter at the 1961 Nationals
- Set a PAA Clipper cargo record in 1955
- Elected president of the AMA In 1948 and 1949
- Obtained a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Missouri, Columbia
- Served two years in World War I and was selected to study abroad at the University of Belfast, Ireland
- Was a high school teacher and then principal for 22 years; then served on the staff of the Kansas State Teachers' Association from 1932 to 1965
- Wrote numerous articles for modeling magazines; had two books published on education
- As AMA president convinced the Navy to sponsor the Nationals, which they did for 20 to 25 years

Honors:

- 1959 – AMA Fellow
- 1960 – Presented an award by Trans World Airlines for his interest in the progress and development of America's airline industry
- 1975 – AMA Hall of Fame
- 1978 – National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame

The following is an article on C.O. Wright written by William Effinger that ran in the February 1962 issue of Model Airplane News magazine.

Pioneers: C.O. Wright

By William Effinger

Not sure that the claim of oldest is a distinction that C.O. would claim, most active, yes. Be that as it may, there are few who can claim to have given their all to a hobby as long as the pioneer we honor. Past president of the Academy of Model Aeronautics, C.O. Wright has given his all to the cause of modeling.

The story of C.O. Wright, past president of the AMA, exemplifies the combination of the best in the teaching profession and the best in model building.

Whenever anyone asks, "Who is the oldest contestant this year at the Nationals," it is not hard to say, "The most active old timer is C.O."

C.O., as he is known to everybody who flies in national competition, is that all-time great C.O. Wright, 65 years young (in 1962), executive secretary of the Kansas State Teachers' Association and editor of its magazine, is a man we should all know a lot more about.

C.O. himself represents more than one man. He is the symbol of dedicated schoolteachers all over America. Teachers who show that spirit of leadership are found only by competing with their students on a man-to-man basis. Teachers who teach by doing and then by doing it better than others. We haven't been able to find out what the letters C.O. stand for, but everybody in model aviation knows that C.O. means tough competition to fly against!

C.O. Wright was born in Santa Fe, Missouri, and during his lifetime has been active as a teacher in Acheson and in Topeka. With all this railroad influence it is surprising to see that C.O. did not become a railroad enthusiast.

But C.O. was to become a tinkerer and model builder by destiny. His father was a hardworking craftsman, a blacksmith by day and, under an acetylene lamp, a watch repairman by night, supporting C.O. and the six other little Wrights. Young C.O. watched his father and learned craftsmanship at an early age. By the time he was six, he could be found helping his father at the drill press.

A few years later, with the advent of the gasoline automobile, the family moved to Mexico, Missouri, where the elder Wright opened a machine shop. On the side, C.O. and his brother opened a fix-it and bicycle repair shop. As the brothers grew older they graduated into the motorcycle business. C.O. moved his half of the business to Columbia, Missouri, where he was able to work his way through a bachelor's and master's degree at the University of Missouri.

While at the university, C.O. didn't limit his activities to being a bookworm. He was a championship debater and also raced motorcycles. He got his fair share of broken bones along with higher learning.

World War I saw C.O. in France, based at Dijon, overhauling motorcycle and aircraft engines. While there he was chosen to go to Queens University in Belfast, Ireland. There is a story, unconfirmed, that C.O. and a buddy went A.W.O.L. to go to Dublin to witness firsthand the history-making revolution and watch the revolutionists take over.

After the war, it was back to the United States, motorcycle racing and school teaching. In 1921, he set the record for a 25-mile dirt course and wound up the season with seven broken ribs. During the years that followed, C.O. settled down to his profession of teaching in Atchison, Kansas, where he was principal of the high school for 10 years. He got himself married and raised a daughter, Alice, and a son, Bob.

In 1935, C.O., with the help of his wife Dorothy, wrote the sociology textbook that was adopted by the state as standard.

Meanwhile, the children were growing up. Young Bob took an interest in aviation, but was mostly interested in studying and reading. C.O. saw the opportunity to get him active.

“You don’t have to wait until you grow up,” he said. “We can start building model airplanes right now.”

It all started in the basement of C.O.’s home and it wasn’t long before other boys in the area were using the Wright’s basement as their model building headquarters. Since that time, literally hundreds of boys, many of them champs, have learned model building in C.O.’s basement. Bob himself went on to win the Nationals while in high school then he went on to Carnegie Tech and a career as a nuclear physicist. C.O. loves to refer to him as his “abstract egghead” son.

C.O. has attended every Nationals since the 1939 meet in Detroit, Michigan. He seldom wins, but has placed “in the money” in every meet since 1946. His trophy collection has gone past the 100 mark. This is the point at which a wife usually makes a decision, “Dust them yourself or out they go!” Last year (1961) at the Nationals in Dallas, C.O. managed to take second in Free Flight scale and second in helicopter. As far as national records go, C.O. can point with pride to setting the P.A.A. Clipper cargo record in 1955.

