

Weird-Ohs concept drawing, "Davy"

THE GOOD, THE WEIRD, AND THE UGLY BILL CAMPBELL BRINGS STRANGE THINGS TO LIFE

by Mark Cantrell

The first thing I noticed about Digger: he was green. And not just any garden-variety, arboreal green you might find on a hospital wall or a paint chip at Sears. Digger was a sick, repellent, bilious green that spoke of nights spent mold-ering in some godforsaken grave or hugging a toilet in a bus stop men's room. The fact that he was driving a top fuel dragster was just icing on the cake. And because I was 12-years old, I had to take him home.

Digger and his equally ghoulish brethren (and sistren) were the brainchildren of one William W. Campbell, an illustrator who, by the looks of Digger, seemed to have gone completely mad. For those unfortunate souls who didn't misspend their formative years glueing together and painting crude assemblages of styrene, I should explain that Digger was a model. More specifically, he was an injection-molded plastic model kit produced by the Hawk Model Company in 1963. He was composed of, as the box copy put it, "42 horrible bits of fine mouldy polystyrene"—a combination no pre-pubescent model fan could resist.

As happens with so many careers, Bill didn't plan to become the father of monsters, or a model box artist. He was born in the shadow of the Bunker Hill monument in Massachusetts, a few doors down from the house where Henry Wadsworth Longfellow grew up. His family moved to Chicago when Bill was six, and a year later he contracted a nearly fatal case of double pneumonia, which he fortunately weathered with success.

In first grade, Bill was already creating watercolor masterpieces. His teachers were so impressed they sent the young artist upstairs to show a group of jaded eighth-graders how it should be done. Then, with the advent of the Great Depression, his family was forced to



Bill Campbell at the drawing board, c. 2004

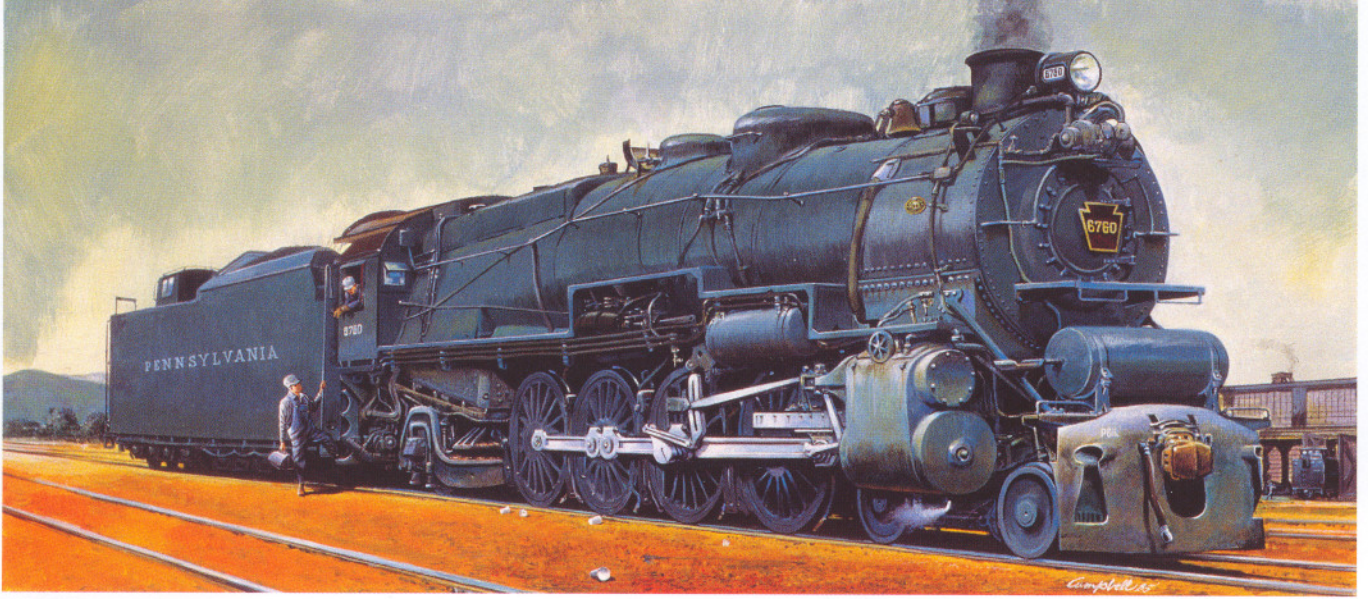
sell their house and move into an apartment, which meant a new school for Bill. But he still kept painting.

