



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of JOHN I. POND

1917-June 11, 2001 Modeler since 1929

AMA #251



Written & Submitted by AP (09/1999); Transcribed by NR (05/2001); Edited & Formatted by SS (10/2002), Updated by JS (10/2007, 05/2011), Reformatted by JS (01/2010)

Career:

- 1934: Founded the Ace-Hi Squadron #15311
- 1950: Founded the Northern California Free Flight Council
- 1962: One of the Founders and main booster of the Old-Timer movement; this was later A featured columnist for the San Francisco for the section of the Junior Birdmen to be called the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM)
- Worked to have SAM included in the AMA Nationals; directed that branch of the Nationals for the next 20 to 25 years
- Founding member of the Model Engine Collectors Association (MECA)
- AMA Leader Member and District X Vice President for three terms
- Contributing editor of the *Model Engine Collector Journal*, *Air Trails* magazine, *Model Airplane News* magazine, *West Coast Model News* and *Junior Birdmen of America*
- Directed well over 100 contests and meets

Honors:

- 1975: AMA Fellow
- 1983: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1987: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1989: SAM Hall of Fame
- 2000: Kits and Plans Antiquitous Hall of Fame

John Pond's son, Allen, wrote the following biography of his father in 1998. The John Pond Plans Service was sold to the AMA in 2002. Many of the Pond plans are available through the AMA's Plans Service.

A Brief History of the Modeling Life of John I. Pond

By Allen Pond

John was born March 20, 1917 at Pierre, South Dakota. In 1923, when he was 6-years-old, he and his family moved to San Francisco, California, for better business opportunities. His first contact with the airplane world was due to Lindbergh's famous New York-Paris flight in 1927. It literally took the country by storm and John was no exception. He was a very impressionable 10-years-old at that time.

No one had ever seen anything like that before, and it deeply impressed John. It was the start of

many youngsters, including John, to becoming air-minded and building replicas of real-life airplanes. He started to build model airplanes immediately after that experience, but due to the Great Depression looming, his parents could not afford to buy the wood necessary for his needs. So, looking around for any type of wood to whittle models from, he found apple boxes and apple crates as his chief supplier for the next several years. John's father had an old touring car and John would take his models on a ride with his father and hang the airplanes out the window just to watch the propellers spin.

In 1929, working at odd jobs when he was 12-years-old, he could finally afford the balsa needed to build realistic solid scale models of the real-life airplanes that he so admired. In fact, he built over 70 models in a two-year period from 1929 to 1930. The local bank in the neighborhood was delighted to hang John's models in its lobby as a colorful display. It was a most prolific time in his early career of modeling, and helped to hone and shape his skills into building real flying models that he would continue to build throughout his life.

In 1931, when he was 14-years-old, he built his first rubber-powered model, a scale-like *Howard Pete*, a popular airplane of the times from money he had managed to save up doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. After this very satisfying experience, he then concentrated almost exclusively on Cleveland Kits thereafter. To him, they were the most realistic of all model kits then on the market. Sometimes he had to work two or three jobs at a time just to earn the money to buy the kits for this marvelous hobby he had discovered. By then, he was deeply involved in modeling, and wished to share his enthusiasm and interact with others who were also model airplane-minded.

In order to do this, in 1933, he joined the San Francisco chapter of the Junior Birdmen of America. Also during this time, he founded the Ace-Hi Squadron #15311 in 1934. This was a small model airplane club made up of 10 boys his own age that John had recruited by himself to share a common interest: modeling. Eventually, the club later changed its name to the San Francisco Vultures. This model airplane club is still in existence today after 64 years with John Pond as the AMA Club Leader Member.

In 1934, John had branched out from flying scale models and was building twin pushers, cabin and stick competition models and becoming a real driving force on the modeling scene. He “spark-plugged” his model airplane club, the SF Vultures, as well as all contests that were being held by the club. In one way or another, he was involved as club contest director, timer, judge, contestant, or just lending a helping hand to other modelers who were new to this sport. He was always ready to recruit new members to the world of flying models, and went out of his way to encourage every friend and acquaintance he knew to get involved. Some of the original members of the Vultures MAC (Model Airplane Club) are still among his best friends today.

