

VENDOR SPOTLIGHT



Tom Bee milling one last set of side frames before handing off all truck and coupler manufacturing to a new team.

A VISIT WITH TOM BEE

by Ryan DeVries

In the early 2000s the author modeled trains in N scale, but took the opportunity several times a summer to visit the Great Lakes Live Steamers public run days at Starr Jaycee Park in Royal Oak, Michigan. Along the track in the park, a spur ran out of the park into a neighboring

backyard. On most visits the gate to the yard was closed, but on one occasion the gate was open and a couple guys were milling around. The author took this as an invitation to investigate.

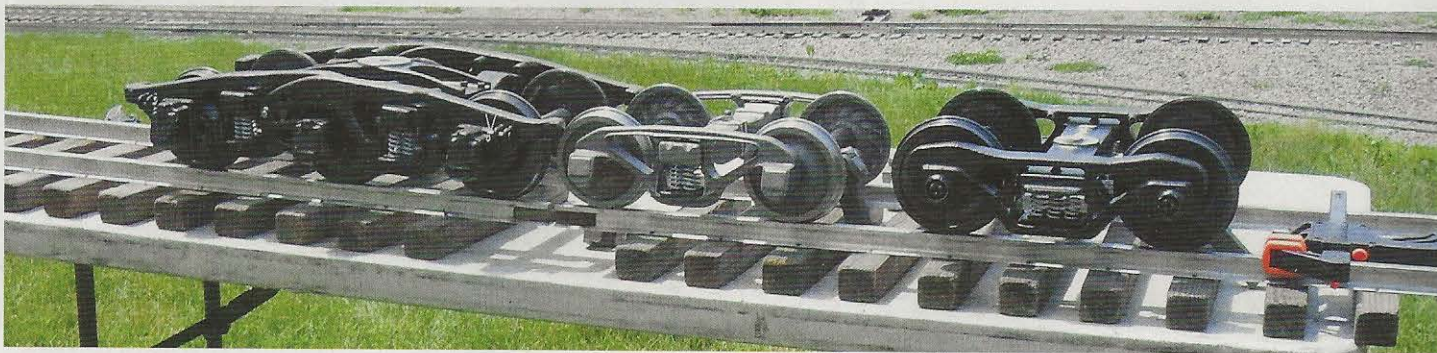
An older gentleman introduced himself as Tom. He was working on an elec-

tric powered steam locomotive, pointing out the drive system, control board and batteries. He then showed a large stationary boiler and an assortment of stationary engines plumbed to the boiler; one powered a generator. Inside a small shed Tom introduced a couple of guys working at a milling machine, making a part to repair an engine. It was all very impressive, and the author decided to get into 1.5-inch scale in the future. Over a decade later, the author made good on that promise and built a boxcab locomotive and two riding cars.

Alas, with less than 10 miles of use, the homemade arch bar trucks failed. Several individuals at the track recommended using Tom Bee trucks because they are very reliable. The author was again introduced to Tom, and found that after 20 years in Royal Oak, he had moved out to the country to have a larger garden and shop.

A date was scheduled to visit and buy a set of caboose trucks. While there, Tom talked about how he got into the hobby. "I started in 1975 because of hockey. My in-laws had an interest in hockey and I did not. To pass the time during a game I started reading a *Popular Mechanics* magazine. An ad in the back advertised 'Build your own live steam locomotive, subscribe to *Live Steam* magazine.' That is how I was introduced to the railroad hobby. I was already interested in stationary engines, so seeing that there was a magazine focused on live steam intrigued me."

Tom did subscribe to *Live Steam* magazine, and based on the club listings in the back he joined the Great Lakes Live Steamers shortly after. "The club was very encouraging; the members would bring their latest build for us all to look at." His involvement with the club made Tom realize how much he liked railroad



A table set up at White Creek Railroad in 2015 with the Buckeye, Bettendorf, and modern trucks. Photo by Tom Bee.



Tom's shop advice: put carpet down in front of the mill and lathe – this will catch the chips and keep them out of the house. Kirby vacuums work best to keep the carpet clean; they last a long time and are easy to rebuild.



Tom's hobby is buying and repairing stationary engines. He likes to make them useful; this small twin-cylinder engine powers a pencil sharpener in the house. *Photo by Tom Bee.*

modeling. The members suggested Tom start with a small project and build up to a large steam engine. "A club member had drawings for a 2-8-2; I shortened it by one axle, making a 1.5-inch scale 2-6-2 propane-fired Prairie over the course of 12 years." When Tom finished the engine he made two flatcars to run with it. At the next meet he got an offer and sold one of the flats. He used the profits to build two more cars.

