

Turning Thirtysomething

Model Retailer: Traveling a twisting road to success

By Gregg Voss

The magazine in your hands has traveled a long way, and we don't just mean via the U.S. mail.

The idea for it took root in 1947 but was sold off, was reborn in 1971 and nearly died three years later. It's a story of twists and turns, but one of a vision that thanks to the ingenuity, passion and ambition of a few simple guys who loved the hobby industry and its products, has not only survived, but thrived.

This marks *Model Retailer's* 30th year of publication. Here is its story.

IN THE BEGINNING ...

The original concept for a model-hobby industry trade magazine was the brainchild of Albert Kalmbach, the patriarch of the Waukesha, Wis., publishing

company that has published *Model Retailer* since purchasing it in May 1987.

Nearly 40 years earlier, in September 1947, Kalmbach started *The Model Railroad Newsletter*, a public relations newsletter that was sent to hobby retailers.

According to "The History of Kalmbach Publishing Co.," the newsletter's name was changed shortly afterward to *Hobby-Model Merchandising News* and by 1953 was shortened to *Hobby Merchandiser*.

Michael Stephens, Kalmbach's current vice president of marketing, who had a three-year stint with the company in the mid-1970s and was a *Model Retailer* columnist in the late 1990s, recalls that *Hobby Merchandiser's* cover

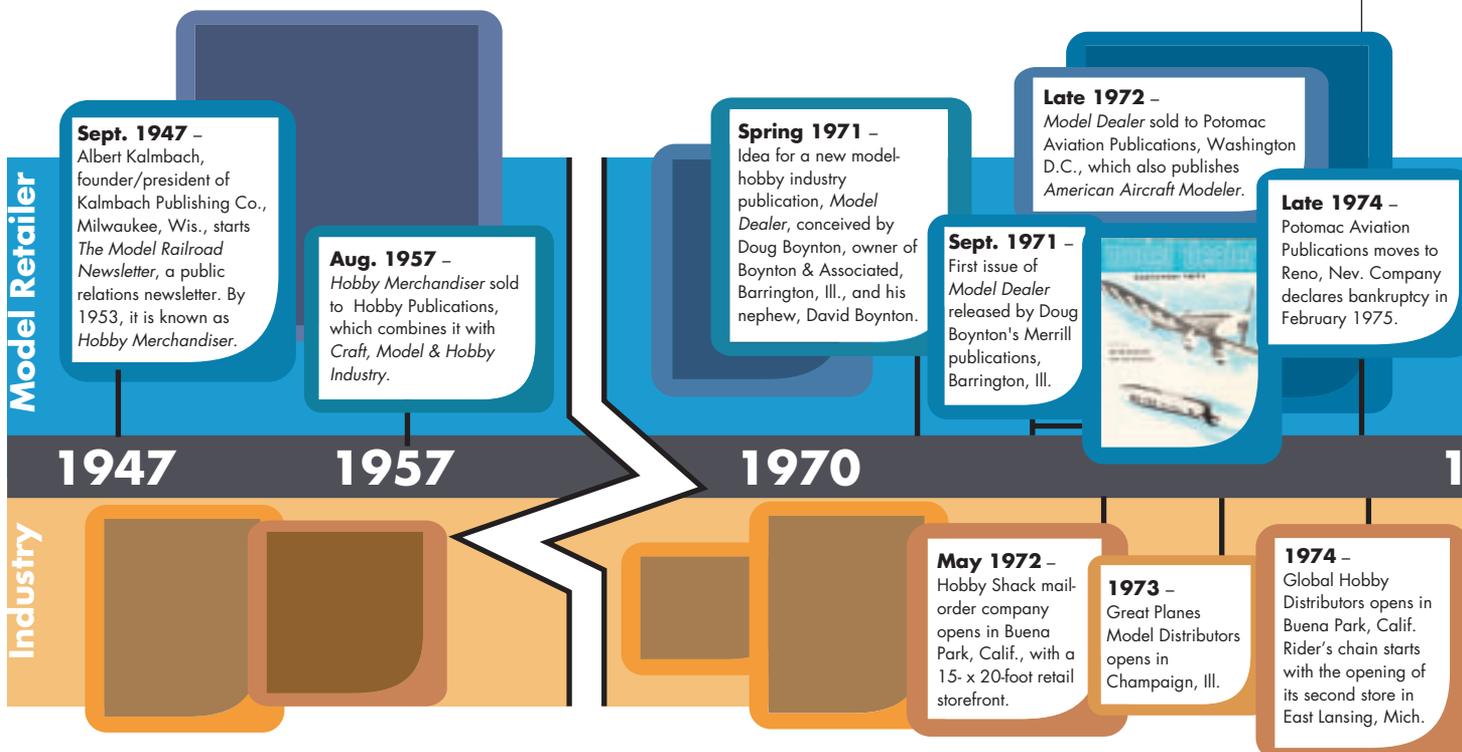
was yellow with black stripes. Why? So it would be noticeable on a retailer's desk.

