



Volume 31, Number 28 Thursday, July 23, 2015

Telling Stories

by Connie Kuzydym

Editor's note — This week, we kick off a new series, "Friends & Neighbors," which will spotlight the many fascinating people in our community. Recommendations for individuals to profile can be made to Editor Drew Tallackson at (219) 879-0088 or drew@thebeacher.com

Ever wonder, when driving through the country, what's in the barns that dot the landscape, especially the nondescript ones?

Nestled in rural Michigan City are three such structures. Driving by them quickly, one might miss the sign hanging on one of the buildings that hints at the magnitude of creativity within them.

FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS

Twenty five years ago, Thomas McComas decided there was no need for his business to be in a metropolitan area, where space was prohibitive and the drive a challenge. Instead, he moved his video production company, TM Productions, to the country, where his commute changed from honking horns and traffic jams to walking from his home, down a gravel driveway to one of the barns. It is a peaceful walk that helps awaken the creative juices.

And create he does.

From within his studio, TM Productions has produced more than 100 shows. Many have appeared on network TV, PBS and cable stations around the country. Clients include iconic American companies such as Ford, John Deere, Caterpillar, Boeing, Lionel Trains, Case IH and, regionally, Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry and the "I Love Toy Trains" series, which is TM's brainchild.



Tom McComas stands amid the many toy trains that have served him well over the years.

Working with these iconic companies, there is no script given to them by an ad agency, only a direction from the company on the product they would like featured in the video, such as how John Deere makes tractors.

Continued on Page 2

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Published and Printed by
THE BEACHER BUSINESS PRINTERS

Delivered weekly, free of charge to Birch Tree Farms, Duneland Beach, Grand Beach, Hidden Shores, Long Beach, Michiana Shores, Michiana MI and Shoreland Hills. The Beacher is also delivered to public places in Michigan City, New Buffalo, LaPorte and Sheridan Beach.

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Telling Stories

Continued from Page 1

TM Productions takes it from there, doing research on the product and interviewing people on-site who make the product and shooting footage.

"The idea of video is to show what the person is talking about," McComas said. "So, if he's talking about how to put the gas tank in, you want to show a gas tank being lowered on the assembly line onto the tractor."

Once back at the studio, they begin by logging in the footage. It takes about 50 hours of footage to produce a one-hour program.

"It's kind of like combat footage, where you come home and you have to somehow coordinate it all so it makes sense," McComas said. "It's kind of challenging to take something out of nothing and make it so people want to buy it and watch it."

From there, they listen to the interviews, write a script, set up the narration.

The basic elements for producing a video are pictures, words, music and effects. It is about being able to tell a good story.

"That's a challenge," he said, "because you have to keep the energy up."

His company, which has about eight employees, is up to the challenge.

Last year, TM Productions produced Ford's commemorative show on Mustang's 50th Anniversary.

McComas' desire to be in filmmaking began when he went to Georgetown Prep. His classmates were from the Northeast who became lawyers and investment types. He wanted something different.

Although he didn't take any formal classes, he spent time shooting film in his 20s. He shot a lot of 8mm film and made home movies. He received a grant to make a film for the U.S. Post Office, which led to him starting his own company producing documentaries and spots for ad agencies.

"If you do it enough and you learn as you go, then it's basically instinctive...after you learn the mechanics," McComas said.

During this time, he produced his first film, "No Game Today." This 11-minute black-and-white film featured a young boy who sneaks into Comiskey Park on a day when there is no Chicago White Sox game. Standing at home plate, he fantasizes what it would be like if he was the batter during a game.

The film was shown at the 1967 Chicago Film Festival. It was produced with the idea of taking it to Hollywood and using it as a sample reel, to raise money to produce a movie based on a script he had written. Like many who pursue the Hollywood dream, he returned home.



Tom McComas (center) with his son, Jeff (right), and Joe Stachler, who has worked with him for 20 years, helping write, shoot, edit and produce.

The most defining moment in McComas' career came a few years later. A friend owed him \$4,000 for producing a video for a product, which never took off. His friend was short the money, so he paid his debt by giving him four boxes of old toy trains.

