



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the GALLUP MODEL AIRPLANE CLUB



Written by WB (09/2020); Reformatted by JS (02/2021)

The following was published in the February 2021 issue of Model Aviation magazine, written by William (Bill) Bickel. The full article can be viewed online here:

<https://www.modelaviation.com/gallup-club-bickel>.



The Air Fair Day flightline on June 30, 1957. (L to R): wearing a dark fedora, Ed Shibata Sr.; squatting and wearing an AMA cap, Edward Cousins; working on a Ringmaster, Bill Bickel; standing with no hat, Walter Shibata; wearing a white fedora, Warren Wakefield; wearing a dark baseball cap, Steve Meza; and wearing a plaid cap, Foster Batt. (Source: Photo by Hank Hengel. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)

Gallup Model Airplane Club Growing Up as An Aeromodeler in Gallup Written by William Bickel

It was 1956, and I was living a teenage boy's dream. I was a freshman at Gallup High School in Gallup, New Mexico (the same Gallup that Nat King Cole sang about in his 1940s [Get your

kicks on] "Route 66" song), and was employed by my father to refuel aircraft, as well as help keep his Navajo Flying Service aircraft clean, perform minor maintenance such as oil changes, clean engine air filters, and replace worn tires—jobs that were not required to be performed by a CAA (now FAA) licensed A&E (now A&P) mechanic.



A Fox .35-powered Twin Ringmaster. (Source: Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



Part of the flightline in March 1957 with spectators freely mingling with the modelers. The flying circle was later roped off according to the conditions of the club's flying site lease. At the far left is Ed Cousins and Ed Shibata Jr. (Source: Shibata family photo. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



A flying phonograph record. (Source: Image provided by Bill Bickel.)

My dad, a World War II B-29 instructor, now flew air charters and offered flight instruction. Shortly after the war, he signed on as a test pilot for Ryan Aeronautical in San Diego. He was on the FR-1 Fireball project, whose pilots liked to overtake a slower aircraft while in flight then shut down the Fireball's front radial engine, feather the propeller, and accelerate away from the aircraft using only the jet engine, which was housed inside the fuselage.

He taught several women, including my stepmother, how to fly, and at one time he had a husband-and-wife team of commercial pilots among his employees. I did janitorial work in the airline terminal and at Tom's Variety Store, which was the local hobby shop. These jobs supported my obsession with building and flying model aircraft.

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An advertisement used in the Gallup Daily Independent on June 28, 1957. (Source: Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



*Outside of Tom's Variety Store at 300 W. US 66 Ave., circa 1970,
Dan Rhinehart's Live Wire trainer is hanging in the window.
(Source: Photo by Edward Shibata. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)*

I had just returned from visiting my uncle, Bob Bickel, in Aledo, Texas. Bob was once a U.S. Army surgeon stationed in Kunming, China, and could recall having treated American Volunteer Group Flying Tigers pilots and personnel. While in Aledo, I attended every day of the 1956 AMA Nats, which was held roughly 50 miles away at Naval Air Station Dallas. I joined AMA during that week and was assigned AMA 1551.

One Sunday in late summer 1955, I was at home recovering from a bad cold and was upset because dad would not let me go to the airport to fly my models. That afternoon, I received a phone call from Warren Wakefield, informing me that I was now a member of the GMAC, or Gallup Model Airplane Club.

The Gallup-McKinley County airport, which my dad managed and was also the fixed-base operator of, was one of our flying fields at the time. The other one was the parking lot of the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial stadium, which was in town. We would set up and fly our models on the ramp in front of the Frontier Airlines terminal and move out of the way when one of Frontier's scheduled DC-3 flights was being processed.

Those of us who were into Free Flight and/or RC would sometimes set up on the extreme southwest corner of the airport property, well away from the runway, but still beneath the

airport's traffic pattern. We had not realized how much altitude some of our models were attaining. It was immediately decided that we needed to find another location for these activities. We were able to locate a suitable, uninhabited open area a few miles north of Gallup, where the only hazards were some sagebrush and a rutted two-track road into the site.

