



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of ROBERT B. (BOB) VAN DEVENDER



Written by BVD (2013); Reformatted by JS (03/2013)

The following was written by Bob Van Devender and sent to the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program) in March of 2013.

Looking Back Again **An Old Modeler Looks Back at a Beloved Hobby** Chapter One The Rubber Power Days By Bob Van Devender AMA 31315

I have been fascinated with model airplanes ever since visiting a home as a small child, where two boys had built them and had them hanging in their room. Later, it was about 1944, when moving to this state, and I was nine years old, when I met a boyhood best friend. He was a year older than I, and was already an avid modeler. Though his enthusiasm, model building, and what flying we were able to do, became almost a childhood obsession for both of us.

It is not possible in such an article, to know which models and kits would be of any interest to the reader, except for the fact that much of their history still exists and will never go away because of the modern Internet. Maybe it would not be too boring, and could cast some light on what childhood modeling was like, in the 1940s, just to mention some of them.

Everything was rubber powered, until after the Second World War, simply because very little of anything was sold in those years that did not contribute to the war effort. More about that later. Maybe the bottom line and greatest lesson of those wartime days, was the really beautiful and good flying planes you could build, using a high percentage of nothing but cardboard and paper.

It could help to express a little bit on the way life was for a child, back then. My modeling pal and I either caught a city bus, rode bicycles, or simply walked the three miles to the downtown area of our city, for the express purpose of buying a model kit, and the supplies to build it. Sometimes we would ride the bus downtown for 25 cents, get a bus transfer, run to the store with model provisions, buy our stuff, and run across the downtown area in time to catch the same bus back home on the same bus transfer token (who said kids are not good managers?)

It is hard, in this day and time, of kids' being hauled in SUV's and mini-vans, to picture the charm of riding a city bus three miles, with a lap full of tremendously exciting plans, balsa sticks, nose plugs, wheels, and most of all, just the smell of a model airplane kit, explored while riding that bus home. In those days, we also had the trusty tube of Testor's glue to put it together with. The model choice of those days (at about age 9 or ten or so) was the Comet Speed-O-matic.

The Comet Speed-o-matic was a line of mostly warplanes, to be sold during a severely-impaired supply market during a devastating world war. I vaguely remember its construction, which was done around a very thinly made fuselage profile, with, best I remember, paper formers added, then filled out and braced with 1/16" balsa stringers. It was, of course, rubber powered, and the models really flew. I first tried my wings in my own designs, at about age ten or so, simply copying the Speed-O-Matic construction format, and making my own model to suit. Thus was born the charm of scratch-building your own plane, which, to me, still is the greatest charm in modeling, especially if the final results do any realistic flying.

It is very true that we try way too hard, in trying to please children with toys. The most you can please a child, is to let them build something, and especially something they designed themselves, even though they usually need some guidance and direction leading to that branching out into their own creativity. In this spirit, hands down, the model I remember as being the most absolute fun to build and fly was the Phantom Flash R.O.G. There was absolutely nothing any more fascinating to the rubber-power restricted child modeler in those days than to build and fly the little Phantom Flash, because it would take off from the front porch under its own power, and fly a great distance before landing.

Even in something as simple as a Phantom Flash, we were challenged to solve problems with our own ingenuity. The provided fuselage stick was of weak balsa wood, and usually broke when you wound up the rubber motor too tightly. We solved this by splitting a hardwood stick from the side of an apple box and making the fuselage from that.

Boy, here is a contender for the product survival record. (<http://retrorc.us.com/katana-3-2-2.aspx>) Here is a current ad for a Phantom Flash R.O.G. on today's market. It has performed plastic nose and landing gear that would have been a dream in my childhood. We cut the landing gear struts out of balsa sheet and used straight pins for the axles. This one sells for \$15.99, which is 99 cents more than I paid for my first Atom .099 gas model engine in 1946! (At age 11.)



Revised image from History of Model Engines article by Bill Mohrbacher, February 2012 issue Model Aviation magazine. Article online at <http://www.modelaviation.com/enginehistory>.

Here is a video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLgyN4bvkkE>) of a Phantom Flash making a phenomenal flight in a gymnasium. It sounds like it has an engine on it, but I can't see anything on it but a wound up rubber motor. Will wonders never cease? Who says it takes a big, fortune costing model to entertain people and to have fun with it? Watch the video.

