



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of JAMES M. SEARS

Born July 3, 1946

Began modeling in 1950s

AMA #8335



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

Career:

- Joined the Lexington (Kentucky) Model Airplane Club in late 1974; served as president in 1976 and senior adviser in 1977
- Helped form the Burgin (Kentucky) Barnstormers in 1977; has served as some sort of officer in the club ever since
- Trained over 100 members to fly Radio Control through the Burgin Barnstormers
- Became AMA District VI associate vice president in 1979; became an AMA contest director and Leader Member shortly thereafter
- Appointed as District VI vice president in 1981 when the former vice president ran for another position at the AMA
- Elected District VI vice president from 1986 to 1994
- Currently (2003) serves as secretary, treasurer, newsletter editor and main instructor of the Burgin Barnstormers
- Received his full-sized pilot certificate in 1982

Honors:

- 1982: AMA Meritorious Service Award
- 1995: AMA Fellow
- 1995: AMA Meritorious Service Award

Having been born in 1946, I was a lad in the 1950s and 1960s. I can remember those as my beginning years for model aviation because that's when I got my first taste with a couple of neat plastic Control Line models manufactured by Cox. Granted, those two models didn't last very long, but they did plant the seed for my involvement in later years.

As was typical of boys back then, I had this strong desire to fly, even though my parents couldn't afford to support my newly found hobby. With that, I gave up on models, for the time being. As luck would have it, my eyes weren't good enough for me to get into flight school in the Army, either. That fact may have saved my life in those war years with Vietnam, but it was very disappointing for this young man who still wanted to fly. It just wasn't meant to be at that time.

After I'd finished high school, got a good job with IBM, spent a couple of years in the Army, got married to my wife, Betty, and returned to college, I was approached one day by a coworker who was excited about model airplane flying. It must have been about 1972 because I hadn't graduated from college, yet. I went to IBM's park with him and watched him fly a small .049-powered Control Line model. I was hooked. I couldn't wait to go to the hobby shop and get my first Control Line model since I was a kid.

Boy, did I have fun building that little model and flying Control Line for the first time since flying those two Cox models. Amazingly, I continued to fly my models long after my friend quit. Like so many, it was a passing fancy for him, but I couldn't get enough of it. My models increased in size until I was flying .35 size models. They weren't contest grade; and, I did well to do loops and circles. I didn't care. I was flying!

In 1974, our home was destroyed by a tornado. It was a disaster for us, at the time, but it was also a cloud with a silver lining. We were able to start over with a new home and were better off than before. As for my models, I was paid by the insurance company for those and decided it was time for me to move into Radio Control (RC). It was a big jump for me because radios were so expensive at the time. Betty was very understanding and offered to finance half of my first radio for a Christmas present. I was off and running.

For my first trip into RC models, I chose the Sterling Fledgling powered with a .35 OS Max engine. I covered it with silk span because I hadn't learned about Monokote yet. My radio was a five-channel Futaba that cost Betty and me over \$200! Boy, was I ever proud of that little bird. That was probably one of the best Christmas presents I've ever had.

Up to this time, I had pretty much been on my own. However, I realized I had a lot of money in my first trainer and didn't feel comfortable about flying it on my own. The local hobby shop owner, Lew McFarland, had offered to teach me to fly my model; so, I decided to take him up on that and joined Lexington Model Airplane Club (LMAC) in Lexington, Kentucky. That was in late 1974 and was my first time as a member of the Academy of Model Aeronautics.

I spent all of 1975 learning how to fly the Fledgling. It took a beating because my training was sort of hit and miss. I'd crash my model, go home to fix it and do it again. While I was struggling, I gained a lot of new friends at the field who helped me a great deal. I swore to myself that if I ever learned to fly that airplane, I'd learn well enough to teach others so that I could repay those who helped me. Well, I did solo and went on to the second airplane. There was no turning back. Oh, yeah. I've been instructing ever since.

As is the usual case when a club finds a member who is willing to work, I was elected club president of LMAC for 1976. I didn't know any better and had gained quite a few new friends during that first year in LMAC. Little did I know they were setting me up for a lot of work! At the time, we had a nice field with a club membership around 120. I must admit it was quite an experience to be the leader and was my first taste of being an officer in anything. We had a good year and even made improvements to the field while I was at the helm. At the end of the year, I decided to step down and became the senior adviser for 1977. Being in the Lexington Model Airplane Club was truly a fulfilling experience. I still feel close to that club today.

