

THE RAILROADS AND DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

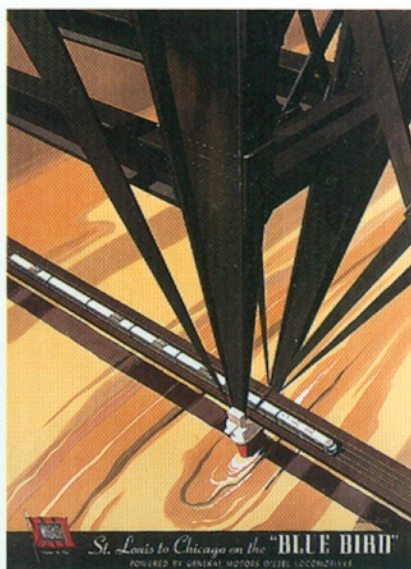
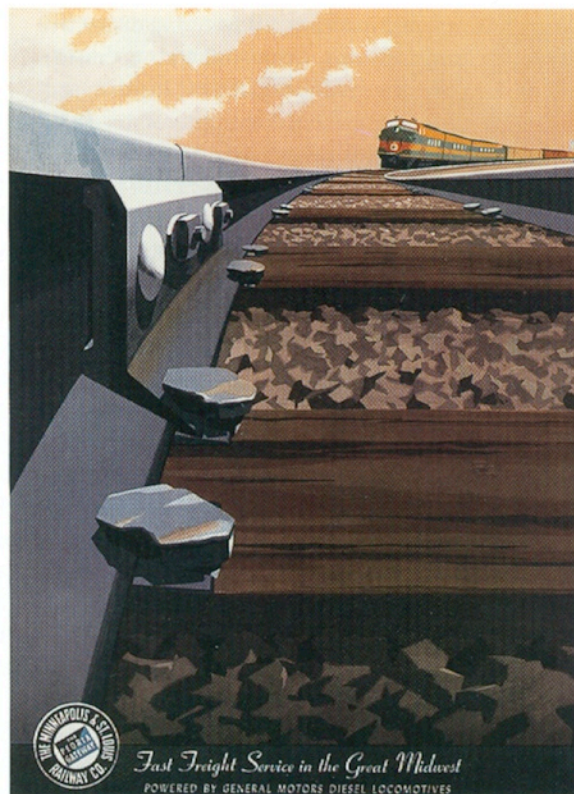
RAILROAD HERITAGETM

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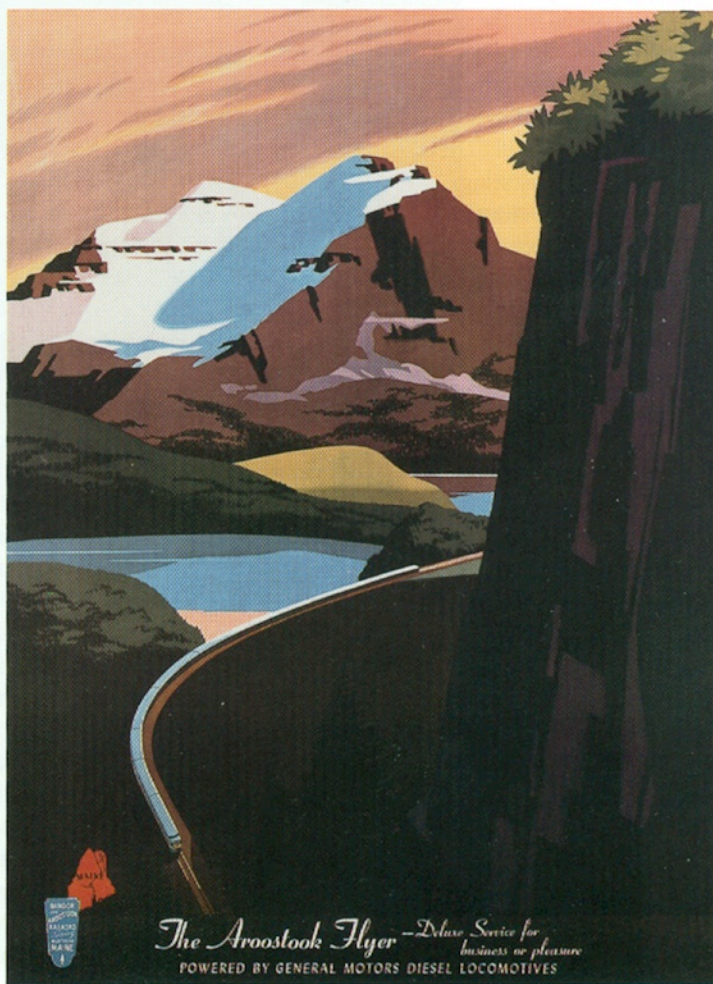
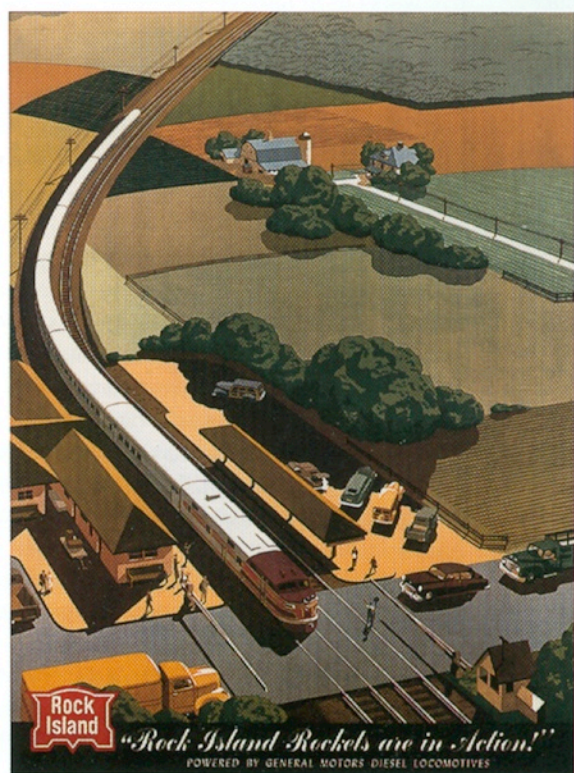




