

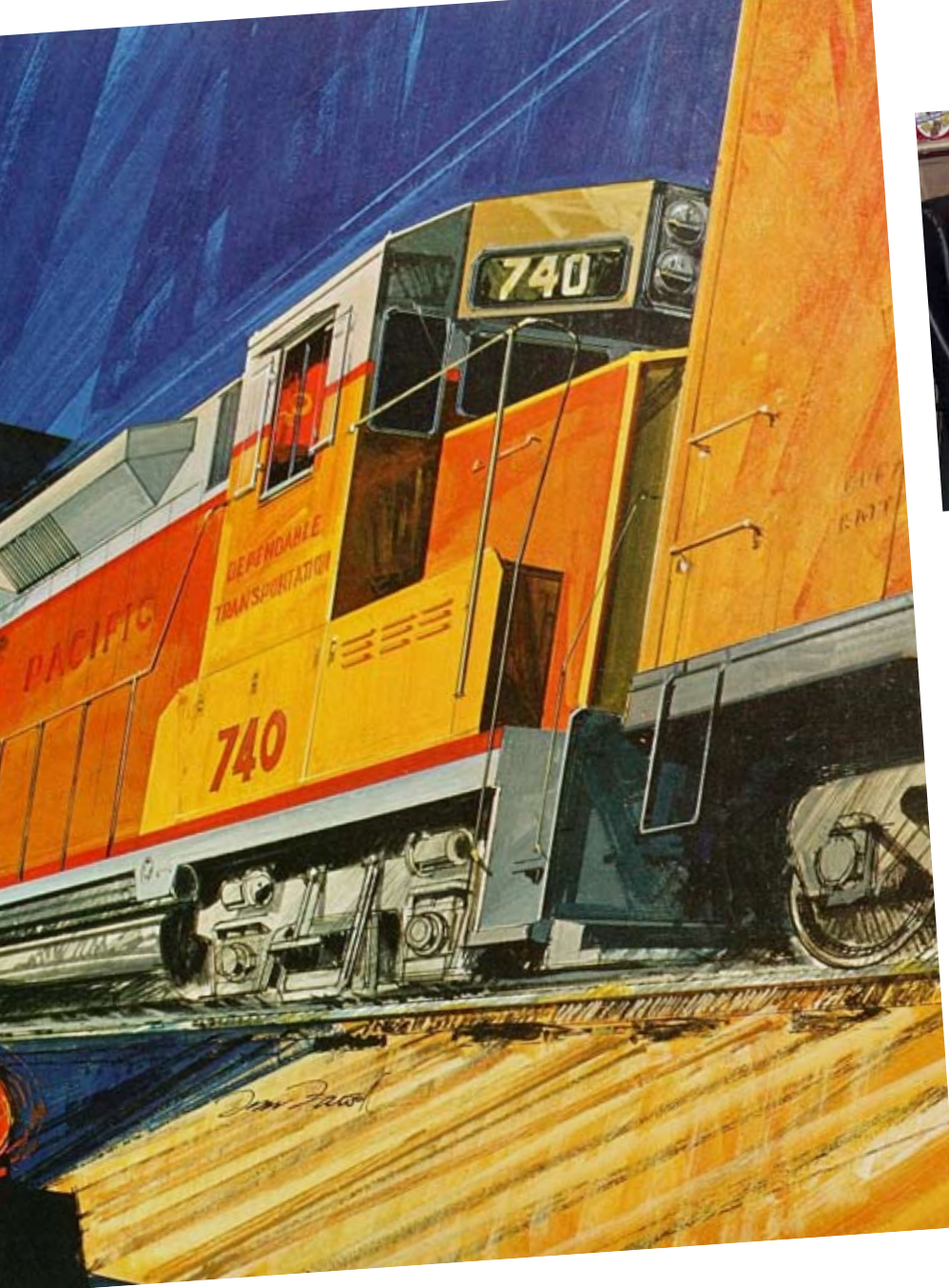


THE BOLD STYLE of Tom Fawell

The angular "Spartan" cab introduced on 1963's GP35 fit well with Fawell's distinctive style. This scene depicts two Union Pacific GP35-DD35B-DD35B-GP35 sets.

