It has been 50 years since Vern and Gleda Estes created the world’s largest model rocket company. Both, however, would tell you that a major part of the success of Estes Industries was due to the creative talent of Bill Simon, who joined the company as a young man in 1962 and quickly became vice president.

Simon not only served as editor of the company’s popular Model Rocket News, he was also in charge of the R & D department and the company’s highly-anticipated annual catalogs.

“Bill was responsible for most of the rockets designed during the 1960s and early ’70s, rockets that are now hot collector’s items,” says Vern Estes. “Bill also did much of the writing for Estes Industries and I depended on him heavily.”

Today, Simon works as a yacht designer in Washington State but he has fond memories of those early days in Penrose, Colorado. He recently answered these questions from LAUNCH editor Mark Mayfield.

LAUNCH: As I understand it, you left college to go to work with Vern and Gleda Estes in June 1962. Can you tell us how that came about?

BILL SIMON: During the spring of 1962 I bought an Astron Scout starter kit from a classified ad in the back of Popular Science. A few days after the kit came I received a copy of the Model Rocket News along with a survey questionnaire. One of the items in the questionnaire was “What suggestions do you have for improving the Model Rocket News?” I sent back a one-page critique, which apparently impressed Vern enough to phone me with a job offer. It sounded like fun, so I accepted, thinking I’d do it for a year or so, save up some money, and go back to school.

After junior college graduation that June I took the train from Portland to Denver, followed by a bus ride to Penrose. I arrived with one suitcase, probably $5 or $10 in my billfold, and my portable typewriter. Vern had already made arrangements for me to rent a cabin, and provided me with the loan of a company vehicle—a 1949 Ford pickup.

Penrose was desolate compared to the lush greenery of the Pacific Northwest, but the hospitality of Vern and Gleda made me quickly feel at home. Also, the job kept me too busy to have any “spare time.”

You also were in charge of all the company’s publications, Vern. You mentioned the Sky Hook. I understand you also had responsibility over R & D, according to Vern Estes. Regarding the catalogs, there is an obsession out there among collectors, and some versions of these publications go for a lot of money on eBay. Did you ever envision a day when the catalogs might become so collectible?

SIMON: I never had a clue that anybody outside the company would want to collect the publications except for a personal reference library. The earliest catalog I’ve managed to hang onto was #631, and I would love to have a seven catalog from the earliest days, but then on the other hand I don’t really need more stuff cluttering up my office at home.

LAUNCH: You also had responsibility over R & D, according to Vern Estes. How did the R & D office work at Estes?

SIMON: When I arrived at Estes Industries, Vern was the R & D Department. I just kind of slid into that responsibility because of the need to have new product to offer in the catalogs and MRN. Gene Street (think Mars Snooper) was hired primarily to illustrate kit instructions, and he and I played off each other to come up with ideas. For example, when I needed another plan to complete an issue of the MRN, I designed the Sky Hook to fill the empty page.

Before long Vern was telling us what type of model he wanted, such as the see-through Phantom for educational use, and we’d pop something out to fill his request. As the company grew, Vern had less and less time to spend on modeling, so I assumed more and more of that responsibility. Basically, when Gene and I weren’t busy with putting a publication together we would fill our spare time designing and building new models. When Wayne Kellner came along a couple of years later he brought an incredible talent to the department, and our output started to ramp up.

We’d scour every aerospace book and magazine we could lay our glue-encrusted hands on for ideas. That was how Gene got the idea for the Mars Snooper. Then there were what I’d call function-driven designs such as the Camroc Carrier, the Drifter (parachute duration), Apogee (multi-stage), Ranger (cluster), and so forth, all designed to illustrate or emphasize some particular aspect of model rocketry.

We were creating new designs constantly, but as the time for a new catalog or MRN mailing approached we would pick several of the models we liked the best and turn them into kits. Later on, under Damon, we had to trot out a dog and pony show for the execs from Boston, setting forth the rationale for a particular new product, the budget to bring it to market, and the anticipated revenue. The kits would not sell, approve some of the stuff, trash some other items, but you could tell they didn’t have a clue.

LAUNCH: You mentioned the Sky Hook. I understand you also designed the Alpha and the SPEV, among others. True?

SIMON: I had kind of hoped the SPEV would be forgotten. The story behind that is that John Hood, our warehouse manager, used the visual system of inventory control: if the bin in his warehouse looked to be near empty, he’d tell George Miller, our purchasing agent, to order more. At some point orders from Eustid, our body tube supplier, were slow coming in, so John, on his next weekly round, would dutifully note that the BT-xx bin was empty and tell George to order more. George in turn would place the purchase order. A few weeks like that and we ended up with a 50-year supply of a couple of items. The “Surplus Elimination Vehicle (SPEV)” was purely a way to correct the imbalance, and it was discontinued as soon as it had done its job.