"It was very distinctive. It stood out," says Stephens, whose father, Hugh, was editor of the publication from 1951-'56.

In August 1957, *Hobby Merchandiser* was sold to Hobby Publications, which combined it with *Craft, Model & Hobby Industry*.

The Kalmbach corporate history also recounts how Al Kalmbach wrote in the final issue that "during the years we have built up *Hobby Merchandiser* as primarily a service magazine to assist with better merchandising in the hobby field.

"Higher publishing cost forced us to





consider a more effective concentration of our activities.”

But the die had been cast.

MODEL DEALER IS BORN

Fast-forward to 1970 and a man named Doug Boynton, who owned Boynton & Associates in Barrington, Ill. He was a publisher’s representative, which meant he sold advertising on commission as a contractor.

Boynton handled a variety of publications in several fields. One of his favorites, because it was his hobby, was *American Aircraft Modeler*, the Academy of Model Aeronautics’ official magazine at the time. It was published by Potomac Aviation Publications in Washington D.C.

Initially, Boynton’s territory for *American Aircraft Modeler* was the Midwest, but by late 1970, he had the entire nation except the West Coast. That’s when his nephew, David Boynton, came to work for him.

In spring 1971 they took a long car trip that would result in the creation of *Model Dealer*, the forerunner to *Model Retailer*.

“Doug and I are going off in his car to a [model airplane] convention on the East Coast,” recalls David Boynton, who now works for the National Science Teachers Association in Arlington, Va.

“We had eight to 10 hours in the car to spin yarns, and on the way, we dreamed up this magazine, *Model Dealer*.

Eric Meyers, currently chief marketing officer for Horizon Hobby, Champaign, Ill., was one of *Model Retailer*’s first employees, when he was in high school. At left, he’s pictured in 1970 with a Du-Bro Seabird, and at right, today with his family – son Jarred, daughter Danielle and wife Helaine.

“There are several reasons we wanted to do it,” he says. “The first is there were no good trade magazines for the model hobby shops. The model people didn’t like being in with the craft people, and we were already talking to the manufacturers because we were selling them advertising in *American Aircraft Modeler*.”

March 1975 –

First issue of *Model Retailer* released by Boynton & Associates, Springfield, Va.



Oct. 14, 1981 –

Albert Kalmbach dies at age 71 after lengthy illness.



1975

1980

1984

Mid-1970s –

After peaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s, slot racing suffers a rapid decline. Government concerns about glue-sniffing prompt Testor to place essence of horseradish in its glue. Digital proportional R/C radios begin to appear.

Late 1970s –

Tamiya electric R/C cars are introduced, sparking a boom in the early 1980s. Lanier introduces the first almost-ready-to-fly aircraft.

1980 –

Mike Wolf forms Mike’s Train House in Columbia, Md., to sell trains wholesale and retail.

