



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of WALLY SIMMERS

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AMA #913



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Career:

- Twice the Chicago champion in the Junior Birdman program
- Held the senior and open indoor hand-launched glider national records
- Opened a hobby shop on the south side of Chicago that supplied quality balsa
- Produced indoor rubber-powered kits such as the *Jabberwock* and *Gollywock*, which were the first production kits to include folding propellers
- Organized Midwest Products, Midwest Supply and K&S Engineering

Honors:

- 1980: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1982: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1992: Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame
- 1998: AMA Pioneer Award
- 1998: AMA Keeper of the Flame Award

The following was written by Otto Curth and published in the National Free Flight Society Journal.

A Most Active Modeler of Yesteryear

By Otto Curth

Twice Wally was the Chicago champion in the Junior Birdman program sponsored by Hearst Newspapers. As a result, he traveled to the East Coast and to Texas to compete in the finals. He also held the senior and open indoor hand-launched glider national records.

During his younger days of competition Wally was the mainstay of any contest in and around the Chicago area and surrounding states. He was always been a leader in the South Chicago area when it came to helping any new modelers join the fraternity. Wally always had an eye for what was needed in the modeling game. He learned early that if you cannot get what you really need, develop it yourself. Therefore, he did. First was the hobby shop in Chicago. This was the spot on the south side of Chicago to get quality balsa and other competition products.

As a result, he soon branched out and started to produce indoor [models] in kit form that truly were competitive. Who will ever forget the two famous Class C rubber models with the famous names of *Jabberwock* (cabin) and *Gollywock* (stick) he produced? These two kits contained good contest quality balsa and were the first production kits featuring folding propellers.

Wally was always looking to produce products that were needed by model builders. He was the organizer of Midwest Products, Midwest Supply, and K&S Engineering – all very notable as

suppliers to the hobbyist. Wally remained active as a builder/competitor at least in indoor hand-launched gliders up through his final years.

Louis G. Vargo wrote the following in 2008.

Wally Simmers As I Knew Him

By Louis G. Vargo

I first met Wally Simmers in 1940 when he was in his early twenties, but already somewhat of a living legend. He got this status by leaving, as a teenager, his family farm in New Lenox, Illinois for the big city Chicago, then becoming a nationally acclaimed model aircraft designer, builder and flyer, then founding a going business (Midwest Model Supply), and generally developing the skills that would serve him for the rest of his full life.

By 1940, his two outdoor [rubber-powered] models, the *Jabberwock* and *Gollywock*, were being kitted by Midwest and were seen at every contest of note. I had bought a *Gollywock* kit in the spring of 1940 and with it went on to win a first place in Junior Mulvihill Stick at the AMA National Contest held in July. Wally did, of course, value the publicity the win gave his product, and, as I saw more and more of him when I went to get supplies -- I had progressed to a scratch builder -- he got to know me also. Bob DeBatty, another teenager like me, was the part-time saw man for Midwest, and my knowing Bob cemented our relationship. Soon, probably in early 1941, Wally asked me if I wanted to work at Midwest after school. I jumped at the chance and began my days as an employee, assembling kits, filling glue and dope bottles (1/2 oz. in those days), cutting balsa wheels on a drill press, packing orders for mailing, and many other tasks that have left my memory.

Let me describe the physical side of Midwest Model Supply at this time, and, in so doing, also sketch a bit of Wally Simmers the person. The company was in a row of wooden storefronts on South 69th St. in Chicago. The buildings dated back to about 1880 so that they were past their prime years. Little maintenance was done especially during the years of the Depression, which was just ending in 1940. At Midwest, there was a front retail area with the usual glass cases. Behind this area on one side was what I will now call the "living area." At the time, this space (about 8 feet x 12 feet) was too different from my middle-class home to comprehend fully. There was at most a 40-watt bulb hanging from a cord to the ceiling. This light showed piles of clothes and bedding under which there were two beds. An electric hot plate with food around it could be seen. The look was one of great disorder and uncleanness. This is where Wally and his friend, Raoul Hoffman, lived. Mr. Hoffman was a German expatriate with some engineering credentials who "minded the store" during retail hours. Mr. Hoffman is also to be noted as the man who had the title of Technical Director for the 1940 and 1941 AMA National contests. As such, he planned and supervised the "processing" of thousands of models for wing area, weight, and cross-sectional requirements. He had the full help of a Chicago Park District staff under Frank Nekimken.