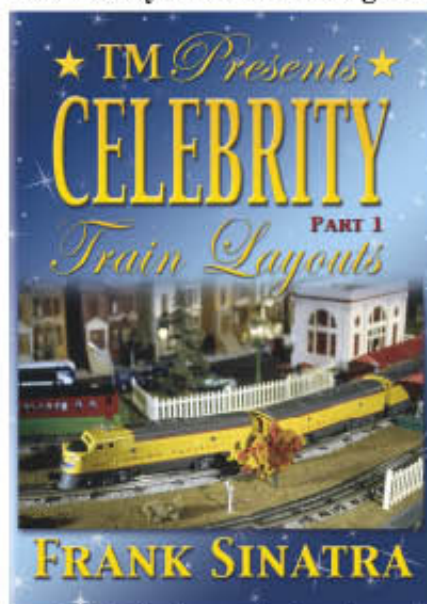
McComas didn't want the toy trains, but on the insistence of his friend took them, put them in a storage locker and forgot about them. A year later, another friend, who was a toy train collector, upon seeing them offered McComas \$7,000.

"It was at that precise moment that I got interested in toy trains," McComas said. "I was smart enough to know if he offered me \$7,000, they had to be worth 10 or 12 (thousand). So I turned him down."

McComas decided to do some research on Lionel trains. That decision changed his life forever.

"That got me into working with Lionel and eventually the 'I Love Toy Train' series," McComas said. "I had no idea my life would take that turn."

McComas, along with Chicago writer James Tuohy, wrote six books covering Lionel's prewar, postwar and modern eras. The books still stand as the definitive history and collectors' guides to Lionel trains.



TM Productions produced a video on Frank Sinatra's train layout.

from the book. In 1989, *People* magazine selected it as one of the 10-best videos of the year.

They also did a video on Sinatra's train layout.

According to McComas, after Sinatra died, his estate was sold to a Canadian businessman who kept everything exactly the way Sinatra left it, including

They also published "The Great Layout," a book on elaborate toy train layouts, including those of Frank Sinatra and two-time Academy Award winner Ward Kimball, a Disney animator who created Jiminy Cricket.

The Lionel books were the beginning of his journey back into filming.

McComas produced a video featuring layouts



Two-time Academy Award winner Ward Kimball, a Disney animator at work drawing Jiminy Cricket.

Continued on Page 3

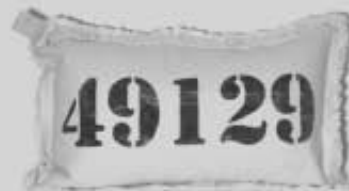
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Telling Stories

Continued from Page 3

the trains. Sinatra had created a separate building on his estate in Rancho Mirage, Calif., to house his layout and collection.

The new owner saw some correspondence between McComas and Sinatra and called, asking him if he wanted to film Sinatra's layout.

Recently, TM Productions finished shooting a Christmas train video for Lionel.

The cheery Christmas layout was in a room behind his studio along with numerous other layouts. It was difficult to not linger at each given the attention to detail and sheer magnitude and variety of trains either on the tracks or on the shelves.

One can begin to get a sense of why his youngest son Jeffery, who was very active when he was young, would stop whenever his father edited a train video.

"My wife, Charyl, suggested I make a film for Jeff. I put together trains, farm animals and peppy music and jokes, and he would stop and watch it for a half hour," McComas said. "Charyl suggested maybe other kids would like it, too."

He polished it up, called it "I Love Toy Trains," took it to Las Vegas to a video show and received orders from major retailers such as Blockbuster, Toys R Us, catalogs and video stores around the country.

Although McComas had never done a children's program, he decided to have his 5-year-old son Jeffery do the narrating.

"The ones I had seen was an old guy talking baby talk. I thought kids would listen to kids better," Mc-

Comas said. "The series kind of follows Jeff up till he was about 12. The shows got more mature as he got older."

