



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of JOHN E. (JOHNNY) CLEMENS



November 3, 1913 - June 13, 1991 Started modeling in 1922
AMA #18

Compiled, Transcribed & Edited by SS (12/2002), Reformatted by JS (2009), Updated by JS (10/2017)

Career:

- Opened a hobby shop, the Hobby Counter, in Dallas, Texas, in 1940; the shop stayed open for about 50 years
- Elected AMA's 18th president in 1970; served from 1971 to 1978
- Held every elected and appointed position within the AMA
- Served as vice president of Federation Aéronautique Internationale's (FAI's) Committee for International Aeromodeling (CIAM) and chairman of CIAM's information and education subcommittee
- Served as the U.S.'s voting delegate to the CIAM
- Served as head of AMA's annual delegation to FAI meetings
- Contest director for the 1950 Nats held in Dallas
- Member of AMA's contest board
- Drafted the first Control Line rules used by the AMA
- Handled public relations for the Nats for over 20 years
- Traveled for Comet Models in the late 1930s
- Member of the AMA's Executive Council for 20 years; helped the council plan and run the Nats
- Played a major role at the Nats when they were held in Dallas in 1950, 1951, 1956, 1960 and 1964
- Created the Control Line Air Show Team
- Won many Free Flight contests, especially with his Hellsfire, a version of Carl Goldberg's Zipper

Honors:

- 1964: AMA Fellow
- 1978: AMA Meritorious Service Award
- 1978: The Hobby Industry Association of America's Meritorious Award of Honor
- 1979: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1988: AMA Meritorious Service Award
- 1989: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- Received the Paul Tissandier Award; one of only about 10 U.S. modelers to receive this award

The following biography of John E. Clemens was written and kept at the AMA. Though no date is given, the biography was most likely written in the very late 1970s or very early 1980s according to the text. This would have been right around when John's term as AMA president was ending (he served from 1971 to 1978), most likely around 1979 when he was inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame. No author is given.

Johnny Clemens is not as old as Methusaleh. It is just that he has been a highly visible figure in the world of aeromodeling for a long, long time – for 58 years as a matter of fact. He was infected by the modeling bug in 1922. Eighteen years later (1940), he opened his hobby shop, the Hobby Counter, which he still head today, 40 years later! Prior to opening the Hobby Counter, Johnny “had been connected with one of the largest manufacturers of model airplanes” (Comet Models). He is reputed to be on of the earliest of the Comet Models “family.”

It is only natural that an energetic, outgoing person like Johnny would eventually become actively involved with AMA activities. If you are an active, competition-oriented modeler, you have to be an AMA member. If you are an active member, sure as anything, you will sooner or later become involved in contest management activities. Once you’ve gone that far, it is very likely that you will become involved in district activities. So it was with Johnny. As a matter of fact, prior to his being elected as AMA’s president in 1970, he had at some time held every other elective or appointive office in the AMA!

Johnny Clemens was also highly visible on the international scene, serving as vice president of the Federation Aéronautique Internationale’s (FAI’s) Committee for International Aeromodeling (CIAM) and also as chair of the CIAM’s information and education subcommittee. He was also the U.S.’s voting delegate to the CIAM and head of AMA’s annual delegation to the FAI meetings.

Johnny was District VIII vice president for a number of years. He was the moving force behind bringing the national championships to Dallas in 1950. He was also the contest director for it that year. He was instrumental in coordinating Navy and AMA efforts to establish the four-geographic-point plan under which the Nats was conducted for many years. He has been actively connected with the guidance of the Nats each year since 1950. As a member of the AMA contest board, he personally drafted the first Control Line rules used by the AMA.

For over 20 years, in connection with his Nats’ activities, Johnny handled the important responsibilities of public relations and liaison for the AMA in its dealing with the Navy, Hobby Industry Association, press, TV, and radio. For many years, he was the emcee of the annual, post-Nats “Eight-Ball” banquet. This was a “thank-the-Navy” affair, for their generous help and other assistance during the Nats. When the Navy was still sponsoring the Navy carrier Control Line event, Johnny served as the leader of the junior contestants on their post-Nats cruise aboard a real Navy aircraft carrier.

