



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of IRWIN S. POLK

Born circa 1912

AMA #230436



Compiled, Transcribed & Edited by SS (11/02), Updated by JS (10/08), Reformatted by JS (01/10)

Career:

- 1925: Founded the Aero Club and wrote a modeling column called “Just for Boys” in the Newark Evening News
- Late 1920s: Established the modeling section at Bamberger’s Department Store, then started the Bamberger Aero Club
- 1932, 1936-1939: Directed the Nats
- 1935: Edited Model Aircraft Builder magazine and edited an aviation newsheet called Contact
- 1935: Directed the first all-gas model meet and directed the first contest with limited engine run for gas entries
- 1938: Initiated the formation of a trade association during the Nationals
- 1941: Directed the International Lord Wakefield Cup competition
- Personally taught over 4,000 children to build a model airplane and then pass a flying test with it while worked with the Bamberger Aero Club
- Instrumental in forming the junior modeler division of the National Aeronautic Association (NAA), which later became the AMA
- Wrote the first contest and contest director’s manual
- Organized many different model contests on the East Coast
- Chosen as technical director of the Junior Birdmen
- Opened a hobby shop in New York City called Polk’s Model Craft Hobbies; eventually went into wholesaling and exporting as well as retailing
- Introduced plastics to the hobby trade under the name Aristo-Crafts
- Introduced Jetex to the U.S.
- An early member of the Hobby Industry Association of America’s (HIAA’s) board of directors
- Helped organize both the International Gas Model Airplane Association and the Metropolitan Model League
- Set up the first model industry trade show

Honors:

- 1960: AMA Fellow
- 1965: HIAA Hobby Hall of Fame
- 1974: Model Aviation Hall of Fame
- 1978: National Free Flight Society Hall of Fame
- 1990: Society of Antique Modelers Hall of Fame

The following information about Irwin S. Polk is taken from the April 1965 issue of Craft, Model and Hobby Industry magazine. It was written when Polk was inducted into the Hobby Hall of Fame.

Honoring Irwin S. Polk, Hobby Industry Pioneer

Irwin Polk is truly a pioneer in the hobby industry.

He started as a model builder, a hobbyist himself, and then when necessity to earn a living limited his spare time he undertook the leadership and club work in aeromodeling. He founded the Aero Club whose media was the "Just for Boys" column of the Newark Evening News about 1925.

When his members found it difficult to obtain model supplies, he urged the leading local department store to establish a model section. The merchandise manager convinced Irwin to be the person to set up and run such a department. Not first, however, without making him build and fly several model airplanes to prove his skill and knowledge.

So with about \$2,000 of open to buy funds Bamberger's Department Store in Newark let Irwin loose in the market. It took a bit of doing to invest this much money in model merchandise. There were only a handful of model manufacturers then, Ideal Model, Selly Manufacturers, Broadfield, and Silver Ace.

With materials now readily available, it was logical for Irwin to form a larger model club. Thus the Bamberger Aero Club was created by him and with good atmosphere for growth became the forerunner of several such department store efforts notable among which were Jordan Marsh in Boston and Stix Baer and Fuller in Saint Louis.

Irwin conducted weekly meetings, gave lessons in aeronautics, and had guest speakers that included most of the notables in the glamorous days of aviation. Heroes of the day such as Frank Hawks, Jimmy Doolittle, Juan de la Cierra, Admiral Boyd, Clarence Chamberlain, and Alexander de Seversky were typical of personalities club members were lucky to hear.

Irwin personally taught over 4,000 boys and girls to build a model plane that had to pass flying tests.

With Lt. H.W. Alden, Irwin was instrumental in forming the model division of the National Aeronautic Association (NAA), which later became the Academy of Model Aeronautics. He was thus, in part, able to obtain the recognition of the Federation Aéronautique Internationale for aeromodeling in the U.S. Then he frequently went to Washington, D.C., without pay of course, to write the first contest and contest director's manual.

