



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of PERCY PIERCE

March 22, 1894 – July 30, 1962

Started modeling in 1906



Transcribed & Edited by SS (11/2002), Reformatted by JS (01/2010), material added by JS (03/2016); Updated by JS (09/2020)

Career:

- Exhibited a rubber-powered model airplane at the first aerial show held in Morris Park, New York in 1908
- Built and flew what is believed to be the first pusher-type model in 1909
- Won his first trophy in 1910 and proceeded to win 26 more cups and medals through 1913
- His models held records for longest fights in 1911, 1912 and 1914
- In 1911, built and flew original hydroplane
- Became model editor of *Aeronautics* and editor of *Fly*, early aeronautical publications
- Designed and marketed the Percy Pierce Flyer
- Manufactured Loop-O-Plane after World War I
- Co-organizer of the Philadelphia Model Airplane Association in 1929
- Organized the Delaware County Glider Club
- Received his class C sailplane license flying a plane of his own design

The following biography on Percy Pierce came from "The History of the Academy of Model Aeronautics: Including Part One and Part Two From the Beginning to the Year 1966" written by Willis C. Brown and Dick Black that was published first in 1966; the second part was published in 1967. This biography comes from Part One written by Willis C. Brown. It was completed by November 1965.

Percy Pierce

(Vice President, Aero Club of Pennsylvania; Philadelphia)

Information quoted with permission of editor, 1936 Model Aircraft Yearbook

“At age 12, in 1906, built his first model airplane...In 1908 exhibited rubber-powered model at the first aerial show, Morris Park, New York, sponsored by the Aeronautical Society. Was a six-foot model bi-plane of dowel stick covered with cambric. In 1909 built and flew what is believed to be the first pusher-type model. Proved to have the best performance of any model up to that time.

“Won first trophy in 1910. From 1910 to 1913 won 26 cups and medals in contests staged in New York, Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. On December 3, 1910 made a flight of 222 feet and seven inches, Rise-off-Ground (ROG), which stood for longest flight in 1910. Models in these contests weighed approximately a pound or more. His models held records for 1911, 1912 and 1914 with flights of 1,814-1/2 feet and 2,733 feet respectively.

“In 1911 built and flew original hydroplane...introduced first double-g geared winder in the form of an attachment fitted to a hand drill. Became model editor of Aeronautics and editor of Fly, early aeronautical publications...Sold a foolproof model known as the Percy Pierce Flyer.

“Made his first solo flight at Nassau Boulevard, Long Island. Built three gliders between 1912 and 1914 – made about 60 flights. During the war was commissioned first lieutenant. After World War I manufactured the Loop-O-Plane, a metal and fiber glider sold everywhere.

“In 1929 was co-organizer of the Philadelphia Model Airplane Association. Organized the Delaware County Glider Club. Received C sailplane glider license passed with sailplane of his on design. This glider is now in the Franklin Institute.”

Model Aeronautics agreement with the National Aeronautic Association, May 5, 1937. Always supported AMA. Your historian [Willis C. Brown] regrets that when he wrote to Percy Pierce for resource material for this history, he learned that Percy had passed away just a few weeks previously. With Cecil Peoli, he was one of the very earliest big names in model aeronautics and did more than can be told to aid its advancement. Will be remembered as a fine sportsman and a gentleman.

The following excerpts are from Gary Prater's Museum Director column in the AMA News section of Model Aviation magazine, published January 1998, on pages 148 and 149. The Percy Pierce collection was indeed purchased by the National Model Aviation Museum. Funds were donated specifically for the purchase of this collection.

“First Model Aeroplane organization in America was started by E. L. Todd No. 131 W: 23rd St. New York, N.Y. Feb. 22, 1907 and it was known as the Junior Aero Club of the United States.

“Through the efforts of Miss Todd and Mr. Edward Durrant of New York, NY, the first aeroplane model flight contest in America was held at the seventy first regiment Armory, thirty-third St. and Fourth Ave., New York, N.Y., by starting models from the floor.

“The first public exhibition of models that attracted any attention was held at the Madison Square Gardens at New York City Dec. 18-26, 1908 in connection with the toy exhibition.

“This attracted the attention of the officials of the West side Y.M.C.A. New York, N.Y.

“When Miss Todd was asked to cooperate with them and this led to Mr. W.R. Campbell taking an active part in the Department of Aviation of the West side Y.M.C.A.