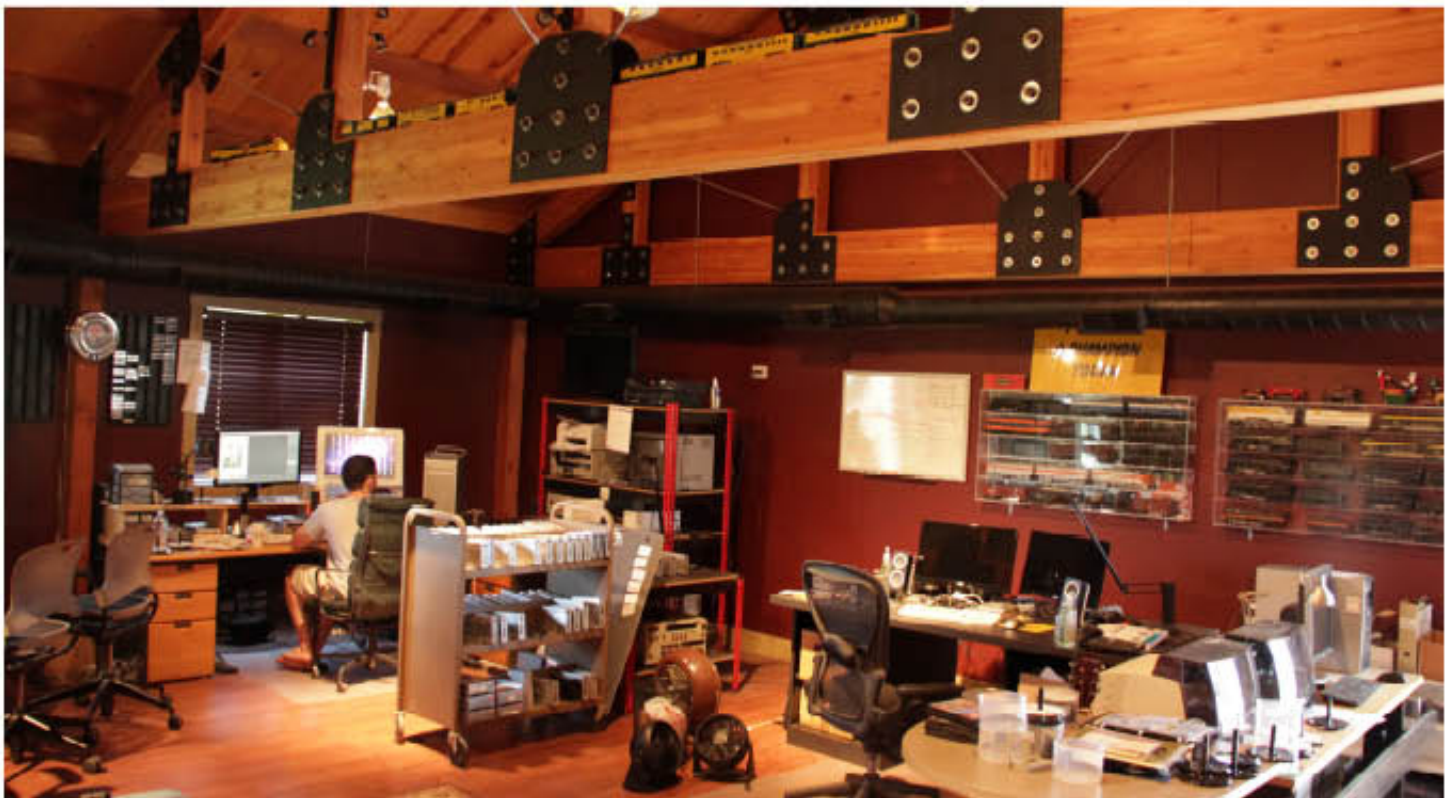
Numerous children across the country have grown up, like Jeffrey did, with the "I Love Toy Trains" videos.

McComas recalls receiving a rewarding letter from a grandfather who wrote, *"I hope you know the joy you have brought to three generations of my family. Every one of your videos we look forward to with great anticipation, and we want to thank you for all the work you've done."*

To date, TM Productions has sold almost 3 million copies of the 19-part series and received Parent Choice Awards. James Coffey received its gold award for his music on the video, and TM Productions received awards for being among the best kid videos of the year.

About 10 years ago, McComas opened an "I Love Toy Trains" store in New Buffalo. The business was eventually sold, then closed. The McComases recently acquired it and reopened it in one of their barns. Jeff is now 23 and plays lead guitar in a group that performs every Tuesday night at The Acorn's Theater's "Open Mic" night. His older son, Tommy, is a Hollywood stunt man whose latest film is "Terminator: Genisys," and who narrated his father's Ford Mustang 50th Anniversary DVD. And, another Ford project is in the works.