In 1936, when he turned 19 years of age, flying a rubber-powered model of his own design, he set the Junior Birdmen of America World Record for Outdoor Commercial Models. Also at this time, he was made field director by the Junior Birdmen Society in recognition for his unselfishness in sharing his modeling knowledge and for taking the time helping others to get started in building models. Quite an award for someone that young!

In 1937, gas models were really starting to come into their own, and John decided that he was ready for the “big leagues.” He built his first gas model on assignment for the Red Shield Boy's Club, so that he could use the proceeds from that assignment to buy his first miniature gasoline engine, a *Baby Cyclone*, to make a gas model for himself. He still has correspondence between himself and Bill Effinger, of Berkeley Model fame, discussing the problems and merits of flying gas models in 1937, particularly the giant *Cavalier* that John built. One of the first successful gas models on the West Coast, a picture of John and his model can be found in the March 1937 issue of *Model Airplane News* magazine.

At this time, he was also the only resident instructor in model aeronautics for the San Francisco Boy's Club. Because of his willingness to help other modelers succeed in flying, and his positive encouragement to all modelers, he was elected president of the San Francisco Junior Birdmen Wing. Not only was he now heavily involved with the Junior Birdmen, he also made the time to hold every elective position in the San Francisco Vultures airplane club at one time or another. He did this to keep the model airplane club energetic and viable.

The largest San Francisco newspaper at that time, the *San Francisco Examiner*, was looking for a columnist for their proposed featured stories on model airplane building and flying. He was approached and asked by the newspaper to be the featured columnist for the section of the Junior Birdmen, which was to report on the modeling world and strive to make all youngsters air-minded. He accepted this offer and challenge, and made the Junior Birdmen column, an interesting and informative airplane digest for all readers of every age.

At this time, he was 20 years old and was doing what he loved best – flying models in competition with other friends and modelers. He very seldom failed to place among the top three in any of the many model airplane contests entered during this time. To this date, he still has numerous awards given to him during this period tucked away in an old chest. As an example, the San Francisco Parks and Recreation Department sponsored a model airplane contest with four events, open to the public. John entered this contest, and flying against other experienced modelers, promptly took first place in all four events, even though he was helping other modelers to compete against him at the same time!

Around 1937 or 1938, at 21 years of age, he joined the I.G.M.A.A., which later became the Junior National Aeronautic Association and then evolved into the AMA. As a result of his expertise and recognition of his willingness to help others, he was made the West Coast representative of this organization. Again, he threw himself wholeheartedly into this latest challenge, always looking for new club members and encouraging those who were first starting out in the modeling world by helping them in any way he could. It was always a cardinal rule with him to share and support others who were novices, regardless of age.

In 1939, at age 22 at the California State Fair, against a full field of modelers, he won first prize with a rubber hydro model of his own design and won several second prizes in different events. At this meet, he also brought with him a brand-new, never flown before, compressed air model that he had designed on his own with no prior knowledge or help from any of the “experts” at the

time. With no previous experience, and against other modelers who knew compressed air techniques, he promptly took second place!

At the start of 1940, he reorganized the San Francisco Vultures MAC to be a more exciting and energetic club. Also during this same period of time, he participated in all of the Scripps-Howard Newspaper airplane contest events. Scripps-Howard was so impressed with this young man that they asked him to put together and arrange the start of hydro contests for all modelers. He promptly organized and directed these events for the Scripps-Howard Newspaper organization. It was the beginning of a relationship between John and Scripps-Howard that was to last for the next 35 consecutive years.

He was also married at this time to his lovely wife, Maryann. It was not unusual to see the both of them out on the flying field together over the years, with Maryann as the official score keeper for the contestants. She was always passing out cold drinks to the modelers during the hot summer months, while John was being either the contest director or a contestant himself. They were married for 56 years before she passed away quite suddenly and unexpectedly in 1996.