1981 –

Great Planes Model Distributors’ owner Don Anderson buys Bridi Hobby Enterprises, which becomes Great Planes Model Manufacturing.

Oct. 1983 –

An organizational meeting for what would become the Radio Control Hobby Trade Association is conducted during the Greater Chicago R/C Show.

Dec. 1984 –

Clint Atkins, owner of Tower Hobbies, a mail-order company, buys Great Planes Model Distributors from Don Anderson; parent company Hobbico is formed.

SPECIAL REPORT

Because Potomac wasn't going to consider the new trade publication competition for *American Aircraft Modeler* and the Boyntons weren't planning on publishing *Model Dealer* ad infinitum, it seemed like a grand plan.

The first issue debuted in September 1971, under the moniker Merril Publications, a business name created to distinguish it from Boynton & Associates.

One of Doug Boynton's first hires for *Model Dealer* was Eric Meyers, currently chief marketing officer for Horizon Hobby in Champaign, Ill. He was in high school at the time.

"In 1971, I covered new products for *Model Dealer*, was the editor of the first R/C Buyers Guide, another Boynton idea, and sold ads for *Model Dealer* to whomever I could – mostly the smaller accounts, but he gave me a few of the 'biggies' for training purposes," Meyers recalls.

"We lived near each other, and our local hobby shop in Barrington was Harry's Bike and Hobby," he says. "Being hobbyists, we had both been there – a dark, poorly stocked shop with a gruff owner ... Doug, and his nephew Dave, figured shops like this needed help. There were no trade magazines at the time, so anything done would be a step forward."

TROUBLE, AND REBIRTH

The Boyntons held onto *Model Dealer* until late 1972, when they sold it to Potomac.

They subsequently moved to the Washington D.C. area along with Meyers, who graduated from high school early.

Doug Boynton continued to represent *American Aircraft Modeler*, while Meyers wrote for that magazine and another Potomac title, *Junior American Modeler*.

In late 1974, however, Potomac relocated to Reno, Nev., and by February 1975 had declared bankruptcy.

David Boynton, who left in 1973 to pursue other work but had returned in 1974 as a freelancer, was back full-time.

"[Doug] goes on vacation to Florida, and while he was gone, Potomac declares bankruptcy, but they declared it under Nevada law and they immediately scheduled a sale of assets," David Boynton says.

"Doug is one of the major creditors, because he's contracted for all this advertising. Doug got together with a couple of other major creditors and forced it into federal bankruptcy."

Model Dealer, he says, "just disappeared," but because his uncle wanted the trade-magazine concept to contin-

ue, Doug Boynton simply started a new one – *Model Retailer*, published by Boynton & Associates, Springfield, Va.

Because Potomac owned the *Model Dealer* name, the Boyntons renamed it *Model Retailer*.

"The truth is, I liked the new name better, and so did Doug," his nephew recalls.

"It was very similar," David Boynton says of the early *Model Retailer*. "Doug had the relationships with the advertisers and their trust. They gave us a vote of confidence.

