

Chris Burger Remembers Gil Reid

As many of us already know, railroad artist Gil Reid passed away on Jan 2, 2007 at age 89. He was a long time friend and admirer of the Chicago & North Western and its employees. Gil donated much of the artwork for our steam program, created paintings for the corporate Christmas card as well as many C&NW related paintings over the years. He was well known as Amtrak's "calendar artist" for many years. Chris Burger wrote this eulogy in Gil's memory.

GIL REID (1918 – 2007) EULOGY

The catalyst for Gil Reid's and my friendship was our shared love of railroading. We were both "hooked" at an early age and were fortunate to be able – in different ways, to make it our life's work.

Gil was born in St. Louis, lived for a while in the New York City area – along the New Haven Railroad and in Richmond, IN – along his beloved Pennsylvania railroad. He was a World War II Purple Heart recipient, mentioned in Ernie Pyle's book "Brave Men"; tried his hand at a couple of other lines of work, but ultimately settled in to make a living at what he loved best – railroad artwork. Freight Trains, Passenger Trains, Steam locomotives, Diesels, Electrics, Interurbans, Trolleys, Depots, Signals, Railroaders; you name it, he did it. I suppose he's best known for his water color work but he's also worked with acrylics and has a wonderful body of pen and ink work – much of it to accompany TRAINS and MODEL RAILROADER articles for thirty or so years.

I suppose Gil knew how good he was but you'd never know it, being with him. He did enjoy the reaction he got to his work and the knowledge that he was able to trigger fond memories – and sometimes, tears; and educate folks with it. I was able to share his artwork through our Christmas cards and my wife and I marveled at the reaction. The best and most rewarding was from friends and relatives with no railroad interest or background.

Gil had his share of honors and awards over the years. Among them was the "Senior Achievement" award from the Railway & Locomotive Historical Society, a "Lifetime Achievement Award" from The PRR Historical Society and the "Warren Mott Award" from the National Railroad Museum, all for his work promoting the interest in and appreciation of railroading.

My first piece of railroad artwork was Gil's "Noonday Water Stop" print, a Christmas present when I was fifteen or so years old. I didn't know at the time it was the picture that launched Gil's career. It hangs today in our home. In 1967 my wife and I moved to Madison, WI to work for the Chicago & North Western. In 1968, I met Gil for the first time at an art show there and purchased my first piece of his original work – sort of an abstract piece, silhouetting a pair of steam locomotives cresting a grade with intermixed smoke and clouds in wild colors. It wasn't until we moved to the Milwaukee area in 1977 however, that we met again and began the friendship artist / patron relationship that lasted nearly thirty years. Gil's studio in Elm Grove wasn't far from my office in Butler. I loved to wander over there at lunch time and look over his shoulder as various pieces of artwork took shape. Gil enjoyed cab rides, business car and hi-rail trips, getting out with our cameras -- his seldom worked -- and the relationships he developed with other folks on the railroad.

I've always thought that Gil's artwork reflects his personality, positive, generous, outgoing and enthusiastic. No one loved railroading more than he did. Many of us marveled at how positive he remained despite health problems in later years and how he'd perk up at any mention of trains or railroading.

I feel like there were distinct phases to Gil's railroad art career. When he was overseas in the Army, he created sketches of railroading there – which he hoped – in vain as it turned out, would help him transfer to a Railway Operating Unit. Then there was his work for Kalmbach. And the artwork for his print business. And his Amtrak calendar artwork. And finally, all the commission pieces he turned out for clients all over the US and a few overseas. Quite a body of work!

One of Gil's heroes was Grif Teller who became famous doing calendar and other artwork for the Pennsylvania Railroad. I think Gil had figured out that he did more Amtrak calendars than Grif did Pennsy's though and got a kick out of that. Gil and Howard Fogg went to art school in Chicago together and were good friends and correspondents for years until Fogg died. Gil loved to tell of the trips the two of them took around Chicago in the 1940's, chasing trains. Gil and railroad artist, Russ Porter were good friends too, as were Gil and Ted Rose. Ted considered Gil to be a mentor and an inspiration. Gil considered Ted to be THE all time best.

Another hero was Pennsylvania Railroad locomotive engineer, Dick Karnes. Dick ran between Richmond, IN and Indianapolis and took Gil along on a trip in the cab of his engine – K-4 No. 5495. Gil's friends know that for years and years, his WI license plate no. was "K4 5495" and have heard Gil live and re-live that trip. I had similar experiences as a young boy with New Haven engineer, Otis Sweet and when I asked Gil to do a painting of that engine and train with Sweet at the throttle, he knew exactly how I felt and created an inspired painting – and name for the piece; "Sweet Memories".

Gil Reid ranks among the all time great railroad artists. His many friends, patrons, admirers and – I dare say, the railroad world, are all the better for his example, talent, and the body of work he left us.

Chris Burger
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