

# Tom Sedarski

## Building Relationships and Fixing Problems

Tom Sedarski didn't set out to be a braking engineer. An industrial education major at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, he began his career teaching shop and driver's education at various high schools around the Badger State. But when the suburban-Milwaukee high school where he taught for a time served notice that it would eliminate its technical education program, Tom weighed his options.

A family friend from Chicago who was in the rail business knew of an opening with a company that was introducing a new air brake control valve to the U.S. market and needed a service engineer for their product launch. "They came up to Milwaukee where I was teaching and took Patti (my wife) and me out to a fancy restaurant," Tom recalls. "Patti had a traveling dad as a salesman growing up and vowed never to marry a traveling man. But when they wrote a figure—my salary—on a matchbook cover and passed it to her, she turned to me and said, 'better pack your bags, hon.' So, I ended up in the railroad industry."

Having grown up on a farm, Tom had become mechanically proficient at fixing things and had a knack for keeping equipment running, which would serve him well in this new chapter of his career. For the next five years, he worked as a service engineer for a subsidiary of Westinghouse Brake and Signal, fixing problems associated with control valves and training people how to test and operate them. Though still based in Milwaukee, his duties took him across the country—to Idaho, Montana, and "anywhere trains ran with our prototype valves on them." A recession would hit the industry in the mid-80s, however, and with railcar building greatly slowed, it was time to move on.

"I worked for my father-in-law for a couple of years selling the rights to TV shows in smaller Midwest television markets. I sold re-runs of *Hill Street Blues*, *St. Elsewhere*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, and others," Tom recounts. "While it

was interesting, it wasn't my cup of tea. I'm a technical guy, so I'm not satisfied with just talking and sales numbers—I need to teach and to fix things."

So, after his brief sojourn in the television business, it was back to the rail equipment industry. Now living in the Chicago suburb of Saint Charles, Tom joined Ellcon National, a braking and railcar equipment supplier where he would work for the next 30 years. It was good timing, as the company was introducing a new type of pneumatic empty load valve to the industry. "The aluminum coal car was just coming into vogue in the late 1980s/early 1990s," Tom notes. "Utilities were switching over to the aluminum coal car, both gondas and hoppers, to carry more lading, and be more efficient and economical—and our empty load device became a perfect fit for those car types."

It was around this time that Tom started attending NCTA meetings (WCTA back then), where his evolving expertise in coal car braking equipment (and hands-on approach) was invaluable to the utilities. "There used to be a joke among some of my car builder and utility friends: 'What's the dirtiest thing under a freight car? And the answer was Tom Sedarski,'" he recalls. "I used to crawl under cars all the time, because that's where our equipment was, and coal cars happened to be some of the dirtiest of all. So I would come out pretty filthy from the black coal dust and rail grease."

Tom expresses particular fondness for the collegiality of the NCTA's Operations and Maintenance (O&M) Committee, for whom he served on the Executive Committee and chaired its Technical Review Committee for a number of years. Competitors as well as utilities routinely set aside their differences in the pursuit of answers to challenges and problems that affected all, he says. "I think that anybody who comes into the NCTA—especially in a technical capacity—should join O&M because



*Tom and wife Patti in Colorado this September.*



*Daughter Molly with Tom at the Great Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado.*

you learn so much and can build such a valuable network of knowledgeable people. They are so proactive in their thinking and so focused on educating their membership.”

While the technical programs and hands-on events, such as the railcar “tear-downs,” were a great source of knowledge sharing, so too were the social events, Tom says. “The annual meetings were as important as any, because you would meet during the day to discuss the technical issues and then have the camaraderie at night. Those things are not mutually exclusive.” Often, he adds, people can be more hesitant to speak up in the formal meetings, while at social events they will open up about a particular issue or challenge. “I would suggest to my colleagues who also attended the NCTA meetings: Don’t forget to attend the coffee breaks and cocktail hour. I would always go to these gatherings because I could learn so much through these informal conversations with fellow members. Sometimes I would even have to go back to my room to take notes so I wouldn’t forget all that I learned.”

Ellcon National (EN) would go on to have several ownership changes over the last 10 years of Tom’s career—Amsted Rail being the last one, which wholly acquired EN in 2016. “I was so fortunate to have been acquired by large companies late in my career who shared the values of building relationships and taking care of the customer,” Tom says. “I look back on my career and am so grateful for all the people—colleagues, customers, and the NCTA organization—that I have had the pleasure of knowing.”

Now retired, Tom laments the effect that the pandemic is having on the opportunity to develop personal relationships.

“I’m kind of glad I retired when I did [in January 2020],” Tom says. “Covid put the kibosh on travel. It would have been very difficult to solve problems or fix things without being there personally, meeting with people face-to-face, and looking at the mechanical issue firsthand. Even with the technology that we have today—how easy it seems to get things done with different communications vehicles like Facebook, Twitter, etc.—it’s not the same. This is one old codger who will never give up face-to-face or phone connections in building relationships,” Tom adds. “Because no matter what the problem was or how technical or political it was, if you had the relationships, it made it so much easier to pick up the phone and discuss solutions.”

After living in the Chicago area for over 30 years, Tom and Patti recently relocated back to Wisconsin not far from their daughter, son-in-law, and three of their grandchildren. And while a planned trip to Europe was canceled (twice) due to the pandemic, Tom has stayed busy working on the construction of their new house, which sits on lakefront property near Madison.

“Someone once told me, ‘Tom, you only have so many years left, and you can classify them as the go-go years, the slow-go years and the no-go years. And the go-go years are front loaded,’” Tom says. “So I took that advice. I’m enjoying spending more time with my bride of 45 years. We’re pretty active—we go on long walks, bike rides, and ride paddleboards; we have a boat on the water that we tool around in; and have a sunset cocktail now and then. We are playing with our seven grandchildren and just enjoying life.”

...And that certainly sounds more fun than crawling around under a coal car. ▲