The news wasn't all bad: Bill's aptitude with a brush earned him a scholarship to the Art Institute of Chicago, so he attended elementary school during the week and spent his Saturdays at the Institute, learning his trade and soaking up art history. In high school, Bill arrived at a crossroads of sorts. After hearing the school band in concert, he decided he might like to be a musician. He still had a cornet his father had bought for him in elementary school, so Bill went to Sears and bought a cornet

instruction book. Night after night he practiced in the basement of his apartment building, until his father took pity and sent him to a private teacher for cornet lessons.

That got him into the band, where he met some musicians who would later become household names. One was the band's drummer, Mel Torme, later to become famous as a crooner nicknamed "The Velvet Fog." Another was a guy named Steve Allen, who would later become better known as Steverino, a multifaceted entertainer and the first host of "The Tonight Show" from 1954 to 1956.

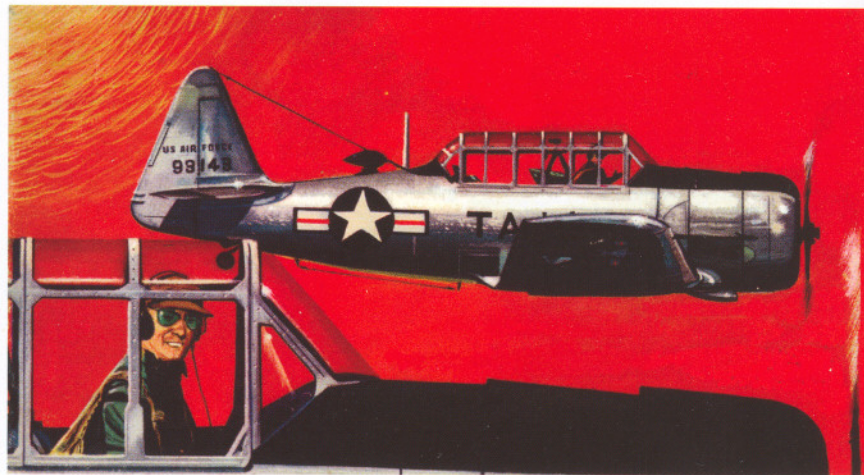
Allen was something of a rebel, and insisted on composing tunes on the piano in Loomis Hall during study hour rather than doing his homework. When the assistant principal got wind of it, he had the piano keyboard secured with a padlock. But that decision came back to haunt him a few months later at graduation, when a student concert pianist attempting to play Von Weber's *Konzertstück* found the keyboard firmly locked in place. The assistant principal had the only key, so the ceremonies ground to a halt for 10 long minutes while he was located and the keyboard unlocked.



Original illustration for model boxtop, c. 1960s



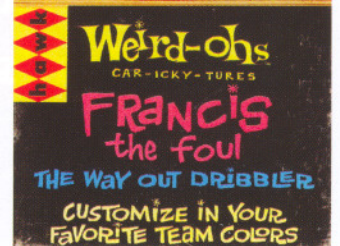
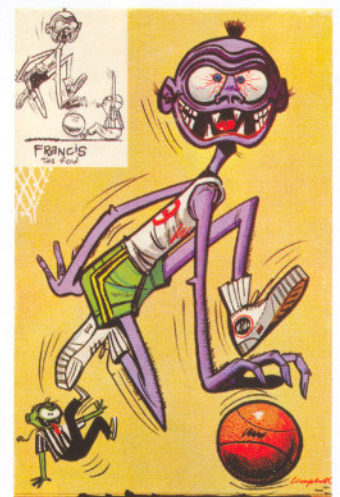
Hawk Model boxtop, Martin Matador, c. 1960s