In 1932, in the heart of the Great Depression, he arranged to have Bamberger's sponsor the National Airplane Championships in Atlantic City. In actuality, he was given the authority to proceed but with hardly any money. Thus on his own, he enlisted the aid of the Atlantic City Visitors' Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Civil Aviation, Naval and Air Force authorities and with less than \$200 he brought about a National Championships. With great moxie, he invited General Fechet and Admiral Fulocs, the biggest men then in the Naval and Army Aviation, who flew in to be guest speakers at the victory dinner.

During his work with the Bamberger Aero Club, Irwin constantly organized all types of model contests, and modelers from the entire East (U.S.) entered these events. Many now famous men

in engineering, aeronautics, and science received the inspiration and recognition that led them to great things.



Irwin and his Mighty Atom plane.

When Mr. William Randolph Hearst wanted to encourage aviation interest in American youth and started the Junior Birdmen, it was natural that Irwin Polk would be chosen as its technical director. To ensure the continuity of his work in New Jersey, he induced his brother, Nat, to leave a rising career with Sears Roebuck and take over the direction of the Bamberger Aero Club. As head of the Junior Birdmen Institute, Irwin conducted a lab to test and inspect model kits. A seal of approval, upon meeting requirements, was granted for ease of assembly, material quality, and performance. This helped inspire many manufacturers to simplify and upgrade their kits.

When the Junior Birdmen program was abandoned, Nat and Irwin decided to go into business for themselves. Nat opened a shop in Newark and Irwin with his wife, “Chuddy,” started in the second floor of an office building in the heart of New York.

Applying his knowledge of merchandising and promotion to his tiny enterprise, Polk’s Model Craft Hobbies grew and grew. Finding retailing alone too limiting, he went into wholesaling and exports of hobbies as well.

In those early days, there were no hobby shops. There were a few model railroad shops and model airplane stores. Polk’s went into model railroading and expanded their shop into a hobby department store. They encouraged model railroad manufacturers to prefabricate their kits so a lathe or a toolmaker’s skill was no longer necessary for model railroaders. Polk’s early recognized HO as the most practical gauge and pushed for HO ready-to-run sets, which had not existed before.

Meantime, in 1936, there was no sponsor for the Nationals. So the late William R. Enyart, who headed the NAA, got together with Irwin to induce the Berry Brothers aviation paint company in Detroit, Michigan, to sponsor the meet. The paint company could give only \$500, so off went Irwin to Detroit to handle the gigantic task of a national meet. The Fort Shelby Hotel in Detroit gave him a room and office in exchange for making it the headquarters hotel. He persuaded the Exchange Club to form an aviation committee to raise funds and help. With “eating money” from his little hobby business in New York, Irwin begged and connived to get the assistance and support of every possible organization in Detroit. The Plymouth Motor Company supplied box lunches for contestants; Ford gave the victory banquet.

The Exchange Club was the sponsor and the banquet was held on a Great Lakes steamer. Irwin directed the National Championship from 1936 through 1939.

When America won the Wakefield Cup and became the international contest host, it fell on Irwin to organize the U.S. competition. He enlisted James Webb, who was then with the Sperry Gyroscope Company, to help open doors. Mr. Webb, who now heads NASA, was interested in air-minded youth and together they got Bernard McFadden to provide prizes, a blimp trip over the city and lunch with New York City's mayor. But a day before the meet, he succumbed to an emergency appendectomy, thus missing all the fun.

During World War II Irwin with the late Paul Guillow headed up our association's [the Hobby Industry Association of America, or HIAA] committee to incorporate aviation educational features in model kits and thus make them valuable to our war effort. This, in turn, enabled the industry to obtain materials during wartime shortages.

It was during the 1938 National Meet in Detroit that Irwin issued the call to all in our industry to join together in forming a trade association. He invited people in the trade to come to Detroit to see their products in use. Those few who attended pledged to meet the following year at the Chicago National Model Airplane meet and form a trade association.

