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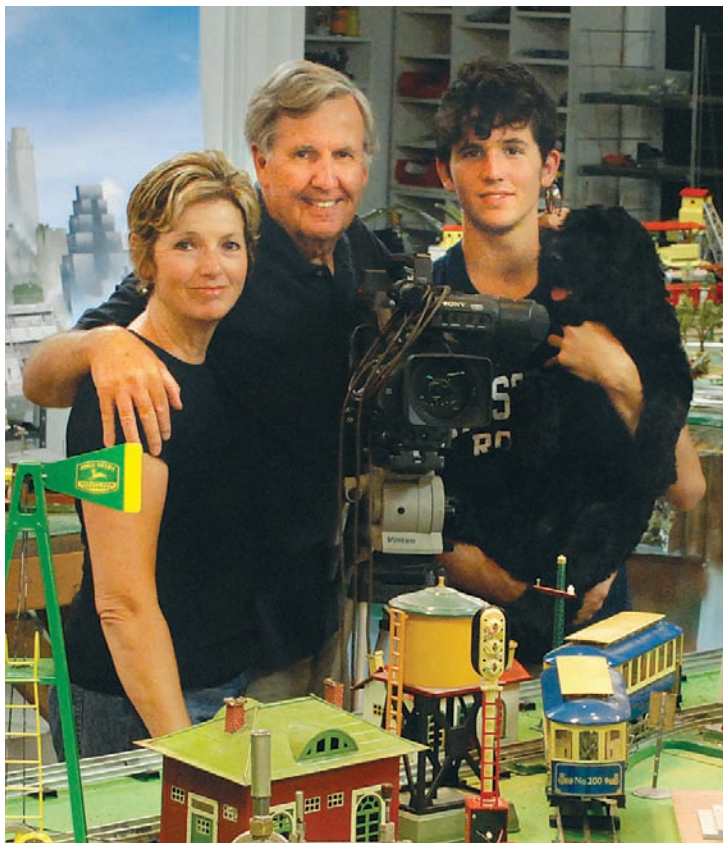
*This is the first in a series of articles that will spotlight a variety of firms, large and small, that support the O gauge railroading hobby. These enterprises provide the sundry products that promote increased involvement in model railroading, inspire individual creativity, and complement the trains themselves. Our OGR staff will, from time to time, take an in-depth look at the people who comprise these businesses and make them work, the facilities they work in, and the variety of products they offer.*

*Due to their interest in promoting the long-standing linkage between toy trains and Christmas, and their goal of encouraging family involvement in the hobby, it is entirely appropriate to launch this series with a pre-holiday visit to TM Books & Video.*

# Keeping a Great Tradition Alive

Article by Allan Miller

Photos courtesy TM Books & Video



Charyl, Tom, and Jeffrey McComas—firm proponents of leisure-time fun for the entire family. Jeff, seen here holding “Charlie the Wonder Dog,” was a very young lad when he first began his regular appearances in TM’s *I Love Toy Trains* series of videos. Just look at him now!

It’s safe to say that a majority of today’s most avid hobbyists were introduced to toy trains at an early age, generally when a train provided by Santa magically appeared around the tree on Christmas morning. But Tom McComas, founder and president of TM Books & Video ([www.tmbv.com](http://www.tmbv.com)), can’t be counted among that majority.

## A Look Back

Tom didn’t become interested in toy trains until 1971 when, as an adult involved in running his own film production company in Chicago, a dinner guest who just happened to be a train collector persuaded his host to retrieve some Lionel trains that Tom had stored away. The trains were in Tom’s hands—or basement storage closet—because a cash-poor client had offered them in payment for a commercial Tom had produced. After examining the items, the dinner guest offered \$7,500 for the lot. “It was at that precise moment that I became interested in toy trains,” Tom recalls.

At the time, there were an estimated 7,000 or so toy train collectors scattered around the country. In those pre-Internet days, very little documented research information was available about toy trains, and word-of-mouth exchanges among collectors were the most common way of sharing what was known.