“Arrangements were soon made for holding Aeroplane model flight contests in a vacant lot next to the West Side Y.M.C.A. Building No. 318 West 57th St. New York, NY. On Nov. 6th, 1909, the first outdoor contest in America was held there. When Mr. J.D. Dalkaranian won the LR. Adams cup by flying his model 92 feet, it was not long before his lot proved to be too small for model contests and arrangements were then made to continue the contests at Mr. Frank Jay Gould's outside private riding academy No. 218 W. 58th St. New York City.

“In a very short time, it was found necessary to produce a much larger building and permission was granted to fly models in the 22nd Regiment Armory, 68th St. and Broadway, New York on Saturday afternoons. During the winter of 1909-1910, Mr. Charles A. Stewart of the West Side Y.M.C.A. conducted the contest at this armory through the assistance of Edward Durrant, (who is the son of Charles F. Durrant, the first American Aeronaut).

“The year 1910 ended with an exciting contest with a "A Leo Stevens Year Cup", a magnificent trophy, which was won by Percy Winslow Pierce for flying his models starting (from the floor) a distance of 222 ft., and it was not long before the contests were compelled to fly their models to and from diagonally opposite corners of armory in order to gain distance of floor space. Finally they were compelled to fly their models outdoors and Mr. Edward Durrant obtained permission to fly the models in Van Cortlandt Park, N.Y. and on the polo grounds where every Saturday afternoon since then, contests were held with very few exceptions on account of inclement weather.

“Among those who have flown their models over 1,000 ft. by using rubber launching from the hands are Frederick Watkins, Cecil Peoli, Stewart Easter, George A. Page Jr., and Charles Lateiner of New York City, and Francis Walton of Newark, N.J., and Percy Winslow Pierce of Philadelphia, PA.

“Percy Winslow Pierce is today the all-round champion airplane flyer of America. The official records are as follows:

“Starting from the hand with the twin propeller plane weighing 1½ oz. Complete, he flew 1,814 ft. 6 in. at Paramount Park Philadelphia, PA. Dec. 28, 1911.

“Same place Dec. 29, 1911, he started the twin propeller from the ground and flew 412 ft.

“The model launched from the hand is capable of staying in the air 70 sec. Among those who have taken an active interest in fostering the art and science of airplane model flying in America are: Aeronautical Society, New York World, New York Model Airplane Clubs, Century Co., St. Nicholas Magazine, Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and Westside Y.M.C.A. of New York. Also Mr. Francis Arnold Collins, Lee S. Burridge, A. Lew Stevens, W.R. Campbell, L.R. Adams, and Edward Durrant.

“The first club was named The Junior Aeroclub of the United States, and to include Canada, the Junior Aeroclub of America was formed. It was not long before the men became very much enthused and New York Model Aeroclub was organized in September, 1910 in order to include them.

“This club meets at the rooms of the Aeronautical Society No. 250 W. 54th St. every Saturday night.”

(Reprinted from the Boy Scouts Review & Aeronautical Bulletin, March 1912.)

The preceding article is just a sampling from hundreds of scrapbook items collected by Percy Pierce (1895-1962). The National Model Aviation Museum was recently given the Percy Pierce Memorabilia Collection for evaluation and possible purchase. It contains several very early hand-engraved trophies; many photographs depicting the beginnings of model aviation in the United States; program announcements documenting the origins of organized aeromodeling; original patent certificates for Percy's many aeronautical inventions; correspondence between Percy and leaders of organized aeromodeling; catalogs from the earliest aeromodeling supply houses; many magazine articles written by Percy; and hundreds of news articles, like the one above, chronicling the origins and growth of aeromodeling across our country.

Percy Pierce introduced the twin pusher to the United States in 1909. He also designed hundreds of other types of flying objects, including perfecting and popularizing the paper airplane, as well as many highly successful competition-style model aircraft. His creations forced the mounting of the first *outdoor* model airplane contest in 1909 (until then, the relatively poor performance of pre-Pierce models relegated aeromodeling contests to being a strictly indoor activity). He also influenced a wide variety of enthusiasts through his prolific writings (including in the collection), like Charles Hampson Grant. Pierce could perhaps be called the father of model aviation as we know it. By 1930 he had designed and built more 3,000 flying models.

Pierce is also a very important personality in the history of the AMA. He was one of the seven signatories to the agreement with the National Aeronautical Association establishing the American Academy [for] Model Aeronautics in 1935, to be renamed the "Academy of Model Aeronautics" a year later. [History Project Editor's note: The official year for the establishment of the AMA may be debated. It is recognized by the AMA as 1936.]

