



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of PERCY PIERCE

March 22, 1894 – July 30, 1962

Started modeling in 1906



Transcribed & Edited by SS (11/2002), Reformatted by JS (01/2010), material added by JS (03/2016)

Career:

- Exhibited a rubber-powered model airplane at the first aerial show held in Morris Park, New York in 1908
- Built and flew what is believed to be the first pusher-type model in 1909
- Won his first trophy in 1910 and proceeded to win 26 more cups and medals through 1913
- His models held records for longest fights in 1911, 1912 and 1914
- In 1911, built and flew original hydroplane
- Became model editor of *Aeronautics* and editor of *Fly*, early aeronautical publications
- Designed and marketed the Percy Pierce Flyer
- Manufactured Loop-O-Plane after World War I
- Co-organizer of the Philadelphia Model Airplane Association in 1929
- Organized the Delaware County Glider Club
- Received his class C sailplane license flying a plane of his own design

The following biography on Percy Pierce came from “The History of the Academy of Model Aeronautics: Including Part One and Part Two From the Beginning to the Year 1966” written by Willis C. Brown and Dick Black that was published first in 1966; the second part was published in 1967. This biography comes from Part One written by Willis C. Brown. It was completed by November 1965.

Percy Pierce

(Vice President, Aero Club of Pennsylvania; Philadelphia)

Information quoted with permission of editor, 1936 Model Aircraft Yearbook

“At age 12, in 1906, built his first model airplane...In 1908 exhibited rubber-powered model at the first aerial show, Morris Park, New York, sponsored by the Aeronautical Society. Was a six-foot model bi-plane of dowel stick covered with cambric. In 1909 built and flew what is believed to be the first pusher-type model. Proved to have the best performance of any model up to that time.

“Won first trophy in 1910. From 1910 to 1913 won 26 cups and medals in contests staged in New York, Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. On December 3, 1910 made a flight of 222 feet and seven inches, Rise-off-Ground (ROG), which stood for longest flight in 1910. Models in these contests weighed approximately a pound or more. His models held records for 1911, 1912 and 1914 with flights of 1,814-1/2 feet and 2,733 feet respectively.

“In 1911 built and flew original hydroplane...introduced first double-g geared winder in the form of an attachment fitted to a hand drill. Became model editor of Aeronautics and editor of Fly, early aeronautical publications...Sold a foolproof model known as the Percy Pierce Flyer.

“Made his first solo flight at Nassau Boulevard, Long Island. Built three gliders between 1912 and 1914 – made about 60 flights. During the war was commissioned first lieutenant. After World War I manufactured the Loop-O-Plane, a metal and fiber glider sold everywhere.

“In 1929 was co-organizer of the Philadelphia Model Airplane Association. Organized the Delaware County Glider Club. Received C sailplane glider license passed with sailplane of his on design. This glider is now in the Franklin Institute.”

Model Aeronautics agreement with the National Aeronautic Association, May 5, 1937. Always supported AMA. Your historian [Willis C. Brown] regrets that when he wrote to Percy Pierce for resource material for this history, he learned that Percy had passed away just a few weeks previously. With Cecil Peoli, he was one of the very earliest big names in model aeronautics and did more than can be told to aid its advancement. Will be remembered as a fine sportsman and a gentleman.

The following information on Percy Pierce comes from the book “The Complete Book of Model Aircraft, Spacecraft and Rockets” written by Louis H. Hertz and published by Crown Publishers, Inc. of New York in 1967. It was on pages 238 and 239.

