

Through an Interview with *Jim Gates*, CM #1, Here's How the LCCA Began!

(Editor's Note: This is the first of a six part series of your Club's background and history. We start with an interview of Jim Gates, the LCCA's founder, conducted/transcribed recently by Dennis De Vito, RM #6758. Jim is shown on the front cover, to the right, receiving a plaque from President Chuck Seddon acknowledging the founding and commemorating our 25th Anniversary. So, here's how the Club first began, straight from CM #1. Enjoy!)

DD: Well, let's begin with you talking about the start up and early history of the Club.

JG: OK, first of all, I came from a railroad family, lived in a small town of about 6,000 called Perry, Iowa. I was the only train collector I knew of in town, but I had played with kids who had Lionel trains and, my family was railroaders, my grandpa my dad, so naturally I was interested in trains. Eventually I ended up in Des Moines many years later. Again I knew no train collectors, so I watched the Sunday paper and one day I saw an ad in the paper for some trains so I called and went over to his house and that is how I met Ed Houck, my first train collector. We had such a nice chat that I told him why can't we do this again. Ed said he thought that would be a good idea. So then we invited J. B. Snyder who, at the time, owned the one and only 'Brute' in the state of Iowa. That was the first get together like a 'club', just the three of us. We had so much fun that we developed the idea, or I guess I developed the idea that why couldn't we meet once a month in somebody's house and rotate. So that's the way my first local club started. Then, the first local meeting was held in my garage a short time later and about twenty collectors showed up.

And that was very successful and pretty soon the local club grew, but I still wasn't satisfied. I wanted to have a Lionel club because I used to buy *Model Railroader Magazine* and *Railroad Model Craftsman* and I'd get so peeved that there wouldn't ever be anything about Lionel in there but when you looked in the back of the magazine all that was for sale and want ads was

Lionel. Finally one day I just got tired of it and I decided the only way to put an end to that was to organize and start our own club, a national club. Of course I met resistance right away with negative attitudes from the local toy collectors who said it couldn't be done. Even my wife said it couldn't be done. Everybody seemed against me. But that helped me because I'm stubborn. I started getting response right away, it grew real slow at first but I finally ran into difficulty because I called the first club the Lionel Collectors Club - period. Then one day the meeting had rotated back to my house, it was in my garage, and somebody invited an American Flyer collector and he stands up there and says "I think you ought to change the name to American Flyer Collectors Club". He was making his point that he wasn't a Lionel collector and by golly they all voted to do that, to change the name. I was dumbfounded. Even though I was President, I was outvoted and they changed the name to Toy Train Club. I was just shot down. I felt defeated and sulked as I sat in my basement. Finally I took responsibility on myself and decided to start a second time.

That's when I put the ad in *Model Railroader Magazine*. The first time I just tried to call the local club the Lionel's Collector's Club. So the second time in order to start again, I changed the name slightly to Lionel Collectors Club of America. And of course, I got immediate response but it was slow. I think after six months of advertising, the new Club only had thirty or forty members so it was pretty slow growing. So, in 1971, when I got around to trying to get the first Annual Convention, I was very worried because I still only had about sixty or seventy members and this was spread out over the whole nation. When I rented the Howard Johnson on Grand Avenue I had to put out a lot of propaganda to try to get anybody to come. I was very worried that maybe nobody would show up. But anyway, there were fifty-two who showed up and I think we only had like eighty members. That was astounding because they came from places like Washington, Oregon, New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts. They came

from all over. And then there was another twenty or so joined at the door so when the first Annual Convention was over, we had about one hundred and ten members.

At the first Convention I told them I wasn't going to run for office. I started the Club mainly because I felt it was needed. Before the Convention was over they elected Van Stockdale as President and the reason he was elected is there was a good sized bunch who came from Kansas City. They thought he was a good guy, I knew nothing about it so anyway when the second Convention came they naturally took it to Kansas City because he was the President and that was what was voted on at the first Convention. Well, as you know, Van Stockdale did not pan out so good and eventually he was replaced by Chuck Seddon. Years later I asked some of the Kansas City guys why did you vote this guy in. They told me they didn't know anything about him. I guess they just did it because he was from Kansas City and they were from Kansas City, that's basically what it amounted to. But the Club was kind of slow growing there in its first years, but when Chuck Seddon took over he did well as it took Chuck a year or two to really get things straightened out and get rolling by the time we had our third Convention in Huntsville, Alabama. Chuck Seddon saved the Club.