Sometime after World War II, John looked at the gas modeling scene in California and knew that a model building boom was about to occur because all the restrictions on materials had been lifted by the government at the close of the war. During the next several years, there was a tremendous surge of interest in flying models, and especially the Free Flight classes in California with its wide-open spaces and flying fields. Therefore, in 1950, he founded the Northern California Free Flight Council (NCFFC), which would serve as the sanctioning body for modelers interested in this type of flying. In order to keep it strong and healthy, he again held every position available at one time or another in that organization from president on down.

Again, as on so many occasions in the past, he would reach into his own wallet to provide trophies and awards for the modelers who entered contests sponsored by the NCFFC. In this way, he could ensure that as many modelers as possible would be honored. During this period, he also had time to hold the national class C gas record for five straight years. This organization is still very active and strong to this date, holding many exciting contests each year.

In 1950, Plymouth Motors was sponsoring the Nationals, which were to be held in Detroit, Michigan. John, encouraging and supporting his 9-year-old son Al, helped him become a Northern California champion, eligible for a free trip back to the Nationals, courtesy of Plymouth. With John as chaperon and plane handler, Al won three large trophies at Detroit. In 1951, again, he helped his son to become a Northern California champion, but economic constraints precluded them from making the trip back to Detroit again. It wasn't unusual to find the Pond family out on the flying fields at that time – himself, his wife and sons Al and Gary. Their models and pictures were featured many times in the old modeling magazines.

In the ensuing years, John noticed that the trend in Free Flight was to hotter motors, pencil bombers and more competition. It was not a direction that he and several others of his friends wished to go, and so they looked to the old gas models of the 1930s and 1940s for a more relaxed type of flying. This form of sport soon caught on with hundreds of modelers, and John saw a real

need for organization and to establish uniform rules and regulations for these “Old-Timers.”

In 1962, he was one of the founders and main booster of the Old-Timer movement, which models pre-World War II gas models. This was later to be called the SAM organization, which is an acronym for Society of Antique Modelers. He held every conceivable elective office for that organization, but was especially proud of the position of historian. To help the SAM organization become a viable part of the modeling world, he attended every single first Old-Timer Annual organized by the various model airplane clubs across the country. He even went to England and Australia (seven times!) to promote the ideas of the SAM movement while it was still in its infancy. SAM is now a worldwide organization with branches in just about every country.

Along with the SAM movement, in 1964 he organized, developed, and officiated the Old-Timer events at the Nationals in that same year. Thanks to John, SAM was now part of the Nationals! John directed that branch of the Nationals for the next 20 to 25 years. It may be noted that during its infancy, again he sponsored each Old-Timer event himself, bought all the trophies and awards out of his own pocket and lined up several sponsors. All this just to make sure that as many people as possible could have a chance at obtaining one of the awards.

John was also the founder and organizer of the Old-Timer Reunion Banquet that is held every year at the Nationals for the past 23 years. This banquet is used as the vehicle to award all prizes and trophies won by modelers and to make the presentations deserving and meaningful. To make it doubly entertaining, John would line up old model airplane stills and movies and recruit other modelers who were dynamic speakers for the banquet members.

He founded the first Old-Timer Radio Control Assist Club on the West Coast, later to be called SAM 21. He organized and officiated the first Old-Timer meets at Taft, California, and at San Diego, California. He was the contest director of all SAM Taft Championships, save one. He thought nothing of driving several hundred miles each way, just to ensure that a local contest would be a success and bring in new modelers.

To honor John and his efforts, members of several Southern California model airplane clubs have initiated a very special annual contest for all flyers. It is called the John Pond Commemorative and is staged each year during the summer months.

He is also one of the founding members of the Model Engine Collectors Association. It was felt at that time that many of the older engines should have a place in the history of modeling, and so the collection of these motors was on to save as many as possible of these early engines for posterity. They have become quite an investment now and make magnificent displays for the owners who are fortunate to have acquired them.

