



# The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of WILLIAM (BILL) NORTHROP



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Written by BN (12/2006), Submitted by CR (3/2007); Written by AMA staff (05/2012); Transcribed & Edited by JS (03/2007), Reformatted by JS (11/2009);  
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*Charles Reich submitted the following biography, by Bill Northrop, in March of 2007.*

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## An Autobiography of Bill Northrop

My first contact with “Old Timer” models was when they were “New Timers!” At age 14, I built and flew a Henry Struck diamond-fuselage rubber-powered endurance model, published full-size on several pages in the July 1936 issue of *Model Aircraft Builder*. (See my current Old Timer plan, no. R118.) A little over a year later, I first built and flew a Scientific Maxwell Bassett *Miss Philadelphia* soon after its first advertisement in the July 1937 issue of *Model Airplane News (M.A.N.)* (See my current Plan No. 1179-OT.) Actually, I had about three years experience building solid models and Megow 10- and 25-cent stick and tissue models prior to that. I had no more help than what I could obtain by reading the current model magazines available at the time, *Flying Aces*, *M.A.N.*, and *Bill Barnes’ Air Trails*.

Things became more understandable when I met Steve Kowalik (no further identification needed!) around 1935. He opened a hobby shop in the young men’s department of Mullins Clothing Store in Wilmington, Delaware, fifteen miles from my parent’s home in Newark (pronounced like two words...New-Ark, not like the one in New Joisey!)

My first gas engine was the Baby Cyclone. (I think it was a Model E, with a stamped metal engine mount, including the gas tank.) At the first Academy of Model Aeronautics Gathering of Eagles for modeling notables in 1996, (I was inducted into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame in 1988) I had the pleasure of meeting Maxwell Bassett, designer of the *Miss Philly*. He asked me what engine I used in mine just as Bill Brown joined us! I had to admit to both of them (how is that for mixing with famous people!?! ) that I installed the Baby Cyclone. There were about five or six photographers clicking away as the three of us talked, and I never thought to hand one of them my camera to get a picture of me with a couple of legends!

One last “New Timer” story: In early 1940, I built Korda’s famous *Wakefield* from a Megow one dollar kit and experienced my second ever flyaway with it at a contest in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Although I had the longest flight of the contest, it was unofficial as the flight occurred on a test flight with only 100 turns on the rubber motor. As the propeller folded, the model started a left turn and bounced up a few feet, then continued to bounce until it disappeared directly overhead eighteen-and-a-half minutes later! Luckily, I received a postcard about a week

later from a small town twenty-five miles northeast of the contest site and recovered it. (My first flyaway was around 1935, a Jim Walker folding-wing catapult glider.)

I first met John Pond at the 1962 Chicago Nationals, where our discussion somehow came around to the Old Timer activity. We hit it off immediately, and the “remember when's” went on and on. We renewed the Old Timer discussions at the Nats in Los Alamitos, California in 1963. I missed the Nats in 1964, as that was the year I had a heart attack that changed my life completely. Up to that time, I was an architectural engineer with Hercules, was into Radio Control, and was a regular contributor of articles for *M.A.N.* and *Air Trails*, including contest reports and construction articles. In addition, I had opened a small advertising business in the model airplane trade. My customers included Swanson (glow plugs), Pettit Paint (Hobbypoxy), and DB Engineering (Don Brown’s Quadruplex Radio Control Systems.) The heart attack hit in April of that year, when I was only 42. Luckily, I came out of it okay, but made the decision that my heart (still pumping) was really into the hobby. By a happy coincidence, Walt Schroder, *M.A.N.’s* Editor, was just beginning to look for a replacement for Ed Lorenz, *M.A.N.’s* Radio Control Editor, and you could say that we both jumped at the chance. My first column was in the January 1965 issue and I stayed there until August of 1969.

