

# Gee Bee

## Model D Sportster

by Henry Haffke

---

In part I, the author gives us the history  
of this classic plane of the 1930's.

---

**A**lmost everyone is familiar with the Gee Bee racers that made headlines all over the world in the early 1930's. However, few are aware of the many delightful aircraft that were produced by the Granville Brothers Aircraft Company located at the Springfield Airport in Springfield, Massachusetts. I was born in Springfield, and at a very early age can remember quite vividly, our evening trips to watch the airplanes fly at the Springfield Airport. Those were hard times and few could afford the normal means of entertainment. I remember my Mother getting me and my three younger brothers into our pajamas as soon as supper was finished. Then Dad would carry us out to the old Ford and we would make the trip (less than a mile) to the airport. The airport had an area on two sides of it where cars could pull up to the fence and watch the activity. I was only four or five years old at the time, so I don't remember any specific aircraft except for a Ford Trimotor and a Blimp. The others were just airplanes but I enjoyed watching them take off and land tremendously. The spot where we parked was next to the Gee Bee factory and I am sure that many of the aircraft I saw doing their thing on those many summer evenings were products of the Gee Bee company.

The five Granville brothers were farm boys from the little town of Madison, New Hampshire, and the oldest, Zantford, left home in the early 1920's to seek his fortune in the big city. He opened a garage and Chevrolet dealership in Arlington, on the outskirts of Boston and spent a lot of spare time hanging around the airport in Boston which is now known as Logan International. He did repair work on airplanes and soon was working in his spare hours for the repair service at the airport and taking part of his pay in flight time. One by one, his four brothers joined him. Tom ran the Garage so that Zantford could spend more time at the airport. Zantford quit his job there and started his own repair service. He built a portable shop on the flat bed of an old truck so that he could go to the site of downed aircraft and make repairs on the spot. He later added provisions to carry the wings on the vehicle and was able to tow the fuselage in cases where damage was too extensive to repair in the field.

After getting his pilot's license, he de-

signed an airplane which he and his four brothers built. It was a two place biplane with many innovative features which he had designed after being dissatisfied with the aircraft he was working on. The craft had side by side seating so that the two occupants could converse with each other. It had a landing gear that would not wreck the rest of the structure in case of a bad landing and had the control stick protruding from under the instrument panel so as not to be in the way of the pilots' legs. The brothers built the craft and Zantford test flew it on a stormy night soon after it was finished. It was a happy group of brothers as they saw what a success their creation was. Zantford immediately decided they would go into the aircraft manufacturing business and produce their new design. Because they needed money for backing and a place to build their craft, he wrote letters to various communities to interest someone in their venture.

In July of 1929 the four Tait brothers of Springfield, Mass. took them in, gave them a place to build in (an old dance hall on the edge of the Springfield Airport) and also gave them some backing. They started building the biplane and produced about ten of them.

Times were bad and the aircraft business was not the best business to be in. So, they tried everything they could think of to make money. Zantford and Bob Hall, their first engineer, decided to design an aircraft around the American Cirrus engine to compete in the Cirrus Derby of 1930. This was a long distance race for aircraft powered by engines of the company, and when the new design was finished it turned out to be a beautiful low wing sport plane with a single cockpit. It was a delightful little ship to fly and utilized a new air wheel to absorb landing jolts, as it had no other shock absorbing devices. This proved to be the only problem the craft had because it took a good pilot to get it on the ground without bounding it all over the field. This first Gee Bee Sportster was labeled the Model X Sportster. Lowell Bayles flew it in the Cirrus Derby and finished 2nd which netted the young Granville Brothers company a nice piece of change.