In 1977, I had had enough of driving to Lexington seven days a week. I drove the 35 miles five days a week to work at IBM and 45 miles two more days to fly with the club. Four of us decided to form a club in Burgin, since we had another member of LMAC in Burgin. With that, the Burgin Barnstormers was formed in 1977 with a membership of four. I'm still a member of that club and am the only founding member left in the club. I'm very proud that the Burgin

Barnstormers has lasted for over 25 years. I've been an officer of some sort in the club almost every year that the club has existed.

Since we formed the Burgin Barnstormers, I've done most of the instructing. I know I've trained well over 100 members through our little club. Some still come up to me today, ask if I remember them and remind me that I taught them to fly way back when. I'm still at it today. I wonder if I'll ever pay back the kindness that was showed to me when I learned at LMAC. I keep trying!

In 1979, Horrace Cain was vice president for AMA District VI. Our area associate vice president was Wynn Paul of Lexington, Kentucky. For some reason, Wynn decided to step down, so Horrace sent notes to the clubs in search of a replacement for Wynn. Being the glutton for punishment that I was, I sent a résumé to Horrace. Hey, I had been the president of a fairly large club, so I really thought I could do a good job. In reality, I was very green to AMA politics and such. I'd only been in AMA about five years. Besides, he wasn't going to pick me because I was a nobody. Wrong! In a heartbeat, I found that I was the new associate vice president. Nobody else wanted the job! I had no idea how my life would be changed by that.

From 1979 to 1981, I became very active in club activities. I became a contest director (CD) as part of my becoming an associate vice president to establish my Leader Member status. I felt I should exercise my associate vice president position, so I started visiting clubs in my area at my expense. I also got involved in competition to see what it was all about. I flew some fun fly contests and did a little scale. I was even lucky enough to win some trophies! However, none of those were thought more of by me than those friendships that grew out of those club visits.

I can't forget the first Nationals (Nats) I attended at Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1979. Horrace thought this neophyte associate vice president should attend one and offered to pay my way out of his expense account. His account was very small back then, but he got free flights because he flew for United Airlines. Betty and I jumped in our truck and headed west. She stayed in Saint Louis to visit her brother as I trekked on out to Nebraska. I flew in a contest at Omaha with the Omahawks and won second place in an IMAC event! I had never flown IMAC and had never seen a Nats! Boy, was I impressed with both! I was in heaven!

In 1981, Horrace decided to run for the office of AMA executive vice president. As luck would have it, the by-laws of that time did not allow a member of the AMA Executive Council to run for a higher office and still hold his current office. With that, he asked if he could have one of his associate vice presidents appointed to the vice president position so that a special election would not have to be held for a one-year term. He had picked me to replace him. I was shocked, to say the least. Granted, I had worked my butt off as associate vice president, but I had no idea how to be a vice president. I was a green member with only about seven years in the organization. What did I know about being a leader in the Executive Council? I was doing well just to do my job as an associate vice president. Later I learned why he picked me. I was one of few associate vice presidents who put out the effort. He felt I'd give it my best.

The Executive Council decided to side with Horrace and made me the AMA District VI vice president for 1981. With that, I may have been the first person to ever be appointed to a vice

president position. I'm sure I was the first to be appointed so an officer could run for a higher office. As a newbie, I carried with me a mind not cluttered with competition and with the sport flyers in mind. That year was quite an experience for me. It was also the year we [the AMA] decided to buy the property in Reston, Virginia. I'm proud of the fact that I signed the paperwork for that endeavor. It was the highlight of the first year of my being a vice president.

Alas, my new status in AMA ended early because I was defeated in 1982 when Bob Underwood won the election for District VI. Sadly, he didn't offer an associate vice president slot to me for some reason. For the three years following, I was not an officer in AMA and missed it very much. To add to that, Bob Underwood stepped down before his term was up and became an employee for AMA. As a parting gesture, I was awarded the Meritorious Service Award. That plaque still hangs proudly on my office wall.

In 1985, I was challenged by local clubs to run for District VI vice president so that sport flyers could say they have a representative on the council. I ran for the office and narrowly beat out John Gunther, a good friend of Bob Underwood's and well-known scale nut. Needless to say, he was upset that I won. I was elated! I couldn't believe a nobody had won over someone who was a lot more well known. I guess the sport flyers had spoken.

I served as AMA District VI vice president from 1986 through 1994.