Another model of interest in childhood years. I remember being called a Major Endurance. It was a rather large rubber powered jobbie, and it may even have had a folding prop on it. It is hard to remember. I can remember some really fun flying days with the Major Endurance.

I don't seem to find the specific airplane, but here is a sorta like example, Gee whiz. (http://www.outerzone.co.uk/plan_details.asp?ID=1672) It brings back such a charm of nostalgia feeling, just looking at those tiny, outlined fuselage side frames, you built first, then joined the sides with tiny balsa sticks, to make me want to build this one. I did not see a full-sized plan. Scaling it up would be the standard challenge. Anyway, it gives an idea of how we kids spent weeks absorbed in the building and flying of certain types.

Modeling, then as now, included the age old challenge in finding some common item, and making something useful with it, especially during a very hardware-constrained war time. I remember building a really neat rubber-powered biplane, a WACO D Military example. (WACO had nothing to do with Waco, Texas. The letters stood for Weaver Aircraft Company of Ohio.) Anyway, the little WACO biplane was terribly tail heavy and would only stall out when I tried to fly it. I discovered that the aluminum crimp top from a glass milk bottle, also crimped onto the nose of the model, perfectly balancing the CG for a nice powered flight and glide. Is it possible that the grooming and development of personal ingenuity might be the one most valuable benefit of a lifetime modeling hobby?

It is so hard to remember everything from childhood days. I also remember building and flying a tow-line glider or two. One striking example was the Cleveland Eaglet, which has such really beautiful stick and glue construction, that it was almost a crime to spoil it with covering. I can remember standing in the front yard with it before covering it, just marveling at the beauty of its construction, and having friends who happened to see it while driving by, comment on how really pretty it was.

Here is the URL for the kit. I may not find a picture of the glider:
http://www.jitterbuzz.com/model_contests.html#classd.

I was ready to close this, nearing a senior bedtime, but it seemed a bit incomplete not to mention some building practices. Most rubber powered models were built from very small, square balsa sticks. You started with building two fuselage sides on the plans (underlaid with wax paper, if you wanted your plans to survive the building.) Then you carefully bridged down the fuselage sides with more small balsa cross members, until the fuselage frame was completed.

In those days, we would not have thought of covering a model with anything but tissue paper which came to be called "Jap tissue" (no offense intended) in the years after the Japanese war. Covering a model with tissue paper was a fine art, in itself. I am not sure I could even do it now, all these years later, with my shakier hands. You sat in the floor with a wide dish of water, or either beside the bath tub, and wetted the sheet of tissue before applying it. Using a not-so-quick drying dope or glue, you coated the outline of the targeted frame portion with adhesive, and then carefully stretched the wetted tissue over it, being ever so careful not to over stretch it in any direction. You found out very quickly, that an unevenly applied tissue section, either dried leaving wrinkles, or warped the structure when it dried, or some combination of both. Can anyone imagine any more constructive training to childhood hands, than this delicately-demanding process of cementing a frail piece of tissue paper to a frame that took hours in its own construction? Can anyone think of a more exacting challenge than to get the covering on there neat and pretty, to have it dry drum tight, and most of all, to not spoil, break or mess up that carefully built framework, usually in those days, made of nothing more than a crutch of 1/16" balsa sticks?

You found out, right quick, that if you did not cover both sides of a structure, when the tissue shrug up nice and tight, it also warped the thunder out of the framework, on wing and tail sections. The Phantom Flash was covered only on top of the wing and tail. Somehow it flew nicely, even when these sometimes looked more like a propeller from the warping.

It was only years later that we discovered something called "Silkspan Tissue". It was like heaven to have that durable tissue to cover with, and even more heavenly to enjoy its much stronger stress endurance, on your Veco Comanche, or Playboy B, or whatever the models were of the time. (You can see an example of Silkspan, right now. Just go to the laundry room and look at any dryer sheet.)

We still were years away from the then-standard way of covering a model, still to me, the finest era of model covering, when we evolved to post war availability of inexpensive real silk by the yard. We covered with silk and treated the fabric with a good fuel proof dope like Aero Gloss, but that is part of a later chapter.

That comes to somewhere near the end of the childhood rubber-powered days. Maybe someone will be interested in these "grandfather stories of an old modeler on a Saturday night. It is bedtime here in the Sunbelt. Maybe we can get off another chapter later, beginning with the first discovery of gas model engines. Gee whiz, what an exciting discovery that was in a child's life!

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