Our club members ranged in age from junior high school students up to the adult members who were employed as auto mechanics, airport line servicemen, store clerks, Santa Fe railroad brakemen, and several other professions. The membership included Asian, Caucasian, and Latino modelers. Two of our members were full-scale aircraft owners. Warren Wakefield, the club's president, had a Luscombe Silvaire and Foster Batt owned a two-control (no rudder pedals) Ercoupe, both of which were based at the Gallup Airport.

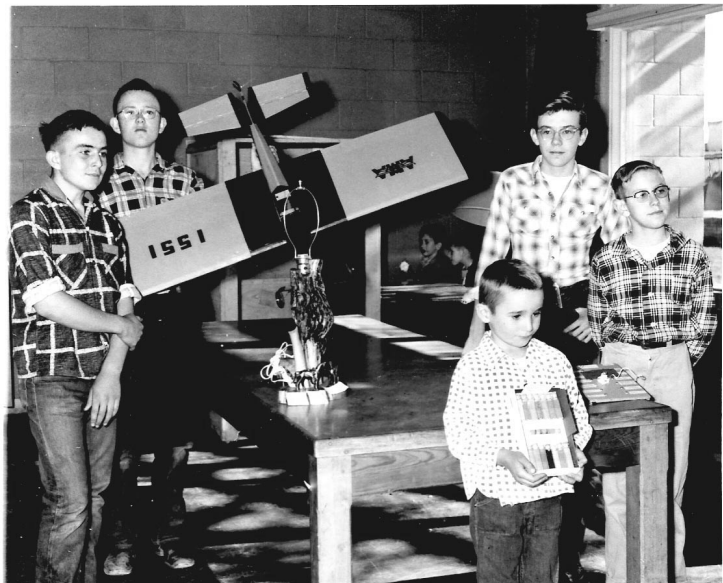
My mom's parents, who were retired Indian traders, were now living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which was slightly more than 100 miles east of Gallup. I visited them a couple of times each year during summer when school was out.

My friend from Albuquerque, Kip Stephens, wanted to learn about my model airplane hobby, so I decided to demonstrate to him what it was all about. Dad was going to fly me to Albuquerque early one week and pick me up that weekend. At the last moment, he got a charter flight, so he could not take me to Albuquerque as planned and he bought me a Frontier Airlines ticket instead.

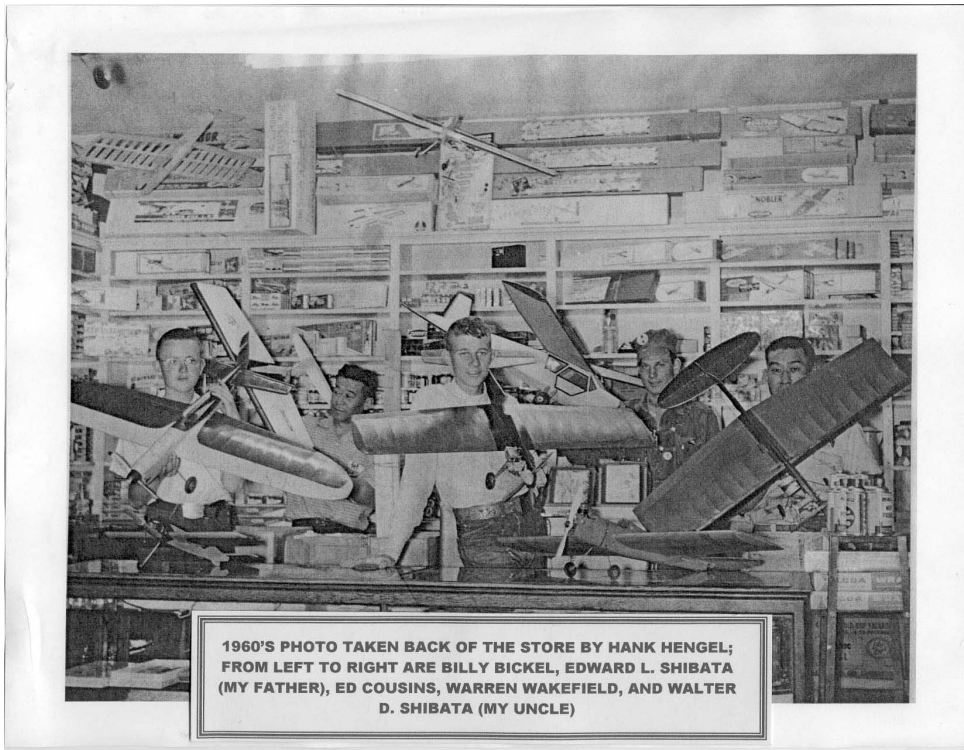
I asked him, "What about my model?" He replied, "Take it with you on the airplane."

