



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of NATHAN J. POLK

Circa 1913 to August 6, 1996 AMA Number: 9800



Compiled, Transcribed & Edited by SS (11/02), Updated by JS (10/08), Reformatted by JS (01/10)

Career:

- 1922: Opened the Newark (New Jersey) branch of Polk's Model Craft Hobbies (PMCH); unfortunately the location was not good
- 1935-1985: PMCH in business
- Took over the Bamberger Aero Club when his brother, Irwin, left
- One of the original sponsors of gas model competitions
- Directed many meets
- Organized the International Gas Model Airplane Association for Model Airplane News magazine; served as its field director
- Served as eastern representative for the Burd Model Airplane Company
- Wrote "Gas Lines" for Model Airplane News magazine
- Was active in the Hobby Industry Association of America (HIAA)
- Promoted the philosophy that very community should have a hobby shop; won the first hobby wholesalers award for promoting this philosophy
- Worked in many ways to promote hobbies throughout his life
- PMCH sponsored numerous contests
- Was the hobby industry's first sales representative
- Worked with his brother Irwin at PCMH in New York City, which grew into wholesaling and exporting as well as retail
- Owned Aristo-Craft Trains
- Life member of the National Model Railroad Association and active member of the Train Collectors' Association
- Former vice president of the HIAA

Honors:

- 1960: AMA Fellow
- 1974: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1978: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1990: Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame
- 1996: Pioneer in Model Railroading award from the National Model Railroad Industry

The following biography on Nathan Polk came from "The History of the Academy of Model Aeronautics: Including Part One and Part Two From the Beginning to the Year 1966" written by Willis C. Brown and Dick Black that was published first in 1966; the second part was published in 1967. This biography comes from Part One written by Willis C. Brown. It was completed by November 1965.

Nathan Polk

Field director, International Gas Model Airplane Association

Quoted with permission of the editor of the 1936 Model Aircraft Yearbook.

“He is a demon organizer with a marked propensity to ignore his own welfare while assisting others. He took over Bamberger Aero Club when his brother Irwin left for the Junior Birdmen Model Plane Institute. He changed the club bulletin from a drab weekly digest into Tailspins, a lively newsheet.

“He is one of the original sponsors of gas model competition and has directed more meets than one can count. He quit the Bamberger Club to go into business. He opened the Newark (New Jersey) branch of Polk’s Model Craft Hobbies. His business ability became overshadowed by the Samaritan instinct with the result that the store operated strictly for the benefit of the model builders.

“He continued to stimulate gas model activity and organized the International Gas Model Airplane Association for the Model Airplane News magazine, becoming the field director. He closed up the store and accepted the post of eastern representative for the Burd Model Airplane Company.

“He has directed every large eastern U.S. gas model meet and has been writing ‘Gas Lines’ for Model Airplane News magazine. He was formerly the high-salaried advertising manager for Sears Roebuck, but gave up that position to take over the Bamberger Aero Club. That proves what we said in the first line.”

Nathan is still (in 1965) active in the Hobby Industry Association of America and is still helping others, but his store is now an outstanding success. With his brother Irwin, the two make a team that is hard to beat in business or any project in which they are interested.

The following article about Nathan and his brother Irwin ran in the March 1971 issue of Craft Model and Hobby Industry and Hobby Merchandiser magazine.

Nat and Irwin Polk Celebrate 35th Year

For Nat and Irwin Polk, 1971 marks their 35th year in business. The industry honors these two for their many contributions to industry growth.

Most people, after 35 years in business, think about retirement. Instead of looking ahead to new work, they begin to look back. The future becomes a closed book.

Not for Nat and Irwin Polk. The year 1971 marked their 35th year in business, and both are so involved in different business and industry activities they have not even time to think about retirement. Why should they? As Nat says: “The hobby industry hasn’t even scratched the surface of its potential. Only within the last few years has the American consuming public been in the financial position to begin enjoying some of the leisure time it’s won.”

Both Nat and Irwin became involved in hobbies long before there were enough companies to call an industry. Recently, in his office Nat recalled the early days and what it was like getting started.

Build an industry? Get involved!

“When we first began thinking about going into business, you had to be involved in the general promotion of a hobby,” Nat says. “The simple reason was you had to work constantly at developing a market. As you developed customers, you had to encourage people to make the products.”