Bern Hill



Bern Hill's paintings for EMD advertising in *Railway Age* include Western Pacific, 1950; Minneapolis & St. Louis, 1951; Wabash, 1950; Rock Island, 1950; and Bangor & Aroostock, 1950. All illustrations including cover are from Electro-Motive Division of General Motors.



Bern Hill: The Master of "Feeling"

Greg Palumbo

When the subject of Bern Hill arises in railroad art conversations, *neutrality is just not possible as you either love or hate his work.*

The traditionalists will always offer arguments that cite the lack of details shown in the locomotives and the fact that the locomotive is often minimized where it should have been featured as a predominant center of attention. *On the other side of the argument, well you just have to smile* Hill (1911-1977) was born in Canada. His earliest known U.S. published work was found on the cover of *Cue, the Weekly Magazine of New York Life*, December 21, 1940. It featured a likeness of Santa Claus!

Hill first hit the locomotive world on February 18, 1950, featured on the cover of *Railway Age* magazine. The painting was a beautiful scene of a Western Pacific Zephyr winding through snow covered mountains on a starlit night.

Hill went on to paint 65 paintings for Electro-Motive Division of General Motors while working for the Knudner Agency in New York. All 65 paintings were used as covers for *Railway Age*, with the last locomotive painting showing up in 1956. According to Hill, it represented the largest single body of work in his career.

Hill's paintings were featured exclusively on the covers of *Railway Age*. Electro-Motive also produced a series of very high-grade posters of Hill's paintings that were overwritten by the marketing theme for that particular railroad. Because of the high quality of the paper used on the posters, they easily ripped, even when handled carefully, and very few have survived. It is unknown if all 65 painting were turned into posters. The only known examples of Hill's work without advertising are the original paintings.

Other contributions included advertising work for American Airlines, General Electric, Ford, Sabena Airlines, Aetna Insurance, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Reader's Digest*, and Southern New England

Telephone Company (25 covers for local telephone books). When Hill's son, Steve, as young boy in the late 1950s, received an HO train set manufactured by A. C. Gilbert, he was thrilled to discover that his father had painted the artwork for the box.

Sadly, the limited distribution and audience of *Railway Age*, the fragile nature of the posters, and the fact that very few issues of 1950s vintage magazines remain, left Hill's work relatively undiscovered for many years. *Trains* reintroduced Hill to a larger audience by randomly featuring his work on covers mostly during 1971-1975. While Hill's work is unusable in developing HO or O scale models, Hill's painting may be the only documentation that captured and preserved the essence of railroads no longer in business.

In 1950, Electro-Motive embarked on a new marketing strategy; showcase as many railroads as possible on the cover of the weekly railroad industry publication, *Railway Age* magazine. This was no small undertaking and Hill managed to produce between 12 and 16 paintings per year from 1950 through 1953, in some cases with only two weeks separating his featured covers! The timing of this advertising campaign was not by accident and coincided with a very important year in Electro-Motive's history. It was during this year that Electro-Motive seriously started world-wide marketing of its product and opened a second locomotive plant in London, Ontario, Canada.

Hill's assignment was to portray the "feel" of each railroad in a scene that often captured the landscape of the individual road and gave the viewer the sense of that road's mission (freight, passenger, or switching). The success of Hill's assignment helped Electro-Motive maintain customer loyalty and bolster additional locomotive sales worldwide.

The beauty of Hill's locomotive paintings are found in the way he captures the essence of each railroad. The 1950s represented a period in railroad history that found America with an abundance of

regional rail lines, all featuring distinctive paint schemes. Often, railroads operated only in a small geographical location and were unknown in some parts of the country.

Hill was never bound by traditional rules of art realism and each Hill painting used a unique blend of color and scenery to enhance the feel of his paintings. You often found yourself looking at a yellow or red sky or even a yellow river. Yet, you never even noticed that the abstract colors and the landscape are what drew you into the centerpiece of the painting, the locomotive. But, don't spend too much time trying to determine if it's an E3 or an F7. That level of detail just wasn't important to Hill in establishing the "feel" of a particular road.

Hill loved to change perspective in his paintings. In one painting, you find yourself looking up as a locomotive passes you by on a large bridge *through a blinding rain, and you just know* that the girders are creaking under the weight of *that* powerful locomotive. Flip to the next painting and you're a bird flying through a canyon as the locomotive works itself through a mountain pass with the sky blazing red. Fly higher yet and you're looking down at the beauty of a rail yard with all the intricacies of the switches, curves, and the bustle of locomotives and freight cars.

The scenes are endless and you have to wonder; did Hill fly through that canyon, or did he just sit behind a desk sorting through endless photos, books, and postcards? Remember that the year is 1950, cross-country travel is still not perfect and airline travel is expensive. Did we even have private planes or helicopters *for hire*? All these questions only enhance your appreciation of what Hill accomplished, and if you're a hopeless railroad romantic ... well, *I did try to warn you.*

Palumbo is an employee of Electro-Motive Division. He has written articles for Vintage Rails magazine and Railroad Heritage about EMD advertising art. He lives with his wife and daughter in Chicago and been a long-time supporter in preserving railroad art.