“I knew then that there was a market for a book,” Tom said. “But I soon realized it was a huge job. I needed help.”

Tom contacted a good friend in Chicago, Jim Tuohy,



The prewar O gauge layout has appeared in TM videos over many years.

an accomplished freelance writer, and asked him if he knew anything about toy trains.

“No,” said Jim.

“Neither do I,” replied Tom. “Let’s write a book!”

Tom and Jim started interviewing collectors. “Fortunately, we met Dave Garrigues and John Palm at the beginning,” said Tom. “They are the two most knowledgeable collectors in the country, and I still say that now even after having met just about every other major collector. Dave and John are the reasons our books have stood up over the years.”

Tom got a loan of \$20,000 to produce 10,000 spiral-bound books. TM sold the books at meets, by mail, and at hobby bookstores all over the country. All 10,000 copies sold in less than six months. Tom and Jim found themselves in the publishing business and published six hardcover books between 1975 and 1980.

Those six books, reprinted three times, are still regarded as definitive works on Lionel trains. More important still, those books helped to fuel the rapid growth of the train-collecting segment of the hobby at just the right point in time. By the 1980s and into the early 1990s, postwar baby-boom-era kids had grown up and reached their peak earning years. They could now afford to buy the toys they had wished for as kids, but which may have eluded them at the time. Since toy trains were *the* preferred toys of most boys in the late 1940s and through the decade of the

’50s, the McComas-Tuohy volumes became something of a “must have” reference for collecting enthusiasts as their ranks swelled to more than 100,000.

“Our books struck a chord with guys who hadn’t thought about Lionel trains for years,” Tom recalls. “They’d see these books with color pictures of all the great postwar trains, and the memories came rushing back. Next thing you know, they are walking into a hobby shop and asking about Lionel trains.”

In 1987, the TM team published *Great Toy Train Layouts of America*, a hardcover

book featuring many elaborate layouts, including one belonging to avid toy train enthusiast Frank Sinatra. “Ol’ Blue Eyes” became a big fan of TM reference books, guides, and videos, and that close bond lasted through the remainder of the legend’s lifetime.

Tom recalls the day when Sinatra called TM’s office. “The phone rang and I answered. The voice said he was calling for Frank Sinatra. The caller said Sinatra wanted information on a train he was thinking of buying. Tuohy is a great Sinatra fan, so I put the guy on hold and told Jim the phone was for him. Now Tuohy is a very charming guy, but not early in the morning. ‘Who is it?’ grunted Tuohy. ‘Frank Sinatra,’ I said and handed him the phone. ‘Yeah, sure,’ said Tuohy. He grabbed the phone. ‘Tuohy,’ he snarled. When Jim heard Sinatra’s unmistakable voice, you never saw anyone go from grumpy to charming so fast.”

When Tom moved from Chicago to the country, Tom and Jim went their separate ways. “Jim wanted to devote all his time to a book he was writing on judicial corruption in Chicago,” says Tom. “That was a big job, and Jim had no time for toy trains.”

## Back to the Future

In 1988, Tom returned to his professional roots and started producing a series of videos featuring layouts from the *Great Toy Train Layouts* book. Part 1 was chosen



Much of the home-base filming action takes place inside this main studio building.





Joe Stachler, seen here in the editing suite, has been film producer with TMBV since the mid-1990s.



The film production team includes (from left to right) Phil Bell, Dane Lowry, and Nathan Bell.



A view of the Standard Gauge layout.

by *People Magazine* as “One of the Ten Best Videos of 1989.” *People Magazine* also gave the book a rave review. “That was another amazing time,” recalls Tom. “Orders just poured in.”

Book publishing and video production efforts continued through the 1990s and beyond. TM published price guides on Lionel, American Flyer, and other manufacturers and introduced the hobby’s first video magazine, *Toy Train Revue*. But videos gradually took center stage. TM’s last price guide was published in 2004.