McComas' favorite film has never won any awards. Actually, it never earned a penny. He believes it is the best work he has done. It is a film about his good friend. "Frank D'Rone



Inside TM Productions is where the creativity begins.



Tom McComas' video on Frank D'Rone remains one of his proudest accomplishments.

– One Night Only” mixes a benefit performance he gave at The Acorn Theater in Three Oaks, Mich., with D'Rone's life stories.

D'Rone, who didn't have a big name, or a big hit, had a career that spanned 40 years. He was a singer's singer. He headlined at the Copacabana, was on

“The Johnny Carson Show” numerous times, performed in Vegas at the request of Frank Sinatra and toured the world with Liz Minelli.

The video is interesting in its style.

McComas explains in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he was influenced by French New Wave filmmakers such as Truffaut and Godard. In this film, he used techniques they used, which were existing lighting, lots of hand-held footage and mixing black and white and color.

Although McComas is the driving force behind TM Productions, its success is not solely his doing. He readily gives credit to his beloved wife, Charyl, who negotiates all of their contracts. She also shoots the still photography, writes, edits and does graphic arts.

To become successful in anything you do, McComas believes you have to love what you do.

“A lot of young kids want to get into the creative aspect of life,” McComas said. “The best way to be a writer or filmmaker is go watch a lot of movies and read a lot of books and figure out how they do what



Tom's wife, Charyl, who negotiates all TM Productions contracts. She also shoots the still photography, writes, edits and does graphic arts.

Continued on Page 6



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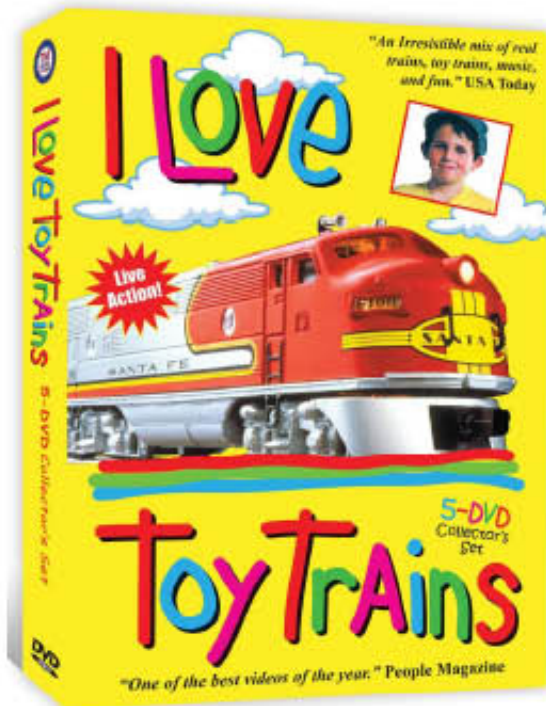
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Telling Stories

Continued from Page 5

they do. Then, take it and do your own thing with it."

He recommends when you read a book, do not just read words superficially. Try to see what the writer is doing. Is he using the first person, is he using the third person? When you see a movie, how did they edit? Maybe see it twice: once for enjoyment, then see it again and try to figure out the technique, the devices they used, the subtle tricks.



The "I Love Toy Trains" series remains phenomenally successful.

What makes TM Productions different than other production houses is it not only produces, but also markets some of its pieces.

"Most producers just produce and have nothing

to do with the marketing. It's really better this way. We have sold 'I Love Toy Trains' for almost 20 years. If you produced a one-time show, you were paid a fee. When you do it yourself and it continues to sell for 20 years, it's a lot better."

Video production has changed over the years, going from film, to VHS tape and now to digital. The next change is occurring with the market moving to streaming and downloading.

With these changes, TM Productions faces challenges on how content is being distributed. Now, it's working with people like Amazon Prime, iTunes and Google Play to distribute their content.

"What you are losing (in the hard copy product) is more than made up for by the added exposure because of the Internet," McComas said. "The image, description and trailer will appear on Amazon Prime all over the world so your market is expanded immensely. People all over the world will see it."

Within that final sentence is the realization that inside three nondescript barns within La Porte County exists a gem of a company, led by a man whose career has spanned almost 50 years, and without question, left his mark on the industry.



The layout for a Christmas train display.



The walls of TM Productions are lined with memorabilia.



The buildings that make up TM Productions.