Johnny’s efforts as the longest-serving president of the AMA (four terms, eight years!) were directed toward securing a better public image for modeling and for improving communications in the AMA organization itself. He campaigned for the presidency with promises of defining the responsibilities for elected and appointed AMA officers, for simplification of AMA procedures and competition rules, for improving communications between and among AMA officers and members and the encouragement of the exploration of new horizons in aeromodeling.

Johnny believes that the AMA should continue to battle for the modelers’ rights and needs, especially with respect to additional Radio Control (RC) frequencies and the obtaining of flying sites. He is sympathetic to the need for the development of useful and entertaining material for use by AMA-chartered clubs and the development of inspiring programs for youth involvement.

He favors the establishment of a model aviation museum – a project that is now becoming a reality.

Addendum

According to an article in the Dallas Morning News on February 20, 1987, Johnny Clemens' hobby shop, the Hobby Counter, was broken into and then set fire. The entire shop was lost in the arson after having been broken into three additional times in the previous 11 days. Not too much was stolen, but to cover up evidence of a break-in, the culprits set his shop on fire. Everything was lost. Later the AMA replaced the awards they had presented Johnny with that were lost in the fire. Johnny rebuilt his shop at another location in Dallas.

The following article ran in the October 1991 issue of Model Aviation magazine following the death of John E. Clemens. The article was written by John Worth.

Johnny, We Loved You

By John Worth

Few modelers have made such a lasting contribution to AMA and the modeling industry as the late, irrepressible Johnny Clemens.
– John Worth

AMA's 18th president (1971 to 1978) passed away in his adopted hometown and state – Dallas, Texas – after many months of complicated health problems. He had for years resisted the urging of friends and family to go into a hospital for proper treatment of his various ailments. He declined, apparently fearing that if he went in he wouldn't come out. That turned out to be true, although it was largely in because he had gone too long without adequate treatment.

In a previous hospital confinement back in 1974, Johnny had almost died. His weight went down to less than 100 pounds, and he looked like one of the starved victims of Hitler's holocaust.

But then, as he continued to do many times since, he recovered. Johnny's will to keep living was indomitable, and it was bolstered by a bright spirit, positive attitude, and determination to keep going. Even during his last weeks in May and June, he confounded doctors and nurses by making several recoveries from seemingly impossible situations. Johnny actually was able to leave the hospital to go into a rehabilitation center, then into a nursing home. But almost daily, there were new crises and emergency situations that finally couldn't be overcome. At the end, he went peacefully and in quiet rest.

Despite the health problems that plagued his past 20 years or more, Johnny Clemens was typically cheerful and happy. He enjoyed making people laugh at his jokes and tall tales. He frequently said that he couldn't see his own smile, so he made others smile to enjoy the reflection.

Often called the Biggest Little Texan, Johnny was originally from Indiana and spent many years at the Indy 500 racetrack. In the late 1930s, he traveled for the Comet Model Airplane Company.

In that role, he came to be a friend of famous modelers such as Carl Goldberg who also worked for Comet.

Johnny's travels took him to Dallas where in 1940 or 1941 he opened his own hobby shop, known as the Hobby Counter. For over 50 years, his hobby shop carried the stamp of his personality. A visit there always resulted in Johnny expounding on his homespun philosophies. It was said that his hobby shop was as much museum as store and that he could have charged admission to it.

Johnny Clemens' eight years as AMA president is a record, made back when presidential terms were for only two years; now (1991) they are for three, but Johnny's record still stands. He was also a regional vice president for 12 years, covering the years before and after his presidency.