During John's career in the world of modeling, he has designed and flown all of these original models. Below are just a few of some of the original designs made by this most prolific modeler:

1. Midget Twin Pusher (second place, Junior Birdmen Eliminations)

2. Outdoor Cabin (Junior Birdmen Record Holder)
3. Outdoor Cabin Seaplane (California State Fair Champion)
4. Outdoor Diamond (second place, Junior Birdmen Eliminations)
5. Gas Model (West Coast Gas Record Holder, five years) and Perpetual Trophy Winner donated by AMA's Frank Ehling
6. Hydro Gas Model (first place, Treasure Island Meet)
7. Blackburn All Metal (second place Exchange Club Winner)
8. Morane Parasol 223 (first place Exchange Club Winner)
9. Outdoor Towline Glider (second place Scripps-Howard Event)
10. Payload Gas Model (second place Los Alamitos Nationals)
11. ½-A P.A.A. (West Coast P.A.A. Elimination Winner)
12. P.A.A. Cargo (West Coast P.A.A. Elimination Winner)

His accomplishments, in addition to being a very prolific builder and modeler throughout the years from 1927 to date, include uncounted trophy wins from many, many contests over the years. In fact, his garage was so full of awards, his wife used to complain jokingly that she had no room to walk around! Not many people know of the awards and meritorious achievements that he has received, because he is very reluctant to talk about himself.

However, it is up to this scribe to describe some, but by no means all, of the awards and achievements he is most proud:

- Model Aviation Hall of Fame Inductee
- Academy of Model Aeronautics Leader Member
- Academy of Model Aeronautics Life Member #251
- Academy of Model Aeronautics Contest Director
- Academy of Model Aeronautics District X Vice President (three terms)
- Junior Birdmen of America San Francisco-area President
- Junior Birdmen of America Contributing Editor
- Scripps-Howard Newspaper Contest Director
- National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame Inductee
- Society of Antique Modelers Life Member
- Society of Antique Modelers Life Member (Australia)
- Society of Antique Modelers Chapters 21, 26, 32, Life Member
- Society of Antique Modelers Distinguished Service Award

- Northern California Free Flight Council Founder
- Western Associated Modelers Life Member
- *Model Builder* Magazine Editor; “Plug Sparks” column writer for over 20 years
- *Model Builder* magazine Distinguished Service Award
- Model Engine Collector Association founding member
- *Model Engine Collector Journal* Contributing Editor
- *Air Trails* Contributing Editor
- *Model Airplane News* Contributing Editor
- *West Coast Model News* Contributing Editor
- Western Associated Modeler Vice President of Free Flight; has been a member of that organization for over 32 years

These are just a few of the acknowledgments he has received over the course of an incredible 70 years of modeling. In actual fact, he has received awards many times over what is printed in this brief synopsis of his modeling career.

His generosity is legend and well known by many modelers. For example, if he had visitors to his home admiring his models and motors, and they couldn't afford to build their own, he promptly gave them a model or motor so that they could begin to enjoy building and flying as much as he does. They were absolutely amazed at this kind and generous gesture, and it gained him many true and lasting friends over the decades.

He has directed well over 100 contests and meets, and has never failed to have a cheerful word to all contestants, whether he was competing against them or just officiating. In fact, he was sought out many, many times to be a guest speaker or lecturer for various events and promotions concerning aircraft models. A witty and gregarious person, he is well liked and respected by hundreds, if not thousands, of modelers.

Having saved every model airplane plan he could obtain since the 1930s, he started the John Pond Old Time Plan Service in 1965 as a way to introduce new modelers enjoyment of modeling and “scratch building.” It may be noted that when this plan service was first started, if he received a request for a plan he did not have, he promptly drew it up to full size at no charge to the modeler. He then only charged \$1.25 per copy to keep everyone's interest focused on building and flying models – his first love. His plan service has always been a family-operated endeavor, and has grown to over 12,000 different full size plans. It is the largest known historical archive of its type in the world, and is dedicated to all airplane modelers the world over. The plans are still sold for just what it costs for the paper, exactly the way the service was first intended to be. His catalog is well over 300 pages now, and includes all categories of modeling: Old-Timers, nostalgia, Radio Control, Control Line, Stick & Tissue, and Flying Scale. In appearance, it is like a small telephone book.