As early as 1926, Irwin, the older of the two by 18 months, became active in organizing clubs, contests and in publicizing hobbies. One of their early efforts was an aviation club where they taught youngsters to build and fly ROG (Rise-off-Ground) planes. “We couldn’t find any merchandise,” Nat recalls, “so Irwin went to Bamberger’s Department Store in Newark (New Jersey) and said, ‘Why don’t you have a hobby department,’ and they said ‘If you come to work for us we will.’”

He did, and after setting up a hobby department, he formed the Bamberger Aero Club, the first of many airplane clubs to be formed in department stores across the country. Within a short time, its membership grew to 5,000.

Very early in their careers Nat and Irwin developed the philosophy that a hobby shop should be a part of every community “like a bakery, a drug store, or a butcher shop.” Both believed that the consuming public had or would soon have the spare time and the ability to work at hobbies.

Years later when the Polks won the first hobby wholesalers award of merit it was for their efforts in furthering this concept.

In the beginning, there were no real hobby shops, only model airplane shops. The first priority was to encourage enterprising people to get into the business of making or supplying needed materials. For instance, before there were companies to make balsa wood supplies for modeling, the Polk boys had to get what materials they could from the Fleischman Yeast Company.

As Nat remembers it: “Fleischman used to make balsa crates for shipping yeast, and we used to go to the company and beg for the wood. Another source was the old hat blocks, which were made of balsa.

“As the industry grew, we **had** to be involved, not only out of interest, but out of self-preservation. If we were to get merchandise, we had to encourage people to go into this business. We would spend half our time trying to build the industry and the other half trying to make a living.”

Often they would sponsor contests in different parts of the country and spend time, money and a great deal of effort getting local support and cooperation. Many was the time, Nat recalls, he took groups of young modelers to national contests.

“Nobody paid us. We felt we had to do it,” Nat says. “Our slice of the pie could never get any bigger unless the whole pie got bigger. There was no such thing as taking it away from the next guy because what did he have to begin with?”

Open retail store

In 1933, Nat opened a small retail shop in Newark. “It was the wrong place,” he says. “Business was so limited I couldn’t get enough of it. In the summer I would travel to sell merchandise and try to sell the idea of the hobby shop concept to whomever I could find.”

An early boost for the industry came when Hearst Enterprises formed the Junior Birdmen of America. Irwin became field director and the 17 Hearst newspapers across the country sponsored contests and gave regular news coverage. Through the Good Housekeeping Institute, which was part of the Hearst organization, Irwin would have hobby products tested. In this way, a number of early products got their start.

After Irwin left Hearst, he decided to open a store in New York. It was a single-room “walk-up” on 33rd Street around the corner from the Pennsylvania Railroad Station. To help support it, Irwin worked as editor of Model Aircraft Builder magazine while he wife minded the store, and Nat went on the road as the industry’s first representative. Nat’s self-created territory ran from Maine to Florida and inland from Chicago to New Orleans. Among the early lines, he sold were Ideal Model Airplanes, Jim Walker, Comet and, later, Burd airplanes run by two young men from Baltimore, Sol and Lew Kramer.

Business at the new store was good and in 1938, they moved to a nearby building where they had two floors devoted to hobbies. As their various activities expanded, they soon decided to go into wholesaling.

Whenever the opportunity arose, they continued to promote hobbies. They would attend various aviation shows (planes were still small enough in those days, so shows could be held indoors) and sold gliders and model airplane kits. County fairs were also good places to interest youngsters in modeling.

As an example of the kind of “proselytizing” that got many people into this industry, Nat tells this story of the time Louis Kapp met Tony Koveleski. “At the time Tony was running a grocery store and in those days none of us travelers could afford to eat in restaurants. We used to go into groceries, buy bread and bologna, and eat in the car. One rainy day Louis Kapp stops at this small grocery store. Inside he sees Tony behind the counter and says: ‘What’s a young fellow like you doing in the grocery business?’ And don’t you think that’s what happened! Louis Kapp did that to more people and that’s what this whole industry has been built on – enthusiasm!”

Still a “growth” industry

The hobby industry is one industry, Nat says, where you can “still start small and go somewhere.” “There are fewer and fewer industries where you can do that and one of them is ours. We’re changing to a large degree, but that’s still true.”