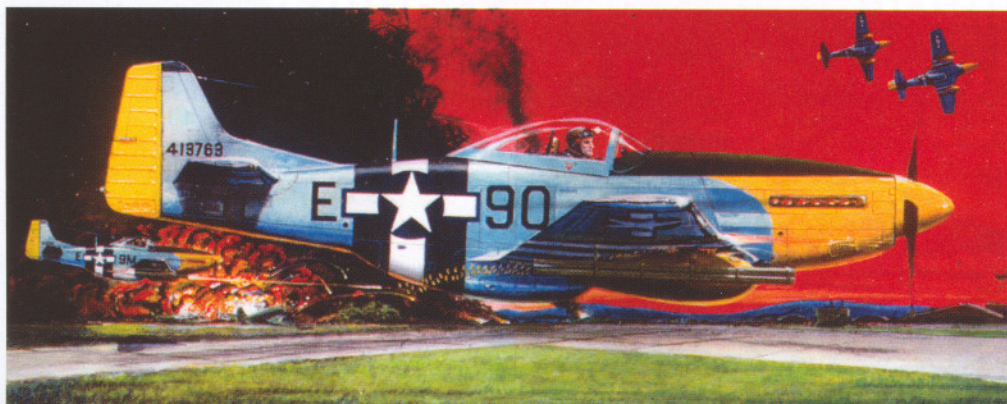
Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, AT-6 "Texan" Trainer



Weird-Ohs concept drawing, "Jolly Old Jet Nick"



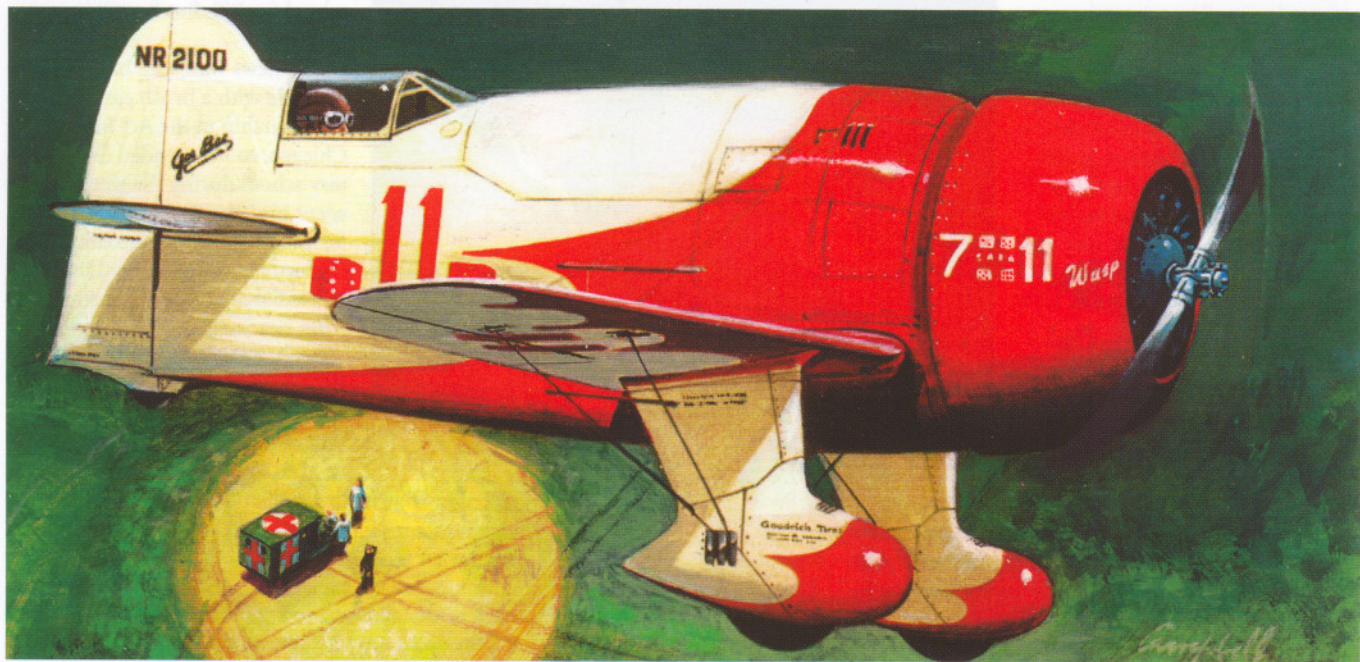
Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Francis the Foul," 1963



