



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of IRWIN G. OHLSSON

1913 - April 20, 1996 AMA #4



Transcribed & Edited by SS (2/2003), Updated by JS (10/2008), Reformatted by JS (11/2009), Updated by JS (04/2011)

Career:

- 1934: Built his first two little engines
- 1934 or 1937: Won the California state modeling contest flying his Pacemaker model
- 1943-1946: Served as fourth president of the AMA
- 1953: Manufactured his own engines, first with partner Frank Bertelli, then with partner Harry Rice and finally on his own starting
- 1953: Developed glow plugs and model engine fuels starting
- Mid-1950s: Helped design and manufacture special igniters for the aerospace industry
- One of the pioneers in the production of miniature spark ignition gas engines

Honors:

- 1975: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1978: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1989: Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame

The following article about Irwin G. Ohlsson was published in the July/August 1996 issue of SAM Speaks (the publication for the Society of Antique Modelers) following Irwin's death.

Irwin G. Ohlsson,

1913 – 1996

By Dan Lutz

It was once said that Irwin G. Ohlsson was the Henry Ford of the model airplane engine business. He built his first two little engines in 1934. They had a .12-cubic-inch displacement and were used to power a small cabin model and bi-plane. His father, an auto shop teacher in a local Los Angeles high school, died at an early age and never got to see the success these two engines led to for his son.

Irwin's first big engine was a converted boat engine that he purchased from Bill Atwood. It was quite heavy. It was installed in an eight-foot cabin model and test flown at Mines Field in the East Los Angeles area. In 1934, he traveled to Akron, Ohio, with great expectations to win the contest. Due to hot weather with temperatures over 100 degrees, he never got the engine started.

Following the disappointment, he attended the California state contest in Sacramento and won first place with a flight of well over an hour.

Irwin's interest in model engines continued to the point where he wanted to manufacture his own engines. He took on his first partner, Frank Bertelli. Irwin borrowed \$1,300 from his mother, which was his father's insurance money. Frank borrowed the same amount from his parents. Harry Rice was contacted and instrumental in developing the tooling for the die cast parts and

supplying most of the machined parts for the first Ohlsson miniature. It was a .56-cubic-inch displacement engine. This engine, along with several kits and accessories was the start of a business that led to one of the most recognized names in the hobby industry.

Frank Bertelli left the partnership and Harry Rice became Irwin's second partner. From then on, it was known as Ohlsson and Rice Manufacturing.

In 1953, Irwin left the partnership and went on to develop glow plugs and model engine fuels. He also helped design and manufacture special igniters for the aerospace industry.

In the late 1960s, he found time to return to the hobby. He built an Ohlsson Pacemaker patterned after the one he used to win the 1937 California State Championships. With the aid of a Radio Control system and a set of Bunch floats, he visited Lake Elsinore quite frequently. He became proficient at flying his Pacemaker and again enjoyed the hobby he dearly loved.

He invited his old friends to join him at the lakeshore. I can remember Tony LeVier, Bob Holland, Carl Goldberg, Bill Atwood, Zip Grandel, Art Synder, Bill McKinzie, Nathan Smith, Doc Young and many others showing up. He would always let them take over the controls of one of Pacemakers before the day was over. A barbeque lunch with all of the trimmings was usually served. Irv and I were always the last ones to leave. He was like a young boy and did not want the day to end.

In later years, he built several sport scale Grumman Widgeons and Joe Bridi became his official pilot. He would always tell Joe to "wring them out" and when doing so, he would put on a terrific air show.

Irv Ohlsson was well liked by everybody. Often, when he was attending trade shows, modelers would walk up to him and tell him how they delivered newspapers and mowed lawns in order to earn money to purchase their first Ohlsson engine. He would smile and carry on a conversation with them. He always enjoyed talking about model airplanes and the engines that powered them.

Several years ago, John Worth interviewed him for an AMA videotape. The uncut version goes for several hours. In it, he tells how the simple O&R enclosed timer assembly was designed and drawn out in the dirt with a stick. This happened while he was sitting around talking to Harry Rice and Nathan Smith at a model airplane contest. The following Monday morning it was on the drawing board and later put into production. As most of us know, many other engine manufacturers copied it.

Harry wanted the first Ohlsson .23 to be a front rotary valve type. Irv complained that the modelers would not have any place to mount the fuel tank as they had on a side port engine. He also said it was an easier starting engine. Most of us know the outcome of that decision.

While flying home from a Chicago show, in the company's DC-3 airplane, Irv ran one of their model engines on glow fuel. He used one of the first Arden glow plugs. This happened at 11,000 feet with Nathan Smith, a coil manufacturer, on-board. He just had to show him that the engine was running without the aid of one of his coils. The DC-3 was a familiar sight at many Nationals.

Irv would invite as many modelers as it would hold. With Harry at the controls, they would take off for a fun filled week.

I do not know of a modeler today that has not gained something from Irwin Ohlsson's endeavors in the hobby industry. We all know of the success of his engines and the company that built them. The Engine Collector's Journal lists 78 different models manufactured until 1957. Today they are sought after by engine collectors and Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) members to help fly their models. The special Ohlsson events always bring out the best. After more than five decades, they seem to run better than ever.

In 1982, Irv was crossing the street with Annie [his wife] in Palm Springs when they were struck by a car and seriously injured. Their lives never were the same after this tragic accident, and in recent years, Irv's failing health was further complicated when Annie had a stroke in early 1996.

Annie was placed in a convalescent hospital where she died four weeks and two days after Irwin. There was a memorial service for the two of them on May 30, 1996, which was attended by Frank Bertelli, Irwin's first partner. They are survived by son Gus and daughter Sigrid.

With Irwin G. Ohlsson's death, we lost one of the great pioneers in this hobby and a dear friend to all of us.