Meet the artist who created the striking images in EMD ads of the 1960's and early '70's

By Gregory Palumbo • Artwork by Tom Fawell



In a 2007 photo by author Palumbo, Tom Fawell poses in his Chicagoland studio with his painting of Southern Railway GP38-2's—running long hood forward, of course.

Have you ever found yourself looking at a TV commercial or a magazine ad and thinking, “I don’t get it”? This is more common than you might think and really not a function of one’s age. It is the job of advertisers and the media to challenge the boundaries of traditional thinking and expression. That challenge will either be accepted or rejected by the whims of the consumer.

Consider the time frame when the work of commercial artist Tom Fawell (pronounced FAY-well) came to be. His striking artwork began appearing in magazine ads for diesel locomotives in the early 1960’s. Yes, the *early* 1960’s—pre-Jimmy Hendrix, pre-psychedelic graphics, and even pre-Beatles!

In the business world, conservatism held sway—three-piece suits and white shirts with starched collars were the norm. The odd duck who choose to wear a colorful tie was quickly branded a rebel unless he had already reached a high status within a company.

In 1961, at age 32, Tom was already an established freelance illustrator, busy raising a family of six children in a far western



The horizontal format of most of Fawell’s EMD paintings was well suited for use in double-page ads, such as this one from May 1966 TRAINS, showing New York Central GP40’s.



Sky not blue? Wheels not visible? Such details do not detract from the power of this scene representing Santa Fe's first SD45-2's of 1972 (which, when actually constructed, did not have flared radiators).

suburb of Chicago. He was working under contract for the Chicago-based ad agency Marsteller. John Calahan, the firm's art director, asked Tom to produce an illustration for the La Grange (Ill.)-based Electro-Motive Division of General Motors, the leading locomotive builder. At this time, the railroads' "first-generation" diesels were nearing the end of their expected lifespan, and EMD was gearing up for what it anticipated would be a brisk business in second-generation diesels.

This was a prestigious assignment, and landing any account associated with General Motors was not to be taken lightly. Using techniques learned at the Pratt Art Institute in

New York, from which he graduated in 1953, Tom wanted to portray the feeling of dynamic power created by a locomotive.

Tom knew this feeling well, having spent his high-school summers working for the Chicago & North Western as a track inspector. He can still recall the bone-rattling trackside experience of standing just a few feet from the rail in the 1940's as a consist of F units roared by his side.

When Marsteller's Calahan presented Tom's first work to Electro-Motive, it was literally laughed at. Had

it not been for Calahan's established relationship with GM and his integrity as the art director for Marsteller, Tom's artwork would certainly never have been used.

Marsteller persuaded Electro-Motive to run a test ad and quickly follow it up with a readership poll. The results were so favorable that they were ranked "off the charts," much to

WHEN TOM'S FIRST WORK WAS PRESENTED TO EMD, IT WAS LITERALLY LAUGHED AT.



The Reading was the first customer for that most stylish of EMD hood units, the GP30. Produced during 1961-63, the cowl-roofed model sold 948 units (40 without cabs).



the surprise of EMD's Public Relations Department. Not willing to argue with success, the locomotive builder launched an ad campaign based around the artwork of Tom Fawell. The first ad, promoting the new GP30, appeared in the October 30, 1961, issue of *Railway Age*, the industry's leading trade magazine. The GP30 ad's debut in *TRAINS* magazine (in black-and-white, the format of most EMD ads in *TRAINS* in the 1960's) was in the December 1961 issue. Electro-Motive turned out to be one of the longest running accounts in Tom's career, spanning nearly two decades—from the GP30 to the 50 Series, introduced in 1980—and including more than 100 illustrations.

While some of Tom's paintings depicted locomotives in EMD livery, most were keyed to actual buyers of a given model. Starting with the paint

scheme for a particular railroad, and maintaining the general carbody layout, Tom picked strong contrasting background colors to highlight the customer's paint scheme. Add to that a radical perspective, and you had the makings of an ad campaign that was sure to spark conversation and raise the eyebrows in both the GM boardroom and the conservative railroad industry.

Best-seller of EMD's Dash 2 line was the SD40-2, which remained in production for 14 years after its 1972 rollout. Milwaukee Road was an early customer, in July '72.

