

Paper planes propel professor's plans

By Jim Berryman

After watching some classmates fly a paper airplane in elementary school, Walter Erbach knew the quest for the perfect hobby was no longer up in the air. Or was it?

More than 50 years ago Erbach, a UNL engineering mechanics professor, was intrigued by that gliding piece of paper. Today at 65, his hobby has grown so big that he is recognized as one of the top model airplane builders and flyers in the world.

"I was so intrigued watching them play with the paper airplane that I asked my mother to buy me one," he said. "It flew the first time I tried it."

Since then, Erbach's planes have become more detailed and complex, requiring just the right materials for flight, he said. Made of hollow cylinders of wood and light paper material, Erbach's creations are lighter than feathers. One plane weighs only 1/30th of an ounce.

Most of the planes are powered by an all-natural strand of tightly wound rubber, similar to a rubber band, he said.

About 50 other Americans build planes like Erbach's, he said, including one of his two sons, who now lives in Canada.

Erbach has filled his trophy case with awards, and set records at national model plane competitions. Because of a lack of time and money, Erbach has not participated in any world competition. However, his travels have taken him to Europe, where he has made a name for himself among his colleagues.

"Once in Austria, I went to the apartment of a colleague," Erbach said. "I identified myself, and practically had my arm pulled off by the man's wife, showing her hospitality," he said.

"There's no one in the United States and damn few people in the world involved with model planes that do not know my name," he said.

But don't try to call him a celebrity. "We're just a group of people who all know each other and respect each other," he said. "It takes a reasonable amount of intelligence and desire to accomplish this, but it's pointless to think that I'm a celebrity."

While other model plane builders may be in the field for a number of reasons, Erbach said, his reason which has kept him flying planes for more than half a century, is the satisfaction he gets from watching his prized planes glide through the air.

"I'm doing this only for the satisfaction of having one something," he said. "There are no financial awards. Just the satisfaction of being able to say that my model was the best at that contest, or I accomplished something, makes it all worthwhile."

Admitting that his hobby does turn heads now and then, Erbach said he may be considered a "nut," but, he said, he loves it.

"Unlike many people, everything interests me," Erbach said. "The world seems so full of things that I would like to know about, but I don't have enough time to explore everything. If I could live to be 200, I couldn't get to know everything I would want to know."

As the final few students exit the Bancroft building this May, Erbach will be making an exit of his own. A UNL associate professor of engineering mechanics for 37 years, Erbach plans to retire at the end of the semester, and devote his time to his life-long loves: planes, photography and his wife, Rowenna.

"I'm over-booked for the summer," he said, referring to the two model plane events he plans to

attend. "I have so much planned that I've got to live to be at least 200," he said.

Erbach said he will miss teaching, but he's off to conquer new horizons.

"People ask me why I do this, and I always say the same answer that somebody said after climbing Mt. Everest: Because it was there. That's why I'm fascinated with model airplanes. Because they're there."