In 1993, TM produced their first children’s video. The inspiration came from Tom’s son, Jeffrey, who loved trains, animals, jokes, and upbeat music. The result was Part 1 of *I Love Toy Trains*, a fun-filled and whimsical adventure that could be enjoyed by young and old alike, and which quickly became TM’s best-selling title and one of the best-selling children’s videos in the entire nation. In all, 14 “I Love” videos have been produced, with sales approaching nearly three million units.

In addition to the *I Love Toy Trains* productions, TM also developed a series of videos celebrating Christmas and toy trains and even offered a *Toy Train & Christmas* music CD with original songs composed and performed by Jim Coffey and Phil Ambrose. Coffey’s music has become a regular feature in many TM videos, and he is considered to be a valuable member of the team.

Filmmaker Joseph Stachler joined the TM video production crew in 1995. A graduate of Columbia Film School, Joe was a good fit. “He knows how to make movies and he is an avid and very knowledgeable collector of Lionel trains,” Tom asserts. “The quality of our productions has improved immensely since he came on board.”

In addition to the aforementioned Frank Sinatra, other celebrities have formed friendships with the affable Tom McComas and have become devoted TM customers. McComas was a holiday season guest on the late Tom Snyder’s nationally broadcast “Late Late Show.” Exposure on Snyder’s program—with repeat airings while the host was on vacation—sent the phone lines lighting up at TM headquarters for days after each segment was broadcast.

Snyder, a devoted Standard Gauge enthusiast, also narrated the two-hour TM video, *A Century of Lionel Trains*, celebrating Lionel’s 100th anniversary in 2000. That program, chosen by the New York Film and Video Festival for competition in the documentary category, has also aired on PBS stations around the nation. And Snyder’s own home layout is featured in a separate Celebrity series of TM videos, as are the layouts of Frank Sinatra and screen star Mandy Patinkin.

## TM Today

TM Books & Video currently operates out of three converted and beautifully restored





Don Zarobski manages the retail store, and the McComas pooch, "Charlie the Wonder Dog," regularly assists.



The TMBV office staff includes (back row, left to right) Charyl McComas; Sally Sweney, marketing; Robin Coe, graphic design; (front row) Jodi Walpole, bookkeeping; Bonnie Gross and Toni Pirkel, sales.

farm buildings on the grounds of the 80-acre McComas homestead in northwest Indiana, not far from the Michigan border. TM also operates the I Love Toy Trains store, a toy and train shop, in the lakeside resort town of New Buffalo, Michigan. Back at the farm, the outbuildings serve as offices and studios and house the six layouts often seen in various TM video productions. Designed with filming in mind, layouts in the two 4,000 square foot studios include:

- Standard Gauge layout, measuring 8' x 16' with a 2' x 8' extension. This layout has one independent outer loop and one inner loop with a crossover and four switches.
- Postwar O gauge layout, currently under construction, which measures 10' x 18'.
- An 8' x 12' HO layout.
- Two-level, green-and-yellow John Deere Layout measuring 8' x 16'. There's one independent loop on the upper level, and the lower level holds one outer loop plus one inner loop with a half loop and two switches with a siding.
- Prewar O gauge layout that also occupies an 8' x 16' area with a 2' x 8' extension. This layout has one outer loop with two switches connecting a three-track freight yard, along with middle and inner loops with two switches, a crossover, and a Bascule Bridge.
- Two-level, 8' x 16' FasTrack layout, with a two-track main line running the perime-

ter. Inside these two loops is a figure eight with a three-track freight yard. The upper level has one loop and a lift bridge. The construction of this layout was featured in TM's *How to Build an O Gauge Layout* DVD.

Recognizing that the toy train segment of the model railroading hobby has changed significantly over the past decade or so, TM is expanding its reach to new and broader audiences in several diverse areas. Significant assistance in this regard is provided by Tom's wife, Charyl, who, in addition to helping with production, photography, videography, and marketing, has

negotiated licensing agreements with Caterpillar, Boeing Aircraft, John Deere, the Chicago Museum of Science & Industry, and Lionel LLC. Charyl is also working on licensing with several other iconic American brands.