Johnny was awarded an AMA Fellowship in 1964 and was inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 1979. For 20 years or more, he was on AMA's Executive Committee, helping to plan and run the annual National Model Airplane Championships – always the world's largest model meet. He had good training and experience, having played a major role in running the Nationals when it was held in Dallas during the years 1950, 1951, 1956, 1960 and 1964.

Another side of Johnny can be seen in his years on the Control Line Air Show Team he created. Flying a great model design of Johnny's, four flyers (Johnny was one of them) flew together in one circle, doing aerobatics and formation flying. Prior to those years, Johnny was well known as a Free Flyer, winning contests with his famous Hellsfire version of Carl Goldberg's Zipper design.

During his years as AMA president, Johnny led the annual U.S. delegation to the Paris meeting of the Federation Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) Committee for International Aeromodeling (CIAM). He also served for several years as chair of the CIAM information and education subcommittee. For his FAI efforts, Johnny was presented the Paul Tissandier; he was one of only about 10 U.S. modelers to have received this honor.

Still another dimension to the Clemens legend was his stature in the hobby industry. Not any hobby shops have lasted for as long as Johnny's. His decades of operation gained him a leadership position among the Hobby Industry Association of America's retailers. Along the way, he received the industry's highest accolade when he was given their Meritorious Award of Honor in 1978.

Through all his postwar years, Johnny preached public relations for model aviation. He was a frequent master of ceremonies, after-dinner speaker, air show announcer, sign maker, and writer. He loved to be on the microphone, telling the public what model airplanes are all about. He used a lot of humor in the process, and laughter was frequent in his audiences.

The many dimensions of John E. Clemens made him a legend. He became famous for different reasons to different people. Many current modelers credit Johnny's teachings during their childhoods with setting the stage for their later successes. He probably loved the teacher role best since he had taught school in his earlier years.

Approximately 100 people took part in a special memorial service for Johnny in Dallas on June 19. It was a grand tribute to his 77 years of service to others. He had a great life, and many around the world will miss him. Because he left so many memories for all of us to recall, he obviously will not be forgotten. His stories and jokes will be told again and again. He'll like that. He always enjoyed getting an extra laugh from an old gag, and several were told at his service. Johnny left his friends with smiles on their faces – a fitting end for this life as he left us for another.

The following light-hearted ad for the Nats ran in the May/June 1950 issue (Vol. 13 No. 5-6) of Model Aviation magazine.

*Johnny Clemens says —
Mail your entry blank early!*

OFFICIAL ENTRY BLANK
1950 NATIONAL MODEL AIRPLANE CHAMPIONSHIPS
 (A.M.A.-Sanctioned AAAA Model Airplane Meet)
HELD AT U. S. NAVAL AIR STATION, DALLAS, TEXAS
 (Indoor Events, Will Rogers Coliseum, Fort Worth, Texas)
JULY 25th THROUGH 30th, 1950
 Sponsored by the Exchange Club of Dallas
 Address all correspondence to:
John E. Clemens, Contest Mgr., 2114 Greenville, Ave., Dallas, Texas

Please enter me in the following events of the 1950 Nationals at Dallas (check events):

..... Indoor Hand-Launched Glider Control-Line Speed Jet-Powered
..... Indoor Stick Model Control-Line Precision Stunt
..... Indoor Cabin Model Control-Line Flying Scale
..... Outdoor Stick Rubber Model Control-Line Team Racing
..... Outdoor Cabin Rubber Model U.S. Navy Carrier Control-Line Event
..... Outdoor Towline Glider Pan American PAA-Load Class A
..... Free-Flight—CO ₂ Pan American PAA-Load Class B

ENTRY FEES:
 Basic Entry Fee..... \$1.00
 Each event or class entered..... \$.50
 Late Entry Fee*..... \$1.00

[All fees must accompany each entry]
 *Deadline for entries without late entry fee is midnight, July 11th, 1950. Entries post-marked after that time will be accepted only on payment of the additional \$1.00 Late Entry Fee.

Total Entry Fees Enclosed:.....
 Check [] ; Money Order [] ; Cash []

(Also fill in other side)

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