The changes, as Nat sees it, include mass merchandising and techniques specially developed to serve this market.

Nat thinks that right now the hobby shop “is healthier than it has ever been. During the past two years we’ve received more inquiries about opening shops than at any time since World War II.”

Conditions under which hobby shops must operate are changing, however, he says. Shops that were once in prosperous inner cities are now faced with the problems of urban decay, crime and a public that flees the city for the suburbs at night. He has hopes for the inner city, though, and feels that plans to turn streets into malls and shopping areas will once again make inner cities important consumer centers.

Right now the trend favors specialty shops in shopping centers, he feels. “No single suburb can support a highly specialized shop,” he says. “A mall draws on many communities and a shop is more able to make a living in a center with the right layout and plenty of customer traffic.”

Another aspect in the development of the industry has been the increase in the number and kind of products. As a wholesaler, Nat feels it is his responsibility to carry not only sets and basic products but the parts and repair backup as well. “How can a person carry a line of gas airplane engines and not carry needle valves and glow heads and cylinders?” he asks.

One of the problems a wholesaler or retailer faces is having his inventory taken up by old or obsolete products. Nat insists, however, that the question isn’t all one of saying, “throw the stuff out.” “Americans feel that hobbies are valuable products, not something you discard,” he says. “Someone puts it away feeling it has value. We get 10 or 15 letters a day from people who want parts for this or that product that hasn’t been on the market for years. In many cases, we can supply them with what they need – not just at full list but even higher. A hobby doesn’t go out of style the way most toys do. This isn’t an ‘item’ industry.”

The strength of the industry’s staples, Nat maintains, lies in the fact that each generation of children that comes along represents a new audience for products. “A kit may have been on the market for eight years, but to a kid just building for the first time, it’s new,” he says.

Changes for growth

Changes Nat feels have helped the industry most are promotion, packaging and greater exposure on T.V., in print and in mass merchandising outlets.

Packaging, in particular, has vastly improved, he feels, and in turn has enhanced the salability of the product dramatically. “You just can’t compare packaging today with what it was years ago,” he says. “It’s marvelous because manufacturers have learned to use the box as a selling tool. For years, kits were always made the same – narrow at the end and long. Companies spent thousands of dollars on artwork, which nobody ever saw because it was on top where it was not properly exposed. We’ve been urging retailers to stack boxes face-up and in our New York store we’ve developed a self-service basket-type display where boxes must be put in that way.”

In short, Nat feels that manufactures are now making more effective use of all surfaces of the box to tell the product story. As a result, hobby shops today are increasingly able to self-service hobby kits and thus leave clerks free to do other important jobs.

Nat was then asked what he thinks of the argument that discounters are hurting independent retailers by taking away business.

“First, I want to know who a discounter is. There really aren’t any discounters now. There are just promotional stores. And the amount of discount they offer is no longer the type of discount that can’t be matched by the local retailer.

“In some cases,” he continues, “the local retailer may be doing **more** discounting. When the discounter operated out of a plain, low-rent store, he was able to sell cheap. However, as soon as he started to upgrade – going into better locations and buying the necessary plant and equipment – he was in the same position as any other retailer. He must have his profit, too. So he promotes certain products to give the impression that he discounts everything when, in fact, he does not.

“I will say this for the mass retailer of hobbies – God bless him! He is creating new customers for us, and, believe me, there isn’t anything better for our industry than a few million more customers!”

Retailers sell “service”

Nat feels that the biggest mistake a retailer today makes is “trying to emulate the mass merchandiser.” “He has to realize that his reason for being is service,” he says. “This takes the form of offering specialized products in depth and being able to provide information, repairs, and technical help.

“The thing is,” he adds, “the opportunity for the independent retailer has never been greater. Everything today is more technical than ever. And he is needed. He doesn’t have to be an expert. All he needs is the desire to follow hobby and craft activities and read the instructions in the kits so he has a basic understanding of how they work. Then he can be of help to his customer.”

The specialized store also plays a major role in the shopping center. People want specialized services, he says, and therefore go to these shops. “For that reason I think the specialty shop is on the upswing. The mass merchandiser recognizes this and wants to be with these people because they also have drawing power.”

