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# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of NEVILLES E. (JIM/JIMMY) WALKER

April 29, 1904 - March 11, 1958



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Compiled, Transcribed & Edited by SS (3/2003), Updated by JS (10/2008), Reformatted by JS (02/2010)

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## Career:

- After teaching himself to build flying model airplanes, set up an assembly line in his basement to teach others how to build them when he was 12 or 13
- 1923: As a young teenager began producing and selling ready-to-fly rubber-powered model airplanes in his basement with the help of friends; the enterprise successfully continued until they all graduated from high school
- 1929: They changed the name to American Junior Aircraft Company and moved to larger quarters; by 1935 the Walker brothers were able to buy their company from the original investors
- Starting in 1935: Jim served as the company president, Bill as the vice president and Jim's wife, Dora, as the secretary/treasurer
- 1951: Was an avid supporter of model competition; supplied funds to send the U.S. Wakefield team to Europe
- Worked as a junior draftsman at Boeing in the engineering department for a short time
- Within a few years after high school graduation, he again started producing model airplanes in the family basement, this time running it like a full-fledged business
- The business took off with the help of his brother and partner, Bill, and they called it the Junior American Model Company
- Constantly experimented with and improved upon the design of his models
- Frequently demonstrated his models, especially the Fireball, to crowds; sometimes interrupting traffic in large cities and frequently giving out free models
- His Fireball became the most popular controlled-flight model in America when it came out
- During World War II, the government used some of American Juniors folding wing gliders and Radio Control models for training purposes
- Invented a sound-control glider
- Invented the first Radio Control lawnmower
- American Junior Aircraft Company turned out 232 million models over the years
- Invented the two wire U-Control lines, the first throttle-control engines, the sonic glider, the American Junior Folding Wing Interceptor and the reel control

## Honors:

- 1965: AMA Fellow
- 1969: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1992: Precision Aerobatics Model Pilots' Association Hall of Fame

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*The following was published in the August 1981 issue of Model Aviation, in Bill Winter's Just For the Fun of it column. The views expressed are solely those of the writer.*

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Jim Walker: A long time ago, it took us 30 days to write these words: "Jim Walker is gone." Jim was the greatest modeling personality of all time, a household word the world over. When he zapped the scene we jiggled like puppets. He was a superlatively gifted man, perhaps the most highly-coordinated flier that lived. He was our Thomas Edison. He invented U-Control – and much else.

Long before the war he was producing millions of remarkable gliders, ROGs, and ingenious stuff that surpasses anything today. He blew our fuses. For kids of all ages he was the Pied Piper, but he led us only to fun places. If he were around today, kids would flock to him and modeling. Jim, the magician. A man of action, move it! During an interminable debate at an HIAA meeting, where Wakefielders like Ed Lidgard pitched for support, Jim stood up and said, "Let's get on with the show." He wrote a check for \$5000.

Nat Polk tells a story. Like Charlie Grant – who sold two to three thousand ready-to-fly models a day from 1919 to 1929 – Jim could convince a stone-hearted toy buyer that model airplanes did indeed fly. This buyer sat at a corner desk, an open window on either side. Like Teddy Roosevelt storming San Juan Hill, Jim strode in and tossed a glider out the window. It circled the building corner, came in the other window, and whizzed in front of the buyer. Jim could make a glider loop over his head, then zoom between his knees and back to his hand. He'd toss it in any direction, and it always alighted in his hand. He never missed. Older readers remember best his *Fireball* demonstrations.

Jim flew three at once, in trail formation. We can still see those three guys desperately flipping the McCoy .29 Redheads to life, Jim snapping the verbal whip. He could make a congressman roll over and play dead. (How about that, Keith Storey?) Jim had a 3-line U-Reeley handle in each hand, with the lines from the third ship attached to a pylon on a special helmet. The third motor control? A clip clenched in his teeth. He even tried a PA system in his helmet so he could emcee his mind-boggling act. (He must have been a ventriloquist with a switch in his mouth!)

A wilder act. For this one, he used a two-speed O&R .23 and his newly invented Remoto, which replaced the mechanical third line trigger with a switch, battery, relay, and insulated lines. Jim would pull the *Fireball* straight up and hang it there, maintaining line tension without seeming to move. Slowly the crate would sink 'til a pin on the tail punctured a tethered balloon at ground level, or held in a pretty gal's hand. And then the ship would accelerate straight up, push over, and resume aerobatics. He could rig his lines so that the *Fireball* would hang like a kite, off diagonally in the wind, at an immense distance.