Oh, I overlooked one important thing, at the first Annual Convention even though we were small, Lionel did send a representative and I wrote them a letter and I always thought that was pretty good because we were so small. Lionel also gave me a box of, I think, 100 catalogs to pass out. That was pretty nice, that was helpful. At the second Convention, we wrote them, or the new President did because I told him how I did things. The Lionel company from that day on always sent somebody and some of the guys don't work for them anymore, but we did have support from the Lionel company from the very start and then I also had a lot of other support from a lot of other people. For example, at the first Annual Convention there was a guy named Ted Dart

and he brought a whole train set we gave away as prizes and we actually gave away some pretty nice stuff for the fact there were so few of us at the time. Really the first Annual Convention was really very very good, we had tours of the Rock Island yards and I have a movie of the first Annual Convention. It's a nice color movie of the first Annual Convention which shows the old cars, man it's amazing how the cars back then look against what they look like today. I even have pictures, movies, of the Lionel representatives, who don't work for them anymore but we really had a nice first Annual Convention. I say I was really worried but when all those guys came, then I knew it was OK.

And then, of course, we had problems like Stockdale and we had some other problems along the way here and there. It took about three, or four, or five years and then, boy, finally the membership started to really grow. I think Chuck Seddon is really responsible for getting the Club rolling because he was President three straight years and then after that, he served in other positions. There were a lot of guys that helped out, I just mentioned some of the guys that helped me to really get the Club going at first like Jim Greytak who was a colonel in the Army at the time. He printed all my literature and propaganda in the first few months I was starting the Club, I just didn't have money to send out propaganda I needed so he helped me by being able to run copies of stuff for me, like the first Constitution and questionnaires. I used to send out questionnaires to ask the members what they wanted what they wanted to talk about all kinds of trains or whether they just wanted strictly Lionel. I got the first constitution established by asking a lot of questions and sending out constant questionnaires, about ten. I still have all them at home. And all the records I have I intend to turn over to the Club some day.

By the way, I got that name propaganda from the last Charter Member who ever joined, number 83, whose name is Lou Sinclair and he wrote me one time and mentioned my propaganda. I thought that was a good word so from then on I used it, the word propaganda.

DD: Why did the Charter Members stopped at number 83? Was there a reason?

JG: That's a good question. I figured the first guys should have some kind of an honor and how long do you allow fellows to join and be Charter Members. I just had to guess at a date so I just one day put out some propaganda and I said that anybody who joined before June 25, or I forget what day it was would be a Charter Member and anybody after that would become a Regular Member. I just had to make my own deadline and I think I allowed like five or six months, I don't remember, but it was made up. I had to make up some stuff as I went along, because there was nobody but me and I had to make all the decisions.

DD: Getting back to your first attempt, do you think you would have started the club if you had other contacts in town and, if you had other people to talk to, would you have started a national club?

JG: I think so, like I say, there were two main reasons for trying to start a club. First off, there were no magazines except *Model Railroader* and *Railroad Model Craftsman* and they never put anything about Lionel in print. Now, I think it's ironic how all of a sudden they came out with the magazine *Classic Toy Trains*. It took them more than twenty years to wake up to how many members are in our Club. It took Dick Christianson, who use to be Editor of *Toy Trains Magazine*, to get a magazine out that had a lot of Lionel information in it. By the way, *Toy Trains Magazine* was very successful, it was always sold out, every time you tried to get one thirty years ago, boy you better be the first one at the stand or you didn't get one. But when *Model Railroader* bought them out, right away they stopped making *Toy Trains Magazine*. So I knew from reading *Model Railroader* magazine and from the fact there was a magazine called *Toy Trains*, a magazine many, many years ago that there was a lot of Lionel collectors around and also the fact that the local club I started became very successful in like a month or so, then I just wasn't satisfied.