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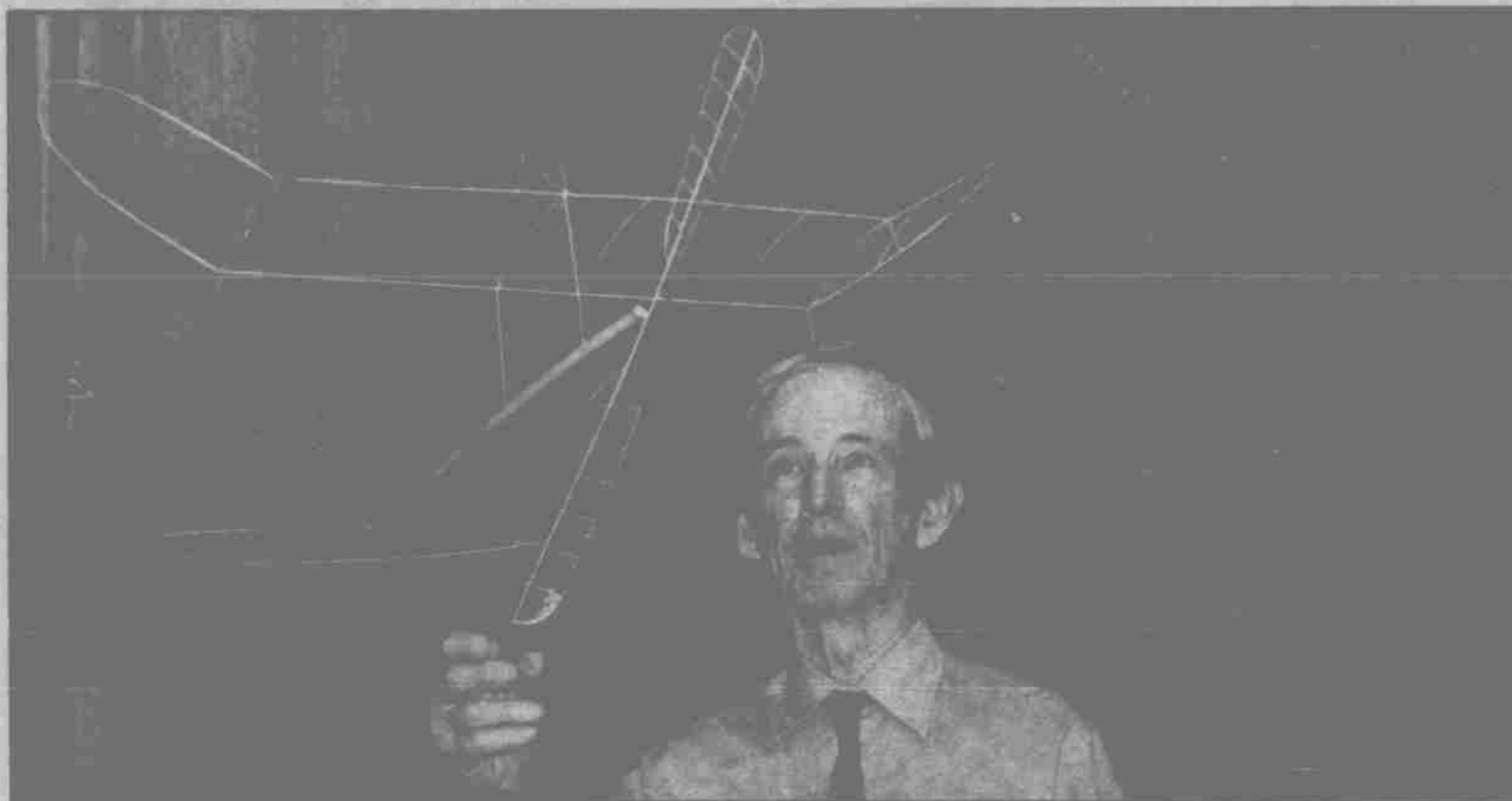
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Walter Erbach shows his award-winning plane.

Dave Truba/Daily Nebraskan

UNL speakers capture title

The UNL speech team defeated nine other teams to win its fourth consecutive Nebraska Intercollegiate Forensic Association title last weekend.

Roger Aden, a senior from Scottsbluff, took first place in oratory, extemporaneous speaking, rhetorical criticism, informative speaking and pentathlon. He was second in impromptu speaking. Chris Wallace, a junior from Fremont, was second in oratory and pentathlon, third in extemporaneous and teamed with Lynne Olson, a junior from Lisco, to place third in duet act-

ing. Olson also placed third in rhetorical criticism, while Wallace was a finalist in that event. Brad Walker, a freshman from Lincoln, placed third in impromptu and was a finalist in extemporaneous. Jerry Roemer, a freshman from Hooper, was a finalist in both extemporaneous and impromptu. Val Benton, a sophomore from Fairbury, was third in poetry. Mary Truba, a sophomore from Lincoln, was a finalist in rhetorical criticism and Jill Pilkelman, a freshman from Hartington, was a finalist in poetry.

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