He'd step out of a crowd at the Nats (they had banned him because he disrupted the show – he made it a circus ) with a *Fireball* in hand, engine singing, then release it at arm's length, slowly paying out lines as he ran into the open, until it seemed to free flight on 200-ft. lines. To see that thing going around a 400-ft. diameter circle was to talk to yourself. Jim dominated Radio Control, winning the Nats at least once – we forget how many times.

We saw him at a prewar Nats with an RC trike-gear modern-looking little crate that taxied out and maneuvered on the ground, then zipped off pretty as you please. (Siegfried won that Nats with a 15-ft. monster that did the first loop.) Jim had rudder, elevator and engine control, all done with a single rotary actuator which traveled to any desired pickup point. It was the greatest (though Rockwood already had reeds for 3- and 5-channel before the war) but, since NiCads were in the future, falling voltage tended to cross up Jim's timed actuator.

Jim had a phone in his special Chrysler Imperial with heavy springs to pull a huge trailer, with which he wandered the land. He'd summon New York's swankiest department store buyer down to the street, call us down from *MAN*, and fly *Ceiling Walker* helicopters on 45<sup>th</sup> St. around the corner from Fifth Ave. The things rose above the high buildings. During a night-time victory parade up Broadway, he slipped a searchlight operator a fiver and climbed on the float from which he catapulted *Interceptor* gliders up the bright beam – as thousands cheered (to heck with the war!). (He had this RC lawnmower which followed behind the horses in a parade on the West Coast; we'll leave it to you to decide why he removed the reel from the lawnmower.) That *Interceptor* – nothing ever remotely approached it for ingenuity or flyability. It had wings which pivoted back, rotating so that the top chords met in the fingers of your release hand. When it was catapulted up by a rubberband, it pierced the sky like a javelin, and then – whap – the wings would rotate, and swing forward for long soaring flights. We've got bald-headed sons who as kids had the darn things fly away, tough on Pop. The Army bought *Interceptors* by the thousands for machine gun practice. We can testify that our kids' 16-gauge shotgun never downed one; they'd glider on and on, full of holes.

Jim invented whip-control. You held this fish pole in your left hand (ok, you are left-handed!), whipped the model like mad in counterclockwise circles, and stunted it by means of a handle held in the other hand. In the mid-thirties he sold millions of camber-winged hand-launched gliders, color printed, selected balsa (on every dang one!)

His *Hornet* R.O.G. was better than anything today. Before the war, it had a plastic prop and nose bearing with necessary offset. He'd nick a prop and snag it on a landing gear leg, then glide the thing; when it touched ground, the prop would spring free, and it would take off. And his ½A *Firebaby*, also with cambered sheet balsa wings. Jim would appear at the Nats, let down a station wagon tail gate, and unload a mountain of *Firebabies* in boxes (they went together as quickly as gliders). He had three doorbell batteries taped together for a booster. If a kid could start an engine, Jim gave him the airplane. Now that's incentive. You'd be surprised how kids start engines when they want to!

Jim actually started riots with his flying. Once, in front of the Central Post Office in New York, he flew a *Fireball*. A Brazilian traffic jam resulted. People climbed on top of buses. Riot squad wagons came out to deal with the panic, Klaxons blaring their slow progress up the avenue. In Chicago he was insulted when only one cop showed up – on a motorcycle. He got the cop to fly the thing and died laughing when the poor chap wrapped himself in the flying wires.

At the Sportsman Pier in Chicago, Jim did his three-*Fireball* act on a tanbark circle. He had three orange *Fireballs* sitting tail to tail. Jim strode on, followed by his lawnmower (still with reel), responding to a hidden switch on his belt. Unknown to Jim the switch snagged. The lawnmower

was on its own – he didn't see it. It waddled over to the *Fireballs*, eating them one by one, spewing out a cloud of orange dust. The crowd screamed "Encore! Encore!" For once, Jim was stumped.