Another family member contributing mightily to TM is Tom and Charyl's son, Jeff. Jeff started narrating in *I Love Toy Trains, Part 5*, and has developed a large following. "We get calls from moms telling us they're in town and their kids want to meet Jeff," Charyl notes with a smile. "If they do meet Jeff, they are in for a surprise. He is now six-feet tall, a junior in high



The I Love Toy Trains retail store is in the lakeside resort town of New Buffalo, Michigan.





"Everything is mellow, and even the cows are green and yellow" on the John Deere Heaven layout.

school, and plays lead guitar in a jazz band."

The John Deere brand, in particular, has seen tremendous growth as a popular

collectible, and TM currently offers nine videos specific to the familiar green-and-yellow farm and industrial equipment

manufacturer (with plenty of both ready-to-run and custom-painted JD trains in evidence). "The interest in John Deere is phenomenal," according to Tom. "They have the same three-generational appeal trains have, and there's a crossover as well. Lots of guys who love John Deere love toy trains, too."

Of course toy trains, the foundation of TM's early success, are still part of the equation. In 2007, the *Building an O Gauge Layout* DVD was released, and in 2008 the first and second in a twice-annual series of *Lionel Nation* programs appeared. Produced in a 60-minute video magazine format, *Lionel Nation* highlights aspects of Lionel railroading that are best presented and appreciated in a video-and-sound format. *Lionel Nation 2*, just released, features a spectacular O gauge hi-rail layout, a "how-to" on using the new Legacy system, and a look at the postwar originals that inspired the Conventional Classics series.



The Lionel FasTrack layout is one of the more recent additions to the six on-site layouts.





Triple trios: three each of the Lionel coal loaders, log loaders, and operating cranes. These rank among the most favored and sought after operating accessories for many collectors.

## What's Next for TM?

"Sales on our hobby titles are down," Tom noted. "That's why we have diversified into John Deere and other areas. But I still love making toy train videos." Tom believes video is the best way to get new people involved in the hobby. "Toy trains have great appeal on video because on video you can hear the sounds and see the action. Every dealer should have a monitor showing the trains in action. They'd sell themselves."

Tom sees first-time set buyers as crucial to the future of the hobby. "You have to get them away from that boring oval and convince them to build a permanent layout." Not surprisingly, Tom thinks video again can play a role. "A DVD should be included in every set that shows how building a layout can be a project for the entire family. Kids can learn about the basics of electricity, carpentry, and scenery making. It's fun and creative, and everyone in the family can get involved. Sell a train set, and it's a one-time sale. Get that set buyer to build a layout and you sell track,

lights, gates, and more trains. Sure, there's lots of competition for the kids' attention, but some will inevitably bite."


Tom feels the York Train Meet, sponsored by the Eastern Division of the Train Collectors Association, is another area where changes are needed. "Open the doors to the public on Saturday and Sunday. Run TV ads in the major cities within 150 miles and you'll get 30,000 folks showing up. Times change. You have to make adjustments. Keep the status quo and you'll fade away."

Over the course of 34 years, TM Books & Video has documented, in print and on film, the most significant period in toy trains collecting. TM was there at the beginning—that spiral guide released in 1974 was the first full-color Lionel collector's guide—and has witnessed changes in the hobby over more than three decades.

"We have worked hard to document, accurately and comprehensively, the important eras of the hobby's early and contemporary history," Tom notes. "It is our hope that this record will assist future generations of toy train fans in learning

about and understanding what transpired in this important hundred-year-plus period."

"Our videos have provided the opportunity for families to spend positive time together, evoke fond memories, and spark conversation between generations," says co-producer Joe Stachler. "Between direct sales and being on network and cable TV, they also exposed the hobby to literally millions. That's a source of great pride to us."

"It's been a fun ride," says Tom. "We've traveled, met lots of people, had fun, and produced a body of work that we are very proud of." 

**For more information and to obtain the latest TM catalog, contact:**

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