

## COLLECTOR PROFILE: ROBERT 'BOB' DAVIS

A lifetime fascination with aviation toys, carousels, and 'anything that goes around'



Aeronautical toy collector Bob Davis doesn't take offense if he's described as having his head in the clouds. In fact, he would probably wear it as a badge of honor, since he has always felt right at home in the cockpit or passenger seat of an airplane, miles above the Earth. A licensed pilot since his mid 20s, Bob says he never knew a time in his childhood when he wasn't around an airport, even though his future career path would follow an unexpected and very different "flight plan." As it turns out, throughout Bob's life, the airplanes that have most often captured his attention were the type originally made for children, over a century ago.

The story we are going to tell you is how a California kid named Robert Davis became a jet-setting toy collector obsessed with aviation toys, carousels and, in his own words, "anything that goes around."

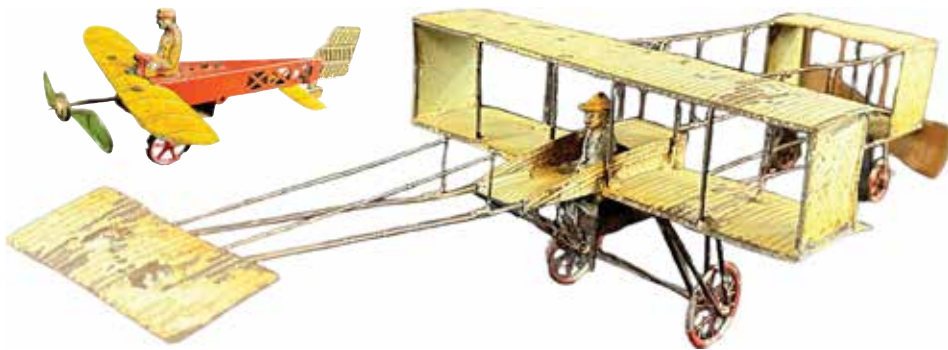
It all started in 1938, when Bob, then a preschooler, moved with his parents to an aviation hangar in the Los Angeles suburb of Van Nuys. "Back then, it was called Metropolitan Airport, and today it's one of the busiest private airports in the United States," Bob said. "My father was involved in aviation and radio maintenance, and bought and sold planes. I grew up around it. When I was 4 years old, Wrong-Way Corrigan gave my father and I a ride in his plane – the one he famously had flown across the Atlantic. All I remember about the experience is being in his airplane, looking down. It's imprinted on my brain. And like anything else, what you become interested in later in life is usually what you were exposed to and got excited about as a child."

Bob grew up during World War II, while his father was serving in the military in the South Pacific. After graduating high school, he spent six years in Southern California colleges, unsure of what he wanted to do in life. Intent on making a living, he went to work in a boat store, selling fiberglass runabout boats and motors. It was there that he discovered he had a natural talent for creating attractive displays, which eventually caught the eye of a woman he knew who owned a ski shop.



"She told me, 'If you're ever interested in working at my ski shop, let me know.' I had always enjoyed skiing and was a skier in college. A couple of years later, I took her up on the offer and went to work for her." Bob said. Not only did the move launch a satisfying career, it also proved very lucrative for Bob. Over time, he became the owner of the shop and even added a second ski shop in Southern California and a third in Reno, Nevada.

Bob's interest in toys was piqued while attending an auction with his first wife. "She collected dolls and I would go with her to auctions where, every once in a while, toys were included. Since I was interested in aviation, it was the antique toy airplanes that caught my eye. The first one I actually owned was a Christmas gift she bought me, a Kingsbury Tri-Motor."



Although Bob had a pilot's license, after a few hundred hours of flying he realized his dyslexia was causing him to make mistakes, so he decided to "ground" himself and "let the airlines take care of it" from then on. Nevertheless, his collecting was on a steady course. He started to buy small things, like TootsieToy planes for \$10-\$20 apiece, and over time shifted his focus to toys that reflected the early days of aviation, a period in history that excited him.

"I've often wondered if Charles Lindbergh had any interest in early aviation toys and if that was what influenced his career," Bob said. Conversely, he pointed out that Frank Lloyd Wright's son, who grew up around great architecture, was the creator of Lincoln Logs. "You have to wonder about the connection between toys and the professions people choose," he said.



Bob's oldest aviation toys – those made around 1910 – number between 125 and 130 pieces. Most are tin and were acquired over a period of 50 years. "I have found airplanes in many ways, sometimes just being at the right place at the right time. In my early days of collecting, I bought some from very famous collectors who didn't have a particular interest in aviation toys, so they were willing to sell them to me," Bob recalled. "I used to go to France and England for toy shows and found some very nice things there, but that part of my running around slowed down about 15 to 20 years ago."

His other toy interest – "things that go around" – led to a collection of no fewer than 100 carousels and Ferris Wheels. "One manufacturer that fascinated me was M&K (Mueller & Kadader). They made some very interesting clockwork toys. The ATCA reproduced a couple of M&K's catalogs, which were very useful to me. I discovered some of the toys in those catalogs were representations of pieces I had in my collection but whose makers I had not been able to identify."



Bob says the best thing about collecting antique toys has been “meeting other crazy people who have a similar interest. Not only have I enjoyed meeting them, I’ve also learned a lot about toys and their values from them, which is always good to know before you buy. But having said that, the value of a toy really depends on how many people want it. It only takes two to send the value up.” Among the collectors whom Bob and his wife Tucker visited during their collecting years were Don and Sally Kaufman, and Aaron and Abby Schroeder, who lived near the Davises in the Berkshire Mountains region of Massachusetts.

Bob and Tucker are longtime members of the ATCA. Around 10 years ago, the couple hosted a club visit to their home, a handsome barn where their magnificent collection of aviation toys, carousels and other motion toys was displayed. “The original barn, which included an apartment, was built in the 1970s using reclaimed barn wood. I bought the barn in 1999 and upgraded it with new insulation, heating and air conditioning. At that time, I also added a second apartment to the structure, where I lived for 25 years,” Bob said.



While he still can't resist boarding an airplane to jet off with Tucker to California, Florida or other favorite destinations, Bob has now decided it's time to send his aviation toys to new "hangars." They will be sold as special highlights of two, possibly, three sales to be conducted by Bertoia Auctions. Bob has very generously chosen to donate 50% of the net proceeds, in equal shares, to the Smithsonian's National Air & Space Museum in Washington, D.C., and the New England Air Museum in Windsor Locks, Connecticut.



Watch for auction preview coverage in an upcoming issue of Antique Toy World. Auction dates and other details will be posted to Bertoia Auctions' website in the near future. Visit Bertoia's online at [www.bertoiaauctions.com](http://www.bertoiaauctions.com).



