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# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of VIC CUNNYNGHAM, JR.

Born February 20, 1942

Started modeling in 1948

AMA #11554



Written and Submitted by VC (3/1997); Transcribed and Edited by SS (6/2002), Updated by JS (09/2007)

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## Career:

- 1949: Took a modeling building class and won its indoor contest as the youngest class member
- 1952: Registered as a mechanic for the Nationals
- 1970-1990: Attended 14 Nats (by 1997) and most of the Cal Western/U.S. Free Flight Championships
- Set seven national records
- Sold his first design, Drifty, at age 19 to Ace Products; the design had won three Nationals' first places
- 1962: Worked first for Ace Products, then for Veco before joining California Hobby Distributors (Cal Hobby)
- Became Cal Hobby's top salesman on the road
- Opened several hobby shops, starting at age 20; most successful was the last one – Grandpa's Antiques and Antique Hobby Shop
- 1966: Became a contest director at age 24
- Late 1960s: Ran the West Coast Delta Dart program
- 1970: Donated the trophy for the first U.S. Free Flight Championships (was formerly the Cal-Western Model meet)
- For several years, starting in 1967 was the vice president of the Southern California Hobby Industry Association
- 1970: Became U.S. Vice President of Kyosho Corporation of Japan
- Has designed nine kits total, including the Geodetic Galaxie series
- 1972: Started Brand-X Manufacturing
- His family is the first four-generation AMA members

## Honors:

- 1967: Named an honorary member of the prestigious Flying Eight Ball Club; was also the youngest member
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## Modeling History

I was born in February 1942 in Saint Louis, Missouri. Both of my parents were accomplished Free Flight modelers. My father starting building in 1927 and is in the Hall of Fame with the National Free Flight Society (NFFS) and the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM), as well as in the Model Aviation Hall of Fame.

My mother won third place in the 1936 Mississippi Valley Championships in the twin pusher event beating out several hundred men (including my father). Their picture was in the September 1936 issue of Model Airplane News magazine.

Having been exposed to modeling (since before birth) all of my life, I started building in 1948 at the age of six. My father was starting up a new business (charter buses) and was very busy, so he didn't have much time to help me at first. In 1949, I was enrolled in a model building class sponsored by the Exchange Club in Joliet, Illinois.

The first class was for hand-launched gliders. The classes were held one night each week; on the fourth meeting, there was a contest. This was an indoor contest (since it was the middle of winter) and even though I was the youngest contestant, I was lucky enough to win. The next course was for simple Rise-off-Ground (ROG) (again indoor) and then in the spring we built the Scientific Model Company Tractor model.

Early in the spring of 1952, we moved to the Los Angeles area and the Nationals (Nats) were held at Los Alamitos Naval Air Station. I was only registered as a mechanic at the Nats, but my father and I both began to fly at most of the many Free Flight contests in Southern California. Beginning in 1955, we made it the family vacation to go to the Nats almost every year.

One of my favorite Nats experiences was the 1957 Willow Grove, Pennsylvania meet. My father could not get off from his job long enough to go to the East Coast, but I was fortunate enough to be the California Junior points champ, or so Johnny Brodbeck said when he told me he could find me a seat on the Nats airlift plane. You see, the trophies for the Nats each year came from Los Angeles and they were flown to the contest on a Navy airlift transport plane. So, what they did each year was load the trophies under the litter type seats on board and fill those seats with Nats' workers and a few lucky flyers.

That trip was one I will never forget. Since my father could not go, some of our friends said they would look out for me (I was only 15-years-old). One of our family's close friends was Howard Johnson who was the current AMA president. Howard looked out for me along with Ron St. Jean, Paul Gilliam, Bob Dunham, Howard Bonner, and Lee Hinds. All of these gentlemen were icons in the hobby and were my friends at a very young age.

This airlift took off from Los Alamitos or El Toro on the West Coast and stopped in N.A.S. Dallas, Texas to pick up more modelers: Johnny Clemens, Maurice Teeter, and Johnny Casburn – all of the names that made the Nationals happen year after year.

Another great friend I met through modeling was Don McGovern. Don for years was the editor of Flying Models magazine and before that he did all of the great Berkeley box art, plans, and advertising. Don and I always stayed together (usually in B.O.Q.) at the Nats. When he came to the West Coast for the U.S. Free Flight Champs, he would stay at our home and when I went to New York, I always tried to stay with him on Long Island. He was a great modeler and we miss him.

The first modeler I ever remember meeting was when I was 5-years-old. The modeler was Carl Goldberg. Carl lived in Chicago next door to my father's aunt. My father and Carl Goldberg met when they were about 15-years-old and were lifetime friends.