Original illustration for model boxtop "The Grasscutters"



Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, Marine F4U "Corsair," c. 1960s



Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, "Gee Bee" Racer, 1960

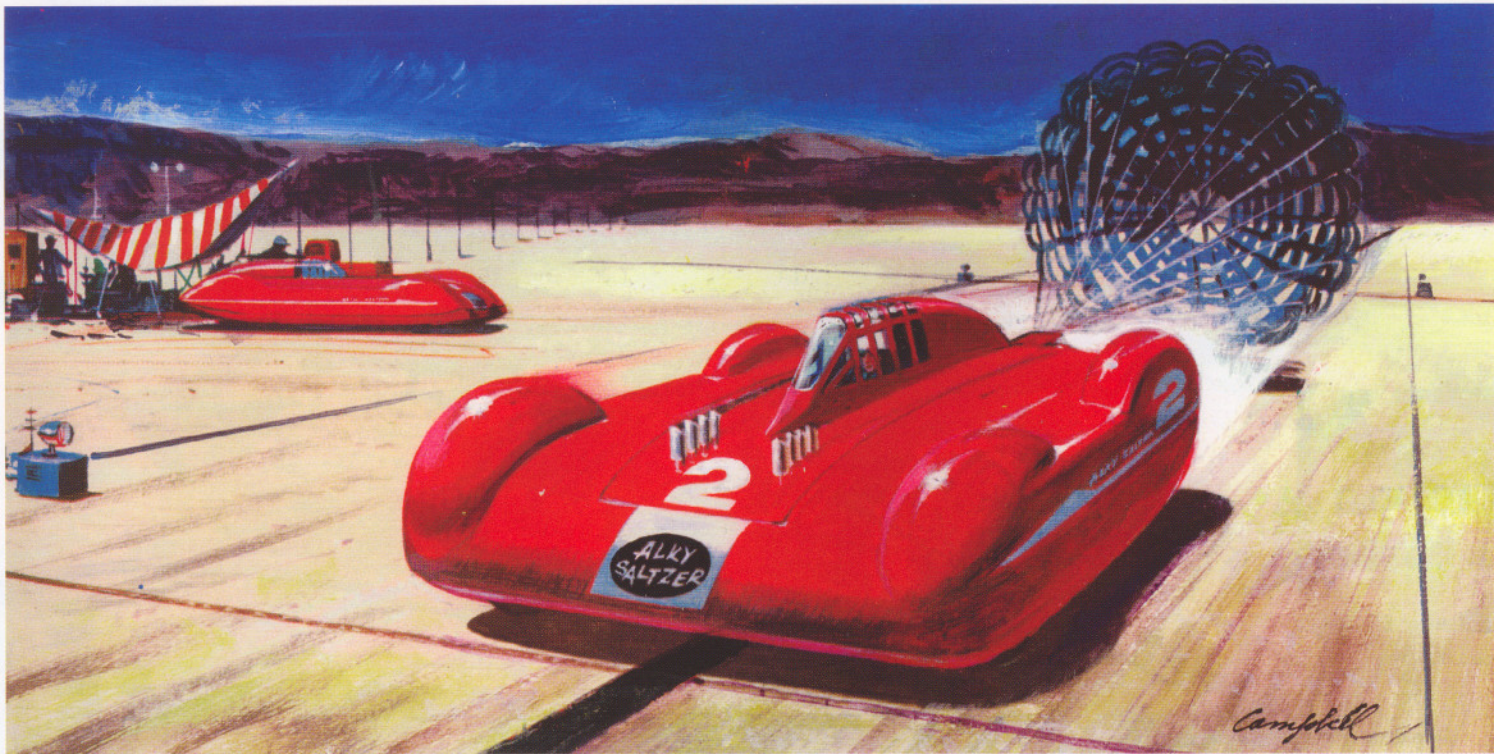
Let that be a lesson to all who would stifle creativity.

