

Farewell to a Good Friend

By Jim MacDonald



On Friday, February 17, we all suffered a loss as Bob Henson passed away. It occurs to me that there are many people in the club who never had the honor of knowing Bob, or who knew him only vaguely. That is unfortunate because Bob Henson was a pivotal figure in the history of the Woodland/Davis Aeromodelers, and to us old-timers in the club, he was a dear friend, a treasured advisor on all things aeronautic, and an icon on the aeromodeling scene in northern California. His passing leaves a giant hole in many hearts and I hope his other friends will forgive me for writing this from a personal perspective, but it is the only way I could think to do it. And I also apologize for taking so long to write. I made many false starts on this project, but was either unable or unwilling to face up to the fact that Bob is gone.

I first met Bob in about 1974 while I was a graduate student at UC Davis, living in one of the McKeon condominiums off of Pole Line road near the go-cart track. My kids were young...my daughter was in kindergarten at the time, and my son was a couple of years younger. As spring was coming upon us, I got the bright idea to take the kids to the park and toss around a glider to amuse them. I had been active in modeling as a kid, making tow-line gliders and flying ½ A U-control. That all melted away when I got into high school and other pursuits like cars and girls (one girl, actually) dominated my attention. Then there was college, marriage (to that girl from high school) and kids. The marriage and kids actually came way before college was finished, but it was the kids who rekindled in me the desire to tinker with model airplanes.

In those days, if you wanted to do anything with models, there were only two places to go: Graphic Hobby House in Sacramento or Hobby Manor in Davis. Hobby Manor was a small little store tucked between Albertson's and an appliance repair shop on 8th street in east Davis. That's where I wound up going. The store had a cozy, comfortable feel to it that reminded me of the hobby shops of my earlier youth. As I looked around in the store, I noticed quite a number of antique U-control kits displayed on shelves high up on the walls. And as I browsed the glider

and rubber-powered kits, a guy in a wheelchair approached me and asked if he could help me find something. I had no way of knowing at the time, but that was the beginning of a 32 year friendship.

I would make gliders and rubber-powered models, take the kids to the park, and as you might expect, the kids would break them. I'd go buy more, and increasingly elaborate types. I was getting hooked again. And the more trips I made to Hobby Manor, the more I got to know Bob and his wife Mavis. Mavis actually ran the store, which committed about half the space to craft supplies and half to model supplies. Bob worked for the state government in Sacramento and would only come to the store on Saturdays, state holidays and some evenings.

As I slowly rediscovered modeling, it shifted from something to amuse the kids and took over again as my own hobby. I got back into U-control models which grew way beyond the ½ A models of my youth. Bob introduced me to Gid Adkisson, who helped me learn the AMA stunt pattern and he got me started in WAM, the organization that sponsors most U-control contests in the region. Gid and I would go to WAM contests to compete in aerobatics and Bob and his old friend "Wild" Bill Barton would go compete in scale speed with models of Art Chester's "Goon" and others. Bill Barton and Bob had been friends since youth, and they had a lot of funny stories they would tell of their early adventures with models.

Around 1975, at Bob's urging, I joined the Davis Aeromodelers. It was a small club that was started by Bob and a few friends (Cy Jannke, Walt Price, Sam Bass, Ed Morgan and a guy named Joe who was the manager at Albertson's, are among the names that stick out). They had just recently acquired a flying site from the city of Davis...the old sewage treatment plant/city dump off Pole Line Road that had been abandoned when the Yolo County Landfill began operation. It was a simple dirt strip with a small wood and metal awning to provide a shaded pit. Those of us who were into U-control could not really use the field, so we continued to fly on some of the big sports fields on the UC Davis campus.

Somewhere around late 1976 I became intrigued with RC and wanted to try my hand at it. Bob recommended I get what he declared to be the best trainer on the market—an "H-Ray." Sam Bass taught me how to fly it and I went to Hobby Manor every Saturday afternoon to buy three or four new props to make up for the ones I broke earlier in the morning.

The club began to grow with a number of people joining from Woodland (Ken Hook and Doug Barton were the earliest ones I remember). We also put in a decomposed granite runway and started to plant grass. An oasis was blooming in the midst of a giant patch of bull-thistle. Bob and Mavis also expanded the store, taking over the space of the appliance repair shop next door. Hobby Manor was a great place to hang out on a Saturday morning. It became a social gathering point for modelers in the area, and Bob was the guru everyone came to see for advice on projects.