The second reason was you used to hear a lot of people knock Lionel, especially HO'ers. So, I would say the other main reason was to put together a group of people who felt pride in the name Lionel. The funny part of all that, I always thought, was darn if every time I knew a few guys who had HO, every time I was around them, their cars

were always on the side of the track, derailling, they were monkeying with them, the couplers were breaking, they were constantly having trouble with their stuff and my little old trains, what few I had, I never had any trouble so, that is just a combination of different things, just me seeing things and reading the magazines, I just felt there was a real need and I used to really get peeved when I used to hear people knock Lionel - so -

DD: When I go back into my early days of collecting, I always had three or four guys I used to talk to. While it wasn't a formal club we at least had people to share interests with and I never felt the need for me to start a club - maybe it was because I had friends there. I wonder if your early history might have lead you to the need to have a club.

JG: Well see, another thing that really made me realize how important is was needed to have a Lionel Club was that day when they brought that American Flyer collector over and he says we ought to change the name to American Flyer Club. The thing that really got me more than anything about that so much was that these other collectors agreed with him and his point was that there were other guys there besides Lionel and maybe we should call it a neutral name, like Toy Train Club. What really got me was the fact that there was not any pride in the Lionel name, not even among Lionel collectors. That was the thing that really got me going.

DD: How long was your older club in existence?

JG: You mean the first club, the local club?

DD: Yes, The Lionel Collectors Club

JG: Oh that club, the first time, I can't remember exactly but I would guess the first club, the one I called the Lionel Collectors Club, it might have been a year, to a year and a half. And, remember, it was just a local club, which by the way every time I mention to the local club let's try to get somebody from Omaha or Minneapolis or someplace - "Oh no! we don't want to get too big because when and where are we going to meet?" You see, they always had negative stuff. It worked great as long as

(Continued on Page 22.)

(Continued from Page 19.)

there were only twenty of us and we could meet in that garage. But then, all of a sudden, these guys were worried about the local guys in the club - "Well if we get too big, where are we going to go?". It was negative talk all the time and I knew it paid to organize because you had John L. Lewis, the union leaders and stuff around at those times and when you organize, you get powerful, and when you get powerful, you can do anything. And that was always in the back of my mind. All we had to do was organize and charge a small amount of dues which would pay for our propoganda and we were down at \$10.00 per year dues, what I think it started out as, and we kept that for many, many years. With a lot of people helping me, I didn't do it all by myself. There were a lot of people who really did a lot of work besides just me. There were never any real problems. About the only things that you could call problems were the negativism and getting pride in the Lionel name. Let me say one other thing, these local guys had such a negative attitude that I withdrew from the club I'd founded. I was mad at them, I resigned as President, when they changed the name to the Toy Train Collectors Club. That meet happened to be at J. B. Snyder's house. I told them what I thought of them, I told them I couldn't believe that Lionel collectors did not have enough pride in their own name and like I say, I went home and sulked. Stared at the wall and then that's when I finally decided to go to *Model Railroader* magazine even though they had treated us badly over the years, by not printing any articles, but at least both of them, *Railroad Model Craftsman* and *Model Railroader* would let me advertise free in that I was trying to start a club and then I slightly changed the name. That's basically how I turned defeat into victory.

DD: *Again, how many members were there in that first club?*

JG: Well when we first started, I would guess there were twenty to twenty-five or so at that time.

DD: *And, how many of those guys you originally started with joined the second club?*

JG: They joined one at a time. It took them a few years, but gradually I noticed there's one local guy joining back up and

then another and finally all the guys who were against me finally came to the LCCA. You know I don't hold any hard feelings against them, only wish I'd have been more prepared when they changed the name.

DD: *Let me ask about the LCCA. You mention you started this Club to be with other people, but at the time there were other clubs. The TCA was around—*

JG: Yeah, I became a TCA member in 1970, which was about the time I was starting this Club. But I wasn't happy with them because they cover all gauges. I felt we needed to establish pride in the Lionel name. That's what was in my head. Come to think of it, I don't remember the exact date that I advertised in the *Model Railroader* for the Lionel Collectors Club of America. Then I just kind of had to guess when I started the second time so I put down the date of August 1st as the anniversary date. To be perfectly honest with you, I don't know whether that's the accurate anniversary date or not, but that was the date I said so that's the date we've always used.