John and I kept up our relationship, and on several occasions I took the liberty of giving Old Timers (Free Flight only) a plug in my column. At the 1965 Nats in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, I put my act together and placed third in Radio Control Scale. Back then, there was no such thing as “Quarter Scale,” but it so happened that my entry was a three-inch-to-the-foot model of the *Gipsy Moth*, proud father of the much better-known *Tiger Moth* of World War II trainer fame. I also earned the first Best Radio Control Scale Achievement Award, donated by Sterling Models. I went on to enter the World Radio Control Record Trials in September of 1965 at the Dahlgren, Virginia Naval Weapons Lab. I set a new record of 16,610 feet, which was also an “absolute” world record for all model aircraft, previously held by a Russian Free Flight model at just over 14,000 feet.

Soon after leaving *M.A.N.* in 1969, I moved to Southern California to work as a sales representative for Bob Dunham’s Orbit Electronics. However, I still had the desire to continue in the publication business. It seemed as though the only way to go was not in the direction of the current model magazines at the time, so it became obvious that the alternative was a start from scratch! Thus, *Model Builder (MB)* came into form and began with three issues in 1971.

*MB* started coverage of Old Timer activity with the January 1973 issue. I established the “Plug Sparks” title of the column with that issue, including the spark plug logo. Jack Transue (where is he now?) carried the ball through the July 1973 issue. John Pond picked it up in the August 1973 issue and ran with it through approximately 274 columns, to the end in September of 1996, when the current owners of the magazine threw in the towel. During that 25-year period, *MB* published 194 Old Timer plans. One plan and fairly long article, which we were extremely proud, was on Joe Raspante’s famous *Snow White*, a winner of the famed Berryloid event. There was quite a bit of confusion and incorrect claims about the origin of the design, and the article settled it for good. The author and creator of the new plans, Al Holmes, contacted Joe. After getting Joe’s

permission, he dismantled the original *Snow White* and made new drawings (right from the parts!) to replace the long-gone originals. The originals, drawn on taped-together brown paper bags, were destroyed soon after Raspante completed the original ship!

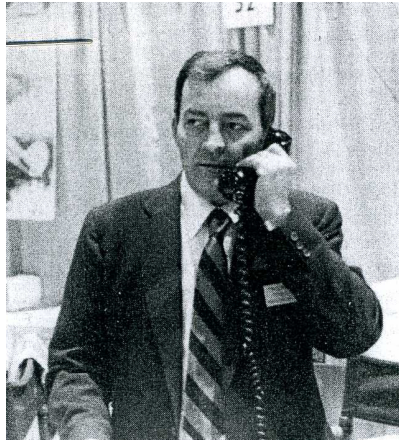
A year or so after we discontinued *MB*, we rescued all of the original *MB* plans from bankruptcy court (it wasn't cheap!) and started a new plans book, entitled "Scratch Builder's Almanac." It currently features 37 more Old Timer plans, including Hank Struck's 1938 *Benny Boxcar*, Irwin Ohlsson's little 1934 *Gyrfalcon* bi-plane and John Tatone's *Atomizer*.

In March of 1974, I wrote and published an article recommending ways to modify Free Flight Old Timers for Radio Control using my Taibi *Powerhouse* as an example. In the April issue of that same year, John Pond reported in *Plug Sparks* that I won the Texaco event at the winter Nats in Taft, California, with a flight of 54 minutes, 22 seconds. Anita and I, with the *Powerhouse*, were on the May cover. (To get on the cover of a magazine, it helps if you own it!) In doing so, by the rules set for Radio Control, I had to take off and land on the Taft site without leaving the field. Consequently, when the plane was nearly out of sight, I had to drop out of the lift and head back. This occurred twice, and both times, I picked up new life just before landing and went back up. I had to drop out a third time, but did not find lift and had to land. For two years prior to this, Free Flight models beat the Radio Control entries. However, immediately following the 1974 contest, the event separated into two categories, Free Flight and Radio Control, sort of like the separation of rubber from gas brought on by Maxwell Bassett many years ago.

