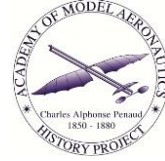




The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of WILLIAM (BILL) EDWARD NOONAN



April 3, 1923 – December 11, 2007

Written by JM (06/2018), reformatted and edited by JS (07-08/2018)

The following written by John McAvoy, who sent it in to the AMA History Project in July of 2018.

Biography of William Edward Noonan

April 3, 1923 – December 11, 2007
Member of San Diego FAC Scale Staffell
AMA Number: 96195

Submitted by John McAvoy (6/2018)

Ruth Buchanan Sachs and the city of St Louis, Missouri welcomed William Dwight Shepherd into the world on April 3rd, in the spring of 1923¹. On that day the St. Louis area had light rain and an average temperature of 53°F². Flying would need to wait; probably a day best spent indoors building models, or painting.

William's father, Romaine Fielding, gave William Shepherd his birth name¹. 'William' was certainly a suitable choice, considering Romaine's own birth name (William Grant Blandin) and Ruth's father's name (William R. Sachs). Both of his parents were artists of sorts; Ruth Sachs is credited with writing the story to the movie '*A Woman's Man*', which starred Fielding in 1920³. Romaine, an actor and prolific writer/director of the silent film era, was known for his intense, unconventional and increasingly strange westerns⁴. He typically filmed his movies on location in harsh and hostile environments, and was not always quick to portray Hispanics as the villain. His writing (and thus his movies) usually depicted both a more compassionate side of Hispanic characters and an accurate representation of their culture⁵. Most of his films unfortunately were lost in a 1914 Lubin Company film vault fire in Philadelphia. Fielding died in 1927 at age 60 from a blood clot following a tooth infection. Additional sources on Romaine Fielding can be found at the end of this article.

Ruth Sachs married Robert Edward Noonan circa 1928 and gave birth to Carol B. Noonan in 1930⁶. About the same time Robert adopted William, changing his name to William (Bill) Edward Noonan¹. The Noonan family spent their early years in St Louis.

48 days after Bill's fourth birthday, Charles Lindbergh landed his '*Spirit of St. Louis*' at Le Bourget Field, Paris on the evening of May 21, 1927. *Spirit's* namesake was derived from the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce funding the construction of the Ryan NYP (New York to Paris) special. Ryan Airlines built the silver, single engine, one-manned aircraft to Mr. Lindbergh's specifications in San Diego, California. After the Wright Flyer, *Spirit* is arguably the second

most important aerospace artifact in U.S. History and its effect on the American youth in the late 1920s cannot be underemphasized. The aeromodeling hobby peaked in popularity at this time period⁷ and there can be no question that young Bill was caught up in the fever pitch. Going for his first airplane ride at the age of six furthered his life-long interest in Golden Age aircraft.

Robert moved his family to Boulder City in September 1934 in search of work. Bill chose to ride in the rumble seat of the Ford coupe for the three day journey⁸. Bill's stepfather worked as an engineer[†] on the construction of Boulder Dam from 1934 to 1936. You may know it as Hoover Dam, as the Bureau of Reclamation changed its name in 1947. When Bill was 13 his family moved west to San Diego, California⁸. Bill graduated from San Diego High School in 1942, where he participated in the aviation and camera clubs. After high school Bill attended and graduated from the Art Center College of Design in Southern California⁹. During this time period three of his control-line designs were published in *Air Trails* magazine. The Copperhead sport model features a modular design approach with removable wings, which would remain a hallmark of many of his future jumbo-scale free flight designs. His early construction articles with their accompanying calligraphy, illustrations, photography and writing show remarkable talent for a 22 year old.

After graduation from college, Bill worked for the Barnes-Chase Advertising Agency where he eventually headed up their art department⁹. Bill then worked for the *San Diego Daily Journal*, where he met and dated Eleanor Ingham. Eleanor, a World War II veteran, served as a flight orderly in the Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) from 1942 to 1945. The couple married in 1949 and raised three children; Barbara, Robert and David. By 1957 the couple opened their own freelance studio "Visual and Industrial Design" in San Diego. Bill's work was in high demand and he worked for such entities as *Psychology Today*, the San Diego Zoo and local aerospace companies. Eleanor was an accomplished artist in her own right, publishing political cartoons for the *San Diego News Tribune*. Bill joined other artists in the letterpress artist group, The Patrons of the Private Press. In 1966 the Noonans purchased a house on Hawk Street as commercial property where Bill continued his freelance design work. In the rear was a garage which they expanded to double in size, repurposing as a workshop. Corrugated translucent fiberglass panels served as skylights, letting in copious amounts of daylight. In the late 1960s Bill co-founded Dovetail with friend, architect and fellow artist Charles Faust, where they designed and manufactured bas-relief sand castings. Like Patrons, Dovetail started out as more of an experimental social club than a business. They first operated out of the Hawk Street garage; but as their commissioned work grew in complexity and scale, they moved the operation to a larger shop on Voltaire Street, Ocean Beach in the early 1970s. As flying models filled the rafters of their new shop, clients such as San Diego Federal Savings and Loan, Anthony's Sea Food Restaurant, Lindbergh Field International Airport and NBC Burbank Television Studios commissioned Dovetail to design, execute and install massive sand cast wall murals.

