



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of WILLIAM C. PRENSKY

Born January 9, 1930 Started modeling in 1938

AMA #8059



Written & Submitted by WCP (03/2003); Transcribed & Edited by SS (03/2003), Reformatted by JS (01/2010)

Career:

- Attended his first Nationals at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, in 1953
- Joined the U.S. Army in 1954
- Worked as a mechanical engineer and studied electrical engineering
- Has attended every Nationals held at AMA headquarters in Muncie, Indiana
- Has been a avid flyer of Free Flight for many years
- Won a lot of contests throughout 30 years of competing including a first in class A nostalgia at the National Free Flight Society (NFFS) Nationals and several firsts in FAI power and the equivalent to 1/2-A at the Canadian Nationals
- Became an AMA-sanctioned contest director in 1994
- Free Flight contest director of the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) Champs in 1994 and 1998
- A longtime NFFS member and former member of SAM

My Life in Balsa Wood

William Prenskey

My model-building career goes back 65 years, to 1938 in Brooklyn, New York, where I was an 8-year-old aspiring modeler. In those days, airplanes were so thrilling that when an airliner flew overhead, all of the houses would disgorge their little boys who would stare until the plane disappeared. We lived across from a large athletic field and were on the approach path for LaGuardia Airport making our view long and clear. I am convinced that the lack of interest in Free Flight today is the result of loss of the glamour of flight.

Manufacturers like Comet made a wide variety of dime models, which were about the size and complexity of the modern peanut scale models. I failed to complete my first 100 of these kits. In 1944, I built a Sparky, the first that I ever finished. Being a demon aerodynamicist even then, I saw no reason to cover the top surfaces of the wing and stabilizer (stab). It flew anyway – about 15 or 20 feet – and was my first success. I have considered building another Sparky; perhaps this one would fly better.

In 1946, I enjoyed the greatest thrill that a 16-year-old model flyer could experience. Engines became available again after World War II and I bought a brand new Ohlsson .23 from the legendary Bill Effinger who owned Berkeley Models in Brooklyn. He took me on a tour of his production line where eight women carrying balsa sticks and sheets walked around a large table and deposited the wood in kit boxes. I believe they were filling Buccaneer B Special boxes. Mr. Effinger led me back to his office, reached into his desk drawer, and sold me a brand new Ohlsson .23 at the advertised price, which was not a universal practice.

I flew that engine in a variety of Control Line and Free Flight models and then lost it in a Playboy Junior at a Hicksville, Long Island contest. Hicksville was an abandoned potato farm

about 20 miles east of Brooklyn. Today it is far better known as Levittown, Long Island, a development of more than 25,000 homes built primarily for World War II veterans. Of course, none of my friends had a car, so we had to take a long trip to the field. We rode the subway to the Long Island Railroad (LIRR) terminal and, after a 30-minute trip on the LIRR, we walked about three miles to the field. This was not a simple matter, carrying an assembled Free Flight model, a toolbox, fuel and, of course, lunch. When I finally recovered from the trauma of losing that engine, I concentrated on contest Free Flight and a bit of Control Line. I would win or place in a contest occasionally, but it was difficult because Frank Ehling and the Brooklyn Skyscrapers (such as Sal Taibi, Leon Shulman, and Henry Struck) had returned from World War II.

Jasco was an extraordinary operation. The legendary Frank Zaic brothers, John and Anton, and sister, Christine, all worked there. They were located in lower Manhattan. In addition to producing a multitude of kits still popular today, they cut fine balsa. Within 200 feet of the building, the odor of balsa dust was overpowering. The odor was so distinctive that even today; I can smell a real model shop hundreds of feet distant. I would go to Jasco to buy balsa from their racks. When I took my selections to Frank, he would question me on the intended use of every piece. Then we would return to the racks and he would pick just the right wood. I learned the art of balsa picking from the master.

I entered Brooklyn Polytech in 1947 to study mechanical engineering. I flew many hand-launched gliders during that period, winning a number of contests and getting a painful case of bursitis in my left shoulder. I also flew power Free Flight models locally.

In 1953, I attended my first Nationals at Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. Two anecdotes remain in my memory. I bought a 1940 Chevrolet sedan from a co-worker. It had no floorboards and came with five gallons of oil and two-dozen spark plugs, all of which were used during the trip. I paid \$35 for the car with an agreement to sell it back for \$17.50 when or if I returned. It was quite an experience, driving along watching the road go by beneath my feet and stopping every 50 miles to change plugs and add oil. I had a Zeek, which flew well with a K&B .19 Greenhead. I bought a new K&B .23 and broke it in before leaving Brooklyn. At that time, max flights were becoming popular. Before that, your score was the total of three flights of unlimited duration. Many models were lost. At those Nationals, the max was 10 minutes. The first event was class B and off went my Zeek and K&B .23, never to be seen again. I spent two days looking for it and contracted the worst case of poison ivy of my life.

In 1954, I joined the U.S. Army at their request. My wife and I went to Fort Worth, Texas. I repaired radars and computers on guns that ringed Carswell Air Force Base. There my Control Line Super Ringmaster was pulverized when the up line broke during inverted flight. The immensity of the open spaces was overpowering for a Brooklyn boy. Unfortunately, poisonous snakes and insects abounded on these fields and I never flew on them. My K&B .29 wasn't damaged and it appeared next in a Free Flight Civi-Boy 61. We stayed in Texas an extra month after my Army discharge and attended the 1956 Nationals at a Naval Air Station near Dallas. It was August and probably about 110-degrees Fahrenheit, too much for me. I put up my first and only flight, drove down the runway to pick up the Civi Boy, and went home.