All told, I have attended 14 Nationals so far and all of the Cal Western meets, which became the U.S. Free Flight Championships in 1970 and almost all of those through 1990.

I have set seven national records.

## **Vic Jr. Industry Work**

At age 18 (right out of high school), I went to work for Ace Products in Pasadena, California. Ace manufactured those neat little wooden car model kits (that were powered by CO2 cartridges) and balsa sticks and sheets. They were branching out into airplane kits, too. They bought my Drifty hand-launched glider design. It had won three Nationals first places already. So, by age 19, I sold my first design. In 1961, Pactra Chemical Co. bought out Ace Products and moved the operation to Portland, Oregon. My wife, Wanda, didn't want to move to Oregon, so I went to Veco (a division of Henry Engineering Co.). I was in charge of the mill producing the 26 kits in the Veco line.

In 1962, I joined California Hobby Distributors (Cal Hobby), a division of Reginald Denny Industries. I started out working inside the warehouse and stayed for about nine years. This business is still the premier hobby distribution company on the West Coast. It was started by Mr. Reginald Denny and Mr. Martin Vier in 1935 as the wholesale division of the famous Reginald Denny's Hobby Shop. I learned a lot about the hobby industry from the Vier family. I still speak with Frank Vier frequently. While with Cal Hobby, I went from a warehouse worker to buyer and eventually became their top salesman on the road.

I opened several retail hobby shops throughout the years – the first one when I was only 20-years-old. The last store, which I sold in the spring of 1996, was the largest and most successful – Grandpa's Antiques and Antique Hobby Shop. This store was very unique in that it was located in an area of 23 antique stores all within a two block district of "old towne" Pomona, California. We specialized in antiques for men – old men. I had amassed quite a collection of old kits and engines, etc. The hobby section was as close to a 1950s hobby shop as I could build. We stocked around 200 engines and 1,000 kits all from the 1950s or older.

We had two very historic models on display that were truly magnificent. The original Denny Plane built in Reginald Denny's workshop and the China Clipper, also built by Denny's model shop for the movie, *The China Clipper* with Humphrey Bogart. There were displayed with the photographs of the models under construction and a tape of the old film, too. This store received a lot of free publicity in magazines and newspapers due to its uniqueness.

## **AMA Work History**

I became a contest director in 1966 when I was 24-years-old. I had been an event director at several Nationals already and in 1967 Walt Billett gave me my honorary membership in the Flying Eight Ball Club and said I was the youngest member of that prestigious group. I ran the West Coast Delta Dart program when it was going strong in the late 1960s with school recreation programs, and the regional winner won a free trip to the Nats. My father started the association joining the West Coast Clubs together. This group, along with the parks and recreation and some hobby industry support, started the Cal-Western Model meets, which in 1970 became the United States Free Flight Championships. I donated the sweepstakes trophy for that first Champs. That trophy was six feet, seven inches tall and was named in the honor of Chuck Broadhurst.

In 1967 and for several years I was the vice president of the Southern California Hobby Industry Association.

I left Cal Hobby in 1970 to become the U.S. Vice President of Kyosho Corporation of Japan. In charge of the U.S. markets, I designed and engineers kits and set up all of the U.S. distribution, advertising and marketing, etc.

I have designed nine kits in all; the most famous would be the Geodetic Galaxie series. At one point in 1972, it had won first place three out of four years in open ½-A Free Flight at the Nats. At that time, this was the heaviest entered event at the Nats. I believe it eventually won the Nats 13 times.

In 1972, I started Brand-X Manufacturing Company with another modeler. We eventually had seven Nationals-winning models among our employment. We produced flying discs by the millions and Styrofoam printed gliders in huge quantities. At one point, we could produce 250,000 gliders per day.

I designed and sold glider to many major users: Topps Chewing Gum, 3.5 million (Crazy Wacky Flying Things); Burger King order six million at a time (twice a year); McDonald's Systems Inc.; Hallmark Cards; and Federal Express, 90,000 per month for four years.

I sold the business to a larger toy company and the rest, as they say, is history.

I am a second-generation model airplane builder but I would have to say one of my greatest accomplishments is the simple fact that I have passed on the love for our hobby to my three sons and now my grandchildren.

My son, Jeff, is a national record holder (and it has held up for 19 years). He is employed by the FAA as the systems manager (Air Traffic division) West Coast Region. Jeff was the youngest air traffic controller and later the youngest supervisor in the FAA – and it all started with his keen interest in model airplanes.

My father, my sons, and I combined with one of my card-carrying grandsons were recognized in 1994 Model Aviation magazine as the first ever four generations AMA members.