The Academy of Model Aeronautics recognized a great leader when they elected him their president in 1948 and 1949. In 1953 he was given a citation, signed by General Jimmy Doolittle, “for distinguished service to aviation.” In 1959, the educational director of Trans-World Airlines had C.O. designated as a TWA ambassador in recognition of promotion of air travel among the teaching profession. Today C.O. is a much sought after public speaker throughout the Midwest and he invariably travels by air.

Two of C.O.’s favorite models are his 1-½-to-the-foot scale model of the Fairchild 24, which placed second in the 1958 Nationals and his 1908 French Antoinette. C.O. admits he could never get the Antoinette to fly right. Says the pilot, if he had been smart, he would have built a model first instead of getting himself killed in the full-scale plane.

C.O. likes young people. His office is like a storefront window in the Kansas State Teachers’ Association Building. Right on the ground floor, across the street from the Topeka High School campus, C.O. can sit and watch the students. “Their youthful exuberance is catching. Their smiles match the bright colors of their cars and costumes...it is a joy to be with the kids.” But this exuberant wit is contagious, actually, as the kids are catching some of C.O.’s.

Everyone model aviation has to thank C.O. for his part in promoting model aviation; his recognized leadership every time congressional help has been needed in obtaining flying fields. If you are having trouble locally in the organization of your model activities, seek out one of your more sympathetic schoolteachers. Tell him about C.O. and what he has done. Ask him to help – most teachers will do their best.

The following information is taken from the AMA Hall of Fame application submitted by Edmund B. Turner on behalf of C.O. Wright on April 29, 1974. C.O. was inducted into the AMA Hall of Fame in 1975 as a result. For a copy of the original Hall of Fame application, see C.O.'s file in the National Model Aviation Museum Archives. Contact the AMA librarian for assistance.

Information on C.O. Wright

Born Santa Fe, Missouri, April 28, 1895. One of seven children of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wright.

Moved 20 miles to Mexico, Missouri where he attended grade and high school from which he was graduated.

With his older brother, Roy, worked his way through high school running a bicycle and motorcycle and clock repair shop.

Major sport in his youth was motorcycle racing (on the then dirt roads).

Holds AB and MA degrees from the University of Missouri, Columbia. Undergraduate work interrupted by World War I. Additional graduate work at Yale University and UCLA, Columbia University and the University of Kansas.

Served in France two years in World War I in the motor transport division, primarily near Dijon. At the close of World War I, one of the few G.I.'s awarded a year's college work abroad prior to their return to the U.S. He spent one year at the University of Belfast, Ireland. (Awards a forerunner of present G.I. Bill.)

Married Edytha Battersby. They had two children, Robert W. and Hazel Alice. Their mother died when the children were very small.

Later married Dorothy Grauerholtz (one of his teachers where he was principal in the Atchison High School), his late wife's closest friend. Dorothy reared the children. A former teacher, she later became a leading therapist at the Children's School and Hospital, the Menninger Foundation. Dorothy died in 1964.

Married Ruth Stout in 1966, a member of his professional staff of the Kansas State Teachers' Association and former high school teacher of his two children.

Professional Career

Reporter, Mexico (Missouri) Daily Ledger and Columbia (Missouri) Tribune.

Teacher and later principal at Atchison High School where he served for 22 years.

Staff of the Kansas State Teachers' Association from 1932 to 1965, first as associate secretary and then as executive secretary, a position he held for 30 years until his retirement at the age of 70. Editor of The Kansas Teacher magazine for 25 years.

Author:

- Two books – a high school sociology text, A Dynamic Society (co-author) and A History of Kansas Education.
- Numerous articles in The Kansas Teacher (in addition to monthly editorials); The NEA Journal, American Modeler, Model Airplane News and other magazines
- Several chapters, yearbooks of American Association of School Administrators.

Voluntary Professional Service

Elected twice as president of the National Association of Secretaries of State Teachers Associations (NASSTA); the position came to be known as the dean of state secretaries.

Elected twice as president of the Educational Press Association of America

Member, several terms, of the Joint Committee of the American Legion and the National Educational Association.

Yearbook Commission, American Association of School Administrators.

Voluntary Services, Other Areas

Member, Hi-Y Model Legislature Program Organizing Committee from 1947 to 1967.

Helped organize and served on the board for many years, Kansas Blue Cross/Blue Shield, from 1942 to 1955.

Helped organize and served on the board for many years, Kansas Council for Children and Youth.

President, Academy of Model Aeronautics.

Honors (not a complete list)

Kansas State Teachers' Association award for distinguished service; also was made executive secretary emeritus.

Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia – special master teacher award.

National Education Association, Division of Field Operations and Urban Services – award for leadership in raising Kansas to the top in membership during his tenure as executive secretary. (Award made 1965 – first of its kind and none since)

Kansas Hi-Y Youth and Government Program – Founders Commemorative Award presented for foresight, interest and confidence in Kansas youth.

