



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of ARTHUR W. HILLIS

July 13, 1928-November 24, 2008
Started modeling in the early 1930s
AMA #1418



Written & Submitted by AWH (09/2002); Transcribed & Edited by SS (09/2002), Updated by JS (09/2009, 11/2013)

Career:

- Enjoys Free Flight flying
- Took his first full-scale flying lesson in July 1945
- Served as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War
- Was a pilot for Frontier Airlines for 25 years
- Entered a few events in the first Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) Champs held in May 1967
- Joined and became an active member of SAM-1 in 1982; elected president of SAM-1 for five years starting in 1992
- Served as the Free Flight contest director at the 1991 SAM Champs
- Elected Rocky Mountain vice president of SAM National in 1994
- Organized the 1995 SAM Champs on a ranch near Colorado Springs, Colorado; SAM-1 was the Champs host that year

Honors:

- 2002: SAM Hall of Fame

The following is an autobiography written by Arthur W. Hillis for the Society of Antique Modelers when he was inducted into their Hall of Fame in 2002. Arthur submitted this as his autobiography also for the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program.)

I was born in 1928 at a hospital in Colorado Springs, Colorado and was raised on a small dairy farm on the outskirts of Colorado Springs.

During the early 1930s, the Alexander Aircraft Company was still building airplanes, including the Alexander Eaglerock and Bullet. Occasionally, I could talk my dad into taking me to the north end of town where the Alexander Company had their factory and flying field. I saw those beautiful new airplanes and the pilots at the flying field and I was hooked for life!

Like so many young boys during the Great Depression, I would save my pennies, go to the dime store, and buy a 10-cent Comet kit. Living on a farm out of town, I had no one to teach me the finer points of building models, so in my early years in this wonderful hobby, I had very little success getting my airplanes to fly. For some reason, I kept trying and sometimes I would actually get an airplane to fly. Fortunately, I lived on a great flying site, so Free Flight was and still is my true love.

I scrimped and saved my money and finally was able to go to one of the two local hobby shops and buy my first model engine – a kit Syncro B-30. With great anticipation, I put it together and put it on a test stand. I took it out to the barn, hooked up the ignition, and started flipping the prop. Once in a while, it would “pop,” but never did run. (I still have that engine.)

My next engine was a used Brown E and I could make it run so I started to have some success with Free Flight gas models.

During the war years, the Colorado Spring Municipal Airport became Peterson Army Air Base where at various times they trained pilots in the B24, B26 (Martin), P-40, P-47, P-38 and p-63. Seeing all of those airplanes only increased my interest in flying and my desire to become a pilot.

In July of 1945, while I was in Red Bluff, California, visiting my grandmother, I would hitchhike out to the Red Bluff Airport and on July 11, 1945, I took my first flying lesson in a Rearwin Sportster that had a five-cylinder, Le Blond 70-horsepower engine. After a few lessons, I made the mistake of leaving my student logbook in my grandmother's house and she found it. To make a long story short, the next day I was on a train back home. My mother and dad let me know in no uncertain terms that they were not happy with me and I was to forget about flying. My dad said, "If you don't quit messing around with those darn airplanes, you will be nothing but an airport bum."

In spite of their wishes, I continued with my model airplanes and flying lessons. In time, I enlisted as an aviation cadet and became a pilot in the United States Air Force. After a tour of duty in the Korean War, I returned to the States, finished my Air Force career, was released from active duty, and started looking for a job as an airline pilot.

Luckily, the "old" Frontier Airlines hired me and after only three years as a co-pilot, I became a captain.

Like most Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) members, career and family were first priority, but I continued building and flying model airplanes.

In May of 1967, the first SAM Champs was held at East Colfax Airport (now Aurora Air Park) and, of course, I entered a few events. I still have the original SAM rules (one sheet of paper), some of the daily newsletters that were published and other memorabilia from that contest. Look at what has grown from the first SAM Champs!

I retired from Frontier on February 1, 1981 after a wonderful 25-year career. The last airplane I flew for Frontier was the Boeing 737-200.

At last, I had the time and enough money to pursue this wonderful hobby of ours. I joined SAM-1 in 1982 and was able to become an active member. I was elected president of SAM-1 in 1992 and kept being railroaded to that position for five years.

I was the Free Flight contest director at the 1991 SAM Champs held in Jean, Nevada, with SAM-1 being the host club with a lot of help from SAM-25 of Las Vegas.

In 1994, I was elected Rocky Mountain vice president of SAM National. While I was president of SAM-1, we voted to be the host club of the 1995 SAM Champs.

Because Steve Norris, the owner of the T-Cross ranches was a friend of mine, I decided that one of his ranch pastures near Colorado Springs would be an ideal place for the SAM Champs. So in

1993, I met with Steve to discuss my idea of having the 1995 Champs on the pasture. The pasture I had picked out was 15 square miles of flat, open prairie – just one of many of Steve’s pastures where he raises cattle. Thankfully, Steve gave me the OK to start planning for the Champs.

I thought the Flying W Ranch would be a great place to have the “bean feed,” so I went there and told them what we needed. The Flying W was happy to accommodate us and along with serving almost 2,000 barbeque dinners every night, the Flying W Wranglers provided great country and western entertainment after dinner.

I arranged to have a first-aid tent set up on the field and licensed paramedics on duty every day. I also provided the local ambulance company and the St. Francis Hospital flight-for-life helicopter with maps of where the Champs flying site was. Unfortunately, we had to call for an ambulance twice during the week, but because of planning, they were able to respond very quickly. The first-aid tent came in handy for the usual prop nicks and cuts.

During the two years of planning and getting ready for the Champs, I arranged to have the local newspaper come out to the flying site and do a story about the Champs, which they did and even had a large picture of Ed Carsten winding his large rubber stick. While I was at it, I also arranged for one of the local TV stations to come out to the field and do a story. I believe 1995 is the only year the SAM Champs have had both newspaper and television coverage.

Thanks to a lot of help from a number of SAM-1 members, Steve Norris, the city of Colorado Springs, the Flying W Ranch, Ray Howard Catering, the Sheraton Hotel and all of the SAM members that traveled to Colorado Springs, I feel that the 1995 SAM Champs was one of the biggest and best ever.

Having done all that, now I look forward to going to the SAM Champs every year as long as I am able. Being a member and officer in SAM has been and will continue to be a great experience.

(signed) Arthur W. Hillis
September 2002

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