By 1974 the world famous San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park was in need of a graphics art department, and they hired Bill Noonan to be its director. His friend, Charles Faust, was head architect at the zoo, and later Tim Reamer and Barbara Ferguson joined the team. Bill (always detailed oriented) retired from the zoo 20 years to the day on May 6th, 1994⁹. His work – paintings, exhibit information panels and functional yet creative solutions for way-finding – had a tremendous and long lasting effect at the San Diego Zoo. Barbara Ferguson: "Bill and Charles Faust were both the start of zoo graphics and way-finding systems that changed the look of zoos

worldwide. Bill as a designer changed the look and feel of way-finding graphics, from wooden signs with arrows to informative, interactive graphics.” This paradigm shift caught the attention of other zoos on a global level, causing them to send their own envoys and graphic designers on a quest to San Diego, to tour the zoo and to pick Bill Noonan’s brain. The 1981 International Zoo Yearbook includes his essay, *Assessing the Merits of Contemporary Zoo Graphics*. He was the recipient of many awards, including Art Director of the Year from the Art Directors Club of San Diego, and the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums Award for Excellence for his work at the San Diego Zoo. Posters and merchandise featuring the commissioned artwork of Bill Noonan continue to be popular amongst art fans and collectors.



Bas-relief Sand Casting, L-R: Charles Faust, Rolfe Faust, and Bill Noonan. Ethan Faust collection, used by John McAvoy with permission.

One of Bill’s favorite mediums was watercolor but it can be very unforgiving to work with. He was known for repainting a single piece of art many times over until it met his expectations. He must have been looking for a certain feel to the painting, and this level of commitment certainly paid off; his watercolor artwork has been described as providing more insight into an animal’s spirit than an actual photograph.

Bill illustrated two books; *Bigfoot and Other Legendary Creatures* authored by Paul Robert Walker and *Great Crystal Bear* authored by [Carolyn Lesser](#). For *Bigfoot*, Paul asked his editor, Karen Grove, to find an illustrator who drew animals and could walk a fine line between legends and reported encounters with the subject creatures. After an interview following a review of his portfolio, Karen brought on Bill Noonan as the illustrator. With his brilliant use of full-page watercolors and half-page sepia tone images, Bill brought an imaginative yet real feel to creatures in the book. The Society of Illustrators (established in 1901) placed *Bigfoot* on display in their 1992 New York “Original Art Show”. Children and adolescents loved the mythical stories and accompanying artwork. Children and adolescents loved the mythical stories and

accompanying artwork. One reader reported to the author that each night the book was carefully stowed under his pillow, in preparation for the following night's adventure. Bill earned accolades for his *Bigfoot* illustrations from *Publisher's Weekly*, *Booklist*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The *Winston-Salem Journal* described the illustrations as eerie and offering more of a feeling for the animal than a detailed examination¹⁰. However the book did have its critics. One young reader enjoyed the book and loved the illustrations ("Please tell Mr. Noonan that his illustrations were excellent, especially the Bigfoot illuminated by the fire"¹¹), but in his letter to the author he took exception to the illustrations of the African Kongamato. Natives had reported that artist renderings of pterodactyl looked just like Kongamato. So Bill illustrated a long tailed pterodactyl-like creature. With its distinctive tail, the young writer properly identified the creature as another genus of pterosaur, *Rhamphorhynchus*. He post-scripted his letter with his own illustrations of the two pterosaurs in an effort to clear up the controversy.

Bill received the commission for *Bigfoot* in 1990, right around the time he was recovering from heart surgery. In a letter to Paul Walker, Bill wrote "My life's focus is art, as I'm sure writing is yours, so you can appreciate my sense of impatience at not being able to launch myself, full bore, into the endeavor....I shall look forward to meeting you and getting the show on the road."¹² In all aspects of his professional career and modeling endeavors, he was a very accomplished artist, illustrator and graphic designer. "Now that I stop to think about it, this guy lived three lives, you know. I don't know how some people can be so prolific!" recalls Tim Reamer. "Just a real quiet and dignified guy."

