



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of ALVIN G. DAVIS

1919 - January 13, 1998



Written by AD (1988-1998); Submitted by GD (10/1998); Transcribed and Edited by SS (06/2002); Reformatted by JS (01/2010)

Career:

- 1933: Managed his first indoor contest at age 15
- Was the aviation reporter and editor for Oak Leaves newspaper in Oak Park, Illinois; later delved into photography and public relations
- 1935: Helped build a tri-motor airplane
- 1938: Attended his first Nationals in Detroit, Michigan; the plane crashed during the official flight
- Over time he served as director, trade show manager, secretary and president of the Model Industry Association
- 1940: Began working as a salesman for the Ritz Manufacturing Company
- 1940 - 1941: Assisted Contest Director Frank Nekimken at the Nationals
- Covered the Nationals with articles and photographs for Model Airplane News magazine
- 1942: Joined the Civil Air Patrol and worked to promote model aviation among cadets
- Mid-1940s: Launched a hobby shop that grew and expanded over the years
- 1948: Wrote a segment called "Model Airplanes" for the Encyclopedia Britannica, Junior
- 1948: His hobby shop conducted the Plymouth Corporation's qualifications for the International Model Airplane Championships
- Established Hobbycraft Exports Inc. with his brother, Bernard, after World War II
- 1963: Went to work for Aurora Plastics Corporation
- After retiring, worked as an international trade counselor for companies in the Far East

Honors:

- 1957: Awarded the Berkeley Models award for contribution to model aviation
- Received the Walt Billett Tin Cup Trophy for model aviation promotion

The following autobiography was written by Alvin over a period of 10 years, up until his death in January 1998. His son, Glenn, submitted the autobiography to the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program) on October 16, 1998.

Dedicated to my late beloved wife, Rose, who passed away on June 30, 1980, exactly 40 years after we met.

And to my sons, Fred, Barry and Glenn Martin and grandchildren, Jeffrey, Ilene, Jason, Erica and Danny

Daughters-in-law Terri and Shari

As I remember...

A Lifetime Love of Model Aviation

[I had] a career that encompassed a devotion to aviation at a level that gave me much personal gratification in participating in and helping promote model airplane interest worldwide.

While my desire to fly airplanes was denied by circumstance, my interest was achieved in the models I built and flew. My early friends were Paul W. Lindberg and Carl Goldberg. Later Frank Nekimken, Wally Simmers, and Frank Garcher were my idols.

Early on, I was told that my position should be as a competing model builder and contestant or assume the role as a leader and competition promoter.

In 1933, at 15-years-old, I managed my first indoor contest at the YMCA in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. The participation and attendance was an immediate success. Model builders from the Flying Buzzards, IMAC-Illinois Model Aero Club, the Chicago Aeronuts, the club of Champion Record Holder, and others attended. Paul Lindberg was the first contest director.

The second part of my career resulted in becoming a reporter for the local Oak Leaves (now a Time/Life newspaper) as aviation editor at 15 cents an inch for text. Later, photography became the supporting activity for the articles. This combination with public relations led to many activities and competitions to follow.

My close friend Harry Zidman, a model builder and designer first influenced me by his great talent at building and later as a designer for several manufactures. From Harry I learned much about model building. We worked together on many projects from slicing balsa to making our own cement from movie film clips mixed with acetone – a cellulose nitrate base.

Our manufacturing efforts were done on a small circular saw powered by mother's borrowed washing machine motor. We used a razor blade device to slice strips from sheet balsa. Later balsa wood was purchased from several Brooklyn, New York, producers. Cement was later purchased from Joe Ott, one of the pioneer model flyers and manufacturers. Five-gallon pails were carried home on streetcars for packaging in the basement at home. Tubes, some slightly dented, of various sizes for cement were purchased at attractive prices.

Packing cement using primitive methods by hand was a sticky job as the product was heavy and fast drying and needed thinning down. Repackaging them in their original boxes made them salable at stores where supplies were sold. Our competitors were Comet and Spartan Models. Through the high school years, we made some progress – just enough to stay in business.

In about 1935, we had an opportunity to build a special tri-motored two airplane that had a unique design. Two of the engines were to tilt up and keep the airplane in a vertical position and the third for forward traction. Getting all three to run at once was a real challenge. The plane was to be U-Controlled and the engines running until air speed was achieved. The designer, Joe Kiss, supplied the money for everything and we received \$50 for our work.

This was our first experience with model engines, the Forster 99. This was a real learning experience. Our fingers had many cuts and bruises from being too slow. In time, we mastered the engines. The U-Control was not so easy, but we managed to get the tri-motor modified design off the ground, though not very high. The autogiro effect was not achieved. We did get paid and the sponsor was happy and we were worn out.

