



# The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of JOE WAGNER

Born May 11, 1928      Modeler since 1934

AMA #835



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Written & Submitted by JW (03/1997); Transcribed by NR (01/1998); Edited by SS (2002), Updated by JS (10/2008), Reformatted by JS (02/2010)

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## Career:

- Spring/Summer of 1949: Chosen by the Model and Hobby Industry Association to tour America, demonstrating model airplanes, engines and race cars
- Designed Free Flight model kits for the Veco company
- Designed the Dakota all sheet Free Flight model; it became an instant classic
- All of his Free Flight kit designs are noted for being foolproof flyers
- Redesigned Veco's entire line of Control Line model kits
- 1946: Qualified as an AMA Scientific Leader and contest director
- Wrote and illustrated three regular columns for Model Airplane News
- 1958: Organized the Model Engine Collectors' Association (MECA)
- Between 1958 and 1961: Edited, published and wrote most of the material for the MECA Journal
- 1950: Became chief engineer of Veco
- Late 1954: Hired by Model Products to become their general manager
- 1955: In Kenhi, developed and produced the model industry's first photo illustrated step-by-step building instructions
- Taught a six-week course in model airplane building and flying to schoolchildren each spring for about 10 years
- Co-founded (with Randy Randolph) the currently burgeoning international S.M.A.L.L. movement. (The non-competitive flying of model airplanes with engines smaller than .26 displacement.)

## Honors:

- 1999: AMA Fellow
  - 2000: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
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My career in model airplanes began in 1935 with solid scale and small rubber-powered models, all built from kits and magazine plans. Before long, I began designing and experimenting with the "offbeat" model airplanes I have been noted forever since. However, in my 62 years of modeling, one thing I have never been noted for is contest flying. Like my heroes Frank Zaic, Bill Winter, and Carl Goldberg, I am far more interested in cooperating with other modelers than in competing against them. (I have not won a single trophy!)

I have always focused on the creative aspects of modeling, and in the early 1940s began a lifelong practice of corresponding with other innovators (notably Jim Walker, Frank Zaic, Bill

Winter and Carl Goldberg) exchanging new techniques and wild ideas.

In early 1942, I was chosen to head the U.S. Navy Bureau of Aeronautics Identification Model Program in the schools of my hometown of New Castle, Pennsylvania. Though only 14 at the time, I was a junior in high school – my model craftsmanship was well known from displays of my airplanes in local store windows over the preceding five years.

After World War II my professional contacts in the hobby industry, plus my experience with several types of model airplanes, caused the Model and Hobby Industry Association to choose me to tour America in the spring and summer of 1949, demonstrating model airplanes, engines, and racecars.

When that tour was over, I moved to southern California and began designing Free Flight model kits for the Veco Company. The first of these was an all-sheet-balsa 1/2A sport Free Flight biplane named Dakota. It became an instant classic. Dakotas were the very first successful flying models for several men I know of who later became influential in the model airplane field. (Doug Spreng co-inventor of digital proportional Radio Control, RC, – was one.)

The Dakota is arguably the best-selling Free Flight gas model kit design of all time, and is still being made today. (In its final issue, Model Builder magazine rated the Veco Dakota as the best sport Free Flight model of the past 25 years – despite the fact that it first appeared 46 years ago.)

Other notable designs of mine were a monoplane companion for the Dakota (the Sioux: Flying Models editor Bob Hunt's first successful model); a near-scale 1/2A FF Taylor J-2 Cub (one of those won the senior scale Free Flight event at the Nationals in 1951 or 1952) and the Comanche, a contest winning 1/2A PAA-Load model which was the first Free Flight kit to feature sharp leading edge airfoils. (An electric-powered version took second place at the 1996 U.S. Free Flight Championships at Lost Hills, California.)

All my Free Flight kit designs are noted for being foolproof flyers. Flight adjustments are built-in during construction and the highly prefabricated Veco kits made them easy to construct both strongly and accurately.

I moved into Control Line kit design in 1950, and developed the first true 1/2A Stunt: the Veco Scout. I continued experimenting with larger Control Liners, and over the next four years redesigned Veco's entire line of Control Line model kits: Chief, Squaw, Papoose, Brave, and Warrior. Hundreds of competitions have been won with these airplanes in the past 40 plus years.

I have also had several designs published in model magazines. As just one example, I started the currently popular reduced-scale Old-Timer Free Flight movement with my 1/2-size .020-powered replica of Frank Zaic's 1935 Miss America. My 42" version was published in Model Airplane News in 1960.

I joined the AMA at the Zaic's' JASCO store in New York City in the summer of 1939. By 1946, I qualified as an AMA Scientific Leader and contest director. In 1958, I organized the Model Engine Collectors' Association (MECA) and served as its first coordinator until 1961.

Considerable writing, drafting, and photography have necessarily been involved in my model airplane activities. I have been published in just about all the American model magazines, including Model Airplane News (MAN), Air Trails, Flying Models, Model Builder, American Modeler, and Model Aviation.

My first submission (to MAN in 1941) was turned down; but C. H. Grant's rejection letter was so highly encouraging, I have not stopped writing for model publications since. For almost 10 years, I wrote and illustrated three regular columns for MAN: "Small Steps" (alternating with Randy Randolph); "About Those Engines"; and "Building Model Airplanes."

I also edited, published, and wrote most of the material for the MECA Journal between 1958 and 1961.

My involvement in the model industry began in 1949 when the MHIA chose me to demonstrate model airplanes on their coast-to-coast "Bandwagon" tour. While on that trip, I first met Roy Cox. He told me about troubles he was experiencing with a 1/2A racecar engine he wanted to produce – and I suggested that reed valve induction might solve the problem...

I became chief engineer of Veco in 1950. I retained that position, handling all the model kit engineering and most of the design work and plans preparation until Kenhi Model Products hired me away in late 1954 to become their general manager.

At Kenhi in 1955, I developed and produced the model industry's first photo-illustrated step-by-step building instructions. These were for my Control Line scale P-51H kit. I used the same techniques again in Kenhi's kit of Paul Gilliam's famous contest-winning Civy Boy 61.

After Kenhi closed, I left the model industry in 1956 to become an aerospace engineer. Still, in later years from time to time I have acted as a consulting engineer for model companies such as Cox, Revell, Pactra, and Babcock Radio.

In 1970, I returned to my old hometown, and since then have been steadily involved in model airplane promotional activities. For about 10 years, I taught a six-week course in model airplane building and flying to schoolchildren each spring. I also co-founded (with Randy Randolph) the currently burgeoning international S.M.A.L.L. movement. (The non-competitive flying of model airplanes with engines smaller than .26 displacement.)

I am married, with eight children – two of them daughters. Three have become active in model aviation and are becoming even more so as time goes by.

One more item of possible interest: since 1959, I have been totally deaf. I can lip-read well, and speak normally.

*Joe Wagner (2/97)*

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