



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of RUSSELL (RUSS) W. NICHOLS



Transcribed & Edited by SS (08/2002), Updated by JS (11/2009, 06/2012)

Career:

- Worked at the AMA from 1942 to 1963; much of that time was spent as AMA executive director
 - AMA Leader Member
 - Served as chairman of AMA's education committee
 - Served as president of the Washington, D.C. Association of Model Airplane Clubs
 - Conducted radio programs on model aviation
 - Part of his AMA duties including serving as editor of the AMA's Model Aviation magazine
 - Elected AMA secretary/treasurer in 1943
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The following memoriam ran after Russell Nichols' death in 1971. It most likely ran in Model Aviation magazine.

A special chapter in AMA's history was closed last May with the news that Russell W. Nichols has passed away. The news came eight years after he left the Academy, in 1963, a relatively quiet period following 20 very turbulent and progressive years during which Nichols was AMA's top man in the Washington, D.C., headquarters office.

Most of those 20 years Nichols had the title of AMA Executive Director, the highest salaried position in the Academy. But in the earlier years, he had various titles and seldom much salary. Even after 20 years, the pay was not much; financial success was slow in coming to the AMA.

Russ Nichols' AMA career began in 1942, immediately following Pear Harbor. In those days, the Academy served as the technical section of the Air Youth Division of the National Aeronautic Association (the NAA). In early 1942, Nichols was appointed acting director of the NAA Air Youth Division and also headquarters director of the AMA. It was a confusing mixture of duties and responsibilities, which typified the interrelationship of AMA and NAA at the time.

But it was the beginning of a long period of meritorious service for Nichols. It followed 12 years of being a modeler, AMA Leader member, Chairman of the AMA's education committee and president of the D.C. Association of Model Airplane Clubs. He had also conducted radio programs on model aviation.

In the early days at Headquarters, Russ had many duties and little help. Included was the position of editor of the AMA publication, Model Aviation. On top of everything else, he was named to be secretary-treasurer in AMA's election of officers for 1943.

It wasn't until after the war, in 1946, that Nichols got a more clearly designed job and took on the title of AMA executive director, which he retained until retirement. Those early postwar years also saw the emergence of AMA as a more independently operating division of NAA, with its own offices and staff.

Despite limited personnel and facilities, great progress in model aviation was achieved in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Those were the years of the great air youth meets sponsored by the Plymouth Corporation, more than a decade of Navy-hosted National Model Airplane Championships, 14 years of PAA (Pan American Airways) sponsored Payload and Cargo competitions and regular participation by U.S. teams in World Championship events.

It was a period of sponsorships by national organizations. Besides those mentioned, there was major support by the American Legion and the National Exchange Club. A major club achievement was the 1954 sponsorship, by the Convair division of General Dynamics, of the Free Flight World Championships at Suffolk County Air Force Base on Long Island, New York. During this period there were also the Air Youth State Championships sponsored by the Hobby Industry Association of America.

With all this activity, the Academy growth was rapid, with over 22,000 members by the early 1960s. But this apparent success turned out to be only a step away from bankruptcy. The earlier years with plentiful sponsorships hid a need for a better financial base. Dues were too low for services rendered and expenses depended upon outside support. When the era of plush sponsorships faded in the late 1950s, the real problems and needs of the AMA came to light. Nichols was caught in a crossfire of internal politics resulting from a basic change in AMA decision-making. AMA members had previously voted directly on all major issues, but this gave way to representation by an elected board of directors, which became known as the Executive Council. In the transition many confusing demands and policy decisions were produced, which made life hectic for the still tiny Headquarters staff.

After 20 years of service and great progress, Nichols saw the organization floundering into the 1960s. What was previously an organization dominated by youth participation had turned into a largely adult activity. Many of the former programs and policies proved to be obsolete in this new atmosphere and there was much searching for solutions to the growth problems. The total impact of all this took its toll on Russ' spirit and ability to keep up.

He grew tired and discouraged. He also had health problems, compounded by a physical disability. There were also personal difficulties at home. Finally, in early 1963, it all came to a head and Nichols ended up in a hospital and stayed there for several months. When he left, he retired from the Academy in order to seek a quieter and less demanding position. He finally went to work for the federal government in Washington, and little more was heard from him until the news of his passing last May.

Because he left AMA during a crisis period, Nichols did not get the recognition to which he was entitled for 20 years of service. The timing simply wasn't appropriate. Since that time, the

Academy has revived and gone on to new spectacular achievements. During this period of new progress, the past was left behind and the old AMA was largely forgotten.