DD: *You are really saying the reason you started the Club was to get just the group of guys who cared about Lionel together.*

JG: Yeah, I just felt that I didn't want to hear people knocking Lionel like some guys did. And I didn't like *Model Railroader* and *Railroad Model Craftsman* not putting anything in about Lionel so when I put out my first propoganda, I told them that we want to get strong enough to have our own *Interchange Track* and our own magazine. And we did, we had it right away. We had an *Interchange Track* within two or three months after I got going. It was pretty small, but we had one.

DD: *You were the Editor?*

JG: Oh no, no, no, no! I appointed guys right off the bat. Even though we didn't have Officers, I appointed guys right away. I never tried to be a glory hound. In fact, I appointed a guy I didn't even know, Len Chenkowski who was the second guy to ever join the Club, actually the first guy. I gave myself the first number which I probably shouldn't have done, but anyway, I did. But Len, who I never met at the time, lived in Pennsylvania. I think I appointed him as the first *Interchange Track* Editor. He was going to college and did it for a short time

and then he wrote me and said he was so busy that maybe I could get somebody else. And then I appointed Jim Hunt, who had come to the first Convention. By the way, he stood up there and gave me a little bit of gruff, but I appreciated it. I always admired Jim for that. He stood up there and I don't remember what he said anymore, but all the other guys were mad at him for giving me some grief on something. But what he asked me, I answered him and he was satisfied. Anyway, I admire Jim Hunt even though he gave me heck about something and today I don't even remember what it was. I appointed him the second *Interchange Track* Editor. The magazine's first Editor was Warren Betts. The guys who ran the first magazines and the first *Interchange Track* only ran it for a short time and then for some reason or another, they didn't want to do it any longer or something and eventually when they finally started to get Officers, they appointed the other people to run these different things.

DD: *When were the first officers elected?*

JG: They were elected during the first Annual Convention.

DD: *So for that first year or so, the Club was a rather loose knit group?*

JG: Right, we didn't have Officers until the first Annual Convention. And then after I welcomed them and thanked them for coming and everything and we went on our tours, I told them I would not run for office. I know they were all thinking I was going to keep on doing this. But I surprised them and told them I'm not running for office and I didn't start the Club to be a hero. So, before the Convention was over they elected Van Stockdale as President, John Vodopich as Vice-President, Jim Brady as Secretary, Don Foote as Assistant Secretary and Larry Keller as Treasurer. Those five guys were the first elected leaders of the LCCA and just like the 52 members who were there in Des Moines in 1971, the first Officers came from all over the country.

DD: *How did you get the idea for the Constitution and Bylaws.*

JG: Here's how I formed the first Constitution. I was a member of the TCA at that time and I took the TCA Constitution and I started studying it. I also went to the library and I checked out a book on Robert's

Rules of Order, I'm forgetful but not dumb. So I studied the TCA's Constitution, I didn't want to copy off them, I changed an awful lot of stuff in there that they had, we had a lot of rules at the start that were a lot different than the TCA. But then, of course, when I put the first Constitution together, I was also sending out these questionnaires which would have like ten questions and I would send those questionnaires to everyone who was a member and I would leave a blank for them too. All they had to do was to write in their opinion or their answer and mail it back to me, and I would wait until I got these questionnaires to decide how to write the Constitution. For instance, I wanted to find out if they wanted to be strictly a Lionel club right off the bat. The majority all said they did so then I wrote in the Constitution that we would be strictly a Lionel club, you see. I really couldn't make the Constitution up until I sent out about 10 different questionnaires, which took quite a bit of money to print those because they had two or three pages and you know at this time I was doing this on my own and that's where Jim Greytak came in handy. He helped print a lot of stuff for me and then I would send him the one copy and he'd send me back a hundred. I would send him a small envelope and I would get back a great big one from him. And that's how I got the first Constitution together and then of course when Officers were elected over the years, they'd change another rule here and there. And now our present Constitution today doesn't probably look too much like the original Constitution, but there's still some rules in there from that first Constitution. A lot of time they would just change a word here and a word there over the years because of something which developed along the way.