The Percy Pierce Flyer was an eminently satisfactory single-propeller canard pusher, which although it too gave way before the A-frames, established Pierce’s name in model airplane history. Pierce was long active in model aviation, building his first model airplane in 1906, when 12 years of age, and in 1908 he exhibited a six-foot rubber-powered model bi-plane at the first exhibition of the Aeronautic Society of New York held at Morris Park, the Bronx, New York. He is reported to have built five out of a total of 35 models entered in an exhibition at Boston in 1910. Around this time his Percy Pierce Flyer was becoming famous; like so many other young men interested in model aeronautics, he soon became a pilot of real airplanes and gliders. He served as first lieutenant in the Engineering and Information Service of the Army Air Service during World War I and produced a standard manual on aircraft rigging. After the war he formed the Pierce Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia and turned out a 10-cent “airplane,” the Loop-O-Plane, actually a slingshot-launched glider. While a reasonably satisfactory seller in the toy marts, the Loop-O-Plane was by no means a sensational development, being quite similar to the Loop-the-Loop glider manufactured by Ideal. Pierce, however, was one of the few pioneer model airplane builders who long kept up a very active interest in model aeronautics. In 1929, he was one of the organizers of the Philadelphia Model Airplane Association and was directing model airplane meets in the 1930s.

The following information on Percy Pierce came from page 304 of the book “Do You Speak Model Airplane: The Story of Aeromodeling in America” written by Dave Thornburg and published in 1992.

Percy Pierce built a series of twin pushers that began, about 1909, to smack the far wall (200 feet away) at the 66th Street Armory in New York City. This was the signal for the New York Aero Club to move outdoors. The move was to Oakwood Heights airport on Staten Island, where Pierce's friend and flying buddy Cecil Peoli met one Captain Baldwin, of airship fame. Baldwin taught Peoli to fly, took him to Europe as an exhibition pilot and got him killed the following year in a Red Devil bi-plane. Pierce himself kept both feet on the ground, became model editor of Aeronautics and then general editor of Fly and lived to the ripe old year of 1962.

The following excerpts are from Gary Prater's Museum Director column in the AMA News section of Model Aviation magazine, published January 1998.

"First Model Aeroplane organization in America was started by E. L. Todd No. 131 W: 23rd St. New York, N.Y. Feb. 22, 1907 and it was known as the Junior Aero Club of the United States.

Through the efforts of Miss Todd and Mr. Edward Durrant of New York, NY, the first aeroplane model flight contest in America was held at the seventy first regiment Armory, thirty-third St. and Fourth Ave., New York, N.Y., by starting models from the floor.

The first public exhibition of models that attracted any attention was held at the Madison Square Gardens at New York City Dec. 18-26, 1908 in connection with the toy exhibition.

This attracted the attention of the officials of the West side Y.M.C.A. New York, N.Y.

When Miss Todd was asked to cooperate with them and this led to Mr. W.R. Campbell taking an active part in the Department of Aviation of the West side Y.M.C.A.

Arrangements were soon made for holding Aeroplane model flight contests in a vacant lot next to the West Side Y.M.C.A. Building No. 318 West 57th St. New York, NY. On Nov. 6th, 1909, the first outdoor contest in America was held there. When Mr. J.D. Dalkaranian won the LR. Adams cup by flying his model 92 feet, it was not long before his lot proved to be too small for model contests and arrangements were then made to continue the contests at Mr. Frank Jay Gould's outside private riding academy No. 218 W. 58th St. New York City.

In a very short time, it was found necessary to produce a much larger building and permission was granted to fly models in the 22nd Regiment Armory, 68th St. and Broadway, New York on Saturday afternoons. During the winter of 1909-1910, Mr. Charles A. Stewart of the West Side Y.M.C.A. conducted the contest at this armory through the assistance of Edward Durrant, (who is the son of Charles F. Durrant, the first American Aeronaut).

The year 1910 ended with an exciting contest with a "A Leo Stevens Year Cup", a magnificent trophy, which was won by Percy Winslow Pierce for flying his models starting (from the floor) a distance of 222 ft., and it was not long before the contests were compelled to fly their models to and from diagonally opposite corners of armory in order to gain distance of floor space. Finally they were compelled to fly their models outdoors and Mr. Edward Durrant obtained permission to fly the models in Van Cortlandt Park, N.Y. and on the polo grounds

where every Saturday afternoon since then, contests were held with very few exceptions on account of inclement weather.