Despite the general acceptance of the EMD ads, many in the "buttoned-down" establishment had trouble relating to Tom's artwork. Critics would ask, "Where are the wheels?" and, "Doesn't this guy know the sky is always blue?" This only served to



When artwork precedes reality, the two don't always match. EMD did paint a unit gold for its 50th birthday, but it was a Chesapeake GP40-2, not an SD45 as shown here.

reinforce Tom's belief that locomotive wheels were not needed in his work, and thereafter he purposely left them out whenever possible.

Another interesting aspect to Tom's work was his choice of a horizontal format. With magazines like *Railway Age* and *TRAINS* being the principal venues for Electro-Motive ads, a horizontal format typically resulted in a two-page layout. This was in sharp contrast to EMD's ads of the 1940's and '50's, which were always of a vertical format. These memorable creations featured the artwork of Bern Hill, who, like Tom Fawell, employed a somewhat abstract style. However, while Hill emphasized the environment in which the locomotives worked, Tom made the EMD products the dominant elements of his compositions. A limitation of the horizontal format is that it cannot be used as "cover" art. So, unlike Bern Hill's paintings, none of Tom's work is known to have graced the covers of *Railway Age* or *TRAINS*.

As part of the Electro-Motive ad campaign of the '60's, a series of

lithograph prints were made. Records of how many of these were produced do not exist, but they featured the same images used in the magazine ads. They were distributed flat, glued to a lightweight, white, pebble-type, cardstock background, with most distributed to customers by local EMD area sales representatives. Although Tom's work survives in thousands of magazine copies, the prints are now quite rare, but occasionally surface at railroadiana shows or on the Internet sales site eBay. (In the mid-1970's, Tom offered for sale signed prints of four of his EMD scenes, but the response was minimal.) The original acrylic and opaque watercolor paintings were generally given to officials of the railroads featured in the artwork.

Tom never considered any other career than that of an artist. When growing up, he anxiously waited for his parents to discard a used envelope or some other paper so he could

practice his drawing. Tom's teachers recognized his talents as early as first grade and allowed him to develop special artistic creations to fulfill his written assignments.

Upon graduating from high school in 1947, Tom attended the Art Institute of Chicago. He found his stay unsatisfactory and, at the urging of an uncle, moved to New York City to attend the Pratt Institute. There he learned that art was a science.

After spending many successful years producing work for some of the most prestigious art studios in Chicago, Tom eventually started his own studio. At one point, he employed 25 full-time people.

He closed his studio in 1990 and, while most would be content to call that a career, Tom went on to become the Director of Public Transportation

TOM FAWELL NEVER CONSIDERED ANY OTHER CAREER THAN THAT OF AN ARTIST.

New in 1972 were EMD's GP38-2 and the Illinois Central-Gulf, Mobile & Ohio merger. Fawell placed ICG GP38-2's on a low timber trestle characteristic of the road's south end.



for the State of Illinois, a position he held for 8 years. Art was in Tom's blood, though, and he would spend his lunch hours sketching Chicago street scenes.

Tom considers his work for Electro-Motive one of the most satisfactory experiences of his life. He was given full license to produce whatever illustration he chose. While this freedom would seem to make Tom's job easier, he says it in fact put him under pressure to produce "bigger and bolder" images. To add realism to his work, he would often actually travel to an individual railroad to get the feel for the territory in which it operated. Indeed, he often incorporated representative landmarks or types of traffic in his scenes.

So what does a retired artist/illustrator do at age 79? Why, keep working, of course. Being an active family man, Tom is currently helping one of his sons in a family-owned restaurant called Tivoli in West Chicago, Ill. Here you can see Tom's paintings, both large and small, some painted as recently as a couple of months ago, all proudly displayed by his son.

Tom was one of the last ad agency artists to be employed by Electro-



Louisville & Nashville coal country is the setting for this scene of L&N SD40's. Fawell sometimes traveled to acquaint himself with his subject roads' territory.

Motive. As Marsteller wound down its account with EMD in the mid-1970's, the builder decided that internal talent could be used to create the illustrations and artwork to support the builder's dwindling advertising efforts.

In an interesting twist, John Calahan, the Marsteller art director who got Tom started with EMD, later

went to work for General Electric's locomotive division in Erie, Pa., and tried get Tom to join him. Tom chose not to jump to the competition, ensuring that his bold style remained synonymous with EMD advertising in the 1960's and early '70's. ■