All this time, Bob and Mavis had been living in West Sacramento and commuting in to Davis to run the store. Then one day, in 1977 or '78, as Mavis was driving to Davis on the causeway, a big rig truck changed lanes suddenly in front of her and clipped the front of her car. She lost control, spun several times, and came to rest in the middle of the highway, perpendicular to the traffic. An on-coming car T-boned her little Ford Maverick. Amazingly, Mavis escaped with relatively minor injuries, but her car was totaled and Bob was badly shaken by the event. So much so, that they sold their house in West Sacramento and bought a house in Davis. I remember going over and helping him set up his workshop in the garage.

As my R/C skills improved, I started moving (softly nudged by Bob) toward scale models. I was the apprentice and Bob the “master.” I would build something and show it off proudly to Bob, who would proceed to critique it. I strove to do better. It was a cycle that greatly improved my building skills. Since he now lived in town, we would visit each other on weekends or in the evening. We would drag out airplane books, magazines, 3-views, and plans, and talk for hours. We would travel to local air shows and model contests together. One day, in the summer of 1980, as we drove home from a scale contest at Morgan Hill, we started talking about building a model of our own and competing in team scale. After browsing a lot of plans and possibilities, we finally settled on a 1930’s civilian plane, the Culver Dart. Plans for a 1/6 scale model were available, and we sent away for them.

We started building the model some time in the fall of 1980, working on various parts of it at his house or at my house. I remember some time around January or February going by the store to get some glue. It was a Monday, and Mavis was complaining about not feeling well. She said that she and Bob had been out to dinner the night before, and she thought she had picked up a case of food poisoning. She was going to see the doctor the next morning. The next afternoon, there was no Mavis...it was Bob at the store. He was visibly disturbed and told me that the doctor said it was not food poisoning, and that he had sent Mavis to the hospital that same day. It turned out to be stomach cancer, and the doctors attempted to operate on her the following day. However, when they opened her up, they discovered it had already spread widely through her system. They just sewed her back up, and as soon as she recovered from the surgery, began a regimen of chemotherapy. This terrible turn of events hit Bob and everyone in the club very hard.

This was, of course, the end of Hobby Manor. Bob held a “going out of business” sale to get rid of the inventory. While he sold a lot of stuff, he could not sell it all before he had to vacate the store and there still was quite a lot of inventory left. I and some other members of the club went over to help him box up all the remaining merchandise, and move it to his and my garage for storage.

Bob and I continued to work on our little scale model. I think it provided Bob with a much-needed diversion and sense of normalcy in his life at that time. We finished it toward the end of April, got two test flights on it, and took it out to a scale contest at Merwin Ranch in Clarksburg. We won first place in team scale, but the model was not very successful and that was the only contest we ever took it to. A little later, some time in July, Mavis passed away. Bob was devastated. He had her buried in her home town of Placerville, and quite a few club members were able to attend the funeral.

The following fall, Bob announced that he was going to donate all the left over inventory to the club, and that we could sell it and keep the profits for field enhancements. That led to a series of garage sales over the winter of 1982. I believe there were two held in my garage, and one in Ken Hook’s garage. When all was said and done, we took in something like \$4-5,000, which was a small fortune for our club at that time. It turned out to be very fortuitous for us, because the City of Davis was beginning to talk about leasing our flying site and all the surrounding property to PG&E to experiment with solar power generation. We struggled against that decision, but by 1984 or so, it was clear that we were losing. The Woodland members of our club started talking to the City of Woodland about relocating to the old Woodland landfill site. This led to a political expediency...the renaming of our club from the “Davis Aeromodelers” to the “Woodland/Davis Aeromodelers.” By 1985 we had a lease from the City of Woodland and were hard at work on the new field. The money we had from Hobby Manor was instrumental in getting it started. It was nothing fancy when we finished that initial construction...a runway

surfaced with decomposed granite, a cantilevered shade structure designed by a UCD engineering student who was a member of the club, and fence posts and sod that we had moved from the old field. In 1986, we held a field dedication and presented Bob with a bronze plaque dedicating the field to the memory of Mavis. That plaque was later affixed to a boulder placed in front of the flagpoles.



And that my friends, is how our club got its name, and how our field got its name.

Bob and I continued to build models and travel to contests together all over the west coast. We generally traveled in separate vehicles. I drove my van in which I transported the models and gear, and Bob drove his car because it was more wheelchair-friendly. We had CB radios so we could still talk on those long drives up and down the valley. Around 1990 he started making noise about retiring and moving up to his old stomping grounds in the Jackson/Pine Grove area. I did not want to see him move so far away, because I enjoyed our ability to drop in on each other for visits. However, his mother and stepfather were in Pine Grove and getting elderly, and he wanted to be close. Besides, he was a country boy at heart and did not really like being in a suburban neighborhood. So he bought a piece of his parent's property and had a house built on it. He retired and moved up there sometime around 1992, as I recall. About the same time, professional pressures crowded in on me and I was less able to spend the time needed to build models that would be competitive at the Masters and Top Gun events. While we did not travel to distant contests anymore, we still got together on occasion at the flying field, or at airshows.