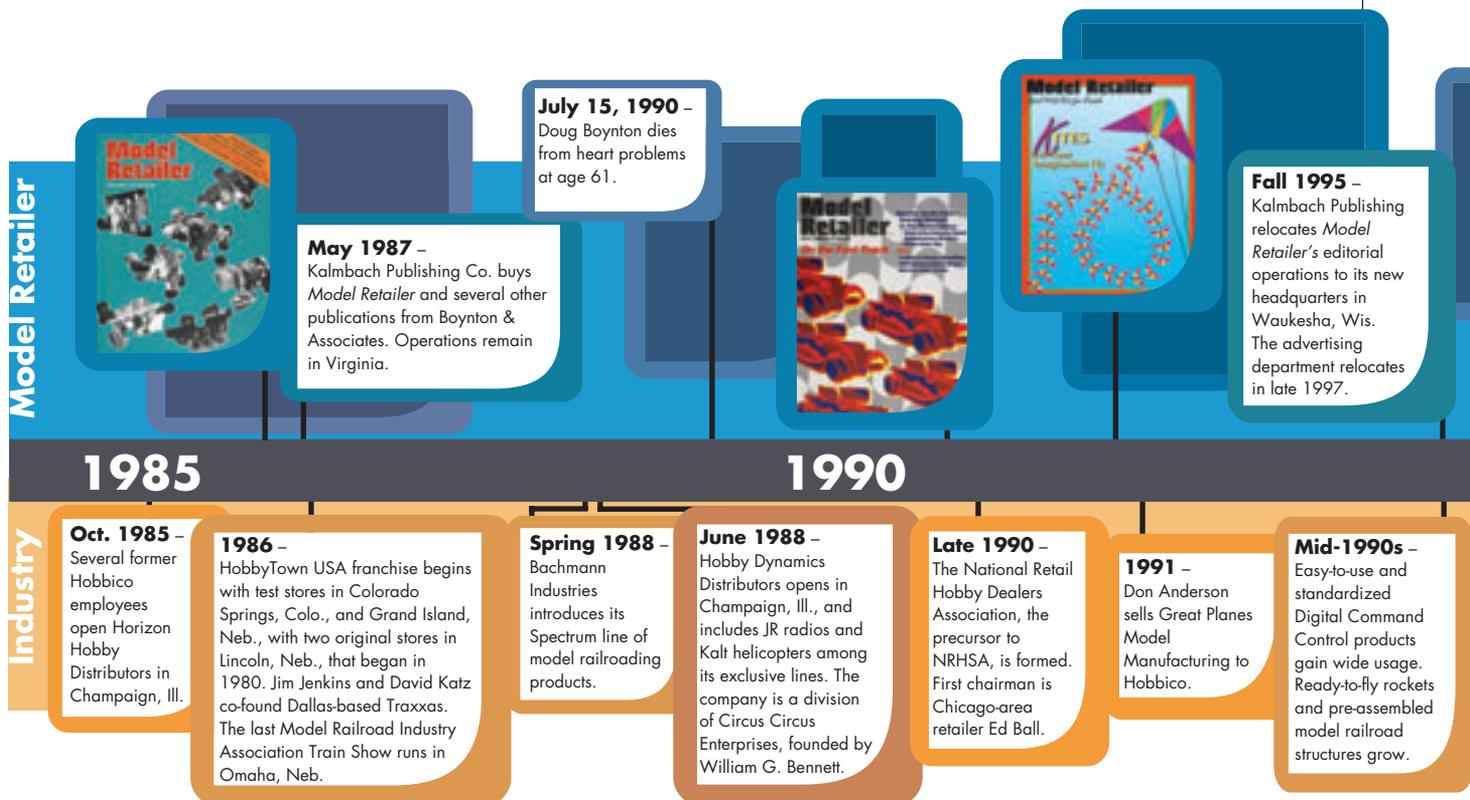
"The first issue of *Model Retailer* had more advertising than would have been in *Model Dealer* had it not collapsed."

Adds Meyers: "This was a great indicator of [Doug Boynton's] character – he always had an angle to make things work.

"So like the Phoenix, *Model Retailer* arose from the ashes with a new name, but familiar management."

Producing that first issue was quite a chore, David Boynton says.

"We killed ourselves," he says. "I was working 16-hour days. I slept in the office. We knew we'd missed an issue. We did not want to miss more than one issue. For the readers and advertisers, we wanted them to feel like it was the same magazine."



The first cover is a story in itself. It features Doug Boynton, Meyers and David Boynton on a 10-speed bike delivering *Model Retailer* to a hobby retailer that was based on a friend of the illustrator, Don Schultz.

There's also an attractive woman standing next to the dealer ... who's not based on a real person but was put there to tweak Schultz's friend!