Being a city boy Irwin realized that six to 10 foot wingspan gas model airplanes were too big to transport in subways. It took such large planes to fly with the gas engines available in the 1930s. So when Ray Arden made a tiny workable gas engine just to see how small he could make it, Polk immediately saw a vast new market opening for gas-powered planes. Thus, the Microdyne Engines Mighty Atom was introduced. It was a fifth of the size of engines then on the market and like many of Polk's projects was 10 to 15 years ahead of its time. Irwin built tiny gas models and flew them at meets to show their potential.

The late Jim Walker of American Junior was a great friend of Irwin's. Walker, too, was always thinking ahead – far ahead. He had sonic control gliders, Radio Controlled (RC) planes, etc. He foresaw space limitations for gas model flying so he developed the Control Line system. Irwin was one of the first people to be in on it and spread its gospel all over the eastern U.S.

During World War II, the government needed model planes for identification purposes. Hobby manufacturers were asked to produce kits for 1/72-scale solid planes. Schools would build them, but not fast enough. So, the government appointed a plastic manufacturer to mass-produce them and Irwin negotiated for the civilian sale of these models.

So, under Aristo-Crafts banner, Polk introduced plastics to the hobby trade. After the war, firms like Hawk Model saw that such models in kit form would be popular. So, perhaps with the spark set off by Polk's 1/72-scale plastic planes, a whole new era in modeling was started.

Irwin heard of a chemical company in England experimenting with small pellets that would work like Jato assist jet boosters used in real planes. He traced this down to a couple of engineers who were modelers, Wilmont and Mansour. He obtained the sales rights for what we know as Jetex, the only true jet power for modeling today.

When gas engine-powered cars made their appearance in the western U.S., it was Polk who promoted them in the eastern U.S. At the 1939 New York World's Fair, Polk's demonstrated tethered racing cars.

At a model exposition in England in 1955, Polk saw a gas car rail track and remarked how much nicer it would be if these cars were powered with electric motors to avoid fumes and noise. Furthermore, Irwin said cars could be smaller and instead of a club activity, car racing could become a family activity.

To cover both areas of activity Irwin introduced tabletop racing and model roadways to the U.S. at the summer 1957 HIAA show in New York. It must be said that only Edward Kapitanoff of Western Models saw the possibilities. Eddie backed his conviction with the first, and only one of a few, orders Polk's wrote. Undaunted, Polk's pushed and promoted and within six months, Freddie Francis in England could not make the racing sets fast enough. Bob Coogan, a big scale racing enthusiast, saw the possibilities of model racing as an adult sport and wrote an article in Sports Cars Illustrated, which set off the boom for tabletop racing.

Coogan saw the possibility of charging 25-cents for "time" on a big track and opened the first commercial slot shop in California, which started another boom in modeling germinated by Irwin Polk.

Through his modeling activities, Irwin was known internationally and had friends in the hobby field in every civilized country. Thus, it was quite natural that he became one of the early exporters of U.S. hobby goods and importer of unusual, non-competitive foreign items.

Ken Mabuchi, a boy hobbyist, came up to Tokyo after World War II and started making small electric motors. Irwin was his first foreign customer and became his foreign sales executive. Polk realized that if a good inexpensive motor was available static scale models could be powered and offer hobbyists a new realm of activity.

When we speak of Irwin's achievements, we must say that Polk doesn't claim to have done it all alone. His wife, Chuddy, who minded the store while he was editing a model magazine and traveling to boost hobbies, his brother Nat, who joined him firm a few years after its inception, Gil Rose, Cliff Crane, Charlie Binder, Marguerite Hubert and many other co-workers who make up the Polk team all played an important part in putting over the ideas that keep stemming from Irwin's fertile mind.

It has always been the Polk policy that what is good for the hobby industry is good for the Polks. By making the hobby pie bigger, Polk's hopes its slice of that pie will also be bigger.

Irwin has unselfishly (and often to his own personal detriment) served the hobby industry through the years in its hobby and sporting phase as much as in the commercial business side. As one of the early members of the HIAA board of directors, as a committee chair and member, Irwin never declined assignments that helped the trade.

