



## “Comet Models” Goes Hollywood

Well, Studio City actually, but the setting was in the home of the original Mack Sennett studio, later to become Republic Pictures, owned by Howard Hughes, and eventually CBS Studios.

The occasion was a showing of the short documentary “The Comet Model News”, a film produced by Nancy Kapitanoff, the daughter of Comet’s West Coast salesman. The film draws from movies and still photos largely taken by Eddie Kapitanoff during the 1930’s and 40’s to tell the story of the origins and development of the Comet Model Airplane and Supply Company in Chicago.

It is hard to imagine that in 1929, two weeks before the great stock market crash, that two high school boys could start a viable model airplane manufacturing business and build it to a million dollar corporation during the Great Depression, but they did. By the mid 30’s Comet employed a staff of 300 with twenty salesmen servicing 6000 retail accounts and selling over a million kits per year.

There were 10 and 20 cent kits which give some idea how Comet could succeed in the era when money was almost nonexistent for most people. But the aviation mystique launched by Lindberg’s flight to Paris, was still a driving force in the passions of American youth, and so many dreams could be fomented by investing so little in these kits.

Dave Gee of the Black Sheep Squadron arranged the showing. I don’t know who had the connections with CBS, but it was a top draw venue; the main theater in the headquarters building. <http://www.cbssc.com/index.html>

The SAM President, Mike Myers, and SAM webmaster, Dave Harding, attended along with about thirty model builders, most of them SAM members. Nancy was greeted with an original Comet model before starting the evening’s activities

A while after Nancy’s parents died she realized that she had a treasure trove of material relating to the Comet story. Her father Eddie had taken both still and movie films of various events related to Comet and aero modeling in general, including several movies of pre-war contests. Her mother was Comet’s bookkeeper during the early years and when she married Eddie she moved to Los Angeles. But over the next few years the staff at Comet in Chicago’s headquarters produced a monthly newsletter and Nancy’s mother saved all of them.

Of course Nancy lived much of the latter years in our hobby although Comet per se went bankrupt in 1947 and the Kapitanoffs moved their activities to the model distribution business and that lasted till the 1980’s.



The movie follows the Comet story from the ideas of its two high school founders, Bill Bibichkow and Sam Goldenberg as they begin making kits in the back of Bill's father's tailor shop using discarded packing case materials to the development of a substantial business. Their initial investment was \$5 and the copy of the "company's" books showed they made a profit from the first month. Eddie's cousin Louis became the third partner when he invested \$100 and started the sales department.

Comet developed a wide range of kits but in the mid 30's their flight performance claims were challenged by another Chicago modeler, Carl Goldberg. Comet hired the young Carl who went on to design several all time favorite models, including the Zipper, Clipper, Interceptor, Sailplane and Mercury. So successful and famous was Carl Goldberg that Comet set him on a two-month US tour to demonstrate his Comet airplanes. These moments are captured in the movie.

A few days after Pearl Harbor Bill Bibichkow received a call from the US Navy. They needed help. It seems that our troops had not been trained in aircraft recognition so all our aviators were vulnerable to being shot down by friendly fire. The Navy asked Comet to develop model plans for a line of solid recognition models. These plans were originally given to high school kids who constructed models for the Navy, but before long the company went on to produce balsa kits of identification models too; by the thousands.

Following an initial showing of the film Nancy answered questions and sought insights from those in the audience with first hand knowledge of these events. This brought out one of the more remarkable stories as one of the Old Timers happened to be from Chicago in the 30's. He said that although he was from a Polish neighborhood, he had some association with the area's Mafia.

Some of his buddies knew some others who made their "living" from hijacking trucks and selling the spoils. One day he was asked what to do with all kinds of balsa wood and model kits. It seems they had hijacked a Comet truck!

Following the round of discussion the audience voted to watch the movie a second time. There are so many gems that flicker across the screen for a moment that you could watch this a dozen times and still see something new.

Nancy is showing the movie on the Film Festival circuit and has now produced a DVD for sale. The DVD also includes an additional 12 minute 1939 silent movie "Building a flying model airplane". You can order the DVD from <http://www.hrunway.com/shop/>

Meanwhile we were treated to a brief but brilliant glimpse of the Golden Age of aero modeling, a wonderful experience at both ends of the time scale.

For more on this see; <http://www.cometmodelnews.com>



Dave Harding