



The AMA History Project Presents: Autobiography of DON BEKINS

Modeler, Newsletter Editor, SAM President

Born June 21, 1931 Modeler since 1939

AMA #95097



Written & Submitted by DB (06/1996); Transcribed by NR (09/1996); Edited by SS (2002), Edited by JS (08/2007)

Career:

- 1981: Society of Antique Modelers (SAM) Grand Champion, Radio Control assist
- Five-time winner and four-time runner up of Radio Control National Championships
- 1989: Contest director of the SAM Championships in Jean, Nevada
- 1994-1996: As SAM President, initiated changes including forming a SAM website
- Won Class C LER with his *Ethy* at the SAM Italia's Champs; his Red Piper won in Class A in the big Pavullo Event
- Helped form a new chapter of SAM in his area

Honors:

- 1994 to 1996: President of SAM
 - 1993: Named top newsletter editor by the Academy of Model Aeronautics (AMA)
 - 2002: SAM Hall of Fame inductee
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I started modeling at age eight in 1939 with rubber models in the small town of Burlingame, California. I built my first gas model at age 12 as my yearend 8th grade project. It was a Playboy Sr. powered by an OK 60. I entered my first Free Flight contest at age 13. Then began building, designing, and flying U-Controls, concurrently with the Free Flight models. I flew in many U-Control contests, winning some, bringing home engines and trophies for prizes. I experimented with gliders and HL Gliders, designing a number of those as well, though none survived the "brown wrapping paper" stage. Most flew pretty well, though.

My early interest in models and aeronautics established my career goals. My father, who was instrumental in encouraging my interest in modeling, died when I was 17, so he was not around to advise me in my higher education and career. Upon graduation from high school, I was accepted and attended Stanford University in pre-engineering. I wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, but have a business background as well. The program at Stanford was long and arduous, dealing little with aeronautics and I moved on to Colorado University (CU) where I could obtain aeronautical engineering and business degrees in five years.

While at CU, I continued my modeling, the highlight of which was winning the Air Force ROTC/Aeronautical Engineering Design and Flying Contest with an original U-Control Speed model. The prize was my first ride in a T-33 jet trainer.

That experience clinched my decision to become an engineering test pilot. I began taking flying lessons at the local airstrip in Boulder, Colorado, flying the venerable Piper *Cub*. Just prior to graduation from college however, I failed the eye examination for flight training in the Air Force.

The track of my career changed at that moment and I had to accept a position in aircraft maintenance in the military. Modeling took a backseat for many years thereafter – girls, marriage, children, travel, a home, schools. Business became more important in my career than engineering and I ended up in investment banking and venture capital.

Then, in 1974, I met John Pond and began thinking about models again, the Old Timer (OT) models like the one's I built as a 12-year-old. My first new OT was a *Playboy Sr.*, built as a beta test for Barnett Kernoff of Tyro Models, one of the early modern kit manufacturers of OTs. My first model in more than 20 years was finished with exactly the same color scheme as the *Playboy* I built as a 12-year-old. Now, 25 years after getting back into modeling, I am still flying that venerable *Playboy* in contests.

I became so enthused about OT modeling I started getting involved with the SAM Chapter 21, John Pond's club. Though it was a long drive to get to meetings in San Jose (60 miles,) I became active, going through chairs from treasurer, the newsletter editor, to president of the club. Then I helped form a new chapter, SAM 27, in Marin County, California, much closer to home. I went through all the posts in that chapter as well – newsletter editor, president and finally their contest director for 17 years. During that time, I became involved with the national organization.

I was appointed by John Pond to form a committee and rewrite the SAM Flying Rules. Later, I learned desktop publishing and became the editor of *SAM Speaks*, the 24-page newsletter for SAM, a worldwide organization with 2,700 domestic members and another 4,000 foreign chapter members. AMA awarded me their top newsletter editor certificate in 1993.

OT competition in Radio-Control Assist became my passion. I attended my first national OT competition, the SAM Champs in 1977 at Las Vegas and won the Radio Control Sweepstakes trophy. I have since flown in many SAM Champs around the U.S., winning the national championship in Radio Control a total of four times and runner-up another four times. I was contest director of 1989 SAM Champs in Jean, Nevada.

I published a number of articles for Radio Control modeling magazines of .020 replica OTs, soaring and catching thermals with OTs, organizing successful modeling clubs, and so on. I dabbled a little in the modeling industry, being at one time a distributor for Kraft Radio Control products and a part time dealer for Ace RC.