Going back a little to 1978, we attended model hobby trade shows in New York, Toledo, Dallas and Puyallup, near Seattle (sounds like a raindrop hitting a puddle), to promote our magazine. We noted (with the help of several exhibitors from Southern California) that there was a serious lack of the same type of show in our area. We decided to get into the trade show business, and produce a model trade show in or around Los Angeles. Thus, the International Modeler Show was born! After a shaky beginning at the Los Angeles Convention Center in 1978, we moved the show to Pasadena and survived for 20 years! I am not sure if we were able to provide free booth space for the Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) in Los Angeles (we came out in the red), but SAM had a free booth from 1979 on. At the time, I believe, Jim Adams was President, Editor of *SAM Speaks* and Chief Cook and Bottle Washer, so naturally the task fell on him to organize the operation of the booth. This included creating a backdrop, signs, rigging on which to hang Old Timer models, and getting volunteers to operate the booth. When we sold the show to the Academy of Model Aeronautics in 1998, one stipulation was that SAM would continue to have free booth space. It remains that way today!

One more thing needs clarification. My reference to "we" in this biography refers to Anita Northrop and me. Anita, while maintaining her activity as a licensed real estate agent, was the official business partner, leaving me with the job of editor, publisher, and trade show organizer. Particularly during the early years of producing the magazine, there were frequent times when it was difficult to believe that it could remain alive financially. There were many after-hours huddles about whether or not we could hold off bill collectors and still print another issue. These talks always ended up with Anita saying, "You do your thing and get the issue ready to meet the

printer's deadline, and leave the unpaid bills to me!" I am not sure to this day how she managed to do it all and keep us out of jail.



*Photo of Bill from the December 1987 issue of Model Aviation magazine, p. 110*

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*The following was written by AMA staff in May of 2012 after Bill Northrop's induction into the 2012 AMA Hall of Fame.*

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### **Champion Free Flight and Radio Control Modeler Bill Northrop: 1922-2012**

M U N C I E – One of the Academy of Model Aeronautics and aeromodeling legends has passed away. Bill Northrop, 89, was a champion free flight and radio control competitor, columnist, publisher and model builder in an aeromodeling career that began in 1936, the same year AMA was founded, when he was 14 years old.

Northrop was honored for his lifetime achievements with an induction into the Academy's Hall of Fame in 1988.

One of his notable accomplishments was in the World Radio Control Record Trials in 1965 at the Dahlgren, Virginia, Naval Weapons Lab. He set a record of 16,610 feet, considered a world record for all model aircraft, previously held by a Russian free flight model at slightly more than 14,000 feet.

While working as an architectural engineer for Hercules, Bill was a regular contributor to Model Airplane News and Air Trails, including contest reports and construction articles. He became the radio control editor for four years for Model Airplane News in the mid-late 1960s. In 1971 he established Model Builder magazine, which was published for the next 25 years. He also owned and operated Bill Northrop's Plans Service, which featured the plans from Model Builder.

Northrop and his wife, Anita, founded the International Modeler Show, which began at the Los Angeles Convention Center in 1978. They moved the annual exposition to Pasadena where it was held for the next 20 years. In 1998, the Northrops sold the show to the AMA. The Academy continues to hold the West Coast exposition to this day, convening at the Ontario CA Convention Center every January.

Northrop's aeromodeling career spanned the full organizational life of the AMA and has left an indelible mark on the evolution of the hobby and sport now pursued by more than 143,000 AMA members across the nation.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

The Academy of Model Aeronautics, [www.modelaircraft.org](http://www.modelaircraft.org), is the nation's collective voice for 143,000 aeromodelers nationwide. Founded in 1936 during the Golden Age of Aviation, the Academy sanctions more than 2,000 events each year and charters 2,394 aeromodeling clubs.

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