



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of JAMES (JIM) H. MESSER

May 4, 1930 – December 5, 2008

Modeler since 1941



Written by JM (1/16/2003); Transcribed and edited by JS (11/2007), Updated by JS (12/2008), Reformatted by JS (10/2009)

The following is autobiography was published in Who's Who in AMA, 2003, District V.

A Lifetime in Model Aviation

This is a story about me and my love for the art of building and flying model airplanes. I was born in Olean, New York and had two brothers, Bob and Bill. We grew up in oil-field country. Our dad was an oil well shooter, a very dangerous occupation.

The year was 1937, and there was no television, so kids had to invent things to do to use up their time. Trips to the city were at most once a week, so we played ball, rode bikes, and hung out in the drilling rigs nearby, but during the winter, we needed something constructive to do. Building rubber-powered model airplanes was the answer. Dad built us a large table in the basement and we were each assigned a portion of it. We built just about every model that Comet kitted and within a couple of years, we had them flying off into the nearby woods. To put it mildly, we were getting pretty darn good.

Every weekday, we walked to a two-room schoolhouse about one mile away in Knapp Creek, and beginning in 1939, my teacher saw to it that I had a building board available so that I could construct model airplanes while she taught the other two classes in the same room. I just could not wait to complete a model so that I could get started on a new one.

Beginning in 1941, two friends and I started a paper route. One of my customers, Ken Koeppel, had a model of a Comet *Zipper* and a Comet *Clipper* in his shed. These were real gasoline-powered models, and I was immediately hooked. It was not long until I purchased a *Zipper* kit (my first gas model) and an Ohlsson 23 engine to power it.

I joined both the Olean Model Airplane Club (now the STARS) and the AMA in 1941. I proudly boast 64 years [as of 2005] of consecutive membership in those two organizations. Brother Bill has 61 years.

During the war years, 1941 through 1947, we flew Free Flight models and attended many meets, both in the US and in Canada. I won my earliest first place trophy in 1945 for high time in Class B Free Flight over five consecutive meets held in Buffalo, New York, sponsored by J. N. Adam and Company. By now, both Bob and I were getting proficient at adjusting our models, and we won lots and lots of prizes up until 1947, when we graduated from high school and went on to college.

During those same years, we also became interested in U-Control models. In the beginning, they were simply converted Free Flight models, and the advantage was that they could be flown in our side yard. I designed my first U-Control model in 1944 at the age of 14; a Stinson *105* powered by a Tiger Bunch .45 engine.

From then on, I designed many of the models that I flew in Free Flight competition. That is where I learned all about center of gravity, incidence, up-thrust, down-thrust, and a whole lot more.

I was sixteen in 1946. Twelve members of Olean Model Airplane Club (OMAC) made the trip to Bethpage, Long Island to compete in the Mirror Model Flying Fair. I flew a Goldberg *Zipper* and a Goldberg *Interceptor*. There were 1122 contestants and 150,000 spectators! I even got my picture on the front page of the New York Mirror newspaper while in the processing line.

In 1948, the Plymouth Motor Corporation in Detroit Michigan sponsored the Second International Model Plane Contest for the benefit of the top 500 modelers worldwide and I was invited. What an honor! They lined us up in groups of five and took our picture. The plaque I received for being a part of this great event is one of my most prized trophies.

Starting in 1949, I attended the University of Cincinnati where I earned a degree in Mechanical Engineering in 1953. Before that, however, in June of 1952, I married my high school sweetheart, Peggy Tapp. Over the next 20 years, we had nine children — six girls, and three boys. We moved back to Olean, New York where all of the children were raised.

I continued flying models all this time, and in 1970, I won my first Nats trophy, a second place in Class B Free Flight. Two years later, my son, Dick, won a first place Nats trophy in Class ½A Free Flight at the age of 10. He also won first place at the Canadian Nats the following year. That was the end of the Free Flight days as we are now well into radio-controlled models.

Bob dropped out of modeling after getting married, but Bill and I continued and were right there when the first radio-controlled models came onto the scene. We started (I believe in 1957) with a single-channel radio purchased from Germany. That was before any were advertised and available in the US. It was a disaster! Later on, we purchased a Citizenship 465, and we were then able to guide the model around in the air. However, there were many flyaways, mostly due to battery problems.