With our experience, we were encouraged to build a Megow Flying Quaker. During the holiday season, we worked as salespeople in a department store toy department demonstrating an all-

metal model, The Flying Fool. It was actually capable of flying short distances but it was not practical indoors, so we rigged a length of piano wire on a homemade pulley about 20 feet long in a 15-degree angle upward. It flew well and rolled back downward to be retrieved for the next flight. Sales were good.

On weekends, we took the Quaker out for flight tests at Ashburn Airport, the small airfield where modelers congregated. There we learned a great deal about model airplanes and met many modelers.

In 1938, we were ready for competition and attended the National Model Airplane Championships in Detroit, Michigan. Harry had a 1932 Plymouth, which we repaired and reconditioned for the trip. With \$35 between us, we set out with enthusiasm. When we arrived, we learned that the Fort Shelby Hotel was fully booked. We could not afford it anyway. The contest people directed us to a private home near the Ford Hospital. For \$6, we had a week's living quarters with breakfast included.

We registered at the contest headquarters and got our schedules and location of events. Our meals were frugal and spaced out. We did enjoy the Victory Banquet onboard a riverboat. On the first test flight, the Quaker flew well and landed safely after a two-minute flight. When making the first official flight, it lasted about one minute and then crashed to the ground. After that, it was irreparable. While we were disappointed, we did enjoy the trip.

While in Detroit, we met Irwin and Nat Polk who were the contest directors and management. These have been my friends since then, now 57 years since we first met. We still chat on the phone occasionally.

Our model supply business continued in a modest fashion but we had aviation ambitions. So, Harry and I decided to join the Air Corps to further our flying desires. We tried to enlist but we lacked the college education to qualify for pilot training. We visited the airport regularly and Harry would sketch the various military and civilian aircraft and make scale model drawings. Harry was very good at capturing the design and creating the three-view construction details. He later went on to design models for Paul Lindberg.

As time passed, Harry slowly became incapacitated with a severe case of arthritis. This became steadily worse and in 1967, he passed away at 51 years of age. Even with his disability, he continued his design work using a pen between his teeth. He took on work from a local manufacturer of scale model ships. With his devoted wife, Evelyn, he struggled and kept his ambitions alive for 26 years. We kept in touch and supplied him with some of his building needs. Harry designed a planter and I was able to sell it to Popular Mechanics. The price was modest, but it gave him much encouragement.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my friend Harry Zidman as he put me on the path for a career in the model business. Not a day goes by that I do not think of something I learned from him.

On June 29, 1940, the Model Industry Association was formed. This was the beginning of a long relationship with the model business. Some years later, I would become director, trade show manager, secretary, and then president from 1957 to 1959.

In 1940, I joined the Ritz Manufacturing Company as a salesman for model airplane propellers. Their methods were unique and their product was well accepted. During the early years with the war effort, Gerald Ritzentaler and Laving Anderson with Frank Nekimken produced props of all model engine sizes. The equipment was designed and built by Anderson and Ritzenthaler.

As the defense industry began to affect the model business and sales dropped, Ritz began to make propellers for drone aircraft for the Army. As the specifications were subject to rigid tests, there were some rejects. To use them, we added an electric clock that just fit nicely into the hub of the prop. The prop clock was laminated of mahogany and basswood made its appearance attractive. Every reject was sold quickly.

With not much sales activity in the model trade for me, I sought work elsewhere. Having knowledge of woodworking, I obtained a job in a trailer factory that was making housing. This lasted for about a year when I got a union card and became a carpenter at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. The drive from home was 65 miles each way. This ended a few months later as this was too much time in transit – from 2 p.m. to 1 a.m.

During the 1940 and 1941 National Model Airplane Championships, I assisted Frank Nekimken, who served as contest director. This training was to serve me well as a meet manager in future years. Two-way radio chase car teams were an added feature. In anticipation of the need for retrieval capability, I built a pair of the early 2-1/2 meter transceivers. I quickly realized that it would take many more units.

Assisted by the American Radio Relay League (ARRL), we were able to put cars on every road surrounding the contest area. Many aircraft were retrieved. The Hams were delighted to have such an event. Their organization has been helpful over many years.

These were busy years as I covered the Nationals with story and pictures for Model Airplane News magazine.

In 1942, I joined the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) to assist in fulfilling their mission of putting airplanes to use towing target socks. As an observer, CAP flew aircraft over the Baby Aircraft Carriers on Lake Michigan maneuvers. Over the years, I have worked with CAP to recruit cadets as a public affairs officer. Model airplane building programs were promoted among the cadets in their aviation and aerospace programs. After 52 years, I am still active with CAP at NAS Glenview as public affairs officer.