Another railroader at GLLS had patterns for early-style Bettendorf trucks, and gave Tom permission to make and sell

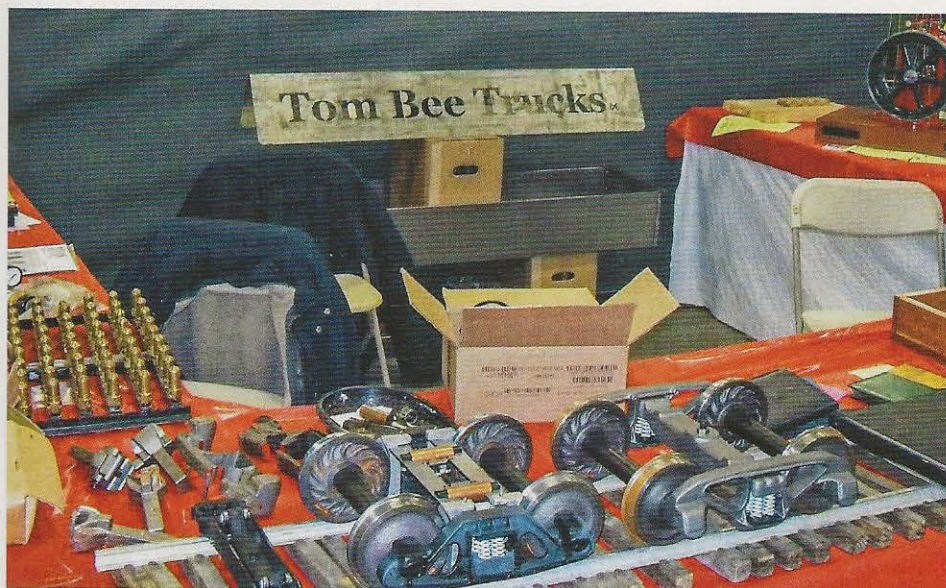
them. "I called the business General Trucks, which can be seen on older castings, but everyone called them Tom Bee trucks; eventually I gave in and rebranded as Tom Bee Trucks.

"While making and selling the ca-boose trucks I got hired at a die model shop. While there I learned how to make patterns. I used that knowledge to make the patterns for the Bettendorf trucks – sold about three thousand sets of them so far. The process was to get the castings made, machine them, load them in my Pontiac Grand Prix, and bring them

to meets and sell them. No advertisements. No presales. I only sold what I had on hand.

"Bill Fitt had great meets in Cadillac, Michigan with the Tri-state group. I sold a lot of the trucks there, as well as Illinois Live Steamers, Lake Shore Live Steamers, North East Ohio Live Steamers, Mid-south, and Hesston. Then later Maricopa Live Steamers in Arizona, Train Mountain and Ridge Live Steamers were also included in the sales route."

While Tom was selling the trucks another club member at GLLS was making



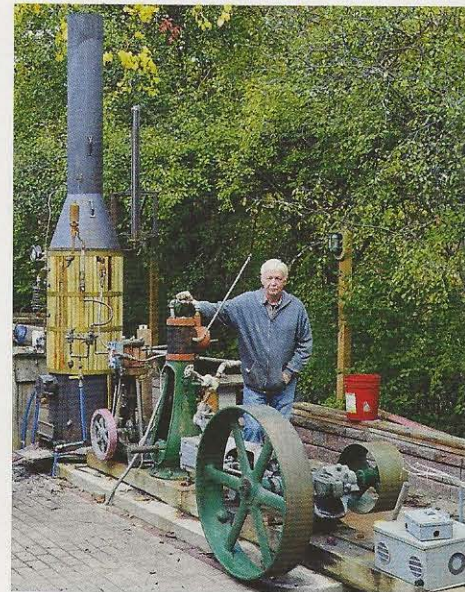
Tom's setup at the North American Model Engineering Society show (NAMES). *Photo by Tom Bee.*



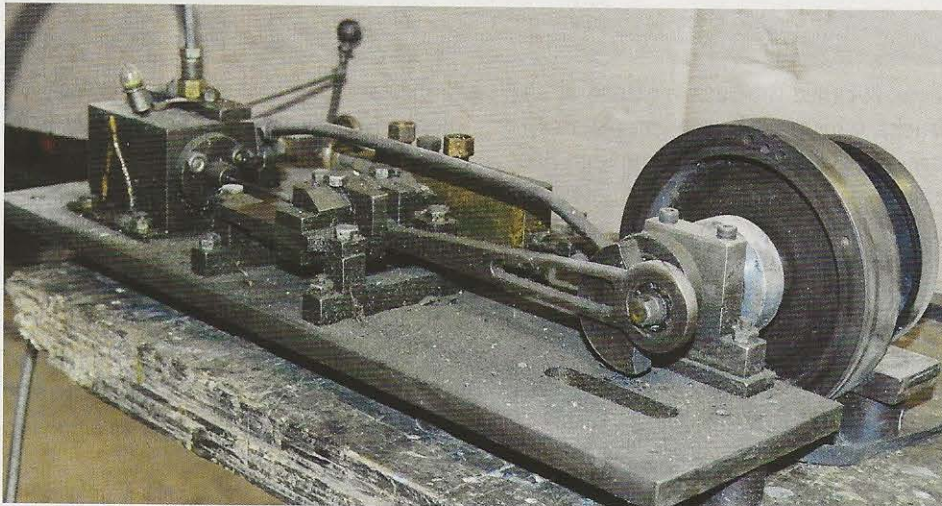
Another engine restored by Tom. *Photo by Tom Bee.*