When the time came, I checked my suitcase and carried my PDQ Flying Clown and my field box out to the airliner. The stewardess (now called flight attendant) had me place the airplane and my field box in the baggage compartment, which was located just behind the rear bulkhead of the DC-3's cabin where the other passengers' bags had already been stowed.

I did this two or three times throughout the next few years, and nobody ever seemed concerned about my airplane or my field box. In Albuquerque, my grandfather lived roughly a block away from an undeveloped city block. While Kip and I flew the Flying Clown, Granddad would practice driving golf balls.



Bill Bickel holding the second-place winning Super Duper Zilch at the Youth Hobby Show, November 1957. (Source: Hank Hengel photo. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



Inside Tom's Variety Store, (L to R): Bill Bickel with a Smoothie; Ed Shibata Sr. with a Ringmaster; Edward Cousins with a Firecat; Warren Wakefield with a Royal Rudder Bug; and Walter Shibata with a Ringmaster. (Source. Photo by the Gallup Daily Independent, June 28, 1957 photo. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



Larry Cantrel (L) and Ed Shibata Jr. with Ed's Super Ringmaster, circa 1957. (Source: Shibata family photo. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



Another view of part of the Air Fair Day flightline. (Source: Shibata family photo. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)

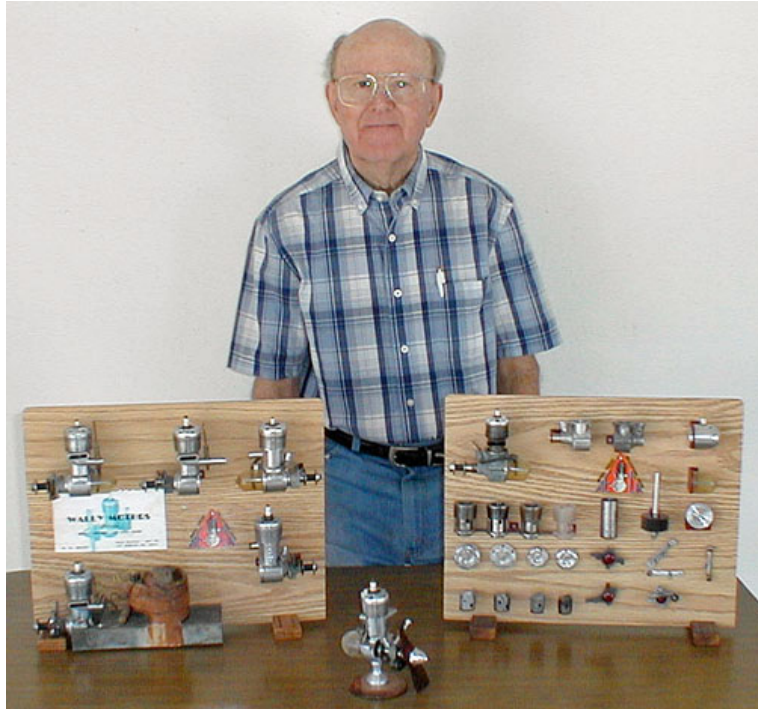
Ed Shibata owned Tom's Variety Store, which was the magnet that held the GMAC together. Located at 304 W. 66, and later moving to 300 W. 66, it was a small store operated by Ed and his wife, Jean. Ed, who had received a Purple Heart while fighting in France during WW II, was now operating the store that his brother, Tom, had started. He promptly stepped up to the plate when he saw that there were kids and adults who wanted to build and fly model aircraft.

The result was that an expanded hobby section was added to the store when it moved to the new larger location. It was kept well stocked according to our modeling needs. I can remember one instance where I was watching Ed unpack a shipment that had just arrived from his distributor in Phoenix. After Ed had unpacked and checked off most of the items, I noticed that there was still one large box that he had not yet opened. Ed had ordered a case of Sterling Ringmasters.