DD: *Are you generally happy with where the Club has come?*

JG: Well, there's only one thing I don't like today and it's about our Constitution. The United States Constitution starts off by saying a couple things in the preamble which I thought were very nice and I had those thoughts in the LCCA's original Constitution. To this day I don't know why the later Officers dropped that preamble that I had, which was something to do with honor and the Lionel name or something like that. They still say on the application something about you're suppose to honor the Club

Bylaws or Constitution, but I had a nice little thing in there on the original one. I don't know why they ever dropped it.

To me, I thought it was pretty neat because its almost exactly like the US constitution. That's the only thing that I don't really like.

DD: *Was the change ever actually voted on...*

JG: I don't know why the change was ever done. I was never an Officer so I don't know the reasons why the preamble was ever dropped but, I have original copies of the first Constitution and everything. Overall, to answer your other question, I don't have any complaints. In the first ten years the Club had some problems, and back then everybody still knew me pretty well. Now the only members who really know me are the long term ones. I used to get constant letters and gradually it's getting to where I don't get too many any more, but I used to get letters from members even though I was never an Officer. I used to get letters every time there was a problem. They would write in and I would have to say I'm sorry I'm not an Officer, but sometimes when they tell me what happened I would write the Officers and give them my two cents worth and once in a while I gave them grief. I tried to stay out of it as much as I could, but there were a few times they did things I didn't like. Naturally, you and I are never going to agree on everything and so how am I ever going to agree with everything the Officers ever did. But I would say I'm real happy except for one minor little detail about the Constitution years ago and I don't even remember exactly what the preamble said anymore but I can understand them having to change the rules to keep up with the times. The one thing I'm really pleased about is that I feel the Club caused *Model Railroader* to wake up and come out with *Classic Toy Trains* magazine. It's the frosting on the cake to me when CTT came out because that was one of the main reasons why I started the Club since there was hardly anything in print about Lionel.

DD: *Why are there the three LCCA publications, The Lion Roars, the Interchange Track, and the Roster. Did you have a hand in that? Was that part of your original concept?*

JG: Yes, I started the first *IT* and the

first Lionel magazine. Based on my idea, the Roster was initially done by Jim Hunt. I think the main reason we did the first roster was because everybody wanted to know who belongs to the Club.

DD: *That's built right in the Constitution that there would be a Roster?*

JG: Well I made all the early decisions, like I say, but I had to write these questionnaires first before I could come up with how we were going to do things. In order to know how to do things we had to have a Constitution, but I could write a Constitution right off the bat because I did a lot of studying on the US Constitution. Also, I do remember when Dennis Chandler suggested to me one day that the Lionel Lion should be the Club's mascot. So I originated that from his idea. But the Hudson was my idea, strictly my idea. Oh, I knew a lot of things about Lionel and I mean, I know that the Hudson was the best thing Lionel ever made and nobody made anything that good and so I was the one who put the Hudson on as our emblem and Dennis Chandler suggested the Lionel Lion as the mascot.

DD: *Why Des Moines? It's not a hot bed of train collecting activity. Is that the reason because there were not a lot of people here and you were seeking a larger membership?*

JG: No, it was like I said, the Lionel name and pride issues. And then hearing those HO'ers knock Lionel some way or other.

DD: *It worked*

JG: Yes, if I had organized better the first time maybe this American Flyer guy wouldn't have caused me trouble, but, who's to say. The only thing I just feel bad that I wasn't ready for that American Flyer guy that day he came in and that I wasn't able to convince them that they were wrong in changing that name, so after that episode, I decided that hey, I'm not going to give up on my original idea of creating a club for Lionel people like myself.

DD: *Glad you didn't give up! Thanks Jim, for your determination and founding of the LCCA.*

JG: You're welcome, and I hope everyone enjoys the hobby and Lionel trains as much as I do.