



# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of ROYCE CHILDRESS

Started modeling in 1936    AMA #16999



Written by RC (10/2003); Edited by JF (11/2003)

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## Career:

- Started building rubber-powered kits at age eight
  - Began working for X-Cell Manufacturing Company in 1943, making propellers
  - Engaged in U-Control Team Racing during World War II
  - Joined Naval Reserve during Korean Conflict
  - Worked for K&B Engines after Korea and designed propellers
  - Designed the GO-JET needle valve for model engines
  - Member of RAMS, the Radio Aero Modelers of Seattle, where he is training coordinator
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The first instance I remember of trying to build a model airplane was probably in 1936. I was fascinated by a beautiful black box about 1 ½ X 3” X 12”, with silver writing and an outline of an airplane on it. I have no idea what kind of airplane it was or what brand kit, but inside was a real “blue print”, balsa wood sticks, a sheet of balsa wood with “things” printed on it, a sheet of tissue paper, and small vials of glue and banana oil with cork stoppers. It was \$.10 at Woolworth’s \$.05 & \$.10 store and I had to talk very hard to get my mother to “waste” a dime on it, but I was pretty good at conning her. I convinced her I could build it. I never did get it built, or even started, since I hadn’t the slightest idea how to begin, but I remember opening the box and laying out all the pieces and trying to imagine what it would look like finished. At this time we lived in Southgate, California.

In 1937, my father bought his own gas station in Huntington Park, California and we moved there in 1938. One of the neighbor kids was Themistocles, Anthony Themistocles Flatos. Of course, everyone called him Sam. Sam was 10 and had built some rubber-powered models and helped me build a Modelcraft Pacific Ace and Super High Wing. Both were \$.10 kits, and both did actually fly, sort of. One of my dad’s customers told him about a model airplane field where people flew “gas powered” model airplanes. The next Sunday he took me to Rosecrans and Western in South Los Angeles, and there really were many people flying huge, five and six foot wingspan models. At times, there would be six or seven in the air at once.

My dad didn’t know it then, but I’m sure he found out later, he had created a monster. I was hooked at the tender age of eight. From that time on, I lived and breathed airplanes. I built every \$.10 solid model Modelcraft offered and all the \$.10 rubber powered kits I could talk my mother into “wasting” dimes on. I even built a few \$.25 and one \$.50 model. That doesn’t sound like much now, but families were living on \$10 per month then, and a dime would buy a meal.

For Christmas 1938, my present was a Baby Cyclone engine with the aluminum tank/mount, and a Miss California airplane kit. The next day my dad and I went to Modelcraft on Vermont Avenue, just south of Western Avenue in South Los Angeles and bought silk, dope, glue and an Austin Craft timer. I still remember a big Seversky P-35, in the bones, hanging over the counter.

Sam helped me build it and in January of 1939, we went to Rosecrans and Western and “flew” it. It did fly for 30 seconds, but when the engine shut off the glide was like a heavy brick. The results are in the picture #1, busted all to pieces. Today’s buzzword for the same condition is re-kitted. Much more civilized.

Every two or three weeks, I built and “re-kitted” another airplane. I gained a lot of building experience, but it never occurred to me to stop building airplanes. It also didn’t occur to me that one day I might even get to fly. I kept this up until 1942, at age 12, when I built a Berkley 54” American Ace. This was the kitted version of the New Ruler. I was very surprised when it took off, climbed out in a shallow right turn until the timer shut off, and then glided down in a nice left turn to a perfect landing. This was the first time I had ever been able to fly the same airplane twice. I flew that airplane until it fell apart from battery acid. In 1942 until 1946, dry cell batteries were not available because of the war. Most everyone used lead acid storage batteries such as the X-Cell and others. Sulfuric acid makes balsa wood purple and mushy.

That American Ace was followed by a string of successes. By this time, I had learned the hard way how to adjust a model to fly even on the first flight. I must give some credit to a book, which I saved my money for several months to buy, “*Model Airplane Design and the Theory of Flight*,” by Charles Hampson Grant. After over 60 years, I still have that book.