Role of the wholesaler

As for the wholesaler in the hobby/craft industry, “he’s the man in the middle and that’s the problem,” he says. Many manufacturers, he adds, are uncertain as to what direction to take. “They want to sell the wholesaler because he can provide service and reach more retail outlets. At the same time, they feel they can capture more space for their products if they go direct. The two are contradictory, but nevertheless real problems for any wholesaler.”

Both Nat and Irwin have been active in raising funds for many promotional programs and feel that as long as the promotion benefits the entire industry and brings people into stores “it doesn’t matter whether or not the promotion concerns a specific product.”

“The important thing is to get people in the hobby shop,” Nat says. “Once he gets there, everything in the shop is exposed to him. He may not buy what attracted him to the store, but instead buy something else. The important thing is exposing the consumer to the range of products.”

Nat finds it disappointing that there is not more industry-wide support for promotion. “Many people don’t want to back anything unless it’s their own specific product. But you can’t do that promotionally. To benefit anyone individually you have to benefit all.”

As wholesalers, the Polks believe in choosing lines they can handle completely. Nat feels it is not the wholesaler’s function to “cherry pick” products from a line. “I think it’s his function to choose a line and back it all the way. Then a manufacturer can say to a dealer in an area, this wholesaler carries our complete line.

“We feel it’s proper to be complete in whatever areas we try to be in,” he says. Then speaking of the manufacturer’s desire to increase his markets, he adds: “I don’t care how much business a manufacturer can get from a retailer directly. If he doesn’t reach the corner shop where only the wholesaler reaches, he can’t capture the youth market and build the habit of buying hobby goods.”

“There are a number of hobby manufacturers,” he continues, “who have been successful because they reached the youngster where he formed his buying habit.”

It is no secret that the Polks were among the earliest developers of slot racing. In commenting on the impact the collapse of slot racing had on the industry, Nat says: “As Jack Besser pointed out when he was president of the Hobby Industry Association of America (HIAA) in 1966 – ‘Who would have thought in November there would be no slot racing in February?’ Nobody!”

However, says Nat, he and brother Irwin believe in being enthusiastic about products. “We get behind products and constantly look for new avenues for them. I firmly believe that electric car racing should be an important part of our industry. The question is the development it took. Our industry controlled everything except the tracks. And when the suede shoe boys came in, that was the end. They opened raceways block-to-block and used up communities in no time. The number of enthusiasts left wasn’t enough to support that many tracks.”

HO racing on the “go”

The Polks find that HO car racing is growing slowly, steadily and, for the most part, safely. Nat, however, is concerned that the issue of ever more speed does not come into plaque the industry again as it did during slot car says. “I watched gas-powered cars take somewhat in the same route as slot cars when speed became the only factor. We had outdoor tracks 6 lanes-wide and 1,500 feet long. The cars rose on greased rails and would go 130 mph. Finally, the guys that kept winning the races all the time were the richest. They turned special pistons and tighter fits. Other racers would come to a track, take one look and say, ‘Oh, he’s here’ and leave. Soon all that was left was rotting track.”

Nat and Irwin were among the early distributors of Scalextric English home race sets. After some years, they have again acquired the line and at this year's HIAA trade show displayed sets and accessories.

Both think the era of large HO track is coming. In Nat's view when a kid buys a fast car, pretty soon he wants to see it take off on a big track. But if commercial HO tracks are to be successful, Nat and Irwin feel, the emphasis can't be on speed alone. "Once a kid sees he has to spend \$25 to compete, he's going to lose interest," Nat says. "Then all you've got left are the pros and they're one-tenth-of-one-percent of our market.

"I hope manufacturers will keep this speed thing in bounds and tailor their products to a boy's pocket allowance. The manufacturer must be the one to set the direction. Instead of making a faster car, why not make a different car, something unusual. Increase the maneuverability of the car, do something to improve the steering. In speed there's a limit you can go until it only becomes a matter of dollars."

Over the years, Nat has worked tirelessly to raise funds for films promoting model railroading. Trains make good action subjects, he says, but the important thing is promotion that brings people into hobby stores. As for trains themselves, "This is a category that is never-ending," he says. "I will never forget when Min Horowitz was president of TMA a few years ago. She gave an interview to the New York Times in which she said that the era of trains was over because kids do not ride in them. But if kids are out in the car and a freight train passes, you've never seen such excitement! Kids love trains whether they've ridden in them or not."