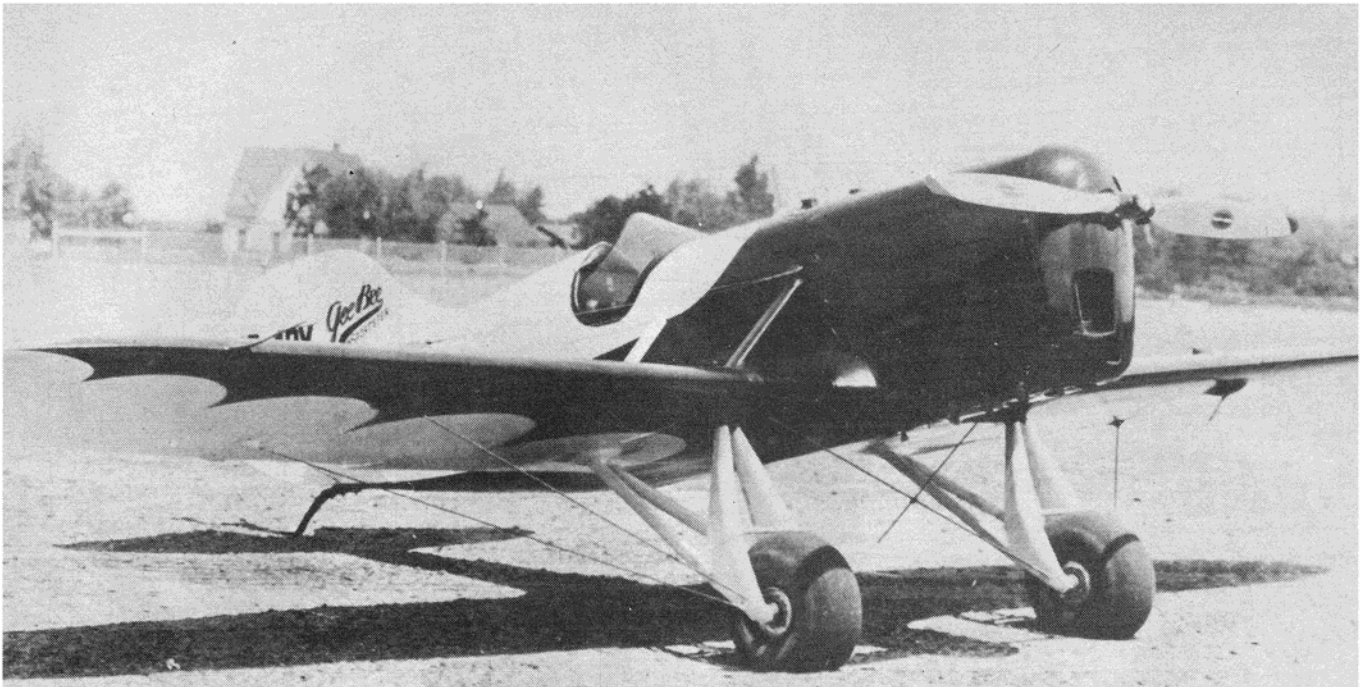
This first Model X (NR49V) was white with black trim with an orange pinstripe separating the colors. The airplane was such an outstanding craft that several wealthy sportsman pilots wanted one. The first new

Model X (NR654Y), was built for Harold Moon and was painted light tan with brown trim with a red pinstripe separating the colors. This was very similar to the first one except that the landing gear was improved and a "spatted" gear was used with shock absorbers.

The third sportster was built for George Rand and saw a few additional changes, the most noteworthy being the installation of a Menasco engine in place of the Cirrus. Also this third sportster sported a cockpit entry door on the left side which made possible a closer fitting cockpit opening as was used on all future Gee Bee's. Because of the different engine, the designation Model C Sportster was used. (The previous Gee Bee biplane had been designated Model A and Model B's). This aircraft (855-Y) was white with red trim and a black pinstripe. A new sportster was planned with further refinements and was to be designated a Model D, but before this was built the fourth Sportster was finished with a Warner radial engine and was designated the Model E. The Model D was planned as a production aircraft and refinements were made to meet CAA specifications. A larger 125 HP Menasco engine was installed for increased performance and the vertical tail surfaces were altered. The biggest difference was the installation of a fully faired landing gear with the full wheel pants seen on all later Gee Bee's. This fifth sportster (NC11043) was painted Diana Cream and Curtis Blue with a red pinstripe separating the colors, and was completed on Feb. 6, 1931. It was flight tested by the CAA and issued its commercial acceptance certificate #404. This was actually the only Model D Sportster built by the Granvilles and was the last of the in line ships.

A year later, George Rand returned his Model C Sportster to the Granville factory and had it modified into a D with the resulting license change to NC855Y. Full landing gear fairings were installed in the process being the most noticeable change.