In 1944, I built my second Comet Sailplane. The first one, powered by that Baby Cyclone, met the fate of all my other airplanes up to the American Ace- one flight, one crash. The new one was powered by an Atwood Champion 60. Bill Atwood was assembling them in a side room at Wetzel’s Model Shop in Bell, California. He had parts and engines all during World War II. By that time, I was having my own ideas about how to make a better flying airplane out of some of the existing designs. I cut the dihedral and polyhedral in half on that Sailplane, and though it was a little critical on adjustments, it was a winner. I set a new Junior record of 10 minutes 52.8 seconds three-flight average with it at the Rosecrans and Western Aero Modelers field in 1945. That record stood until the rules were changed to allow a 10-minute maximum flight. Lew Mahew invited me to enter a Thermal Thumbers contest one day if I didn’t bring that “damned Sailplane,” so I used my Playboy, modified the same way with ½ the normal dihedral and polyhedral, and won class “C” with that. I never did figure out why that 10-minute rule was put in there. Dethermalizers, I guess.

I had tried U-Control with a Fire Ball back in 1942, but didn’t have much luck. I didn’t know that even Jim Walker didn’t fly Fire Balls without shortening the wing a little.

In 1943, a new model shop opened on Florence Avenue in Huntington Park and I went to take a look. It wasn’t much of a retail store, but they made X-Cell Speed propellers in the back room, and several “Vee-Gee” U-Control racers were hanging in the front. That’s where I met Granger Williams and Virgil Clark who were behind X-Cell Manufacturing Company. They were making

all the propellers by hand at that time. In late 1943, they made a deal with Barney Snider, who owned Modelcraft and made D.G. propellers, and came up with the propeller machines. D.G. propellers were discontinued and Granger and Virgil started making X-Cell props on those machines. The demand was immediate when the price came down from \$2.00 to \$.50 each. I would go to their shop and pester them for hours at a time, and since they couldn't get rid of me, they put me to work making propellers. When I started working there, after school and Saturday, I honestly thought I was working for two or three propellers a week. Since I was breaking them at that rate, I thought it was a good deal. I was surprised when they paid me \$.35 per hour and a couple of propellers too.

I was hooked on U-Control Speed then and built several racers. I still think the old Vee-Gee was the best looking of them all. Modelcraft kitted it, but the kit left much to be desired. We were the "X-Cell boys" and were using Hornets in class "C" and pre-war magnesium case Atwood Torpedo 29s. After the war we used Miniature Motors Twin stack Torpedoes in class "B" and later, when they came out, I had a Dooling .61 in a modified Vee-Gee. We were the ones to beat for a couple of years and though we were beat occasionally, we always had the competition on their toes.

The field at Rosecrans and Western had a very weird way of cracking. After a rain, the sun would bake it and it would look like huge potato chips. It was absolutely impossible to take off from the cracked surface. In 1945, Roy Gregson also became one of the X-Cell boys, and Roy built a K&B 29 powered bi-plane. It looked like fun, flying an old timer so I built an Art Chester Racer, powered by a Postwar Bullet. Granger and Virgil decided to get in on the fun so they each built .29 powered airplanes too. They were using K&B engines for these as was Roy Gregson, Granger's brother Lawrence, (he and another brother Don were Super Screw) decided he would like to fly those things too, so he built one and Granger taught him to fly it.

Back to the field of potato chips. One Friday afternoon I went out to Rosecrans and Western and saw the field would be impossible to use Sunday. Saturday, after work sanding propellers, Roy Gregson and I went out and, using a large drag made from railroad ties and my 1937 Buick, drug one circle very well and two others usable so three were available. Sunday morning, Virgil, Granger, Lawrence, Roy, and I set up at the best circle and flew several times each. We were leaving our lines out in that circle, and of course, some people started to complain about our hogging the best circle. I told them that I had come out and drug the circle and we were going to use it. We decided to see how long we could keep an airplane in the air, so before one came down another one of us would take off. We knew two in the same circle was possible because it was done all the time in team stunt events. I think it was Roy who had the idea of seeing if maybe we could get three up at once, then four and we found it was easy. Some of those complaining flyers asked if they could get in on the fun so, of course, we said "the more the merrier."