In 1997 Bill wrote a seven chapter booklet titled *Boulder Fragments*. A memoir of his family's life in the late 1920s through 1936, the stories mostly focuses on his relationship with his new stepfather Robert and the two years the family spent in Builder City, Nevada during the construction of Boulder Dam.

pol·y·math; noun A person of wide-ranging knowledge or learning.

Bill Noonan and Bill Hannan met when they were volunteers at the San Diego Air and Space Museum, organizing and setting up a display on model aviation. The museum provided the volunteers with business cards, identifying them as "Consultants on Aviation History". Both Noonan and Hannan were members of the local San Diego Flying Aces Club, the Scale Staffel, along with other notable names such as Bob and Sandy Peck, Jim Alaback, John Oldenkamp and Walt Mooney. During this period the San Diego area with its aerospace legacy was a hotbed of aeromodeling; of hobbyists, designers and manufacturers. Sandy (Peck) Miller recalls that all these great modelers and innovators – Bob Peck, John Oldenkamp, Carl Goldberg, Hannan and Noonan – met and fed off of each other's ideas, which only motivated everyone to design and build even better models.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Bill provided artwork, drawings and comical filler sketches in such publications as the *Scale Staffel Newsletter* and *Stick & Tissue*. For some time Bill was the editor of the *Scale Staffel Newsletter*. By the time Bill Hannan was writing his book *Peanut Power!* he and Bill Noonan were good friends, frequently carpooling together to model meets and the like. The idea of posing a live elephant with a Peanut (Scale model) for the cover shot was Bill Hannan's brainchild, but he would need some assistance. His publisher believed that using special effects would be too costly and that using the actual mammal in a photo shoot was

even more ridiculous. Bill mentioned his concept to Noonan, and being that Noonan worked at the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park, together they were able to present Hannan's concept to the Zoo's Publicity Manager. She loved the idea and suggested they contact the animal trainer, Franz Tisch, to see if it was feasible. Franz had a friend in mind that he knew would be up to the task. Sunita, or Nita, a mature Asian elephant, weighed in at 8,000 pounds but would do whatever Franz asked. Hannan brought three models to the photo shoot, expecting some collateral damage. However only one Peanut was required; Nita performed superbly, striking poses with a Fokker F.II on her trunk and a Farman on the ground between her front feet. When the book was published, most people assumed that the cover picture was altered; according to Bill Hannan his publisher nearly fell out of his chair when he saw the photographs.

Air Trails published Bill Noonan's earliest known model airplane designs in the mid-1940s. These were control line jobs, although he is mostly known for his intricate, jumbo scale free flight creations. The following list, although most likely incomplete, shows both the length of Bill Noonan's modeling career and his focus on free flight scale modeling:

Aircraft	Publication	Date
Curtiss Helldiver (C/L)	<i>Air Trails</i>	Jan. 1945
Copperhead (C/L)	<i>Air Trails</i>	Sept. 1945
Grumman Hellcat (C/L)	<i>Air Trails</i>	May 1946
Messerschmitt M23b	<i>Model Builder</i>	Oct. 1976
de Havilland Hawk Moth 75	<i>Model Builder</i>	Nov. 1977
Fokker Universal	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Apr. 1978
Aviatic	<i>Model Builder</i>	Jan. 1979
Messerschmitt M20b	<i>Model Aviation</i>	July 1979
Curtiss Wasp 18.T.1. *	<i>The Model Builder</i>	Nov. 1979
Missel Thrush	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Aug. 1980
TBM 3U Aerial Tanker	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Feb. 1981
Kawanishi K-8b *	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	June 1981
Sopwith Dolphin	<i>Model Aviation</i>	June 1981
Latecoere 26	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Feb. 1982
Lubin R-XIV	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	Sept. 1982
Armstrong Whitworth Ape	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Apr. 1983
Good Tern *	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Nov. 1983
Pomilio PE	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Dec. 1984
Savoia S-12 bis *	<i>Model Airplane News</i>	June 1985
Thomas Morse MB7	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Oct. 1985
Parnall Pixie	<i>Model Aviation</i>	Feb. 1988
Santos Dumont Demoiselle N-20	Unpublished	Unknown
Avro 555 Bison	Unpublished	Unknown
Martinsyde Semiquaver	Unpublished	Unknown

* Float plane or flying boat designed to rise off water (R.O.W).