The following paragraphs were printed following the above article in the July/August 1996 issue of SAM Speaks.

Dick Tichenor Writes

A bit of explanation about the O&R saga. Irwin was a very dear friend for many years. Harry was a long time acquaintance. I have been exposed to countless versions of the break-up, ranging from the most credible words to most absurd fabrications. I will admit to having my personal opinions, but refrain from discussing the unfortunate situation.

I will admit to a bit of subterfuge when I invited each of them to meet with me at Mile Square Park in Fountain Valley, California, where I would be covering a giant scale fly-in for Radio Control Modeler (RCM) magazine. That was August 1978. I shot photos of the two meeting face-to-face and shaking hands for the first time in 40 years. Fortunately, it was an amiable reunion. As far as I know, there was no subsequent contact between Irwin and Harry. Irwin was extremely sensitive regarding the O&R break-up.

The following was printed in the August 1996 issue of Model Aviation magazine.

Irwin Ohlsson will long be remembered because many thousands of modelers still fly his engines 40 to 50 years after they were made – a tribute that transcends several generations with many Ohlsson engines handed down from fathers to sons. So long as his engines continue to run,

which should be well into the next century, the name Ohlsson will be seen and heard wherever modelers gather to fly and relive the “good old days.”



As AMA President, #4 (1943-1946): Irwin Ohlsson, right, presided at many award presentations. He is shown here presenting the Ohlsson and Rice Power Model Trophy at an early National Championships.

The following article about Irwin Ohlsson ran in the Vintage RC Society (VRCS) following his death. A similar article written by John Worth ran in the August 1996 issue of Model Aviation magazine as well. It ran in the executive director's column on page 148.

Irwin Ohlsson – Gone But Not Forgotten

By John Worth

Although he has left us (he passed away on Saturday, April 20, 1996) his memory is alive every time we see one of his engines, whether it is in a workshop, on display as part of a collection or flying a model airplane. Irwin Ohlsson is best known for the model engines and products that bear his name since the 1930s when they first appeared right through to the present, where they are still being flown – mostly at Old-Timer type meets.

More than a famous manufacturer, however, Ohlsson was also an AMA president, the fourth, from 1943 through 1946. Irwin's AMA presidency transitioned from early World War II to peacetime afterward, helping AMA continue to grow from its roots in 1936 until the pre-war “kids” came home from military service as adults. He helped insure that AMA would become much more than a youth-based organization of contest flyers.

This change was much like Ohlsson's personal history. Before he was elected to the AMA presidency, he had been an active modeler for about 16 years. He was the California State Champion in 1934. In that same year he, his mother, and Bill Atwood (another budding model engine designer at the time) drove from California in a Ford Model A to attend the Nationals in Akron, Ohio.

At that, event modelers Maxwell Bassett placed first and Joe Kovel placed second in what was then a new gas engine-powered model class (flying Brown Junior engines). Irwin was not among the winners, but he learned plenty about what was working for other flyers.

Ohlsson's personally built his first engine in 1934. Within a year he and Harry Rice teamed up to make engines for others and it wasn't long before engines with the Ohlsson name were being produced by the thousands and winning a large share of contests.

In growing up from modeler to manufacturer Irwin's adult status made him famous and respected worldwide. Ohlsson was often asked for his opinion and advice – his obviously successful business experience and his friendship with many famous modelers and industry leaders made him a person to be looked up to and admired. AMA recognized his contributions to the world of aeromodeling by inducting him into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame at the 1975 Nationals in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

In his last decade, Ohlsson enjoyed a relatively quiet life. But one of his greatest pleasures was flying his twin-engine Widgeon Radio Control Scale model flying boat and also a Radio Control replica of his famous Old-Timer Free Flight Pacemaker model design, which was fitted with floats. It was always a great day when Irwin and his close friends went out to fly these models at Lake Elsinore in California.

Ohlsson will not soon be forgotten because many thousands of modelers still fly his engines 40 to 50 years after they were made – a tribute that will go on for a long time. As his engines continue to be run and flown, which should last well into the next century, the name Ohlsson will be seen and heard wherever modelers gather to do like they used to when most were teenagers.

That they still enjoy running and talking about their Ohlsson engines helps keep modelers thinking and acting young at heart. In appreciation for providing so much pleasure to so many of us, this is to say, "Thanks, Irwin" – we are grateful.

Joe Zingali submitted the following letter to the AMA along with his nomination of Irwin Ohlsson for the 1975 Model Aviation Hall of Fame. Irwin was inducted into the Hall of Fame as a result.

March 25, 1975

Hall of Fame Committee
Academy of Model Aeronautics
806 15th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

Gentlemen:

It would be very hard for us [writing on behalf of the BIRD Club, Inc. of Torrance, California] to tell you all the qualifications that Irwin Ohlsson has, but here are a few of them that I am sure would qualify him to the Hall of Fame.

His modeling background dates back to the late 1920s when he was designing and flying his own rubber-powered models. Not being content with rubber power, he experimented with various forms of power, which led him to develop the Ohlsson Gold Seal engine.

In the spring of 1935, he was one of the pioneers in the production of the miniature spark ignition gas engine, which became a standard of the model airplane industry for over a decade.

In the late 1940s he flew a group of modelers to the Nationals in his own Douglas DC-3 aircraft at no cost to the modelers.

His qualifications did not limit him to gas engines only, because he designed and kitted his own scale-type airplane that was one of the most popular at that time.

At the present time, he is still active in building and flying Radio Control models and is one of the major developers and manufacturers of the glow plug as we know it today.

These are just a few of the accomplishments that Irwin Ohlsson has given to the modeling fraternity.

*Sincerely yours,
BIRD Club, Inc.
Joe Zingali, President*

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