Kansas State Federation of Labor – as an outstanding Kansan for contributions made to the state of Kansas in its growth and development during Kansas' first 100 years.

National Education Association, Legislative Division – certificate of appreciation in recognition of significant contributions to the commission.

Honors (model aeronautics-oriented)

Pan American Airways – various awards over about a 10-year period

Trans World Airlines, 1960 – For sincere interest in the progress and the development of America's airline industry.

National Committee to Observe the 50th Anniversary of Powered Flight – for distinguished service to aviation (1953)

Academy of Model Aeronautics, 1959 – Made an honorary fellow of the Academy.

Honor: Only Kansas citizen to date to (as of 1974) have been publicly censured and called before legislative committees of the Kansas Legislature – an ordeal with much publicity, but considered by him and his colleagues as an honor since his statement of facts caused embarrassment to some legislators who constantly claimed Kansas schools ranked high in the nation and since the coverage was helpful in moving good education legislation through the legislature and into law.

Miscellaneous

Participant and sometimes leader of groups in:

- White House Conference on Education – 1945 and 1955
- White House Conference on Children and Youth – 1940 and 1950
- Two conferences of the National Citizens' Committee for Public Education
- Has personally met each President of the United States beginning with Franklin Roosevelt
- Promoted several Governor's Conferences on Education within the state
- Instrumental in securing several grants from the Kellogg Foundation for the improvement of educational journalism among the states

Commentary (especially related to activity in model aeronautics)

The most important work C.O. feels he did as president of the AMA was with the Navy in getting it, cooperatively with the Academy, to sponsor the Nationals for 20 to 25 years, therefore eliminating the cost for the Academy. In connection with other educational responsibilities when in Washington, D.C. he worked with U.S. Senator Frank Carlson from Kansas who helped him contact Secretary of the Navy Forrestal in the Pentagon to initiate sponsorship. In later years with the assistance of Senator Carlson and Senator James Pearson he continued these contacts in order to continue the sponsorship. Because the Academy lacked funds, C.O. also spent about \$2,000 of his own money in these endeavors.

Second, he, with others, was instrumental in getting changes in regulations regarding radio control frequencies in order to get citizens' band licenses.

Further, he helped set up the Pan-American payload events and won numerous awards from Pan-Am, usually in the form of watches or bonds.

His favorite events and wins are as follows:

1. First in Free Flight scale with the Marie Antoinette in Philadelphia, 1961; Dallas, 1962; Los Alamos, 1963; Willow Grove, 1964
2. First in international record with PAA cargo, Los Alamos, 1955 and numerous other PAA events
3. Numerous rubber jobs
4. Helicopter events
5. Radio Controlled (RC) events

Beginning in 1939 at Detroit, he has been a regular participant in most national model meets up to and including the one held at the Naval Air Station, Willow Grove, outside of Chicago sometime around 1970. He has attended many regional events as well, particularly the Southwest region in Dallas and also the Midwest, Mississippi Valley and Missouri state meets. Though he won many trophies, it was always more important for "his boys" to win than for his own flights to place.

His model plane building began as C.O. made an effort to build rapport with his small son, Bob, after his mother's death. This mutual interest in model building and flying has continued to the present (1974).

Later he developed a following of boys who needed a father image, a friend, a place to create or just a place to whittle, experiment, talk or be silent. The numbers grew and as boys grew up and moved away others replaced them. The Wrights' basement became not only a fun place for any boy who wanted to come, but also a therapeutic experience for many. On this latter point, a member of the Menninger Foundation staff said C.O. accomplish as much with "his boys" during the evenings (of what were often six- to seven-day work week) as therapists on the Menninger staff were achieving with their patients.

Distance was no factor when it came to loading a station wagon with boys and their models and going to regional and national meets. It did mean staying in inadequate motels and eating hamburgers instead of steak so the boys would learn responsibility for paying their way (though often subsidized inconspicuously by C.O.).

The Wright basement still overflows with planes, parts and materials. The interest persists by the hobbies of model building, furniture building, refinishing and upholstering have given way to a more sedentary repairing of old clocks or building new ones, and the once diversified victory garden is now primarily a small but productive tomato patch.

Commentary (added without C.O.'s sanction)

Throughout his life he has continued to combine the mechanical and philosophical bent of his early youth. His professional life has been devoted, through the Kansas State Teachers' Association and the National Education Association and related organizations, to promoting legislation and policies that would improve both the educational program and the profession at state and national levels. Not content with getting the laws enacted or the policies agreed upon, he went to great lengths to make them work.

Quiet listener, philosopher and scholar; debater and tenacious father; journalist, writer, editor; teacher and administrator as well as counselor, C.O. is an amazing admixture of wisdom, respect for others, patience and courage, who has always placed children and youth first, whether he was working for improved quality of education, higher standard in the education profession or building model airplanes.

- End -