The Alpha went together on my kitchen table one night to get Vern off my back because he had been insisting that we needed a new beginners’ model. There were some others like the Drifter, Farside, and Cobra, which I also designed, and many others that were joint efforts. Wayne Kellner created a chart of “who designed what” a few years back, and I find myself referring to it to refresh my memory.

LAUNCH: Vern Estes has said that you and he developed the first multi-stage rocket together, which of course required a booster engine with no delay charge. I have an original Apogee II kit in my office here, dating from 1964. This replaced the earlier Apogee, which as I understand it was the first two-stager at Estes?

SIMON: In fact, we had been producing booster engines for some time, but the reliability of multi-staging left much to be desired. Vern was working on ideas for improving upper stage ignition, but not having a whole lot of success when I suggested to him that he try just taping the two engines together. He tried it, it worked, and with a little experimenting with different types of tape, we came up with the system that we could feel confident about. The original Apogee (XII) system predated the tape technique. (Another degression here: Note the shape of the fins on the Astron Apogee, Astron Ranger, and later, the Big Bertha, and to a lesser degree, the Streak. That double taper is a Vern Estes signature.)

LAUNCH: I understand the Alpha was the top selling Estes kit of all time. How many kits were sold in the years you were with Estes? And what other kits were best sellers?
LAUNCH: You mentioned that you designed the Drifter, Farside, and Cobra, among others. Those are certainly iconic Estes rockets. I’m reminded that the Farside-X, for instance, was an extremely popular three-stage with its large payload. And of course the Cobra was a clustered-engine model. How challenging was it to design these kits, and how much testing did you do between the first drawing board sort of iteration and mass marketers, and the number of kits increased at a greater rate than sales dollars. I kept a copy of a chart showing comparable year-to-year sales dollars but finally decided to toss it into the recycle about six months ago.) I do remember that kits accounted for between one third and half of the company’s revenues.

LAUNCH: What was your favorite Estes rocket?

SIMON: I’ve had to say that the Mars Lander was my favorite. But I also have to admit that I myself never built one. But then, I’ve never painted a Van Gogh either.

LAUNCH: How fast did the growth seem to you? When you arrived in Penrose, the company was still becoming known. I’m assuming by the time you left, there was a mail order list of a million kids and adults.

SIMON: I think there were fewer than 20 employees when I arrived. That was probably the peak. By the time our catalog print runs reached 260,000, we had automated mailing equipment. Starting with catalog #651 they were printed in Denver and delivered to us ready to label and mail. The mail room and shipping crews put in long hours to get the catalogs mailed as quickly as possible, but it still took a couple of weeks to do the job. Gleda Estes, Diana White, and Oakie Six put in heroic efforts to get the catalogs out quickly.

LAUNCH: Of course, some of the test launches were just for the hobby’s standard way to measure the airframes of these rockets.

SIMON: The body tube designations were my fault. I really didn’t know anything about good practice in part numbering, so I just tried to use numbers that would let us add in between sizes later on. BT-60, of course, accommodated 3 BT-20 tubes inside, and that was the entire basis for the system. The complexity came a few years later as we added special tube sizes for specific scale models. By that point the system was a huge dinosaur, but we were stuck with it. When we switched to electronic inventory systems we assigned purely numerical part numbers, and the old BT number became just a part of the description.

About those body tubes...

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LAUNCH: You were known as the company’s top writer. Did you have a background in journalism? Did writing come naturally? Did you ever go back to college after leaving Estes?

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About those body tubes...
You now work as a boat:yacht designer in Washington. Can you comment on your view of the current Estes from your perspective after working there for a number of years since.

I can't say the same for a lot of the people I've had to deal with in the past. Under Damon the spirit went out of the organization, and it was a good thing. However, I was getting pretty burned out by that point. Shortly after leaving Estes I found myself a single parent, and yes, any rocket or airplane that you buy in ready-to-fly form is a TOY.

I have continued my education throughout my adult life. Rather than following a particular degree path, though, I've taken courses to pick up specific knowledge or skill I felt I needed, or something I just wanted for the fun of it. As an example, the Estes mailing list grew, we needed a better way to keep customer records. I took data processing and computer programming courses at Southern Colorado to equip myself to better evaluate our options.

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Bill Anders. Can you give us some details about that?

Apart from the whole Harry Potter thing? That's fired the peoples' imaginations fired up again. From what I hear, that's already happening in China as they ramp up their own space program.

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