I'm not sure how many we did get in the air at the same time that day, but it was at least 7 or 8. At that point, it became a little dicey, but we had no crashes and no one was killed landing and taking off. Things really took off after that with many more people getting into the fun and the inevitable rules were written. I've heard many stories about how Team Racing started, but this is the real story and it was a lot more fun when there were no rules and anything that would fly on

lines was o.k. We did finally make one rule. To keep from killing the pit crews, everyone must use the same length lines, and 60 feet seemed like a good compromise. For a couple of Sundays we had 50s, 60s and 70s up at the same time with no problems, but almost all agreed that requiring everyone to use the same length lines might save some accidents.

In 1948, X-Cell closed its doors for good. Granger went in with his brothers at Super Screw and their products became much better because of it. They eventually became Williams Brothers. Virgil went to work for an automobile dealership in Los Angeles, Roy went into amateur radio and started a successful business making QRP (very low power) ham radio equipment, and I went to work for K&B Manufacturing in Bell Gardens, California as a “run-in boy.” I was still working after school and Saturday because I was attending Pepperdine College. In those years, Pepperdine was a block west of Vermont Avenue just south of Florence in southwest Los Angeles. I decided, after two years, I wanted to get into electronics and enrolled at National School of Electronics and Television. I also built some model racecars at this time, and was quite active in West Coast racing. Between airplanes, racecars and girls, I also joined the U.S. Naval Reserve. Everything was fun. I was winning airplane and racecar contests, had a good-looking girl, and a job I liked which supported it. What more was there? I soon found out. Korea came along and I suddenly found myself as a radarman on active duty on a 2100-ton Fletcher class destroyer. I also married that good-looking girl. Bad mistake.

I was discharged from the Navy in 1953 and also divorced that good-looking girl. I went to work for Lud Kading, who had left K&B to start his own machine shop. This was a two-man job and we did what came along, from oil well tools to precision missile valves and parts. We also built a machine, which dropped a clown or, “good-looking girl” into a tank of water, if you hit a target with a baseball.

At Kading Specialty Company, we marketed the GO-JET needle valve in two sizes for model engines. This was my design and had the feature of the fuel line and needle on the same side of the engine as nearly all are today. As an added, and most unexpected bonus, they also gave a noticeable increase in power. We also produced the TIMET fuel shut-off pneumatic timer and a mechanical fuel shut-off. Lud and I were also flying some of the smallest free flight airplanes around using the K&B .020 Infant, an engine, which was entirely his design, as well as the first 1/2A engine on the market.

One of the designs was a 12” pylon type called the ROLYDUCE. Lud hung that name on it because those were the letters of our first names. We built them identical, except for the rudder. We each had our own rudders that, more or less, identified our individual designs. His was a backwards looking rounded affair, while mine looked more like a dart. Mine flew and his didn’t until he changed the rudder. We also built them in 14” size using .049s, and I built one 7 1/2” with a lightened Infant. That was a screamer. We probably had more fun per dollar with those models than anything else we had ever built. *Model Airplane News* was going to publish the plans of the 12” one. I don’t know if they ever did, but we were paid for it.

In 1958, Lud sold Kading Specialty Company and I went to work for Rohr Corporation in Riverside, California. I also was married again and with a family of three children to support, so I drifted away from models. I just couldn’t afford it.

