
Autobiography of AL BORER

Modeler since the early 1940s

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The following is an autobiography by Al Borer, retired Boeing Engineer, written in 1993 for the Boeing BEAMS newsletter.

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How a Kid Got Started Building Model Airplanes

It is often mentioned when the subject of “how I got started building model airplanes” is discussed, the name of someone, a mentor or teacher, was instrumental in getting a young person started on a lifelong hobby interest.

Back in Minneapolis, in the mid-1930s, I was first exposed to stick-and-tissue models when my future brother-in-law helped me build a 10-cent, Donald F. Duncan-designed *Great Lakes Trainer* kit. I did most of the work as I remember, getting the fuselage into the classic (for a beginner) “banana” shape. The model was finished, and wonder of wonders, it actually flew!

On and off through junior high, I made just about all the 10-cent Comet kits available, with some of the 25-cent models thrown in, too. In 1937, a couple of buddies and I would go to a little hole-in-the-wall neighborhood grocery store for a bottle of Pepsi and noticed the guy running the store had a table in back with “big” balsa sticks (1/8th -inch square.) We had not used anything over 1/16th -inch square. There was lots of sheet balsa, with shavings all over the floor.

We showed some curiosity and it was not long before we all had some “big sticks,” sheet balsa, and model plans in our hands, going out the door with instructions and coming back with a frame of a Class “C” Outdoor Stick contest model finished and ready to cover.

The name of the guy was Conrad Renning, a well-known contest flyer in Minneapolis. He won many rubber events (Wakefield, Moffett, Cabin, and Stick). We completed our models with his help and he took us out to the flying field to test fly our creations.

We learned the proper use of thrust-line adjustments, rudder tabs, wing warp, center of gravity location, and all the necessary tools to get a model to fly a proper, consistent pattern. According to Connie, it was always “right turn under power and left turn in the glide.”

His models always had a spectacular “right corkscrew climb” and a “floating left glide,” so when he sensed a thermal, he usually “cored” it all the way until the propeller folded. By then, it was almost out of sight, and sometimes the model was lost. This was before any type of dethermalizer (DT) was used and no “Max,” so one flight could win it all. An example of this was Dick Korda’s flight of his 1939 Wakefield on the Bendix Golf Course in New Jersey. On the first flight of that contest, his famous model, the Korda *Wakefield*, made a 43 minute, 10 second flight.

In 1940, I was fortunate to win a trip to the Chicago Nats by winning the Class "C" Rubber Stick event at the Minnesota Free Flight Championships. My trip was sponsored by a civic organization, the "40 and 8 Club." As a 16 year-old, I had the chance to actually see the famous Korda fly and to observe the great camaraderie of all modelers staying at the same hotel, testing their engines until the wee hours of the morning. It was really wild...!

Many years went by without much of any model building because of military service, attending the University of Minnesota, and other distractions. However, the seeds of modeling were there and only needed a bit of fertile ground to sprout.

With a teaching degree (Bachelor of Arts in Industrial Arts) and no job in sight, I was interviewed by a Boeing representative, whose office was a used card table and folding chairs in the U.S. Employment Office. I was hired as a mechanic because I showed that I could read blueprints. I was to make \$1.43/hour and worked on the RB50 Modification Program outside during the winter.

After a couple of months of this, I was ready for an inside job. With my degree, a position in Industrial Engineering was possible, so I jumped at it. I spent fifteen years at Methods, Loads, Scheduling, and Forecasting.

My modeling knowledge really came in handy. I know my way around aircraft structure. It paid off all through my Boeing career as an instructor on "Bomarc" Propulsion and Electrical Power Systems. My last assignments were in manufacturing, engineering, and again, modeling experience made it a lot easier.

Now retired, I know model building is for a lifetime. It never gets old. To close my story, I want to commend the Everett Group for their effort to bring modeling to young people. With mentoring and fostering the love of the freedom of flight, (seeing one's own crafted model take to the air), we will have many new fliers. We need the "kids" (yes, of all ages), but mostly the young kids to get the "bug" and carry on the hobby and science of aerodynamics and Free Flight modeling, building, and flying.

-Al Borer



Al and Piper Vagabond
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