Ed, who was also the GMAC secretary/treasurer, brought supplies that we were most likely to need out to the flying field on Sundays and sold them out of the trunk of his Oldsmobile. We were allowed to take any items that we needed and pay for them at a later date.



Combat at the Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial stadium grounds. (L): Bill Bickel and Ed Shibata Jr. (Source: Photo clip from 8 mm movie filmed by Jim Bickel. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



Shown is Bill Bickel with his collection of late-1940s Wally Engines made in the Los Angeles area by Walter Dailey. (Source: Image provided by Bill Bickel.)



Dan Rhinehart displays the restored Live Wire Trainer. (Source: Dan Rhinehart photo. Image provided by Bill Bickel.)

Ed also served as the scoutmaster of our Boy Scout Troop 330 and he provided me with my first non-family-related job as the store's janitor.

Ed died in October 1980 and the store closed in 1981. In the late 1970s, stepping into the store was like entering a time capsule. The building the store was in, once the Rex Hotel, now houses the Rex Museum.

In a couple of instances, my dad had a chartered flight scheduled for Phoenix. Knowing that Ed needed some hobby items to support an upcoming Sunday flying session, I mentioned this to my dad, who had Ed telephone his order to Cacti Model Supplies, a hobby distributor owned by Gaylord Webster in Phoenix, and make arrangements for my dad to pick up his order and fly it back to Gallup on the return trip.

Gaylord's brother, Quentin, owned Webster's Hobby Shop, which was the largest hobby shop in Phoenix at the time. On one of these flights, there was an open seat on the Beechcraft Bonanza that my dad was flying that day, and I was allowed to accompany him on the trip. I can remember adding a GHQ fly wheel and a couple of other items that I thought I needed to add to Ed's order that day.

In the summer of 1957, the city of Gallup decided to celebrate having had airline service for 10 years and also tried to promote a new location for the airport. An Air Fair Day event was scheduled to take place on June 30 at the Gallup airport. There would be a demonstration of radar aircraft tracking and how anti-aircraft guns operate using radar.

The New Mexico Air National Guard demonstration team, flying F-80 Shooting Star jets, was scheduled to perform stunts, and Frontier Airlines would be giving short DC-3 rides over the city for \$2.75 per person. In order to keep the spectators entertained between the events, the GMAC was called on by the Gallup Chamber of Commerce, the Active 20-30 Club, and Frontier Airlines, who were all sponsors of the event, to display and fly our model aircraft.

Our flightline was set up next to the boarding gate along the fence that separated the airline terminal from the ramp. We were to fly our models as much as possible between the departure and arrivals of the sightseeing flights. As soon as a Frontier flight taxied away from the boarding area we would start putting up our CL flights and we would keep doing so until a returning flight approached the boarding area. The crowd loved it!

Saying that the event was a success would be a gross understatement. The July 1 Gallup Daily Independent headline stated, "4,000 turn out for Gallup Air Fair Day." Not bad for a town with a population of less than 14,000! According to the Gallup Chamber of Commerce, the current population is roughly 21,000 and it knows of no model airplane clubs currently operating in town.

In May 1960, I graduated from Gallup High School (go Bengals), and after attending the University of Arizona in Tucson, I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force. After my discharge in 1966, I found that my modeling interests had drifted toward engine collecting rather than building and

flying models. I am currently the historian for the Model Engine Collectors Association (MECA), which is an AMA Special Interest Group.

By William Bickel

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Photos by the author except as noted.

Be sure to visit the AMA History Project to read stories like William's, as well as other club and company histories. While you are there, please consider sharing your own model aviation story.

The AMA History Project is our ongoing endeavor to save the history of model aviation by collecting the stories of model aviation enthusiasts and the histories of modeling companies, clubs, and other organizations, as well as other compilations of historical data about the hobby/sport that is model aviation.

We have more than 1,080 modelers' biographies, 59 club histories, and 26 company histories completed and online, and our collection continues to grow. The following link will take you to our current collection of biographies, histories, as well as other model aviation-related historical information. Consider contributing your story today! Visit www.modelaircraft.org/museum/history-recognition/ama-history-project.

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