It further contains much of the scale three views found in the old pulp magazines, such as *Flying Aces*, etc., along with almost 1,500 model engine layouts, suitable for placement of motors or just plain collecting. Many of these drawings were done by John himself for *Model Builder* magazine. He also has plans considered by many to be quite rare and a big part of modeling

history. His catalog is priced at \$10, and may be ordered through the John Pond Old Time Plan Service, P.O. Box 90310, San Jose, California, 95109-3310.

Each year, he receives many letters of thanks from modelers around the world who are most appreciative of the size and availability of the selections listed in his catalog. Many modelers have written to say that they thought they would never be able to obtain that particular model plan again that they built when they were younger. They are pleasantly surprised to see that John carries it in his inventory and amazed that they can still obtain copies of the original plan through his service. It is letters such as these that make his continuing efforts to sponsor his plan service a worthwhile endeavor after 33 years of continuous service to all modelers.

Throughout the years, John has generously donated literally hundreds of plans and gift certificates to various clubs and contests, in addition to the catalogs themselves. On many occasions, he has totally sponsored various contests, providing the trophies and awards out of his own pocket, in addition to making himself available in any position required to make a successful “meet.” During his career in modeling, he has always put the interests of others ahead of his own as it gives him the same amount of satisfaction to see others become as successful as he has been.

All of this was accomplished while working 40 hours or more a week at the United States Naval Radiation Defense Laboratory along with raising a family of four children. In addition, he went to college night school for 12 straight years, never earning less than a “B” average. Thus, he obtained his Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering while working, raising his family, going to night school, and being heavily involved in modeling. Quite a remarkable person!

John is 82-years-old now, and is still active in modeling. Although he uses a walker or a wheelchair to get around in now, he never misses a monthly meeting of the local SAM 21 Chapter. He is still the man to talk to when you have modeling problems or just need historical data. There are very few modelers left with us that have such a plethora of knowledge and a willingness to always take the time to share that knowledge with others.

He will always send his warmest regards and very best wishes to each and every one of you and wish you the very best of thermals.

Respectfully submitted by his son Al on Christmas Day, 1998

The following is from Red Barrows. He shared this memory at the 2006 AMA Convention in Ontario, CA, January 14, 2006.

“Back in 1970, I had been flying gliders in Torrey Pines in San Diego. [I] got fed up with hang gliders [and] went back to flying old timers as radio-controlled models... I had a big giant field in east San Diego that I could fly and not be bothered by other modelers.

One day, I am lying on my chase lounge, flying one of my old timers. Out of the clear blue sky a big, smiling face leans over my face. "I've been looking for you for about three years," the smiling man said. He wants to know what I have been flying. I said "*Miss America* with an Enya 29 with the biggest propeller that the engine could possibly turn over."

John was immediately interested, especially when I brought the wingtip down to his nose and he immediately had to have the transmitter, flew the plane until it was out of fuel, [and] landed it as if it was a dead stick. Then he says, "Oh, by the way, I'm John Pond." I [say], "I know, J.P. You helped me when I was a little kid and you were one of the big guys." Then we begin to visit for the rest of the afternoon until sunset.

[We] exchanged phone numbers and addresses with invitations for both to visit. That evening, about seven 'o clock, J.P. appears at my front door in his red Chrysler convertible, top down. We carried nineteen models up to my model room in my house. They were all so oil soaked they would have met the EPA superfund, but John being John, "Let's get these converted to radio."

There is a box of radio equipment. There are about thirty sets of radios in the box. We take a buzzard bombshell with I think it was a *Super Cyc*; put a Perry carburetor on the *Super Cyc* [and chop] up the rudder and the elevator. One or two o'clock in the morning, it was ready to fly.

The next morning, the sun has not gotten up but JP has and off we go to fly. He flew his buzzard bombshell for near the rest of the day and, of course, we had to get him a chase lounge...Daddy Warbucks idling at his normal mock one, this is the way it was, knowing J.P."

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