During my tenure as vice president, I was able to experience the changes we made in the radio frequencies and supported the sport flyers through those changes by making the council see the light about not doing the change in one jump. It was hard to change the minds of most of the members on the council because they didn't see any harm in making the one time change. I knew that sport flyers, unlike competition flyers who pour money into their sports, were most likely not able to afford to replace all their radios at once. Finally, AMA President Don Lowe attended some local events and discovered to his dismay that members were really ticked at the idea of having to give up all of their good radios at one time to start over. I tried to tell them so, but the council didn't believe me. With that, we stepped out the old radios gradually and gave the membership time to change. I guess you can say I was sport flyers' knight on a white horse. I'm still proud of that. Maybe that's why I was meant to be on the council, after all.

Of course, I was also around when we [the AMA] decided to move to Muncie, Indiana. The search for our new home was quite an experience. We had a couple of good choices, but the folks from Muncie worked in force to get us there. They bent over backward to answer every question we had for them. In the end, the choice was made easy. I'm very proud to have had a part in that decision making process. I go to Muncie and know I was part of making that happen. I still get goose bumps over that.

During my tenure as vice president, I felt it important to keep in touch with the membership. At that time, I could see it was lacking for some of the members of the Executive Council. I visited clubs on a regular basis and talked with everyone I could. Even though I was primarily there to support sport flyers, I also realized the importance of competition and went to many contests. My years on the council were mighty busy. It became a second job because I poured a good part of me into it. I just hope my work benefited those who continued to support me.

Alas, some things have to come to an end. In 1992, the Lexington, Kentucky, IBM plant was sold and became Lexmark International. With that, my life change dramatically. I was a programmer and was heavily involved with the changes in software to support the new company. Something had to give. Because I was not giving to the members like I wanted to, I decided to step down after an accumulated 10 years as a vice president. To this day, I still regret having to do that. It was as if part of my life had been taken away from me. For my efforts, I got another Meritorious Service Award and the AMA Fellow Award. Both hang on my office walls along with my key to the city of Muncie plaque. Wow! How can a nobody greenhorn in AMA become an AMA Fellow? It can only happen in America!

Today, I'm still an officer in the Burgin Barnstormers. Wait a minute. I'm the secretary, treasurer, newsletter editor, and main instructor. Our club is starting to grow again after a long slump and is taking a lot of my time. I enjoy going to the flying field and just working with new students. It's most rewarding.

In 1997, I did run for the vice president office, again after Charlie Bauer's first term, and was defeated. He had a strong following in the Chicago area that I couldn't sway. I was disappointed, at the time, but I'm very happy as I am today. I'm an associate vice president and cover all of Kentucky for Charlie. I've thought about running for vice president again, but I'm not sure I want the hassles of being in that position these days. It's a lot of work, if one does it right. Still, at each election time, I consider it. It's in the blood.

Before I forget, you'll remember that I really wanted to fly full-size. Sure, flying models was big on my list, but there was still that wander about flying full size. Alas, I was afraid to get much more than a foot off the ground, so I didn't think full-size aviation would ever be a part of my life. However, one of the founders of the Burgin Barnstormers was a full-size pilot as well as a modeler. He insisted on taking me up in 1977. After much foot dragging, I accepted his offer. I was terrified on that first flight. Three weeks later, he asked me to go again. I did. I flew the airplane and was immediately hooked. Over the next few years, I caught rides with other pilots, but I still couldn't afford it for myself.

In 1982, I got my full-size pilot certificate. I saw the need for one because I was covering four states as a vice president and could not drive to the events I wanted to attend. Well, my defeat in the election ended that notion. In 1986, I bought my first airplane because there was no doubt that I needed it. This time, I knew I would be on the Executive Council for three years. I used the airplane to fly all over the district as well as to national events and council meetings. I bought my second one in 1990 so that I could get to those places faster. Having an airplane helped me to get the most out of my district's expense account. Where other vice presidents would overrun their accounts and ask for more, I had money left over each year because the airplane made my trips very efficient.

In 1992, I started building my first experimental aircraft. Hey, it was a spin off from model airplanes. Let's call it my venture into giant scale. In 1999, I flew my RV-6A N198JS, better known to friends as Scooter Too, on its maiden flight. What a treat that was! I still get goose bumps each time I watch the video we made of that flight.

Today, I'm still building and flying full-size and model airplanes. It can't get any better than that. Well, I guess it can, too. I retired from IBM in 1996 so that I didn't have to stay with Lexmark. I've been building airplanes since then. In fact, I'm currently hiring myself out as assistant and adviser on full size aircraft projects. My model airplane experiences have led to that. Life is good.

(signed) Jim Sears
March 2003

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