My next job was starting a hobby shop for a downtown department store. This was a real challenge. As I was familiar with the wholesale trade, I had an idea of what was available and salable. With the help of Mike Trost, the local hobby supplier, I got started. Kits were scarce, but Trost and Cleveland Models' the Pachasa brothers were very helpful. Our first promotion was a Cleveland scale model competition. Surprisingly, we had over 100 entries. The hobby shop was launched.

With flying models restricted as to air space, we expanded to solid scale aircraft and ship models. Our supply business was brisk and we sold plans, wood, glue, and paint. This program expanded for several years. I had offers from other department stores.

My next move was to Central Camera Co., a nearby retailer who wanted to expand their wholesale business and made me an attractive offer. Locating sources of supply was not easy. A trip to Brooklyn, New York, with the help of the Polk brothers, who I met at Detroit in 1938, was fruitful. This was in 1942. The business grew rapidly. Several years later as the war seemed to be winding down, the camera company wanted to discontinue hobby business so they could be ready to get back into the camera business.

At that point, there did not seem to be a choice, try either to buy the business or start my own. With Bill Korr who had been our salesman, we combined resources and, with his father's guarantee, we rented space and proceeded to start our own business. At first, we offered to buy their wholesale division, but at the last moment, they decided not to sell. This was a blow to our finances.

Nevertheless, we had our trade contacts; the suppliers knew us and they gave us their complete support. Our business grew well the first year and tripled the second year. We encouraged and supported many model plane competitions indoor and outdoor, participated in Midwestern States Championships, individual dealer contests and exhibitions with trophies and medals. We supported many AMA National Championships and the Plymouth Internationals.

Starting National Model Distributors in 1945 was the beginning of a close association with the model airplane industry for 19 years. Our constant effort was to do everything to promote and encourage the youth of the world to participate in this exciting pastime. Our search for products that encourage and stimulate a hobbyist's continued interest with a chronology of new products.

Among my many articles and photographs was one titled, "Model Airplanes," that appeared in Encyclopedia Britannica, Jr. in 1948.

In 1948, we undertook the conduct of the Plymouth Corporation's qualifications for the International Model Airplane Championships in joint sponsorship with the U.S. Navy Cadet Procurement Program. This was a two-day event with 56 events in each of three classes and was held at the U.S. Naval Training Station at Glenview, Illinois, coupled with a massive air show each afternoon. This was one of the early events that featured the Blue Angles and the latest in military aircraft.

With a field staff of 175 naval personnel assigned to this activity, the operation was smoothly conducted and was well covered by the media.

The competition attracted 1,500 contestants of all ages and a weekend audience of over 100,000 spectators. The contest director was Wally Simmers and was succeeded by Frank Garcher in later years – both are noted model airplane contestants. Simmers established many records in indoor and outdoor events. The U.S. Naval Command on the base was most pleased with the Cadet Procurement Program as a result of this activity.

From 1948 to 1953, this was an annual event. Since that time, the Chicago Lakefront Annual Air Show has been held.

In 1957, I was awarded the Berkeley Models award for contribution to model aviation. Later, I received the Walt Billett Tin Can Trophy for model aviation promotion.

As president of the Hobby Industry Association from 1957 to 1959 (formerly MIA), great efforts were made to publicize model aircraft building and competition flying. Programs introduced youngsters in a building program developed by the late Charles W. Miller, Testor Corporation, Frank Garcher of Midwest Models and others.

In the post-war years, we established Hobbycraft Exports, Inc. to distribute products for manufacturers as an export management company. American products were and still are being supplied worldwide by my nephew, Joel Davis, who succeeded my later brother, Bernard W. Davis in the firm now known as International Hobbycraft Corp.

In 1963, I joined the Aurora Plastics Corp. of West Hemstead, New York, as director of international operations and later as vice president and managing director of foreign subsidiaries. My interest in promoting model airplane competition continued through our worldwide plants and distribution centers. One of the Aurora subsidiaries, K&B Manufacturing Co., with Johnny Brodbeck as CEO enjoyed foreign sales directly.

Since retiring, I have been an international trade counselor serving clients in several Far East countries. As I have traveled extensively, seen and heard the sound of the engines, and seen the Radio Controlled aircraft in the air, I feel that my efforts may have made a small contribution to its growth.

These are my memories of my association as an ordinary model builder who enjoyed carving balsa props and trying to fly gas model planes and encouraging others to do the same.

That's where I was.

(signed) Alvin George Davis

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