After the Army, we moved to Pennsylvania, north of Philadelphia. I built a Live Wire Kitten (Radio Controlled – RC), a transmitter and receiver and powered it with a McCoy 049 diesel engine. That was the beginning of my love affair with diesels, but not RC. I was disappointed that so many RC flyers knew nothing about radio or engines.

Now they don't know much about building either. This was a period of intense Free Flight building and contest flying but I have no recollection of any of my models of that era.

In 1961, I was working as a mechanical engineer, studying electrical engineering at night, building and operating Ham radio equipment and playing Tournament Bridge. My two sons were born that year and something had to give. For reasons that no longer make any sense to me, I gave up model airplanes.

In 1968, we moved to Rochester, New York, to work for Eastman Kodak. I returned to the hobby with a vengeance. My wife took our sons to Miami to visit her mother. As solace, she bought a Starduster 600 kit for me. I built it quickly and powered it with an old Supertigre .29. It was an excellent flyer but had two weak spots in the fuselage, one just behind the pylon and the other just ahead of the stabilizer. I once watched it glide gently into tall weeds and break the fuselage off at the stab. I built most of the other Starduster kits and a few scaled to other sizes. None of them had that fault.

Then I met Bob Rambo, a neighbor in the next street. We had 160 acres of nearly empty land (occasional crops) right behind our houses. One evening while flying, I was approached by Bob, who was an old Free Flighter but was fiddling with Radio Control. He went back to Free Flight, never built another RC and we have been flying buddies for 35 years. Bob was an excellent mechanical engineer with Xerox in Rochester. He had access to large machines that had not yet been marketed. In the following years, we built Stardusters, Shocers, Country Boys and others in every conceivable size. I still have two modified Shocers and a Country Boy. Now that the so-called classic Free Flight rules have been incorporated into the AMA rules, I hope to fly them again.

The Nationals went through many changes over the next 25 years. It was flown in the east, usually Philadelphia, then counter-clockwise around the country. Next would be Glenview Naval Air Station in Chicago, followed by California and the Southwest. In the 1970s, budget cuts forced the Navy to terminate this arrangement. After that, it was held wherever a field could be found. Several times we flew at Wright Patterson Air Force Base and Lawrenceville, Illinois. Finally, AMA bought the property at Muncie, Indiana. Initially it was not a great Free Flight field but each year improvements were made. Now it is close to 1,000 acres and an excellent field. It has all but replaced Wright Patterson Air Force Base and Lawrenceville. We have been there every year since and, although it is about two hours farther than Dayton, it is worth it. Besides, over the years the Air Force placed armored vehicles and fences all over Wright Patterson. It became a difficult place to fly.

A notable development in the 1970s eased the burden of the Free Flighter. We started to use very small radio beacon transmitters. They were light and used small batteries so they were easily attached to models with little loss of performance. My experience as a Ham led me to experiment with a variety of these transmitters even before they were commercially available. They became widely used and model recovery was eased considerably. I used a beacon to find a friend's model six miles off the field at Wright Patterson. I walked around a house several times listening to the signal. The homeowner asked me what I was doing and I had him listen to the signal on my radio receiver. He opened the garage and sheepishly handed the model to me.

I won a lot of contests over the next 30 years. Notable was first in class A nostalgia at the National Free Flight Society (NFFS) Nationals at Lawrenceville. It took 11 maxes to win. I had firsts in FAI power and the equivalent to ½-A at the Canadian Nationals. There were several firsts at King Orange Contests at Palm Bay, Florida, and, of course, there were many second and third places – probably close to 200.

In 1994, I agreed to be Free Flight contest director (CD) at the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) Nationals at Muncie. I had never been a CD before, but the contest manager asked me to take the AMA test and do the job. I thought that it would be repayment for all the years of being a contestant at meets run by other poor souls. It was a tough job and it ruined my flying for that year and the next. I did it again in 1998 and it would have been even more difficult but my wife, Tina, and Bob Oslan's wife, Leah, worked all week at the scoring desk. In addition, my friend Jim McCarty of Rochester set up and ran a computer scoring system that enabled us to post all scores five minutes after the contest ended. I believe that Jim's system is widely used in large contests today but his was the first.

In 1999, we moved to Frederick, Maryland, and that curtailed my flying. In the last two years, I started flying again, even won a SAM contest or two. In 2003, I'm hoping to fly much more and be competitive again.

I've been a member of AMA since 1946. They award contest directors four-digit numbers and I am AMA 8059. I am also a longtime member of the NFFS and a former member of the SAM.

Somehow, Tina and I managed a fairly normal life. We raised two sons. I worked almost 40 years as an engineer. She worked as a reference librarian and assistant director of a large library near Rochester.

It is impossible to measure how much Free Flight has enriched my life. I must have met hundreds of flyers and formed many friendships. Even now, we often sit in the field telling flying stories, many of which lead to long laughter.

*(signed) William C. Prensky
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