KALMBACH'S PURCHASE

Boynton & Associates published *Model Retailer* until 1987, when Doug Boynton, contemplating retirement, sold the publication and several others it owned to Kalmbach Publishing, then located in Milwaukee, Wis.

Model Retailer remained in Clifton, Va., where Boynton & Associates was based, before moving a few years later to nearby Chantilly.

"They bought it because Kalmbach thought it was a fit with what they were doing at the time," says Fred Hamilton, currently executive director of the Model Railroad Industry Association, but who was Kalmbach's advertising sales manager in 1987.

"Kalmbach began to expand after that."

In 1995, five years after Doug Boynton died due to heart problems at age 61, Kalmbach relocated *Model*

Retailer's editorial operations to its new home in Waukesha, a western Milwaukee suburb.

Two years later the advertising staff followed.

The new editor was Jim Slocum, formerly an assistant managing editor for the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, a daily that merged with the *Milwaukee Journal* that year.

He went to work in earnest changing the focus of the magazine, taking cues from an industry survey it conducted that year.

"Retailers wanted information about shop management, new racking systems, POS materials.

"The survey made that abundantly clear," recalls Slocum, now the publisher.

"We reshaped the magazine with [retailers'] views in mind, and it was a significant change, to make the product more useful."

Today, as *Model Retailer* looks ahead, Slocum says it's prepared.

"I think news is going to be very important," he says.

"We may have more ways to transmit it, through e-mail or the Web. We're going to have to continue strong and get better at letting retailers know about industry trends and techniques to sell, not only from their hobby retail



David Boynton, Doug Boynton's nephew, helped found *Model Retailer*. Today, he works for the National Science Teachers Association in Virginia.

colleagues, but other retailers, because it's so competitive."

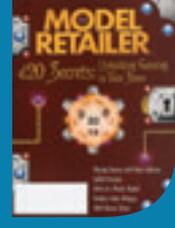
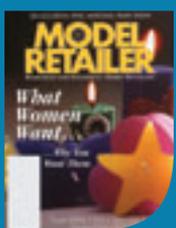
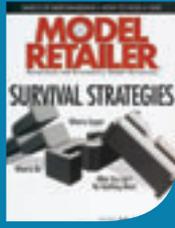
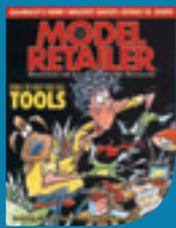
David Boynton, who recently paged through his first *Model Retailer* in 15 years, came away impressed.

"It was kind of fun," he says. "Actually I found it quite interesting that you can afford as much color. Back then, we couldn't."

Meyers says Doug Boynton would have been proud, too.

"Today, the publication fills the goal Doug had better than he ever could have imagined," he says. "The publication mirrors the sophistication of today's retailers."

April 1996 – *Model Retailer* undergoes major redesign; format changes include more articles to help retailers run a better business.



1995

Fall 1995 – Wellspring Associates LLC buys Lionel LLC from Richard Kughn.

Spring 1997 – Atlas O spins off from Atlas. Thunder Tiger Taiwan buys Ace R/C, Higginsville, Mo., and renames it Ace Hobby Distributor.

Spring 1998 – Horizon Hobby buys ISC International Trading Co. and its Indy R/C mail-order arm. Greenfield Hobby Distributors, Warren, Mich., files Chapter 11 bankruptcy and closes.

April 1999 – Racing Champions Corp., Glen Ellyn, Ill., buys the Ertl Co., including AMT.

2000

Sept. 2000 – Horizon Hobby buys Team Losi, Chino, Calif.

Dec. 2000 – United Model Distributors, Wheeling, Ill., liquidates. Hobbico buys some assets.

2003

Late 2002 – R/C-based cable TV shows make their debut – "Inside R/C" on The Outdoor Channel and "Radio Control Hobbies" on the Do It Yourself network.

May 2003 – Air Age Publishing teams up with Vision Entertainment to produce the first Radio Control Expo (RCX) in Anaheim, Calif.