Neatness and cleanliness were not of much concern to Wally -- he always looked rather disheveled in his clothes. What drove Wally at this stage in his life was the spirit of entrepreneurship. He wanted to make his business grow. By 1941, Wally decided that the *Jabberwock* and *Gollywock* needed upgrading. First, the *Dynamoe* was the *Jabberwock*

successor. It never caught on well in sales. Many regarded its retracting gear as a gimmick; many found trouble with the Rise-off-ground (ROG) demand. Many others, however, did like the replacement of the bamboo wing tips with balsa. Second, the "New Gollywock" replaced the old. Wally asked my father who was a skilled draftsman to draw it up, and the result was the now-extant plan that carries my father's name in the title block. It was the Dynamoe wing, stabilizer, and rudder, which were transferred to the old *Gollywock* fuselage. *These two Gollywock designs mentioned here are the only ones falling under the SAM Old Timer rules deadline of 1 January 1943.*

Wally was a good boss. One incident occurred which shows his concern for his employees. I came into the back shop of Midwest one day after school and saw a large shipment of kits and supplies in an obviously damaged condition. I had filled the order a week or so earlier and mailed it, but it was not wrapped well enough and was sent back as "delivery rejected." We used corrugated cardboard to wrap orders for shipment (no cartons) and had only the old-style water-activated tape to hold things together. Anyway, it was my fault and I felt terrible about it. Wally never chewed me out; he just said to repack and resend. Since the order was bulky and beyond my ability to do a good job, I think I got DeBatty to wrap it -- he was stronger and a better shipper than I.

A word about pay at Midwest: I received 15 cents/hour cash and 15 cents/hour credit toward store merchandise. On December 15, 1941, I reached the \$16.50 mark in credit and brought home my new O&R 23, which is on my mantel today.

Wally was not building or flying much on his own during 1941. He spent most of his days securing orders from wholesalers and other business matters. We (DeBatty, my brother, and I) persuaded him to join us in the "Miss Production" project for the Illinois State Championships, but he seemed spent from years of competition. Remember that in the 1930s he held both indoor HLG records and indoor "B" stick. His exertions in outdoor rubber events need no recounting.

Wally had a girlfriend at this time named Aggie. She was always kind to us teenagers, but I can recall not showing her respect because of her appearance. She was disheveled like Wally. I am sorry for that Aggie. Wally kept his personal life to himself and he never tried to corrupt us kids with adult talk. He was quite honorable in matters such as this.

The Pearl Harbor attack and the US entry into World War II changed the scene at Midwest Model. Wally was of prime military draft age, he was unmarried, and his job did not exempt him from the draft. His mission for the remainder of the war was to remain a civilian, and, short of that, a noncombatant. He got an initial deferment because he was the sole support of his mother back on the farm. When that expired, he contrived to get a job as an essential war worker. From what I can remember of his telling me about this story at the AMA Pioneers' meeting in Muncie in 1998, the job involved inspecting some important wartime device. When this job ended, the US Army finally had its chance with him. Wally managed to retain his noncombatant status, and an *Air Trails* magazine of September 1946 shows him in uniform ready to cause his sergeant to seek an early medical discharge for himself. However, I have extended this account to the end of the war in 1945 without further remarks about 1942. This was my last year in high school; my parents had given my brother and me sets of golf clubs, and could now join Wally in his favorite sport: golf. Even DeBatty caught the bug. We would be working at the shop and suddenly Wally

would yell out, "Let's go play golf!" And off we would go to the Walnut Hills course picking up our clubs along the way. Wally was surely uninhibited and free-spirited. His favorite song was *Rose of San Antone*. He would break out singing it at any time and make us feel cheerful.

I rode back home from the St. Louis contest in the summer of 1942 with Wally and his friend Chuck. Wally had a reputation (well deserved) as a believer in the winding rule, "Wind until it breaks, then back off a few." Very few would hold for him. These were pre-stooge days. Chuck, a non-modeler, would hold for him and was regarded as a savior. Back to the non-stop St. Louis to Chicago trip: Wally owned a 1936 Ford business coupe. The qualifier "business" meant there was no rumble seat. We were jammed in the car and Wally lived up to another of his traits of reputation. He drove fast in a seemingly careless way, so that every 50 miles or so would see at least some minor near misses. These events would be followed by Wally's baritone voice:

*Deep within my heart lies a melody
A song of old San Antone.....*

Such was life with the owner of Midwest Model Supply! I went into the Navy in February 1943 ten days after I graduated from high school and thus ended my direct contact with Wally Simmers until, as I mentioned before, we had several chats at Muncie in 1998. Wally was killed the next year in a car crash.



1948: Wally Simmers with Towliner at the Nats

9 January 2008
Lake Forest, CA, USA

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