The team at Tom Bee Online with a set of passenger car trucks. Left to right: Ron Trenheile, engineering; Melissa Perdue, office; Marcel Uhrich, CEO; Mike Harkleroad and Kevin Pfeiferoth, manufacturing; and Marcel's daughter Bridey Uhrich, performance testing.



Tom stands with his boiler and stationary engines on the patio behind his new shop.



Tom's first steam engine, a stationary engine designed and machined from bar stock while in school. For a long time it powered a 6-volt bicycle generator and light until the generator gave out and was removed.



The 17th electric-powered steam outline locomotive manufactured by Tom Bee. *Photo by Tom Bee.*

and selling couplers. He gave Tom the right of first refusal to buy the patterns and make and sell functioning cast iron couplers. Tom took that option and added couplers to his portfolio. He realized a lost wax process would produce a better prod-

uct. Tom found someone to make a mold and a foundry to cast them in steel.

"I have sold about three thousand pairs of couplers. My work experience helped the business a lot. I have worked at twelve different places. I went to school

to be a mechanic, then worked in shops that did pattern making, and ended in quality control running Coordinate Measurement Machines for Chrysler."

Besides work experience, Tom's upbringing was a tremendous asset to being in the truck and coupler business. "My father was a toolmaker and retired as a tool designer – he passed along to me the interest in toolmaking. My mother taught me to be respectful to everyone. I took both to heart for the Tom Bee products. I provided good customer service, mostly by not promising what I could not deliver. I would only sell what I had on hand. Also, I try to take care of any problems and issues – always trying to improve the products, such as designing double-bearing trucks for the higher-capacity cars."

In the '90s Tom designed a one-piece gondola body, with the sides and bottom bent from one panel and the ends separate. "With short sides it is a flatcar, with tall sides it is a gondola, or it can be a combination car perfect for use as an engineer car. I wanted it to be easy to assemble and structurally strong. I sold them as basic, assembled, ready-to-roll cars – ready for a customer to add details." The next year Tom designed two- and three-bay hopper cars. All the cars are available at TomBeeOnline.com.

In 2000 a surgeon asked Tom about building an electric-powered steam outline locomotive. Tom designed and built him a USRA 0-6-0. Since then Tom has

built a steam outline engine almost every year. Number 17 was recently completed, and orders for 18 (a 2-8-0) and 19 (a 2-6-0) are in the works. But alas, going with his philosophy of not over-committing, Tom will not take any additional orders until he is confident he can fulfill them.

To help meet the demand for trucks, couplers and cars, Tom has expanded on a long-time partnership with Marcel and Bridget Uhrich, who have been machining wheels for many years. A member of Lake Shore Live Steamers and owner of Shaker Numeric machine shop in Euclid, Ohio, Marcel has assembled a team to help.

Bridget set up the *TomBeeOnline.com* website and has been fulfilling online sales for the past few years. In June of 2019, Tom handed the reigns of production, along with the selling of all the trucks, couplers, and railcars, to the team.

This has allowed Tom to focus on building the "e-steamers" and his hobby of stationary steam engines. He has obtained many engines over the years, mostly as

basket cases that he has restored. Since the move they have been stored anywhere in his shop there is room.

This past summer, Tom and his friends built a patio to showcase a new boiler and three large stationary engines, similar to what was set up at Royal Oak. These engines are again doing work – one powers the lights around the patio, another is dedicated to cutting kindling. And a table is available to set up and run the smaller engines.

Tom also looks forward to spending time at Bill Hayes' Michigan Central railroad, where he has a dozen of his railcars, most with a Davison Southern herald, on loan to the railroad for their "car card" switching sessions.

Photos by Author except as noted.

TOM BEE ONLINE

Tom has spent many hours, and plans to spend more, with the Tom Bee Online team to teach his "tried and true" techniques to manufacture and assemble the trucks and cars. Kevin Pfeifenroth, an Army Veteran, was enlisted full time to assemble the Tom Bee products with the same care as Tom. Melissa Perdue supports the office, tracks orders through production, and coordinates the casting and component suppliers. As part of the ongoing improvements, Ron Trenheile, an engineer with Shaker Numeric and member of Lake Shore Live Steamers, has updated the CAD drawings, improved tooling setups for faster assembly, and is working on new product offerings. The first, 4-wheel and 6-wheel passenger car trucks with swing-motion bolsters, are available for purchase now. Next in development are modern passenger car trucks.



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