



Brand built from the ground up

Local couple
builds wildly
successful
video company
around toy
train enthusiasm

By **KIM NOWATZKE**
For The News-Dispatch

MICHIGAN CITY — It was just three boxes of old toy trains, yet, they drastically changed the direction of Tom McComas' life.

They first led to the publication of a series of best-selling books and then sparked the creation of a successful video production company that has produced more than 100 videos, many for well-known, national companies. He also won national awards, prompting the opening of a specialty shop and much more.

In 1970, McComas was producing documentaries and commercials at his film production company in Chicago when he created a promotional film for a friend's new toy invention. His friend's idea flopped, and he offered the boxes of old toy trains as repayment for the \$5,000 he owed McComas.

McComas didn't give the trains gathering dust in his basement much thought until a dinner guest happened to be a train collector. Seeing the trains, he offered McComas \$7,500 for them. Intuition told the novice they were actually worth more, and he suddenly became very interested in toy trains.

"They were the hall of fame of pre-war trains. I had no idea ... it just goes to show you how a serendipitous thing like that can change your life," McComas said.

He soon discovered there were 7,000 other toy train enthusiasts nationwide that were just as interested, yet there were very few written works dedicated to the hobby. So, he contacted a successful writer friend, Jim Tuohy.

Knowing nothing about trains, the two decided to collaborate on the book anyway, which was a collector's guide on post-war Lionel trains, published in



Photo by Kim Nowatzke

Charyl and Tom McComas in their I Love Toy Trains store at 4212 W. 1000 N., in Michigan City.

1974. All 10,000 books sold in less than six months and the duo went on in the next six years to produce five more hardcover books on the history of Lionel and the collection of their iconic toy trains.

Then, in 1987, they wrote the book, "Great Toy Train Layouts of America," which featured elaborate Lionel layouts from around the country, including those of Frank Sinatra, Tom Snyder and Mandy Patinkin.

Partly because of the efforts of McComas and Tuohy, train collecting experienced a resurgence. The kids who played with toy trains in the 1950s were now in their 50s and had reached their peak earning years.

"The hobby boomed in the 90s when they could now afford to get the trains they only wished for as kids," explained McComas.

Special interest video sales were booming, so McComas decided to return to his filmmaking roots. He turned "Great Toy Train Layouts of America" into a six-part video series.

"People Magazine gave us rave reviews on both the book and the videos and also picked one of our titles as among the 10 best videos of the year," said McComas. "I appeared

twice on the Tom Snyder 'Late Late Show.' All this gave us nationwide exposure and dramatically increased our customer base. We went from three phone lines to eight."

Around this time, McComas decided to leave the hustle and bustle of Chicago and he and his wife, Charyl, settled into a charming farmhouse on 75 acres just outside Michigan City.

"We love it here ... I needed space (to produce videos) and it was prohibitive in Chicago," McComas shared.

It was their son, Jeffrey, who inspired McComas' next business venture. An active two-year-old, he would sit transfixed watching his dad editing train videos. So, McComas produced a train video just for kids called, "I Love Toy Trains."

It was an instant success and one of the best-selling children's videos in the country. Nineteen more videos in the series followed, with rave reviews by People Magazine, USA Today and more. In 2001, "I Love Toy Trains" celebrated its one-million-unit sales mark; to date, more than three million copies have been sold. TM Productions' newest title, "Railblazers," was released this past summer and has won a Parents

Choice Award and National Parenting Center's Seal of Approval.

TM Productions also has produced videos for such well-known companies as Case International, Caterpillar, Boeing Aircraft, John Deere and Chicago's Museum of Science & Industry. Ford Motor Company contacted McComas, asking him to produce a video commemorating the Mustang's 50th anniversary in 2015.

TM also launched video magazines titled "Lionel Nation," "Toy Train Review" and, most recently in 2017, "21st Century Great Layouts."

In 2005, Tom and Charyl decided to open an I Love Toy Trains store in New Buffalo, Mich., as a way to move merchandise used to create their videos. The store was owned for a brief time by another couple, and then eventually re-purchased and moved to the McComas' Michigan City location at 4212 W. 1000 N. in 2015.

At the I Love Toy Trains store, customers will find a wide variety of merchandise, including operating toy train layouts, new and collectible toy trains, new and antique toys and memorabilia. Some of their best sellers, especially for Christmas gifts, are starter train sets including the Polar Express,

Harry Potter and Disney ones. There are DVDs, t-shirts, Melissa & Doug brand toys and more. The shop also offers customers free appraisals on vintage trains.

As DVD sales have dropped in recent years, TM Productions has changed with the times. Fifty of their videos, now available on Amazon Prime, receive an average of a million streams and downloads each month. By year-end, they will also be available through iTunes.

"You have to evolve or die," emphasized McComas, mentioning how younger generations are more apt to stream or download while older customers and especially collectors still prefer the physical hard copies. "We thought it would put us out of business, but now it's a crucial part of our business. The brand impressions are immense."

"They say that loyalties developed young last a lifetime. That's how companies view brand impressions at young ages. Even a kid watching it over and over is exposure."

It takes TM Productions about 50 hours of footage to produce one hour-long video. In prior years, Charyl has also written, edited and shot the still photography for video; today, she concen-

trates on graphic arts and working as office manager. Jeffrey, now all grown up, is producer at the family business. Their other three sons are Tom McComas, with a successful career as a Hollywood stuntman for such actors as Ben Affleck, Jim Carrey and Christian Bale; Jack Lane, who owns his own video production company, Lane Media Productions; and Chris McComas, who works as a realtor for @properties in Chicago.

Counting Tom and Charyl, TM Productions employs five full-time and two part-time employees. Joe Stachler has worked with the McComases for more than 20 years helping write, shoot, edit and produce as well.

Now in his 70s, McComas looks back on a career that has spanned 50 years. His secrets to success?

"Working with iconic companies like Caterpillar, John Deere, Lionel and Case International has certainly helped in having a brand to sell," McComas said. "For a three-barn company in Michigan City, that's pretty good."

There's also the "putting in a lot of hours."

"Once a show is done, it's done forever. You have to make it as good as you can because you won't do it over," he said.

Tom gives credit to his wife of nearly 30 years, too. "She plays a big part in every facet of the business."

His favorite video? "The one I'm working on is my favorite. I get very excited. It's fun to see what you've been working on come all together ... we have a variety of what we shoot. It's fun. You have to research and learn new stuff."

I Love Toy Trains, located at 4212 W. 1000 N., is open Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. CST; beginning Nov. 26, the shop will also be open on Sundays.

For more information about the I Love Toy Trains store, visit www.ilttstore.com or "ilttoy trains" on Facebook. To reach the website for TM Productions, visit tmbv.com or "TM Books & Video" on Facebook; both businesses may be reached at 219-879-2822 or 800-892-2822.