



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of L. A. JOHNSTON



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A life that took flight: The story of LA Johnston

ONE OF MY earliest memories in this hobby is of walking into Hobby Lobby to get help with my first electric-powered airplane. Behind the counter was an older gentleman who took one look at my soldering job and could hardly contain his disgust for my shoddy craftsmanship.

He picked the model up, examined it more closely, and said three words: “Come with me!” I had no idea that I was about to get a soldering lesson from the great LA Johnston. As the senior technician for Hobby Lobby International for many years, LA has helped thousands of people. He has been a modeler for 73 years.

After I finally mastered a good solder joint, LA gave me a nod of approval. As I left, I remember saying, “I’d like to work here.” Little did I know that my wish would come true a few years later, when I became the public relations and marketing director for Hobby Lobby, and that I would be able to call LA a friend.

In talking with LA through the years, I have gathered tidbits about his past and always thought someone should write a story about him. I showed up for LA’s farewell party at Hobby Lobby, and while he and I were discussing the intricacies of real barbecue, it hit me; I should be the one to write LA’s story. He and I sat down and had a wonderful conversation.

Fellow RC enthusiasts, I give you the life story of LA Johnston: a man obsessed with flight.

Building Models for 73 Years

“I have been crazy about airplanes all my life. My mother used to tell me that when I could just walk, I heard an airplane flying overhead and wanted to go outside and watch it. So since I was able to work on airplanes almost all my life, you could say that I always loved my work and I never really worked a day in my life. It was always a labor of love!

“My earliest memories of models are the ones I built at my grandfather’s house. I lived with my grandparents for a couple of years in 1935 and 1936. During that time I built my first model airplane. I don’t remember what it was, and I don’t think it was a flying model.

“I remember there was a lot of carving involved. The reason I remember the carving is because I cut myself several times and still bear the scars of that first build!

“The next memories I have of modeling are around 1937 to ’38. We lived in Talihina, Oklahoma, and I built several rubber-powered models. I had to buy the kits in Fort Smith, Arkansas, because that was the closest town that had a hobby shop.

“Before the second world war, I met some active modelers and very actively built planes for several years. I was about 9 years old at the time. The local Ben Franklin 5 and 10 cent store had a pretty nice hobby shop. Comet Models sponsored a contest to see who could build the best model in several of the different sizes of the models they sold.

“I picked up a 10 cent Fokker D.VIII to build. I had it all finished and covered with red tissue. I even water-shrunk the covering material. Then I read that if you painted the tissue with banana oil, it would shrink tighter and have a much brighter finish. I bought several 1-ounce bottles of banana oil and painted the airplane with it.

“Yes, indeed, it did look much better, but it had all these white areas on the painted surface. In doing some more reading, I found that those areas blushed because the day I painted the airplane it was cold and rainy outside. The blush was caused by the humidity.

“My idea was to put another coat of banana oil on the plane and put it next to the floor furnace grate. At that point I went back to the front room to listen to Jack Armstrong, and 20 or 30 minutes later when I went back to check on the airplane, there was nothing left but hardwood and wheels! That’s when I learned what the word ‘flammable’ meant.”

LA and the AMA

“I attended the first year of the AMA Nats held in Wichita, Kansas. I think that was around 1945. I also officiated the AMA Nationals at the Dallas Naval Station as a flightline coordinator. It was the first year they had ever flown more than one RC airplane at a time. Everything was on 27 MHz at that time.

“During the second world war, they curtailed production of model-airplane engines. We couldn’t get materials for castings. All the people materials were used for the war. During the war, people were afraid to fly Free Flight because they might lose their engines. People would fly back then but wouldn’t thermal. All competition stopped during World War II as well.

“After the war, U-Control really got big. Radio control started to get popular. At first there was a lot of equipment failure. You had to have a ham license to operate the RC equipment.

“Around 1952 I got my first RC transmitter on 27 MHz. I didn’t have to have a license to operate it. Most planes at that time were really Free Flight planes with occasional radio interference [LA laughs], hopefully to turn the airplane. You had to tune the transmitter and receiver for practically every flight.

“Back then it was always extremely exciting if you had a successful flight. You would tinker all day and get to fly your model once. If you came home with your plane in one piece, it was a big deal!”

