

30 Years of Flying at the Field (Part I of III) Jun 07-- Gerry Markgraf

Introduction

After bragging once too often about the many years that I have enjoyed RC flying at El Dorado, I was punished with the assignment to set down in writing as much as I could recall about the history of RC flying at El Dorado. I have decided this is not necessarily a bad thing as it has forced me to drag out old photo books, locate earlier copies of "The Winchline" and track down old model airplane magazines – all to help me refresh a creaky memory. Many of you will find me a bit of a pest in the coming weeks as I seek to identify people and models in photographs as well as try to determine the approximate dates of the photos. I intend to tell the story partly from my own perspective, but include as much of the people, models, technology, events and city politics as I can discover. In the end, I expect to enjoy the experience – I hope you will too.

The Beginnings

The North end of El Dorado Park was a pretty bare place in 1977 when my wife, Priscilla, and I first discovered it as a good hiking venue. The park was new, the grass at the North end was generally un-mown and the few trees were still pretty small. The small trees did little to obscure the giant brooding gas storage tower that dominated the skyline to the North. We liked this part of the park because it was still pretty wild and few people found their way to this spot. As Priscilla and I sat on the hill one spring evening, enjoying the view and the steady on-shore breeze, I was transfixed while watching the only other visitor in our view. He was launching a sailplane (I later found out it was a Mark's Models Windward) using a rubber catapult. When He got the Windward down low by the lake, the wind acted as a funnel and he was able to keep the plane hovering in place just over his head for what seemed like minutes. I was hooked. I had flown a lot of control line and free flight gas as a kid, but had never been able to afford to move into RC – now I was ready and so was the technology.

Within a few days, I found myself the proud owner of a 2 channel 2 stick Cox-Sanwa radio and an Airtronics Super Questor sailplane kit. A 3 month work assignment in Sweden kept me from completing the Super Questor right away, but it was a priority when I got back. The wings were my first experience with Monocoat (wonderful stuff), but good old Pactra dope helped me finish the fuselage in a nice yellow green. The first glide test was disappointing (I had the controls backward) but soon the model was gliding and showing promise. Almost simultaneously, I was building number 2, a Mark's Models Windward to fulfill the dream of hovering over my head in a good breeze. At work, modeling became the primary focus of my conversation and soon, I had 2 converts from work at the field. My Douglas co-worker Mark, built a Mark's Models Wanderer and another engineer, Larry, had a beautiful Airtronics Aquila as well as a Mark's Models Windfree.

We concentrated on learning to fly while gradually becoming aware that other people were using the field and most were at about the same stage we were. Weekends would find 5 or 6 fliers trying to make successful flights and we quickly learned to share High-starts to avoid tangles. There were only a few channels available (pre-1991) but it was OK with the limited number of fliers. One individual seemed to be there every weekend when we arrived. He was a great flier and more than willing to share his knowledge with all of us. Joe was a mentor to us all. I later learned that he had been the first to negotiate with the city to get permission for modelers to fly at the field. Eternally cheerful, patient, knowledgeable, helpful, it was several years before I knew that "Joe's" full name was Joe Richert. At one time there was a suggestion to name the field after Joe Richert in honor of his pioneering activities for fliers at the field. Apparently, the city discouraged this, but Joe will always be in my memory for the help and encouragement he gave me and many others. He is sorely missed at the field.

We flew primarily from the North end of the field, but if the Santa Anas were blowing, we packed up and moved to the South end. Less frequently, we flew at the East side near the lake when the evening breezes were blowing. More than once, I set up my High-start and unloaded my planes at the North end, only to find out I was outvoted and everyone wanted to move to the South end because of the wind. A successful flight was one with no crashes that landed somewhere in the vicinity of the starting point. A truly successful flight (and an early goal for us all) was to catch your airplane on landing. Modest aerobatics were tried and mastered, but a major focus seemed to be modifying your airplane. My co-worker, Mark and I both converted our airplanes to a "V" tail using a primitive sliding servo mixer. We built larger and better airplanes (I built an Oly II, A 2 meter Wanderer, an RO-8, Challenger, Aquila and several other sailplane designs). I moved from Cerritos to Hacienda Heights in 1980, which considerably increased the drive, but El Dorado remained the only place to fly.



Gerry Markgraf displays the latest in 1970s sailplane design as well as polyester leisure wear



Leo admires Gerry Markgraf's collection of Elipstick Wings in the days when electric flyer's flew from the hill.



The EDSF canopy and banner provided shade during hot contest days.



Geoff Drought on winch. Myrtle Holloway timing.

Gradually, the field became more populated with fliers, particularly on the weekends. Perhaps it was better and more affordable radio technology coupled with the availability of good kits, but the sport was becoming popular. I was becoming friends with fliers like Mark Childs, Wally Beers, Jim Barnhart, Walt Lewis, Bob Peters, Dan Wilson, George Cayer, Geoff Drought, Ron Howell, Merle Holloway, John Bickle, John Callahan and many others. Some were more experienced than I was and others were just learning. A popular plane at the time for beginners was the Goldberg "Gentle Lady", but soon the "Gentle Lady" wasn't providing enough challenge. About the time that the first electric winches appeared at the field, the more aggressive fliers began appearing with the Midway Models "Gnome" sailplane. The "Gnome" was quite a bit heavier than a "Gentle Lady" or any of the other low wing loading polyhedral designs that had been favored by the more sedate fliers. The "Gnome's" advantage was that it coupled an efficient polyhedral wing with a spar that was built like a tank. The "Gnome" could be "zoom-launched" off the winch and generally gain an extra 100 feet or so compared to the lighter designs. By the mid-'80s, friendly competitions were the norm as fliers practiced their new skills. An organization seemed to be in order to help regulate activities at the field, organize contests and promote safety. In the mid-1980s, Mark Childs, Bob Peters and several others applied for an AMA charter and organized the beginning of the El Dorado Silent Fliers. We received AMA charter no.2523. Mark Childs was elected the first President of the club.

More to come