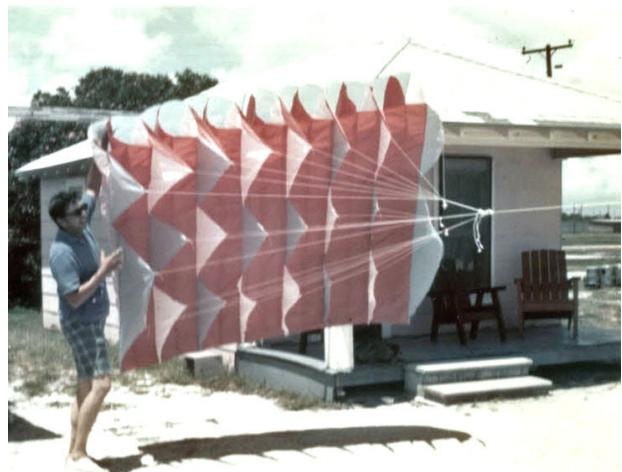


The Early Days of the American Kitefliers Association (AKA)

Bob Ingraham began the American Kitefliers Association in 1964 with a handful of male kite enthusiasts. Now there are over 3,000 members world-wide. In 1967 I learned about the Association and joined. There were around 120 of us in 1968 and our kite hobby horizons widened 100%. We learned about each other through the Kite Tales published by Bob who lived in the little town of Silver City, New Mexico. And we wrote to each other. In the absence of many books with plans, ideas, and building techniques, we exchanged plans, pictures, and information. Bob and I corresponded regularly from 1967 until his death in 1995. We saw each other in person only twice – once in Dallas in 1973 at a kite activity at the Olla Podrida and at the Annual Convention of the American Kitefliers Association in Lubbock in 1992.

At the age of 40 I was one of the youngest members. Membership was restricted to age 21 or older until 1970 when the rest of our family joined. I am now the only member who was a member in 1968 and am likely one of the oldest. One of the first contacts I made was with Dick Swanson in Florida who was a dentist by day. We were about the same age and both had kids interested in kites. He had learned about the Scott Sled, a simple plastic tail-less kite introduced by Walter Scott who wintered in Florida. Dick not only sent me the plans but a Scott Sled he made. We still have the aging kite. We both had kids participating in Kite Tournaments and exchanged rules, pictures, and ideas. Unlike us, Dick did not continue his participation in kite activities but contacted me a couple of years ago to find a home for his kite memorabilia. I suggested the Drachen Foundation and hope he followed through.

When Kite Tales reported on another individual, I would write to them. The most famous was Domina Jalbert of Boca Raton, Florida who invented the parafoil and patented it in 1964. Parachutes and para sails that we now see are basically parafoils. Domina was a wonderful friend of AKA and any who had contact with him. He was making various sizes of parafoils and offered them at special rates to members. I bought a 4 cell and a 6 cell parafoil from him. (They could not be purchased from any other source). The nylon scraps from his manufacturing were donated to Bob at AKA and sold in bundles to members to financially help AKA. Nylon from old style parachutes was practically impossible to use for kite making.



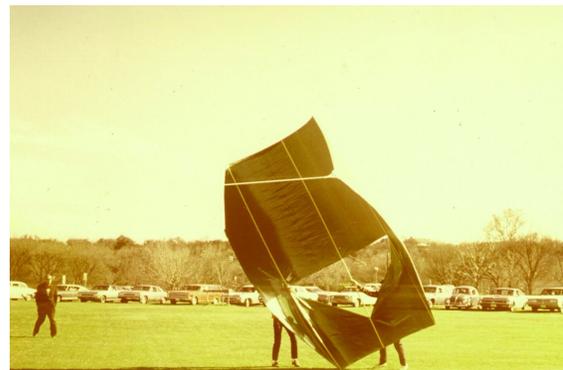
Me & Parafoil at Rockport

When we made a 49 square foot parafoil, we called Domina on the phone to see what test line we needed for the 24 shroud lines and the flying line. He quickly made a mental calculation and gave us the answer. Then he asked if we needed any supplies he might have. We needed some

parachute swivels and nylon tabs and he said he would send them. “How much may we pay you,” we asked. He said “My payment will be a picture of your parafoil flying in the air.” It flew beautifully the first attempt and we sent him the picture. The congratulatory letter we received is a treasure! He came to the AKA Convention in Houston in 1981 and looked all around for us. We were scheduled to go but had to cancel because of a death in the family.

In April 1967 Tyvek was first produced commercially. Kite Tales quoted a letter from DuPont saying they agreed it could easily be used for kites. In 1968 I learned that L.G. Striegel in Louisville who was making commercial kites was using Tyvek. I bought a French Military kite made of Tyvek from him and talked him into selling small rolls of Tyvek to the rest of us. It is strong, does not tear, and can be decorated with permanent markers and colored ink. We have made a number of Tyvek kites and used Tyvek for our 100 foot centipede.