In 1994, I was elected the president of SAM with a whole new group of officers. After two years in office with many new initiatives for the organization, including new by laws, rules changes and creating a SAM Web Page on the Internet, I will retire to again build models in October of 1996.



1995: Don Bekins launches his Ramrod at the SAM Champs in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

(signed) Don Bekins
June 1996

Addendum

At the 2002, SAM Champs held in Muncie, Indiana, I came through as the overall Radio Control ignition champion, garnered the longest single flight of the contest at one hour and 41 minutes, winning the large Edwards Trophy Perpetual Trophy, which is in the AMA Museum. I also received my plaque for the SAM Hall of Fame. It was a good week of flying! In addition, I came in second by one point as the overall Radio Control glow champion.

Other trophies he won at the 2002 SAM Champs include a first in Texaco, first in class C ignition, first in pure antique, second in antique, second in Classic Texaco and second in OT towline glider.

(signed) Don Bekins
September 5, 2002

The following article ran in SAM Speaks, the Society of Antique Modelers' newsletter, in the spring 2002 issue. Photographs accompanied it.

Member Profile: Don Bekins

Don is a man of many parts. He is a keen competitor, a meticulous builder, an outstanding flyer, a SAM mover and shaker, has boundless energy and enthusiasm and to top it all, a really nice guy. He just recently added to his résumé the title of Grandpa.

Don's early years were spent in Burlingame, California, where at age eight (1939), he started his modeling career with rubber models. His first gas model, at age 12, was a Playboy Sr. powered by an OK 60. His first Free Flight contest was at age 13. Don then began building, designing and flying U-Control along with his Free Flight activities. Always the competitor, Don flew in many contests and started his huge collection of trophies. During this period one of Don's modeling buddies was none other than fellow SAM 27 member Dick O'Brien.

After high school, Dick enrolled at Stanford University to study aeronautical engineering combined with courses in business. After some time at Stanford, he transferred to Colorado University, which had courses more in line with his career goals. Don continued modeling while at CU and won a ride in a T-33 jet trainer as a prize in a U-Control Air Force ROTC/Aeronautical Engineering design and flying contest. This sparked his desire to become an engineering test pilot and prompted his taking flight instruction, naturally, in the venerable Piper Cub. Unfortunately, eyesight problems derailed his effort to get into the Air Force flight-training program, so his military career was in aircraft maintenance.

As with most of us, this was the stage in life when girls, job, marriage, home and children essentially halt the modeling activities. Don decided that instead of engineering, a business career would be the way to go, so he ended up in investment banking and venture capital.

In 1974, Don met John Pond and rekindled his interest in models, especially OTs like the ones he built and flew as a 12-year-old. His first new/old model was a Playboy Sr. finished in the same colors as its predecessor and that model, now over 25 years old is still flying in contests and winning trophies. Don's enthusiasm grew and he joined SAM 21 – John Pond's club. Although it was a 120-mile roundtrip to club meetings in San Jose, Don was an active member, serving in succession as treasurer, newsletter editor, and president. Subsequently, Don helped to form a new chapter, SAM 27, in Marin County, serving as newsletter editor, president, and contest director. During this time, he became involved with the SAM national organization and was appointed by John Pond to form a committee to rewrite the SAM flying rules. Don went on to become editor of SAM Speaks, the newsletter for the SAM worldwide organization and received the AMA award for top newsletter editor in 1993. In 1994, he was elected president of SAM and during his two-year tenure initiated a number of changes including the formation of a SAM Web page on the Internet.

Don's passion is OT Radio Control Assist and, in addition to competing in many local contests, has flown in most of the SAM Champs meets around the U.S. He is a five-time winner of the Radio Control National Championship, as well as four times runner-up. In 1989, he was contest director of the SAM Champs in Jean, Nevada. Don's lovely wife Joanie, a professional arts photographer, is usually present at these meets and can always be found contributing to their efficient operation.

Don has not slowed down and, except for "command performance" conflicts, yacht deliveries or trips to Europe, Alaska or the South Pacific, he can usually be found at the weekly TOFFF sessions, the monthly SAM 27 meetings and any SAM contest within a day or two's drive. In one of his trips to Italy, he took his Ethy and Red Ripper models in a hard-sided golf bag. The Ethy won Class C LER at the SAM Italia's Champs while the Red Ripper won in Class A in the big Pavullo event.

Don is always generous with his time and patience when it comes to helping newcomers to OT flying or assisting other flyers with trimming or "bugs." SAM 27 and SAM International are very fortunate to have had the benefit of Don's many contributions.

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