Life has its ups and downs and Polk has ridden the waves of fortune. Through it all, he still searches for ways to make creative modeling hobbies more popular. He works to spread the joys

of creativity, the sense of achievement, the pride of ownership through bringing modeling into every home in America.

The following information about Irwin Polk ran in American Aircraft Modeler magazine's February 1975 issue in the AMA News section regarding the Polk brothers' induction into the AMA Hall of Fame in 1974.

The Polk brothers, Irwin and Nathan, New York, New York, between them have made notable contributions to modeling, including many firsts. Among them:

Conducting a model plane column in a daily newspaper (Newark, New Jersey, Evening News, 1926).

Organizing the first large department store aero league (Bamberger Aero Club, 4,000 members, 1926).

Setting up a sizable hobby shop in a major department store (Bamberger's, Newark, 1926).

Directing the 1932 and 1936 through 1939 National Championships and the 1941 International Lord Wakefield Cup competition, plus all the early Eastern States Model meets.

Interesting the National Exchange Club in supporting model aviation and also automakers (which were brought in as part sponsors for the national meet).

Conducting the Junior Birdmen of America Institute; playing a vital part in the organization of the AMA, the International Gas Model Airplane Association (IGMAA), and the Metropolitan Model League.

Editing an early model magazine (Model Aircraft Builder, 1935); editing an aviation newsheet (Contact).

Running the first all-gas model meet (Caldwell, New Jersey, 1935) and also the first contest with limited engine run for gas entries.

Laid the groundwork for the model-hobby trade association; set up the first model industry trade show; served as the first manufacturers' traveling sales representatives for the trade; introduced Jetex power to America.

Lent enthusiastic support and innumerable hours to every worthwhile pro-hobby program that has come along.

Irwin, the elder of the two by 18 months, now 61 (in 1975), recalls that Bamberger Club members built Baby Rise-off-Ground (ROG) models in the mornings and held meetings in the afternoons. With most of the members new to modeling, much help was needed with the little rubber-powered models and Irwin was their teacher. He himself had considerable prowess in the days when the models were built from pine and basswood, but the delicacy of microfilm-covered duration models got him down; that is when he turned to promotion and leadership to keep close to his hobby.

Among the many large meets Irwin directed was the famous depression Nats of 1932 (Atlantic City) at which Maxwell Bassett forced a revolution in competition rules by flying his plane with Bill Brown's gas engine. In the following year, Irwin organized an RC team among the department store's membership; the big plane they built flew very nicely, but never under really successful radio control.

Looking for an even bigger field in which to promote modeling, Irwin left Bamberger's to go with Hearst Newspapers to work with the Junior Birdmen organization. At this point younger brother Nathan took over at Bamberger's and ran the club for several years before opening his own hobby shop.

While he was editor of Model Aircraft Builder (the magazine folded because of the publisher's financial difficulties with other magazines), Irwin also opened a hobby shop, which was operated for a time by his wife. Then Nat closed his store and joined Irwin. With business being good, they soon needed more space; just before World War II, the Polks moved to New York's Fifth Avenue where they have operated as Polk's Model Craft Hobbies for many years.

The Polks were very active in the formation of both the AMA and the HIAA. Irwin, especially, made many trips to Washington, D.C., to work with the National Aeronautic Association and Bill Enyart in seeking more recognition of aeromodeling by full-scale aviation interests. With the setting up of AMA as a division of NAA, their efforts bore fruit. And the Polks also aided AMA in the early days by turning over the insurance and licensing programs, which the International Gas Model Airplane Association, organized by Nat, had originally developed.

The Polks, Irwin and Nat, are still promoting to this very day (1975) – and not just for themselves – including a recent appearance on the Sunday morning T.V. show, Wonderama, seen in many cities.

For more information on Irwin Polk and his brother Nat, see the February 1960 issue of American Modeler magazine, starting on page two.

This PDF is property of the Academy of Model Aeronautics. Permission must be granted by the AMA History Project for any reprint or duplication for public use.

AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