Another early contact was with E.A. “Mac” McCandlish of Lambertville Michigan. Mac was a retired electrician and was eager to share plans and techniques and material ideas. He was a wonderful contact with many of the members and generous with pictures and plans of his kites and home crafted reels. When we wanted to make a 15 x 17 ft Scott Sled similar to his, he drew plans, suggested sources for heavy duty plastic, gave dimensions of the spruce sticks, and how to assemble it. We built it in the Fellowship Hall of the church and it flew well at every outing.



15x17 ft Scott Sled – 1969

David Jue was a retired Chinese Noodle Broker in Palo Alto California and wrote the book “Chinese Kites – How to Make and Fly Them.” We corresponded from 1969 until his death at the age of 77 in 1975. He sent me “hand-drawn” plans of kites and introduced me to the Centipede.



100 ft Centipede – 1977

Based on his plans we first made a 15 ft and flew it successfully at Zilker and at various other places. Then in 1977 we built a 100 ft centipede based on his plans. Unfortunately, he was

Based on his plans we first made a 15 ft and flew it successfully at Zilker and at various other places. Then in 1977 we



no longer around to see or hear about it. When he sent plans about the Dragon Fly, he sent along a little cardboard model of it . At the very first Washington D.C. Smithsonian Kite Festival in 1971, David won first place with his 15 ft Centipede. He was very proud and sent me a copy of the congratulatory letter from the Smithsonian.

Al Hartig, the Nantucket Kiteman, was another correspondent in the early '70's. We learned about his cloth deltas he named Valkyries through Mac McCandlish and Kite Tales and bought a red and black one that we still have. In January 1972 Al sketched plans and dimensions of his Swallow Kite and a combination French Military and Valkyrie. The latter is very similar to Marshal Conyne Delta so many of us made in the late '70's and '80's. We made both kites and sent him pictures of them. Pictures and write-ups of Al appeared in Boy's Life and other magazines. When we saw his picture of a Pterodactyl Kite, we had to make one. We wrote him, but he did not answer. So we estimated his dimensions based on the picture and made a green 14 ft Pterodactyl out of cotton in 1976 and we still fly it.

Hod Taylor of Austin, Minnesota, was partially blind so he only made large kites so that he could see them in the sky. Not only were we both happy to live in an Austin, but I had gone to St Olaf College up the road from him in Northfield, Minnesota. We immediately bonded. Most of his large kites were modified Deltas and many depicted birds. He was very generous with photos of his kites and I still have a nice collection. In spite of his eye problems, he drew me a perfect plan for an 18ft Turkey Buzzard. As per his plan, we used heavy duty plastic and large bamboo sticks to frame it. And it flew beautifully.



Hod's 18ft Turkey Buzzard

Long Beach, California began a kite festival a year before our Zilker Festival. Somewhere along the line it was discontinued leaving us with the longest-running large kite festival in the U.S. In 1972 I received a letter from Al Beach of Long Beach. Al operated a travel agency, was a member of AKA, and was interested in building a large Eddy kite. I had built a 9ft one based on Jack Aymar's Plans and drawn detail plans for mine and shared them with Bob Ingraham at AKA. Bob had no copy machine to copy my plans so he referred Al to me. This began a long and intense correspondence and fruitful exchange of information. Al even shared correspondence he had with Francis Rogallo, the inventor of the parawing that led to the popular hang gliding sport. From hot air balloon contacts he managed to get good rip stop nylon and made a 49 square foot parafoil. He shared his plans which we used for our parafoil that brought Domina Jalbert help and led to our article in the Kite Lines .

Our Margaret Greger connection did not begin with correspondence but in person. Margaret, of course, lived in Washington State, but she had an ex-college roommate living in Austin. So she

contacted us when she came to Austin and we went to Zilker Park to fly kites together. When she brought her husband, Greg, with her one trip, we got some of the Austin fliers to all come to our house for supper and we had a great time sharing stories, ideas, and pictures. Following her trips here, we exchanged plans and tried to get her to lead our new Northwest Recreation Center workshop that we continued for 27 years. In 1999 we were privileged to attend the Long Beach, Washington Kite Festival and by accident we found her there. It was a great reunion for us.

There were others we corresponded with. Dinesh Bahadur of the Come and Fly a Kite store in San Francisco, Tal Streeter, Dave Checkley, and Pat Hammond from San Antonio.

In 1976 Bob Ingraham closed out Kite Tales and the American Kitefliers Association and sold it to Valerie Govig in Randallstown Maryland who renamed the publication Kite Lines and the Association later became a separate entity.

A lot has changed in the kite world over the last 43 years and we have made friends with kites from all over the world. Materials for construction now range from Tyvek and rip stop nylon for kite sails and synthetic rods of fiberglass and carbon for structure. The Association has a first class publication, Kiting, and we have Regional Directors who keep us all informed of festivals, workshops etc. 3,000 members as compared to 128. Email and cell phones instead of letters. But it is still hard not be nostalgic about the days when we waited in anticipation of hearing from Bob, Domina, Mac, Hod and those other guys who loved kites and were so creative with the materials that were available.

Richard Robertson
October 2010
Memoirs\AKA Early Days