Among those who have flown their models over 1,000 ft. by using rubber launching from the hands are Frederick Watkins, Cecil Peoli, Stewart Easter, George A. Page Jr., and Charles Lateiner of New York City, and Francis Walton of Newark, N.J., and Percy Winslow Pierce of Philadelphia, PA.

Percy Winslow Pierce is today the all-round champion airplane flyer of America. The official records are as follows:

Starting from the hand with the twin propeller plane weighing 1½ oz. Complete, he flew 1,814 ft. 6 in. at Paramount Park Philadelphia, PA. Dec. 28, 1911.

Same place Dec. 29, 1911, he started the twin propeller from the ground and flew 412 ft.

The model launched from the hand is capable of staying in the air 70 sec. Among those who have taken an active interest in fostering the art and science of airplane model flying in America are: Aeronautical Society, New York World, New York Model Airplane Clubs, Century Co., St. Nicholas Magazine, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and Westside Y.M.C.A. of New York. Also Mr. Francis Arnold Collins, Lee S. Burrige, A. Lew Stevens, W.R. Campbell, L.R. Adams, and Edward Durrant.

The first club was named The Junior Aeroclub of the United States, and to include Canada, the Junior Aeroclub of America was formed. It was not long before the men became very much enthused and New York Model Aeroclub was organized in September, 1910 in order to include them.

This club meets at the rooms of the Aeronautical Society No. 250 W. 54th St. every Saturday night."

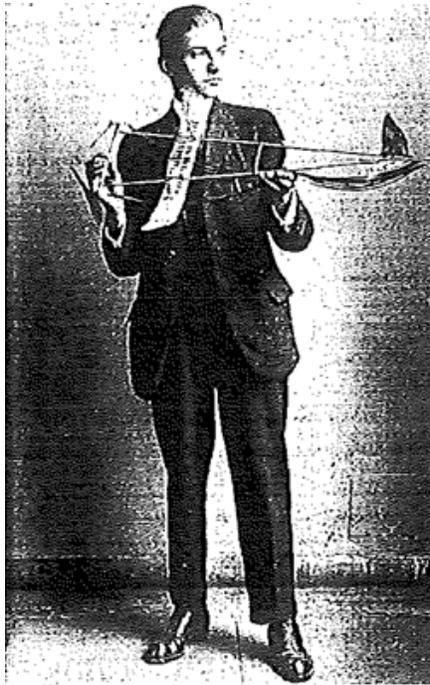
(Reprinted from Boy Scouts Review & Aeronautical Bulletin, March 1912.)



The explosion in popularity of model aviation was a long-lasting social phenomenon that began in the second decade of this century. This photo depicts a meeting of the New York Model Aero Club on August 17, 1912. Note the serious intent on the boys' faces and their pride of allegiance, demonstrated by their identical armbands with the initials "NYMAC." Contests of the era were judged by straight-line distance only. Percy Pierce is in the back row, fourth from the left. The Percy Pierce Collection contains many other photos like this one.



Leo Stephens Trophy, awarded for the longest model flight in the United States in the year 1910. Percy Pierce was awarded this trophy for a flight of 222 ft., fourth longest in the world. Percy's accomplishments were followed by hundreds of newspapers, including several in Europe. At the age of 13 he was regarded as a "boy wonder," and already operated his own model building company and had attracted the attention and interest of the Wright brothers.



Percy Winslow Pierce at the age of sixteen. Percy's fame grew as he grew older. By the age of 18, he, along with [his] friends Cecil Peoli and Jim Noonan, often attracted crowds of up to 2,000 people to watch their flying demonstrations. At that age Percy also operated his own mail-order model aviation business, lectured at the Aeronautical Society in New York City, had built more than 75 models, was Model Editor for Aeronautics magazine and Editor-in-Chief of Fly magazine, and at the same time held most national and world records for distance and duration. Until the success of Percy Pierce, aeromodeling, especially in Europe, was widely considered to be an adult activity carried on by serious-minded experimenters. The explosion of its popularity to youth was peculiar to the United States.



Percy Pierce in his attic workshop. Source: #0012 Percy Pierce Collection, National Model Aviation Museum, Muncie, Indiana.

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AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