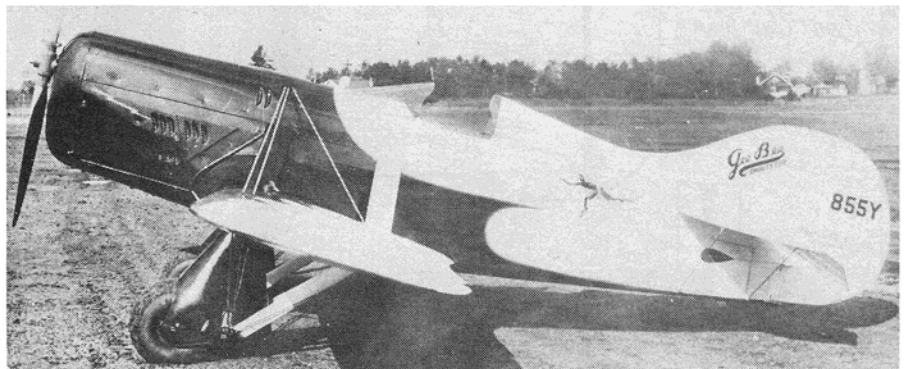
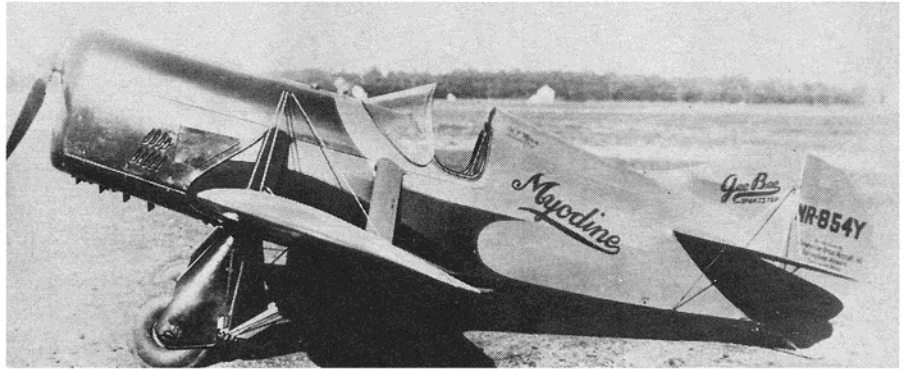
NC11043 was not built on special order for anyone and Zantford Granville used it a lot for demonstration flights, air show work, and also installed his own smoke device and did a lot of sky writing with it. It was first sold to a Massachusetts auto dealer named Charley Pain, of Weston, Massachusetts, on June 18, 1931. He owned it only a short time and flew it very little before selling it to Bill Rausch on August 16th of 1932. Rausch flew it a lot and did a lot of racing with it during the next year and then lost interest in flying as his marriage approached. He put the Gee Bee up for sale late in 1933. It was sold to Clem W. Whittenbeck of Tulsa, Oklahoma on May 17, 1935. Clem was an air show performer and used it in his air show work. It was sold again in August of 1935 to S. H. Saunders of Austin, Minnesota. Then it was sold to Channing Seabery and Robert J. McManus of St. Paul, Minnesota in December of 1935. On June 1, 1936 the aircraft was in excellent condition with everything standard as the aircraft and engine had been completely overhauled and the total time on the aircraft was 466 hrs. 40 min. On July 9, 1936 the aircraft was wiped out in an accident in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which proved fatal to



PHOTOGRAPHY: GRANVILLE COLLECTION

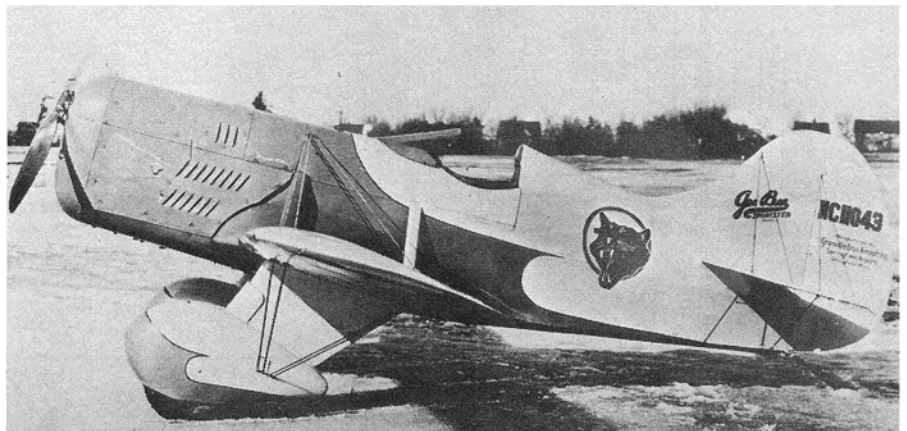
Mr. Channing Seabury. The remains of the aircraft were later involved in a fire and it was not known what remained of it.