Bill and I continued into eight-channel reed systems, but things did not get good until Bob Dunham made me one of the very first Orbit 7-14 digital systems. From then on, things just got better and better. In 1971, both Bill and I switched to Pro-Line equipment, and that lasted for twenty years.

The highlight of my modeling career was in 1975, when the STARS club in Olean built six ¼-scale Bristol *Scouts* (designed by me and Bob Dunn) powered by converted industrial gasoline

engines. I believe these were the first 1/4-scale models flown anywhere, and the STARS club received much notoriety all over the world. It was the beginning of Giant Scale as we know it today.

The models were first flown as a squadron in 1977 in Rhinebeck, New York. Initially we used two-gear Webra Speed 61 engines, and then converted Roper gasoline engines, but George Privateer and I changed to a Quadra 35 in 1977, possibly the first two Quadra engines ever sold in the US. The performance of these engines/airplanes was so good that I called Ron Schettler in Canada and became the first Quadra dealer in the US under the name Jim Messer's Quality Model Products.

Remember now, these accomplishments were all done at a time when there were no engines, not propellers, not wheels, no nothing for big Scale models. We made our wheels out of wood on a lathe and carved our own propellers from a block of Maplewood, using a reference manual for Volkswagen-powered aircraft as a guide. It was a challenge indeed, but we changed model aviation for the better.

Jim Messer's Quality Model Products remained in business for twelve years, specializing in Giant Scale engines, accessories, and kits. My 1/4-scale *Ercoupe* and Piper *Tomahawk* kits were two of the first to hit the market. We had a booth at the Toledo Show for eleven consecutive years, and I got to know hundreds of Giant Scale modelers from around the country. I retired from my engineering job in 1986 and sold the business to Dave Reid, now known as Reid's Quality Model Products.

My wife and I moved to Sebring, Florida in the summer of 1994. We built a new house in Golf Hammock and it is a great place to live. I joined the Highlands Radio Control Club (HRCC) and we have the best flying field that I have ever seen. It was provided to us by the county, free of charge. Other clubs should take note of this!

Upon arriving in Sebring, I started designing Scale models and making kits for club members free of charge. So far, we have constructed 54 Scale models: 1/5 *Ercoupes*, 1/4 Taylor *E-2 Cubs*, 1/3 *Ercoupes*, 1/3 Aeronca *Sedans*, and 30% Stinson *SR-10s* to name a few. This program was made possible by an event that happened back around 1980 when I stumbled onto a cache of balsawood totaling about 13,000 board feet. I was able to purchase it for \$750. I used about half of it while making kits for the business but I still have a lifetime supply so I give it away in the form of free kits to club members.

Our very first project involved the construction of five 1/5-scale clipped-wing *T-Crafts*. I would be willing to bet that no other club in the country has ever done what we did – and that was to build the five airplanes and then test fly them all on the same day! It was a great day for the HRCC club, and everybody turned out to see it happen.

I have been in this hobby now for 65 years and have witnessed many changes, especially with the advent of Radio Control. I first saw a radio-controlled model fly at the 1948 Plymouth Meet in

Detroit, when Bill and Walter Good put on a demonstration for all to see. I was only 18 years old then; I did not have a clue about radio waves and I was impressed to say the least. I never dreamed at the time what the impact of that event would have on my later life. Only nine years later, radio-controlled models became a reality to everyone in the hobby.

In 1980, I was at the organizational meeting of the International Miniature Aircraft Association (IMAA) at Toledo, Ohio and became a Pioneer Sponsor of that organization (PS-69.) I am the current secretary of the HRCC. I try to design at least one new Scale model every year and share that design with others where possible. My immediate project is the design of a 40%-scale Piper *J-3 Cub* for 100 cc gasoline engines, staying within the 55-pound weight limit imposed by the AMA.

I will conclude this story by introducing you to my very fine and loving family, all of which have taken part and encouraged me to stay in this hobby as long as I have. My sons, Dick and Mark, have become full-scale pilots, and Dick is currently building his own 200 HP Vans *RV-6A*. My wife and I are proud of all of our children.

This PDF is property of the Academy of Model Aeronautics. Permission must be granted by the AMA History Project for any reprint or duplication for public use.

AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