He was into sound control. A glider soaring overhead, responding to vocal signals through a megaphone; had to be seen to be believed. He chased sea gulls with it. (Problem: covering had to be loose so it would not act as a drum.) To test noise-source controls, Jim emerged from his basement in the dead of night, equipped with whistles, a drum, noise makers, and even a pistol, which he shot into the air. The neighbors called the police. The cop was so fascinated by Jim's explanation that he said, "Here, I'll shoot my revolver; it makes more noise than yours."

Jim's nerves became jumpy. The industry was cheating on his U-Control system. He had a lock on it, by patent, just as if one guy today had control of the entire RC industry. There were court fights. Many kits appeared with an "X" on the wing with a notation: "Install your favorite control system here." By weight of numbers they beat him down. The doctor said, "Jim, you have to get a hobby." Good gravy! So Jim took up, briefly, model railroading. He had one of the most elaborate systems man could conceive. He even had a derrick which lowered him into the middle of it – or so they told us.

Jim was at war with the industry and with all the editors. He thought we dragged our feet. We did, given such standards. Ole Bill was a novelty, the only guy Jim never got cross with. Beyond understanding. But we have a clue. We once had a regional high school math teacher known beforehand by every kid within models of North Jersey, a terror. He was reputed to read the *Congressional Record*. When we fell into his hands, he conducted classes with Prussian—line discipline. He'd point at you, then at the board, and up you went to display your ignorance. The Paper Chase – in sign language. He never called us, but named me "The Professor." I knew absolutely nothing, and he evidently knew that. I suspect dear Jim looked at a mere editor in the same way. Go easy on the clod. But we sat up with him many times, spellbound by his mental gymnastics, as would Cal Smith. Jim sent many of us, at least once a year, a huge carton containing dozens of all his unique models, and the family would fly them for weeks. The "terrible" Jim was a benevolent Santa Claus.

We have marvelous letters from Frank D. Macy, who is a MECA and SAM member. We know his book on Walker will be a delight. From Bob Smurthwaite, who shared in the Walker manufacturing story, we hear of a recent reunion of family members and the now-scattered people who were close to Jim. Macy was privileged to visit with Mrs. Walker, who gave him a large collection of old photos, articles, trophies and two boxes of 16mm movies and tapes. The Oregon Historical Society offers their services to review, splice, edit and salvage the old movies.

Macy is putting together a program entitled "An Evening with Jim Walker." It consists of a display of kits, built-up models, products, photos and other memorabilia of American Junior and Jim Walker. He will show a movie about Jim, and then explain the Museum Exhibit effort, winding up with a Q&A period and how to help.

"Jim Walker was my boyhood hero," Frank tells us. "I never took the opportunity to thank him for all he had given me. Writing a book or two is one way of saying belatedly, 'Thanks, Jim.'"

“There is another reason. To share and teach those that never knew him. Their hopes and dreams are not in the ‘promise of a bright tomorrow, or the skies of success’ like ours were. Yet I see the yearning within them.

“I thrill to look into the eyes of the young people who have viewed the collection in my home. As they first file in, I see that look that says ‘Let’s hurry up and get out of here.’ Ninety minutes later, those kids have a hero. Sad that he is gone, glad that he was here. They always ask, ‘Why isn’t this being done today?’

“They always leave reluctantly, full of interest, enthusiasm, quality questions – and with much more than what they had when they walked in. Truly, the American Junior theme still lives: Wings for Young America. I see it in their eyes.

“The American Junior collection (still far from complete) will be donated to a museum for permanent exhibit, hopefully in Portland; if not, then somewhere here in the Northwest.

“To Jim, these were the Hills of Home.”

We are all too busy doing rolls and loops to be aware of kids. Much of the industry says there isn’t enough money in it. It is too easy to say kids are indifferent. Betty Boyle, at Sterling Models (if this be ERA, we give three cheers) is not too busy doing rolls and loops. It’s quite possible that kids are good business for Sterling. There’s Guillow’s, Peck, Comet and others.

Not all kids will build models. Perhaps just a small percentage. That small percentage is a mighty big head count – and they, or some of them, would become RCers too, and they could have had something many of us have missed. If we can’t find he handle, there is one thing we can do. Keep an open mind. There are many ‘who, like Jim Walker, have this thing with youth, work at it silently, for the only reward that counts. Jim, wherever you are, let’s go fly.

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*For more information about Jim Walker, visit Frank Macy’s American Junior Classics website at <http://www.americanjuniorclassics.com/> (as of April 2012.)*

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