It has been reported that Jim Page of Seattle, Washington, has acquired the remains and is in the process of rebuilding the aircraft. Much correspondence with him and several lengthy telephone conversations has given me little information about the rebuild. He has told me in our most recent contact that the wings are finished so it is possible that the Model D will again be seen in the skies at a future time. The other in line sportsters are gone so far as can be found out. Mr. Brinton, who was Lowell Bayles partner in a flying business had to bail out of their first Model X over Vermont when something went wrong and this was the demise of NR49V. George Rands NC855Y was wrecked during an aerobatic performance by another pilot. Harold Moons NR654Y was last known to be flying in Spain about 25 years ago. There are reports of it being used as a fighter in the Spanish Civil War with claims of shooting down five enemy aircraft. Bob Granville told me that these claims have never been substantiated, however, so this is the last that could be found out about this aircraft.

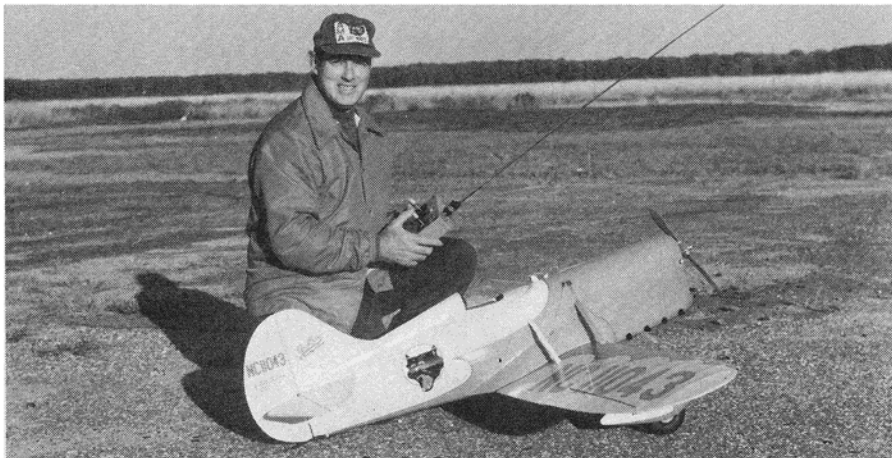


I have had personal contact with several of the pilots and owners who flew these colorful aircraft and without exception, they all raved over the aircraft's flying character-

**The first Gee Bee Sportster, the Model X, was built for the 1930 Cirrus Derby and was flown by Lowell Bayles (top). The second Sportster was built for Harold Moon and bore the name of his company, the Myodine Special (top right). The third Sportster was powered by a Menasco engine and was built for George Rand. (center right). This was the first Sportster to have an entry door to the cockpit. This factory roll-out picture of the Model D Sportster shows the wheel pants to good advantage (right). Note that the eyes of the panther have not yet been added.**



## Gee Bee Part 1



PHOTOGRAPHY: HENRY HAFFKE

istics. Some of the persons that I have corresponded with, or talked directly to, include Bob Hall, who designed these ships with Zantford Granville, George Rand, Clem Whittenback, Mae Haizlip, and Danie Fowlie. Mae Haizlip had never flown a Gee Bee before when Zantford Granville asked her to fly it in a womans race at the National Air Races in 1931. Her husband Jimmy gave her some quick instructions and told her to fly the aircraft around for a while to become more use to it after the race before landing. Mae took off, won the race and then landed immediately as she decided there was no reason to feel the ship out more, as it flew so well. The Sportsters were excellent flying craft and were all used for air show work as well as for racing where they were practically unbeatable in their class.