I bought an occasional model magazine to try to keep up with the hobby, but wasn't really involved. In 1980, Boeing was advertising heavily in Southern California for toolmakers, so on a whim I wrote them asking about what skills they needed. One night about 8 o'clock, while watching television, the phone rang and a man asked for Royce. I said speaking, and I was interviewed by a Boeing shop foreman directly from the Auburn, Washington plant machine shop for a toolmaker job. He told me he would send all the papers I would need and the job was mine if I still wanted it after reading the information. Two days later, it came and I had to decide if I really wanted to move to Washington. If I wanted the job, I had to be at the Boeing employment office in Tukwila, Washington at 9 a.m. June 2, 1980 ready to go to work. They would pay all my moving expenses, as well as travel mileage and even extra for my car pulling travel trailer.

I made the move while my wife stayed in Cucamonga to sell our home and dog grooming business. We completed the move two days before Christmas, 1980. I worked for Boeing as a toolmaker for just over two years before being laid off. I finally landed a job with the City of Seattle as a "Station Maintenance Machinist." We did anything the city couldn't get anyone else to do. We caught all the tough and sometimes dirty jobs, like rebuilding sewer pumps and sewer line TV cameras, most of the diesel and gasoline dispensing systems, and all of the drawbridge work that the bridge crew couldn't handle. We did much work on one-of-a-kind fire trucks and other fire fighting equipment also. I never knew what I would be doing when I went to work, or where in the city or one of its watersheds I would be, and I loved it.

I retired in 1996 and found I didn't like doing nothing. I went to Ultimate Hobbies in Auburn and looked at what was available in the airplane line. I didn't even know what an "ARF" was, but I soon found out. I checked out a couple of R/C flying sites and joined the Radio Aero Modelers of Seattle, RAMS, and have been the Training Coordinator for 3 years. I am not an instructor because I can't always see well enough and my reflexes aren't really fast enough either unless I'm three or four mistakes high. I keep the club trainers ready to fly on training days, which are Wednesdays and Saturdays. I also try to connect new people with trainers. We have trained pilots from 12 to 78 years of age. I also try to check out and correct problems with new airplanes before they get in the air with things like reversed controls and loose servos.

That pretty much brings you up-to-date on me. I still have my original number, 16999 although I was out of modeling for sometime. I still have a lot of projects going that I'll probably never finish, but "he who has the most toys wins." I'm working on a 40-powered S.P.A.D. right now, and my DeHavilland Beaver is next in line, and a Tiger Moth is in the next room also. That will be an interesting project as several are flying locally to and from Canada on a daily basis both from wheels and floats. Lots of material for scale details. I didn't mention I also belong to the North West Sky Raiders, a U-Control club.

I have just hit the high spots, as you can see. With so many years of modeling, it would take a good-sized book to get in all the funny things that happened. One funny thing I just can't resist was when Duke Fox called X-Cell to tell us how fast he had one of his long shaft engines turning one of out 9" X 14s. I don't remember how fast it was, but I do remember telling him that he should be able to hit 160 mph with it. I also told him I would make a special propeller that would

really make it go. We arranged to meet at Rosecrans and Western the next Sunday for some tests. I made a beautiful 9" X 14" diameter pitch propeller- left handed. Of course, everyone who came to watch knew the propeller was left handed except Duke and the guy who did his flying, I think his last name was Sousie but not sure. Duke really liked the propeller, and put it on his plane. When he fired up the engine, it was blowing clouds of dirt in his face, Sousie was motioning to let go and if we hadn't stopped him, he would have. I'm sure it would have set a backwards record that would have stood to this day. Granger and Virgil were almost rolling on the ground laughing.

I believe Granger and I are the only ones of that group left. Every time I read, a new Model Aviation it seems one of my old flying friends has passed on. Well I guess they just weren't mean enough, like I am. Or maybe they didn't try something new often enough. I've started in electrics and indoor rubber power is still as much fun as ever. The last two years I won the "Most Fun Per Dollar" award at the RAMS annual indoor R/C and rubber power meet held in January. Next year it will be in February and I'll have my rubber-powered airplane there again, only this time I'm going to get some "Contest Brown."

Signed  
Royce AMA #16999

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