Bill's stint as a cornet player had been fun, but his artist's soul refused to be denied. In a career move that was to have far-reaching repercussions, he decided to become a cartoonist. After graduation he began scouring the classifieds and eventually found a prospective position on Michigan Avenue at a company run by a man named Mort Cowan.

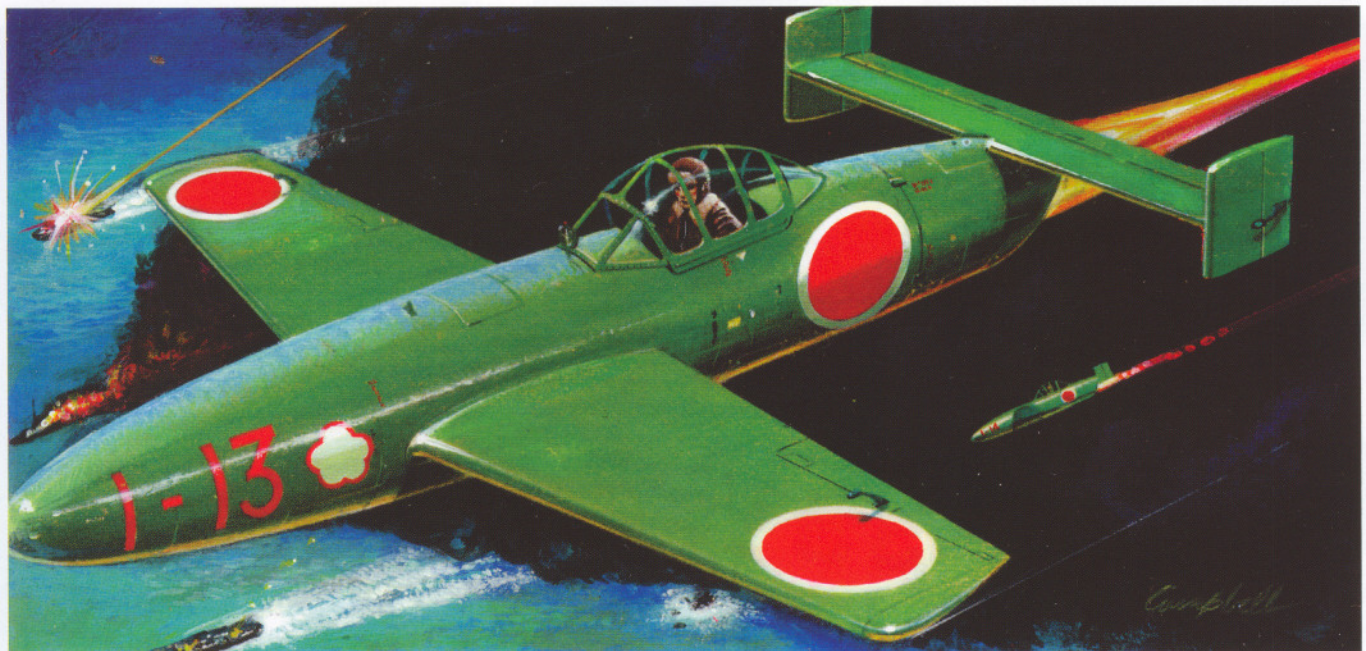
"I took the elevator up to his office," Bill remembers, "and was greeted by 50 people with the same desire as mine. These folks were all standing around waiting to show their portfolios for the grand

opportunity of working for nothing (this was before the advent of wages and hours)." Bill got the job, and was at first ecstatic. Cowan's stable of artists included names like Chester Gould of Dick Tracy fame, and E. Simms Campbell, the pioneering black illustrator who eventually worked for *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and the *New Yorker*.