I flew my smaller version of the Model D Sportster (July 1978 FLYING MODELS) for over three years and felt the same way about it as did the pilots of the real one. It was a delightful model to fly and after three years of contest flying, it had a lot of contest wins to its credit. I decided that if the 56 inch model flew that well then a 1/4 scale version of it would be even better. The popularity of building big models was on the increase and many contests were including a 1/4 scale event. Also the Model D was not a large aircraft and would not be a monstrous thing. It would fly on a good .60 and I had a new Enya

60X which I had won with the smaller Model D Sportster in its First Contest. I scaled the model up from three views and using the many photos given to me by Bob Granville I was able to render a very accurate model of the ship.

I started construction right after the holidays and had the model ready to show at the WRAM show in White Plains, New York, the end of February. (Not bad for a fully detailed model, less than two months of spare time of which I don't have very much of.) The model took second place in Non Military Scale at the show and was ready for flight tests.

Once again, I called on our South Jersey R/C Society "Test Pilot Supreme," Sid Clements, who has test flown most of my designs. He is a great pilot and is the best I know to try a new ship. He can tell immediately just what it needs to make it fly right and he can fly it if it will fly at all. We met at the club field one evening after work, and as usual the wind was blowing the wrong way to use the grass strip. I hate to fly a nice scale model on a hard top surface as any mishap creates much more damage than if it happened on a grass surface.

Sid checked all control movements and everything was working in the right direction. The engine ran well and he adjusted it to his liking and I headed the model into the wind on the hard top surface. Sid opened the throttle and the tail came up and it gained speed

on the main wheels and finally came off beautifully after a long run. It needed full up elevator to get off. (My smaller version was the same on its first flight). The flight went beautifully except with the elevator trim as it was, it was reluctant to fly over the top of a loop. Sid told me he would try to land it on the grass as it handled so well that he thought he could put it down across the strip. He landed it nicely and we made the trim adjustment on the elevators. The second flight went even better and doing a loop was no problem now. Part way through the flight the ailerons became very sluggish, so Sid made another landing to investigate the situation and we found that one of the two aileron servos was not working. No changes were needed and it was getting late so we stopped flying after the two flights.

I had not flown it yet, but Sid and I arranged to meet at the Clayton Club field on Saturday for some more flights. I had changed the faulty servo and made my first flight on the new bird at the Clayton field which has a grass strip in any direction on Saturday and found that the Model D was a great performer. It was so enjoyable to fly that I flew it all afternoon just for the fun of it and logged many flights. Now I was ready for a contest. Two weeks later the model was entered in the AMA event at the Masters Eliminations at the Warminster Naval Air Station.

The model scored very well in static points, getting 376 points but was still in second place behind George Rose's well known Curtis Hawk P6-E. The wind was horrendous at the meet but when flight time arrived I put in a very good flight and got very good flight scores, but George also did well, to remain in first place. Next outing was the Rhinebeck Classic meet where the Model D again did very well under much better flying conditions and again I ended up in second place behind George's P6-E.

I didn't get to fly in any other contests during the Summer due to business commitments, but I did compete in the final two contests in the Fall with the Model D. At the Eastern Championships at Piscataway, New Jersey, the Model D was flown in the Giant scale event and high flight scores it earned were not enough to make up for its third in static score and it finished in 3rd place. At the big scale contest in Bealton, Virginia, the Model D was again entered in the Giant scale event and its high static and flight scores made it an easy winner in a very highly contested event. It was also crowned the Grand Champion of the Bealton meet as its winning score topped the winning scores of the winners of the meets other events. To top it all off, the pilots of Bealton's Flying Circus Air Show judged the top three winning aircraft in each event at the meet and from among them, selected the Gee Bee Model D sportster as the "Best of Show" model and winner of the "Tom Mountjoy Memorial Award." It is the only time that one model has won all top three awards at the Bealton Scale Contest.

*This completes the first part of the Gee Bee Model D Sportster article. In next month's issue Henry will detail the construction phases of this classic airplane.—Ed*



Author Haffke takes a moment to pose with his Quarter Scale Sportster (top). This ship is very easy to fly. The details make a difference (above). Note the cockpit door and the flying wires. Henry is famous for his many model versions of the Gee Bee designs. Order your plans now and be ready for part 2.