And every now and then, my wife and I would make the trek up to Pine Grove to have lunch with Bob and pass time talking about airplanes and old times.

Bob was a very proud and private person. He never liked to receive visitors unless he was properly dressed and shaved. He would never eat food that he had to pick up with his fingers, because that was undignified. And he would never, EVER let anyone help him with his wheelchair. In all the years I knew him, there was only one time he allowed me to help push his chair up a steep incline. Even when the rotator cuff in his right shoulder was giving out, he would not let anyone help him put his chair into the back seat of his car. He was fiercely independent. And in our many travels, I became acutely aware of handicap access issues. It was not uncommon when we arrived at some contest site in Phoenix or Riverside, for me to check out the motel rooms before we registered to assure that he could get into and move around in the bathroom. I do quite a lot of traveling in relation to my work, and even to this day, when I check into some motel in Washington, D.C., Orlando, or wherever, and walk into the bathroom, I think to myself "Bob would [or would not] like this room."

Because of his private nature, and my natural reluctance to pry, there are many things I do not know about Bob. For example, in all the years I knew him, Bob never once spoke about the accident that put him in his wheelchair so I do not know the precise events. I do know that he was an engineer working for Northrop Aviation and that he was involved in the test program for the F-89 Scorpion. The F-89 was an airplane that had problems in its early flight tests, resulting the deaths of 2-3 test pilots. All I know for certain is that Bob was involved in some sort of accident in an F-89, and the result was a broken back. Bob never spoke about the accident, but years ago, he and I traveled to Phoenix to compete in the Scale Masters. We took a side trip down to the Pima Air Museum. As we wandered through the aisles of parked airplanes, we stumbled across an F-89. I'll never forget Bob pushing his chair through the gravel to get up alongside the dusty airframe. He reached out, placed his open palm against the fuselage, and broke down in tears. It was an airplane that changed his life.

Bob's private nature almost led to his death last October. He had not been feeling well, but also avoided going to the doctor. He really did not like doctors, and who could blame him after the long and tortuous recovery from his F-89 accident? As he got feeling worse and worse, he happened to mention it to his friend Bill Kosenski, who lived near him in Pine Grove. Bill went immediately to Bob's house, and essentially commanded that he go to the Jackson Hospital. When they got there, the doctors discovered that Bob had an aortal aneurism, and had him helicoptered to the UC Med Center for emergency surgery. The aneurism gave way as he was in the operating room, and they were able to repair the damage. Had he waited any longer, he would not have made it.

The surgery really took a lot of strength out of Bob, so he was transferred to a convalescent home in Jackson to recover. I went to visit him shortly after he got there, and was taken aback by how weak he looked. He could not sit up, and he was very worried about the lack of strength in his arms, which he relied upon for his mobility and independence. However, every time I visited him, he was visibly stronger than the last time, and his spirits improved. The last time I visited him, just before the Christmas holidays, it was like old times. John Eaton and Dave Reifer accompanied me, and Bob was very upbeat. We all sat around and looked through airplane books that Ed Morgan had loaned to Bob, and we swapped stories and lies about each other. Bob was talking about being discharged after the first of the year and he was anxious to get home.

I was not able to get up to visit him during the first part of January as I had hoped, and then in late January, I received a call from Bill Kosenski saying that Bob was in the hospital again. He had been complaining of an abdominal pain, and they moved him from the rehabilitation center to the hospital to diagnose the problem. Somewhere in that time period, he picked up a pneumonia-like lung infection. This really knocked him down and they had him in an isolation ward in the hospital. By the time I heard this, no visitors were being allowed, except for Bill who held power-of-attorney over Bob's affairs. I called Bill every couple of days. Some days things sounded better, some days not. It got to the point that Bob needed an oxygen tube inserted into his lungs in order to breath. Things were slowly sliding downhill.

On February 17, Bill called to tell me that Bob had passed away. A team of doctors had visited with Bob earlier in the day to discuss his situation. He was very weak, but lucid. As a result of the meeting, the breathing tube was removed and Bob passed away a couple of hours later. That fierce independence carried him to the end.

Bob and Mavis Henson were important figures in the history of the Woodland/Davis Aeromodelers. They were good and generous people and I feel privileged to have had them as part of my own life experience. I know that's true for many others in the club as well. And for those of you who did not have the good fortune to know the Henson's, I hope I have been able to give some context and meaning to that bronze plaque near the flagpoles.

They were good friends to us and may they rest in peace.