But those who remember the old days know that what AMA is today it owes to what was done during Russ Nichols' 20 years of service. Much of what has been recently accomplished is a result of the lessons learned from the past. Nichols is gone, but not likely to be forgotten by those who knew him best. His early efforts are constantly recalled to guide and influence the decision-making of today's AMA officers.

AMA today reflects what Russ Nichols contributed before. That in itself is a lasting memorial and tribute. Russ has paid his dues. His friends now wish him the calm he didn't have to enjoy while in the hot seat of AMA Headquarters. His was a turbulent tenure, but it is fitting that his time is remembered best for what was accomplished rather than the problems involved. Russ Nichols deserves our thanks and the chance to rest in peace.

The following was written by AMA staff, published in the Model Aviation publication, October 1946 issue.

Nichols Takes Over as AMA Executive Director; Lewis Leaves for Post in Model Industry

Russell W. Nichols, Academy secretary-treasurer, assumes the post of Executive Director; it was announced in Washington recently by AMA headquarters and the National Aeronautic Association. Mr. Nichols takes over the position held until now by Albert L. Lewis, past president of the organization and one of the original founder members.

"Russ" Nichols is well known to Aeromodelers, having acted as headquarters director for the Academy during the war years. In addition, he is director of NAA's Air Youth Division. He has been active in the establishment of junior aviation programs for the Air Scouts (BSA), Wing Scouts, and other youth organizations.

"Al" Lewis has been identified with the Academy and the Junior NAA organization since 1936. He was an early editor of "Model Aviation" and served as second president of the AMA. In 1939, he went to Washington to handle Junior NAA activities; in 1941, the Academy absorbed these and set up as the model division of NAA. Mr. Lewis will enter the model industry as sales promotion manager for Polk's Modelcraft Hobbies, a leading hobby house with offices in Chicago and New York City.

Russ Nichols and Al Lewis have worked together since 1940 when the former was active in the Silver Springs (Md.) Aeronauts club. Later he organized a metropolitan council, the Association of Model Airplane Clubs of Washington. Russ was born and educated in Melrose, Massachusetts and attended Boston University, Southeastern University, and American University. Prior to his work with NAA and the Academy, he was with the Farm Credit Administration, a federal

agency.

Like Russ, Al Lewis was born in Massachusetts and educated in the Somerville schools. He attended Boston University and worked on Boston newspapers and as assistant direct mail advertising manager for the largest department store in the northeast. Lewis became AMA director in 1941; he was on leave of absence during the war when he served overseas with the Airways Communications System of the AAF. He will continue his associations with the AMA as chairman of its International Coordination Committee; recently he was appointed the American member of the Model Commission of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale.

He will devote spare time to the completion of several projects: a history of model aviation, an American aeromodeling yearbook, and a "who's who" of U.S. model aviation.

The following was written by AMA staff, published in the Model Aviation publication, January 1955 issue.

Nichols Leaves AMA

It was in the year 1946 that the AMA Headquarters staff said goodbye to Al Lewis when he left to enter the model industry and Russell W. "Russ" Nichols took over the task of directing the operations and programs of the Academy of Model Aeronautics. Now we must again say goodbye to another champion of model aviation and, most particularly, the AMA.

Russ Nichols resigned as Executive Director of the Academy effective December 31, 1954, to take a most challenging position with an advertising firm located in Detroit. He has not completely severed his connections and plans to be an active Leader member and a staunch supporter.

Russ came with the organization in March 1942, as director of the Air Youth Division of the National Aeronautic Association. He served as acting director of the AMA during the war years when Al Lewis was in the service and accepted the directorship permanently in 1946. Under his leadership, the recognition of AMA has grown from national to international in scope and AMA has become a potent voice in worldwide modeling affairs. Many new, important programs and projects were instigated and brought to fruition which have built the Academy into a more effective and respected organization.

His untiring and unselfish devotion to the Academy and the furtherance of model aviation will be sorely missed by all.

The following was written by AMA staff, published in the Model Aviation publication, December 1955 issue.

Russ Nichols Back

Russell W. Nichols, former AMA Executive Director, has accepted a temporary position with AMA to assist the Headquarters staff in an advisory capacity. He left AMA at the end of 1954. Russ is expected to work with AMA at least until the end of March 1956.



Model Aviation magazine cover, September 1955: "To the victor goes the spoils, and no greater honor could be bestowed on Willard S. (Woody) Blanchard, center, Grand National Champion, than to have the championship trophy presented to him by Navy Secretary Charles S. Thomas. Keith Storey, left, AMA president, did a fine job of MC'ing the championship presentations.

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