Other than the Helldiver, Bearcat and Dolphin, even an airplane aficionado may have trouble recognizing the other names in this list (other than reading the construction articles!) Bill was never one to select from the usual modeling subjects. His Kawanishi K-8b floatplane is an example of such a rare airplane that it exists only in a few photos and 3-views. This stunning ship hallmarked his ability to research museum archives, discover and select virtually unknown aircraft that made exceptional flying models.



*Bill and his Curtiss Wasp at Lake Elsinore. Photo by Warren D. Shipp,
Courtesy of Bill Hannan*

As his Missel Thrush was “...the antithesis of the foam ready to fly”¹³, a Bill Noonan plan was the antithesis of the modern, CAD drawn plan. Through the use of shading, typography, calligraphy and three dimensional sketches, his plans seem more suitable for framing than to poke pins into and build off of. The clean layouts and minimal amount of annotations contrast sharply with his brilliant use of built-up structures. Typically only one wing panel is shown on his plans, which normally would be considered a deficiency; however, Noonan almost always provided a partial three-view and fit everything onto one sheet – sacrificing a wing panel for the sake of the art. (“Take a rag with a little common household lubricating oil on it and rub over the...plans, this will allow you to turn the plans over and build the other side without having to trace the other half.”¹⁴) Noonan accomplished his clean, minimalist drafting approach by putting his construction articles to work. While a typical sport/scale free fight construction article may range from 1400 to 1800 words, Noonan’s write ups can go as long as 2800 words. His TBM 3U Aerial Tanker design, with built-up wing spars, laminated fuselage formers/wing ribs, and air foiled empennage, stretches an amazing 3900 words - surpassing many a short story.

Bill was both laid back and never too serious about his hobby and he always flew his models. His construction articles included such quips as "...it's not too difficult to build, just glue one stick to another to another..."¹³ and "Our model once flew into a parked camper, making a spectacular crunching sound, but close inspection disclosed only superficial dents and dings. It was flying again in minutes."¹⁵

Bill Noonan passed away at the age of 84 in December of 2007. The following words are taken from an online elegy of sorts that fellow modelers posted on R/C Groups shortly after:

"Walt Mooney...introduced me to the Scale Staffel and Bill Noonan. Bill showed us how to make beautiful details out of common materials (but uncommon to us modelers at the time) that weighed almost nothing, like engine cylinders from the flex section of bendable soda straws, lots of fairings from coffee stirrers and such."

"The thing I liked best about Bill was that he was not at all 'stuck up' regarding his achievement and craftsmanship, and could always find a good word and a helpful suggestion when looking at a much cruder model by a beginning club member. And he was extremely modest regarding his own talent, yet he was almost as well known locally for the work he did as an illustrator for the San Diego Zoo."

"The July 1979 issue of Model Aviation features ...Bill Noonan's Messerschmitt passenger liner with a cigar-smoking pilot in the cockpit with a "fumar verboten" sign on the cabin wall behind him, illustrating his dry sense of humor."

"I always loved the delicacy of Bill Noonan's plans. You had a sense that they couldn't help but fly."¹⁶

One final note: In October of 1984 *Model Airplane News (M.A.N.)* went "All R/C", formally revising their format to cover only radio control modeling. Why, then, does Bill Noonan's construction article of his 1920 Savoia S.12 appear in the June 1985 issue of *Model Airplane News*? Probably a quarter-scale, full house R/C model, right? No, we encounter a free flight, rise-off-water flying boat, amongst the plethora of radio control airplanes, boats and cars. How is this possible? The late, great Dan Santich, then editor of *M.A.N.*, opens the construction article with the following explanation:

"Since M.A.N. is a declared "all R/C" magazine, you may wonder why we're presenting a CO₂ non-R/C model. The reason is that we recognize craftsmanship, as well as notable projects, be they R/C or not, car or boat, plane, etc."

"This model of Bill Noonan's Savoia S.12 is an example of that effort and M.A.N. is pleased to present it to you."¹⁷

Perhaps Dan, like the black plastic raven that once peered over Bill's drafting table, was saying "Nevermore. Well...maybe sometimes."



*Bill Noonan, circa 1940. Bill Hannan collection,
used by John McAvoy with permission.*

† Bill Noonan's memoir, *Boulder Fragments*, indicates Robert Noonan studied Electrical Engineering at Washington College. In the 1930 Census, Robert listed his occupation as Civil Engineer. It is quite possible he studied Electrical Engineering but at the time his work was more in line with Civil Engineering.

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