[History Project Editor's note: Continuing paragraphs in this article discuss the cost of the collection and process of raising funds. Funds were donated and this collection was purchased. The museum rarely purchases items, but this was a very rare collection. The following photographs with descriptions were at the end of Gary's column, appearing on page 149.]

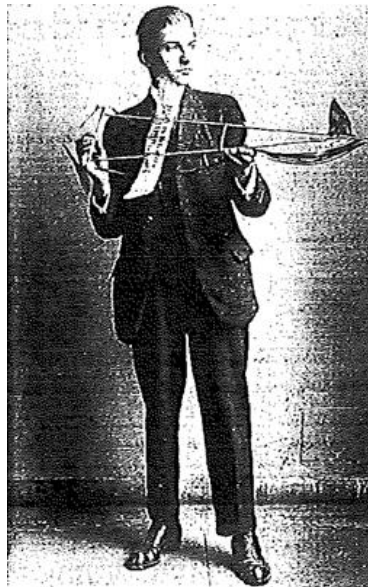


The explosion in popularity of model aviation was a long-lasting social phenomenon that began in the second decade of this century. This photo depicts a meeting of the New York Model Aero Club on August 17, 1912. Note the serious intent on the boys' faces and their pride of allegiance, demonstrated by their identical armbands with the initials "NYMAC." Contests of the era were judged by straight-

line distance only. Percy Pierce is in the back row, fourth from the left. The Percy Pierce Collection contains many other photos like this one.



Leo Stephens Trophy, awarded for the longest model flight in the United States in the year 1910. Percy Pierce was awarded this trophy for a flight of 222 ft., fourth longest in the world. Percy's accomplishments were followed by hundreds of newspapers, including several in Europe. At the age of 13 he was regarded as a "boy wonder," and already operated his own model building company and had attracted the attention and interest of the Wright brothers.



Percy Winslow Pierce at the age of sixteen. Percy's fame grew as he grew older. By the age of 18, he, along with [his] friends Cecil Peoli and Jim Noonan, often attracted crowds of up to 2,000 people to watch their flying demonstrations. At that age Percy also operated his own mail-order model aviation business, lectured at the Aeronautical Society in New York City, had built more than 75 models, was Model Editor for Aeronautics magazine and Editor-in-Chief of Fly magazine, and at the same time held most national and world records for distance and duration. Until the success of Percy Pierce, aeromodeling, especially in Europe, was widely considered to be an adult activity carried on by serious-minded experimenters. The explosion of its popularity to youth was peculiar to the United States.



Small trophy awarded to Percy Pierce. The inscription reads “Appreciation of Services to PMAA, 1931, Percy Pierce.” PMAA stands for the “Philadelphia Model Aeroplane Association,” one of the many groups Percy served as he grew older. His scrapbook contains hundreds of newspaper articles documenting the awards and recognition Percy received for his continuing involvement with youth and model aviation. Many trophies and awards are included in the collection.

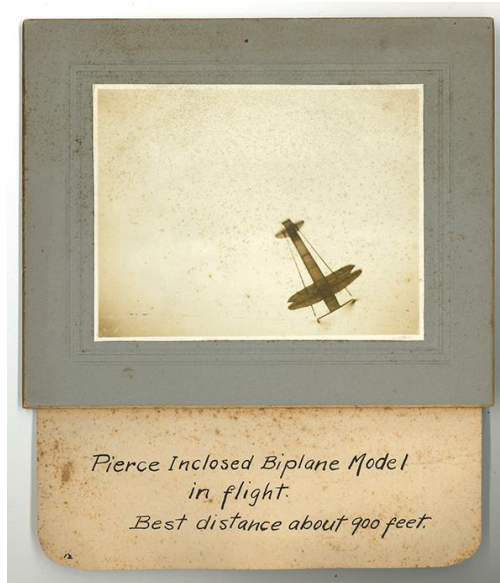
The following images are of artifacts from the Percy Pierce Collection at the National Model Aviation Museum. Some of the items from this collection can be viewed online in the museum’s online database by clicking [here](#).



Percy Pierce in his attic workshop. Source: #0012 Percy Pierce Collection, National Model Aviation Museum, Muncie, Indiana. A2009.52.07.



U.S. patent for Percy Pierce's "Toys," dated January 27, 1920. Source: #0012 Percy Pierce Collection, National Model Aviation Museum, Muncie, Indiana. A2009.52.12.



Source: #0012 Percy Pierce Collection, National Model Aviation Museum, Muncie, Indiana. A2009.30.04

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