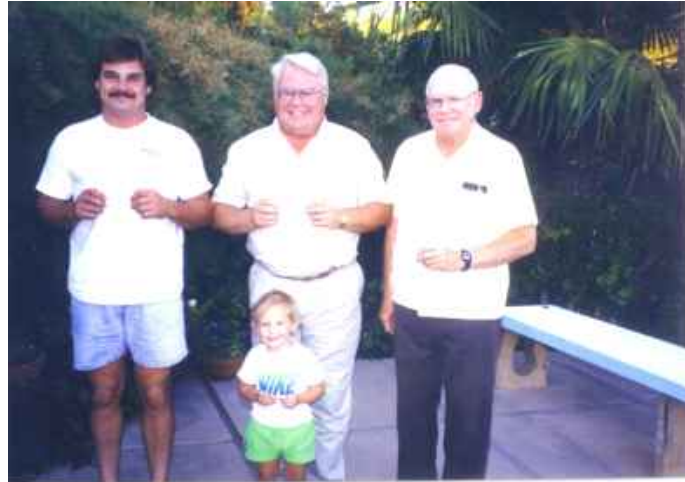
*(signed) Vic Cunnyngnam, Jr.  
March 18, 1997*



*c.1989: Vic, Sr. built this “Duplex” Rubber model. Vic, Jr. covered and decorated it.*



*c.1989: Vic, Jr. and lifelong friend Sal Taibi at the Jean, Nevada SAM Champs. Sal signed this model, which hangs in the AMA’s National Model Aviation Museum. Vic, Jr. is noted for applying the Japanese tissue decorations.*



*c. June 1990: Four Generations of AMA Membership: The Cunnynghams: (L-R) Kenny, Vic, Jr., and Vic, Sr. (In front) Kyle, all are holding their AMA Cards. This photograph was first published in Model Aviation as the first family with four generations of AMA membership.*



*Date unknown: Vic, Jr. with the "DIABLO" C/D 1100 square model. This model won a total of four places at the U.S. Free Flight Champs.*



*C.1996: Vic, Jr. at the counter of Grandpa's Antique Hobby Shop. The store was sold in 1996 and much of it was donated to the AMA's National Model Aviation Museum.*



*Just a little bit of Grandpa's Antique Hobby Shop.*

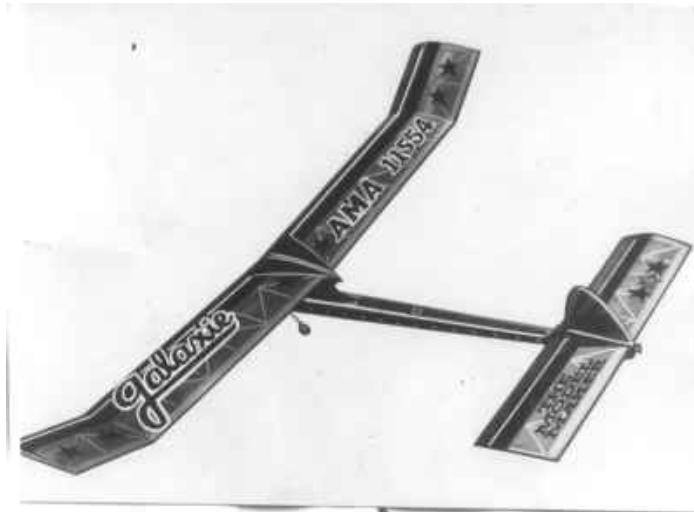


*c. 1968: At the Nationals in Olathe, Kansas, Vic, Sr. won first place with Vic, Jr.'s design model.*



*c. 1936: Vic, Sr. with wife Ann six years before Vic, Jr. was born. Ann won three events in the 1936 Mississippi Valley Model Airplane Champs. Vic Jr. came from a true model builder family. This photograph was published in Model Airplane News.*





*c. 1961: American Modeler Annual published the “Space Rod,” designed by Vic, Sr. and Vic, Jr., and deemed it “the Winningest Design in America.” In 1972, the Galaxie by Vic, Jr. won the 1/2A Open four out of four years. Between the two designs, they won over forty U.S. Nationals and records.*



*c.1989: At the Sam Champs, Ralph Prey, Contest Director, awards the first place of “Team Entry” to Vic, Sr. and Vic, Jr.*



*c. 1960: (L-R) Dave Vincent, Vic, Sr., Vic, Jr., and Howard Johnson (then AMA President) all set records with the Space Rod design. Vic, Jr. set six of the records. This photo was featured in the 1961 issue of American Modeler annual magazine.*

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