Surveying the market recently, Nat found both N gauge and HO selling well. As far as model railroading in general is concerned, he thinks that one of the best things that could happen for the industry was Lionel's re-entry into the field through MCP. "What we've missed in recent years," he says, "has been the advertising of giant companies like Gilbert and Lionel who were promoting the fun of model railroading. Now that we've got one of the big companies back, their advertising will help us sell the other gauges, too."

Model sales solid

Nat considers the sales of model airplanes "just amazing." "There are fewer manufacturers of balsa planes today, but they are prospering beyond belief."

Although Nat calls himself a "five time loser" in selling crafts, he feels that crafts have finally come into their own. "I think we've hit the time when everything is being programmed in the right direction. Manufacturers are better financed, more crafts are being attractively packaged, and the income of the American family now finally matches the spare time they have. The American woman has almost literally been released from her daily chores, so we now have these advantages going for us."

The biggest problem in selling crafts, Nat feels, is convincing more stores to group crafts with hobbies. "Half the time I find crafts in needlework, the art department or scattered throughout different departments." By grouping crafts with hobbies, Nat feels that both products can be sold more effectively. "The only one out shopping during the day is the woman. Put crafts in with

hobbies and you can sell her crafts while encouraging her to buy a hobby for son or dad, too. It's up to the industry to direct a tremendous drive toward gathering craft items under the heading 'Hobby Department.'”

For years, the Polk store has served as a hobby landmark on New York's Fifth Avenue.

“It's been quite a product laboratory for us,” Nat says. “When we opened it in 1946, it was a big shot in the arm for our industry. ‘My gosh,’ people said, ‘a hobby store right on Fifth Avenue!’ People then went into hobbies because they could see it was a business. We were right. There **is** business. The volume now generated is infinitesimal compared to the leisure time people are going to have. In the next few years, you're going to see the industry really take off!”

And you can be sure that Nat and Irwin plan to be very much a part of this growth.

The following press release was issued by Polk Aristo-Craft after the death of Nathan on August 6, 1996.

Nathan Polk, 83, Electric Model Train Manufacturer and Hobby Industry Pioneer

Nathan J. Polk, former owner of Aristo-Craft Trains, died on Tuesday, August 6, 1996, at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Miami, Florida. He was a native of Newark, New Jersey, and lived in East Orange, New Jersey, until May of 1995 when he retired and moved to Miami, Florida.

The cause of death was a complication from a spinal anesthesia during surgery, said Lewis Polk, his son.

Mr. Polk was also the co-founder, along with his brother Irwin, also deceased, of Polk's Hobby, a five-story hobby shop on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, New York, from 1935 to 1985. He was a member of the [Model Aviation] Hall of Fame and a life member of the National Model Railroad Association, a former vice president of the Hobby Industry Association of America and was active in the Train Collectors' Association, International Plastic Miniature Society, and the Military Figured Collectors' Association.

Mr. Polk traveled the world over promoting the hobby industry and was one of the best-known personalities within the field. Mr. Polk had just received a “Pioneer in Model Railroading” awarded by the National Model Railroad Industry at its recent annual convention, which is given to honor those that blazed a path at the inception of the industry for others to follow.

Mr. Polk manufactured and imported a wide line of innovative hobby products such as Scalectrix slot racing, Aristo-Craft HO trains, Stadden miniatures, Shuco models, Jetex motors, Heller plastic kits, Constructo ship models, the Atom gas engine, and Mabuchi motors. In recent years, he concentrated on manufacturing Aristo-Craft large-scale indoor/outdoor trains that are garden size and were featured at the Christmas display of the New York Botanical Gardens and at the National Christmas Tree in Washington, D.C., this past Christmas season.

His wife, Ruth, died in 1988 after 49 years of marriage. Mr. Polk is survived by his sons, Frederic P. Polk of Scottsdale, Arizona, and Lewis M. Polk of Maplewood, New Jersey, as well as six grandchildren.

For more information on Nathan Polk and his brother Irwin, see the February 1960 issue of American Modeler magazine, starting on page two.

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AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