A Model Takes a Trip

“From the time I got really good at flying models, my favorite type of aircraft has always been soaring airplanes, be they gliders, rubber-powered Free Flight, or powered models. I always loved the soaring capabilities. While in Tulsa during the late 1950s, I belonged to the Tulsa Glue Dobbers, which was predominantly a Free Flight club.

“We used to have a loosely organized contest about once a month. I had a big Free Flight called a Ghoul. It had an 8-foot wingspan and was powered with a .60-size glow engine. It used to a parachute for a dethermalizer. The chute would drop out of a hatch in the bottom of the airplane and create enough drag to bring the airplane out of a thermal.

“On the day of the contest, I got the airplane set up and launched straight up at 12:00. In about five minutes, when the dethermalizer was supposed to pop, nothing happened. In about another 10 minutes, the airplane disappeared still going straight up. I decided I couldn’t chase it since it went straight up, so I got something to eat and went to a movie with my wife.

“When we got home that evening, the baby-sitter said, ‘You had a phone call earlier. I wrote the number down.’ I called the number and the voice at the other end said, ‘I have your model airplane here. It landed in my pasture this afternoon at 5:30.’ When I asked where he lived he said Caney, Oklahoma. As best I remember, that was 60 miles away by air.

“We drove to Caney to pick up the plane, and it had absolutely no damage. Five-and-a-half hours in the air. What a story the pilot would have had to tell!”

Building Full Scale

“I started working in the aircraft industry for Douglas Aircraft in 1954. At Douglas I worked on the RB-66C, the B-47, and then I went to Temco and worked on the TT-1 and Corvus missile. I have worked on the B-70, Convair 880, Convair 990, C-5A, and many more.

“I got a chance to work at General Dynamics on ground-support equipment for the F-16. I found I loved this type of work because I didn’t have to argue with stress engineers or weight engineers.

“Then I heard about the need for engineers at LTV to help design the B-2 bomber, so I went there. I worked on that for about a year and then went back to General Dynamics to work on a prototype of the YF-22. I also designed much of the ground-support equipment for the B-2 bomber. I finally got a job at Aerospatiale designing a special-mission stealth helicopter.

“A year after that, I retired in December of 1994. That lasted about 21 months. I was about to go nuts, so one night while attending a club meeting at Hobby Lobby, I asked Jim Marin for a full-time job. And as they say, the rest is history.”

Will a Senior Telemaster Carry Two Chickens?

“About the funniest call I ever had while working at Hobby Lobby occurred shortly after I got set up to answer all the technical calls. The customer never did identify himself, but the conversation went like this: ‘Have you got a model airplane big enough to fly a couple of game chickens across the Rio Grande River?’

“I tried to give the customer an honest answer. I asked him how much the birds would weigh and tried to calculate how much space there would be inside the model. I honestly thought one of the Senior Telemasters might have been big enough. I kept that voice mail for some time, and every time we wanted a good laugh I would replay it.”

A Life That Took Flight

“Now the strange thing about this is that from 1935 I have been involved with model airplanes. During all my years in the aircraft industry and while raising a family, I never quit designing, building, and flying model airplanes. They literally are the love of my life.

“I love to design them, I love to build them, and I love to see a machine that I created take wing. It’s like giving birth to a child. You created it and you brought it to life.”

Thank You, LA!

I knew when I worked at Hobby Lobby that being able to hang out with someone like him was not something everyone got to do.

Imagine having someone around who had experienced every change in the hobby. Imagine being able to walk to the back of the building and have someone who could answer any question you could think of about RC, from old-school building techniques to modern electric setups. Not to mention LA was a great storyteller and liked to have a good time.

More than all these things, he has always been a good friend. Many of you who are reading this might have been helped by LA and know exactly what I’m talking about.

When we think about our hobby, we think about the things we want to accomplish. In the pursuit of our hobby, we help people along the way and occasionally get a few new people into aeromodeling. LA’s love for flight has extended to people all over the world.

He would be greeted every day by E-mails and phone messages from modelers just like you and me. Usually when I was headed out the door, LA was on the phone still helping someone and would wave as I left.

It's hard to know exactly how many people he has helped through the many years, but thank you, LA!

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