



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of DAWSON GILLASPY

Born July 9, 1930

Started modeling in 1936

AMA #522648



Written & Submitted by DG (01/2003); Transcribed & Edited by SS (01/2003), Reformatted by JS (08/2009)

Career:

- Built his own transmitter in the late 1950s and *Model Airplane News* magazine published a “how to” article about it
- Started a club newsletter for the Lewes Radio Control Club in lower Delaware shortly after he joined in 2000; continues (in 2003) to edit the bimonthly newsletter, Prop Wash, which goes to about 70 members
- 2003: wrote a “how to” article, pending publication, for *Quiet Flyer* magazine

This is a brief historical sketch of my aeromodeling background. Currently (2003), I am 72-1/2-years-old and have been engaged in this activity since the age of six, which translates to 1936. I have always considered myself a sport flyer and have not entered competitive events.

My introduction to model building came about oddly enough because of medical circumstances. When I was about 6-years-old, my 2-year-old brother contracted polio and, as was custom then, my mother and I were confined to our home, which was under medical quarantine. The local health department even tacked red posters to the doors of the house warning others not to enter because someone in the house had a very contagious disease. Practically speaking, this meant my mother and I had to remain indoors while my father temporarily moved out so he could continue going to work each day. Contrary to public health rules, he would sneak into the house every two or three nights for a visit and to bring us groceries and other items we needed.

This quarantine was expected to last two to three months and, naturally, boredom set in for my mother and me. In an attempt to relieve this boredom, my father showed up one evening with a rubber band-powered stick and tissue model kit and encouraged my mother and me to build it. Since I could not even read directions at that age, my mother dove in and introduced me to the world of aeromodeling.

As I recall, I remained active building and flying first Free Flight then Control Line from age six until about 21 when I finished college and entered the military. About five years later, at age 26, I renewed my interest in modeling – this time in Radio Control – and continued for about nine years (until age 35) when family and job responsibilities took on a higher priority. I remained inactive in the sport for some 20 years until at age 55 I glanced through a copy of *Model Airplane News* magazine and got hooked. I have continued in Radio Control to this date and hopefully will do so as long as my faculties permit. All together, I estimate I have been involved in modeling for some 51 years as of this writing.

My adult modeling club activities began in about 1956 when I saw a notice in a local hobby shop (Park Forest, Illinois) about a Radio Control club that was forming. I joined this newly formed club and we were fortunate enough to fly at a nearby sod farm. My relationship with this club

continued for two to three years when I relocated to the Los Angeles area. At that time, my radio gear consisted mostly of a single-channel Ace transmitter and receiver, which I assembled, along with escapements (Bonner and Polk). My most significant transmitter was a home-built job that was powered by an automotive six-volt battery driving a vibrator device to achieve the required voltage input. The antenna was a full 96 inches long. The guts of this transmitter were stored inside a wooden box I made (about one cubic foot in size) with a six-foot lamp cord exiting that box and terminating in a doorbell button, which I depressed one, two or three times to send the required signal to the plane. What a Rube Goldberg device! However, it worked so well I sent the details to Model Airplane News magazine and they printed it as a “how-to” for their readers. I believe that item appeared about 1958 or 1959. I laugh as I look back on that because the only feedback I received was from a reader in Puerto Rico who wrote in Spanish. I had a tough time calling up my college Spanish, but did it well enough to write back to him.

While living in Los Angeles, I learned about a manufacturer named Orbit and invested in an eight-channel reed system, which then was really state-of-the-art. With that leap, I switched to Bonner servos. Whenever I had electronic troubles I would troop over to owner Bob Dunham’s house where he had a fully equipped garage in which he and his wife along with a helper would bail me out of trouble. He was always very helpful and never charged me very much for repairs or assistance. Most of my flying in Los Angeles was either at the Sepulveda Basin site or at the Los Alamitos Marine Corps Air Station. (NOTE: Bob Dunham was posthumously admitted to the AMA Hall of Fame sometime in the 1990s. This was a well-earned honor.)

When I resumed my modeling interests at age 55 after a 20-year hiatus, I joined a club in Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania – the Spring Meadow Radio Control Club. However, because the flying field was some distance from my home, I was never very active in that organization.

When I retired in 2000, my wife and I relocated to lower Delaware where I immediately joined the Lewes Radio Control Club and began flying at their fine field. Several months after joining that organization, I inquired as to whether a newsletter had ever been considered. The president replied it had not, but promptly asked if I would like to start one. I agreed to do that and the first issue came out in August 2000. To this date, I continue to write that publication – Prop Wash – on a bimonthly basis and it currently goes to about 70 members.



Dawson in December 2002 holding an electric model designed by John Chapis called the Pollutionless Pig. The model was powered with an Astro Flight brushless 05 motor. This photo was taken at the Lewes Radio Control Club flying field in Lewes, Delaware. Dawson is a member of the club.

For the past five years, I have built and flown electric planes exclusively and have sold all my glow equipment. This move has introduced me to a completely new technology, one that I am gradually learning at my own rate.

At the time of this writing, I have an article pending publication in Quiet Flyer magazine. This is a "how to" piece of about 1,800 words plus photos and concerns the conversion from glow to electric of a Hanger 9 Ultra Stick .40 almost-ready-to-fly airplane. I submitted the article in late September 2002 and Will Byers, the editor, wrote back that he was sure he would use my material, but did not say when it would appear. My best speculation is that it will run in their March or April 2003 issue.

In closing I would like to add that modeling has given me an opportunity to experiment and express ideas that otherwise would never see the light of day. I also have enjoyed the camaraderie that exists within the club to which I currently belong and get a solid sense of accomplishment by editing the newsletter.

*(signed) Dawson W. Gillaspay
January 2003*

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