



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the CHICAGO AERONUTS

Since the 1930s



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Louis G. Vargo, AMA #7098, composed and submitted the following history in 2006 to the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program.)

An Early History of the Chicago Aeronuts

Perhaps no other aeromodeling club had such an auspicious beginning as the Aeronuts. Carl Goldberg's hobby shop became the focus of modeling activity in Chicago in 1936. Experienced builders and fliers were attracted to Carl by his contest record during the first few years that model aviation had any organized form (from about 1932). He also drew people to his shop and the club by his friendly and helpful personality. The shop was near Lane Technical High School so that a pool of serious, curious, and bright young men was there as potential customers. Many, bit by the airplane bug, became nationally known competitors. The strength of the club's early appeal was shown also by the membership of almost all the "South Side" contest fliers (Wally Simmers for example) even though Lane Tech was on the north side of the city. A central meeting place was soon established.

Meetings of the Aeronuts could be described as "technical sessions." The emphasis was always on novel and better ways to design and build. Flying techniques were often debated. However, it is not accurate to think of the membership of the Aeronuts as all nerds-of-their-time. Free spirits such as Simmers and Fromm kept things humorous and lively.

In addition to this technical information sharing, the club had two specific goals in this pre-WWII era:

1. To capture and hold as many national records as possible.
2. To compete in local inter-club contests with rival clubs such as the "Riser Riders." These contests had all the intensity of a Cubs-White Sox game. They were usually held "off-season," i.e. in the winter.

As an aside to this club history, the writer remembers an inter-club contest between the Aeronuts and the same Riser Riders in the winter of '41-'42. The temperature was about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, with a wind-chill below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, but sunny. It was an outdoor rubber-powered competition. I took first place in this contest, and as a relatively new Aeronut 16 years of age, I was very proud and honored to do my best for my club. This was the day I lost my first twin-Gollywock, named by Al Heinrich of Aerodyne and known in the approved old-timer lists as the "Vargowock."

By the early 1940s, Aeronuts held over one-half of all indoor AMA national records! Having the 132nd Infantry National Guard armory available through 1940 was certainly a help. Also,

a member, Frank Nekimken, was a ranking employee of the Chicago Park District. Frank did much in sponsoring workshops and flying sessions in the smaller gymnasia under control of the District. One can learn quite a bit about indoor flying with a miked baby-ROG (Rise off Ground) in a room with a thirty-foot ceiling.

There are two examples of outstanding Aeronuts of this period before January 1, 1943, the official end of the old-timer era per the Society of Antique Modelers. Milton (Butch) Huguelet was the first AMA individual national champion. At the 1938 Nats, he captured first, second, third and fifth places in the hotly contested Senior Indoor and Outdoor Stick and Cabin events. His was a truly remarkable showing to start the AMA individual championships.

Secondly, there was Ed Vargo. In 1941-1942, as a Junior, he won first place in B-Gas at the AMA Nats, a first in B-Gas and Indoor Scale at the Canadian Nats in Toronto and enough places at the Illinois State Championships in Springfield to become the overall Junior State Champion. Earlier in 1941, he set a national record in the Class-C Outdoor Stick Junior rubber-powered category at a contest at Davenport. Then to top off an amazing year of modeling, Ed set national records in the Indoor Ornithopter and Autogiro events.

In 1946, Ed Lidgard, an Aeronut and former co-worker of Carl Goldberg's at Comet Model, wrote an article for *Air Trails* (September issue) briefly describing the club and including photographs of many of the old members. Of those shown, and to my best knowledge, only Bob DeBatty, Otto Curth, James Tangney, Leo Vartanian, and the writer are still alive. We remember all the others.

-Louis G. Vargo, February 23, 2006

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