



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of EARL L. MCMAHON



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How I Got Into Building and Flying Model Airplanes

by Earl McMahon, AMA member 52926

I was in grammar school in the 1930s. There was hardware store in our neighborhood named Tuplers that sold model airplane model kits and held a contest each year for the winner in various classes of model airplane building. Most of the models displayed were carved balsa wood models and a few stick-and-tissue paper-covered models. During that period, Kellogg's had a program for children whereby if you sent ten cents and a few Kellogg's cereal box tops (not sure of how many), they would send a model plane - to be carved - back to you. At that time, we could earn ten cents at the grocery store for watching the produce that was put on display in front of the grocery store each day. The box tops were often found in the alleys.

When I could save enough money delivering *The Herald American* newspapers and *Saturday Evening Posts* to buy a stick model, I began building those rubber-powered models while still in grammar school. A paperboy had to collect from the customers and pay the paper companies for the delivered papers first; whatever collected money left was his to keep. Failure to collect came out of the boy's pocket.

I knew enough to assemble a stick model from the plans but lacked the knowledge as to what made them flyable. The lack of knowledge resulted in many crashes and destroyed models. My older sister bought me a board for assembling that permitted me to stick pin into it while building a model; it is still useful today. A kit of a model having a twelve- to eighteen-inch wingspan at that time cost a quarter. I built a few of these rubber-powered models with the same results: crashes.

After graduating from grammar school, I ceased building for a while.

In high school, I met a student named Clarence Sinkula who was into modeling. We became friends and I became interested in the gas models of the time. Sink's father allowed us to use half of his garage for a workshop where we would often test run our engines. Sink and I worked on a few models together, and at times we built our own planes. I build a free flight model named Playboy Sr. for my use. We often flew our planes at the old Checkerboard Airfield at 87th and Cicero. The field had not been in use for a number of years and was a wide open field, ideal for free flight flying.

One day, a couple of brothers who were neighbors of Sink showed up at our shop and offered us a proposition. They informed us that they had a couple of airplanes in their attic and they would like to see the larger one of the two fly again. They asked if we were interested in making the plane flyable again for them. They told us that they would like us to modify the large ten-foot wingspan plane by removing the mounted twin cylinder engine that they had made in their

machine shop and replace it with a Forester 99 engine. If we did as they asked, we would be rewarded with the other plane, complete with engine and ignition system. We changed engines, recovered and balanced out the model, and eventually flew it to their satisfaction.

During one of our test flights, we were revving up the engine and it slipped from our grasp on the rudder. It took off before we could stop it. The flight was short and as it returned to earth, we heard screeching tires on Cicero. A man came running shouting, "Where is the airplane that just crashed?" When he noticed that it was a large model airplane on the ground, he threw up his hand and returned to his car.

The model we received was a high-wing cabin-type model named Mr. Something that we flew several times until we lost it in one day in the area. We looked for it for hours.

We started to build and fly control line aircraft. Some were built from kits, but most were from plans found in *Air Trails* magazine. We bought most of our supplies from a hobby store located on 22nd Street and Douglas Boulevard in Chicago. The proprietor would allow us to buy on the installment layaway plan; pay what you could until your purchase was paid for before you got your purchase. We spent a lot of time in this hobby store. We decided to start a flying club. We got permits to use the baseball diamonds in Douglas Park as our flying fields. We named the club the *Flying Grasshopper*.

One afternoon, while hanging out in the hobby store, we got to talking about a new kit that just arrived. It was the Night Twister kit, a low-wing racing-style aircraft. We, along with the owner, decided to build it that night and fly it the next day. We worked all night, building the model in the back of the shop.

After staying up all night building, I went home to let my mother know that I was all right. Arriving home, my mother asked as to where I had been all night, and I informed her that I was at the hobby store building a model to fly. When I began to leave she asked where I was going. I said, "To fly a plane." She said, "You're what?" I repeated, "Going to fly," and left.

I believe glow plug engines became popular around this time.

In 1946, I went into service and was stationed in Trieste, Italy. One day, while walking in Garibaldi square, I saw a boy flying a U-Control model. I talked to him about modeling and he informed me there was a shop that sold model engine and planes. I found the shop and purchased two small diesel engines and a larger diesel one. I ran the large diesel attached to a footlocker. The heat from the engine and the gasoline caused a leak in the gas tank that was attached to the back of the crank case. I repaired the problem with a condom stretched across the crankcase and replaced the tank; *no more leaks*. I shipped the motors home and still have them.

In 1948, when I returned from service, Sink and I were going to buy the hobby shop but changed our minds after checking inventories and discovering that there was too much dead inventory to make it profitable to own. After that, things changed. Sink got married and I did, too, a little later. Modeling for me ceased.

After I returned from service, I went to work at Automatic Electric, and for several years I did no modeling. One day, I got to talking with a fellow employee and it turned out he was into Radio Control flying. He (Dick) mentioned that he flew at the fields on Higgins Road and 355 and was

willing to teach me to fly RC. I went to a swap meet, purchased an RC plane kit to build, and bought an engine from Al's hobby shop in Elmhurst, IL. I also joined the AMA. Balancing that model was a task in itself. The design and material used in the design made the model extremely tail heavy.

Dick and I flew a couple of times a week after work. Dick would stop at home to pick up his ship and I would have mine in my car at work those days. Dick would take the plane up, I would attempt to control it in the air, and Dick would land it. On one occasion, while I was flying in a clockwise direction, I encountered another plane flying contrary to the flight pattern and we collided. I only lost a windshield and propeller, but the other flyer lost his plane. I never really got accustomed to the knack of flying when Dick and I flew together.

This all stopped after a while. Dick and my hours were no longer compatible, so I joined a club in Palos Heights who flew at 107th and Manheim Road. The members were very friendly and helpful. I went to a few meetings before deciding to attempt to fly again. I believe I mentioned at one meeting that I was going to buy a plane to fly. The club had a trainer, complete with engine, that they were deciding what to do with it. One of the officers asked the membership if the plane could be donated to me with their approval. Needless to say, approval was given, and I was a proud owner of a flyable airplane. I never expected this, so in appreciation I made a sizable donation to the club treasury.

This club had flight instructors to help teach flying. One of these men helped me at the field several times. They would take the planes off and I would fly them in the pattern. I flew with some difficulty. I had difficulty distinguishing which way to move the stick when the plane was approaching.

One day the instructor asked if I wanted to try taking off. I said yes, and almost had a disaster upon taking off. The plane lifted off but veered to the right as it left the ground, almost hitting some people at the end of the runway. Immediately upon seeing what was happening, I moved the stick to the left, climbed the plane, and leveled off, handing the controls to the instructor so he could land the plane. That was the end of my attempting to fly.

-Earl McMahan

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