Bill was immediately put to work on a strip for King Features, and turned out drawings for five months until approached by Cowan's secretary. "She said, 'Bill, you're making a lot of money for this man and you're working for nothing.' She showed me the



Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, "Alky Saltzer" Bonneville Racer, 1961



Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, "Baka" Bomb, 1958

amount of money he was pulling in from King Features, and it was \$13,000 for the year. I was doing all the work gratis. The next day I left a letter on his desk saying I couldn't provide him with free work without some kind of remuneration."

Cowan's reply: There were plenty of cartoonists out there who would be happy to work for free, and Bill could either like it or lump it. So Bill went back to hauling his increasingly voluminous portfolio around Chicago.

Eventually he signed on at a mail order studio that supplied full-color art pages to Sears and Montgomery Ward, and later landed

at Blomgren Brothers, where he produced everything from full-color brochures for International Harvester and Fruehauf trailers to menus and book covers. Meanwhile, he maintained his musical chops by playing cornet in the brass section of the 80-piece University of Chicago Symphonic Band, even as the clouds of war began to gather in Europe.

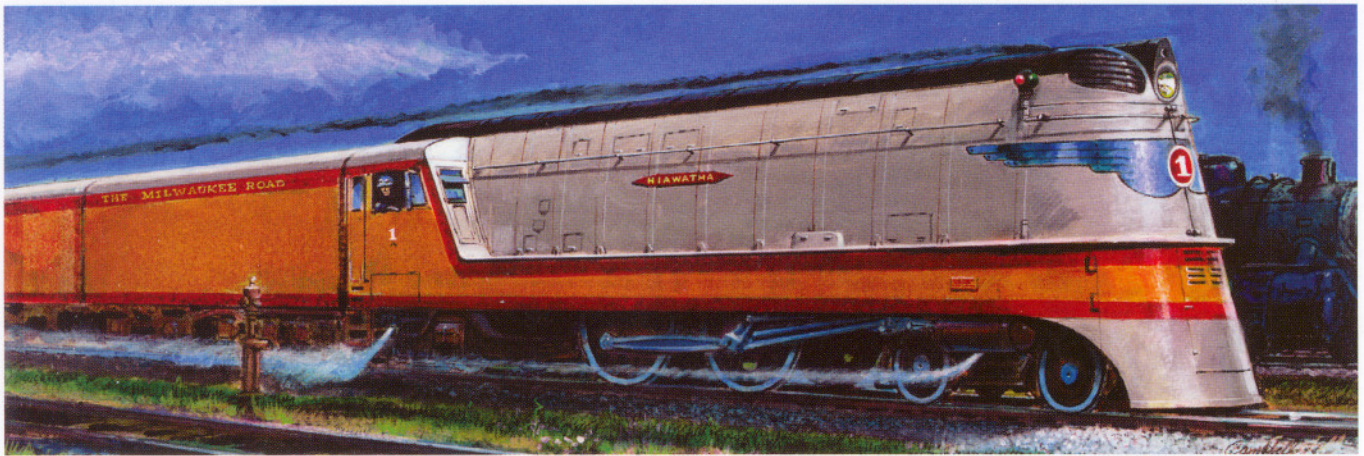
"The band's rehearsal hall was at Stagg Field," recalls Bill, "and one day the director said we had to move to a new hall. Had I an inkling of what was going on, I probably would have fled the city. It turned out that the first phase of the Manhattan Project, the pro-



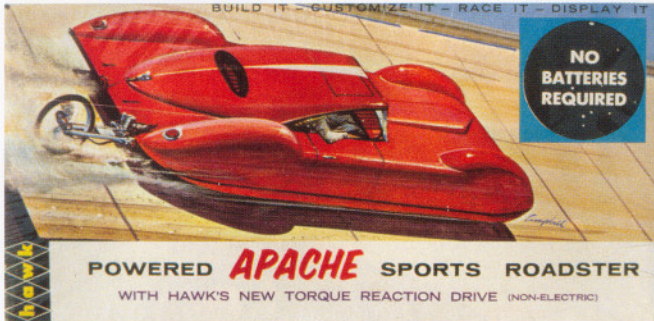
Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, Corvair C-131, 1959



Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, Howard "Ike" Air Racer, 1962



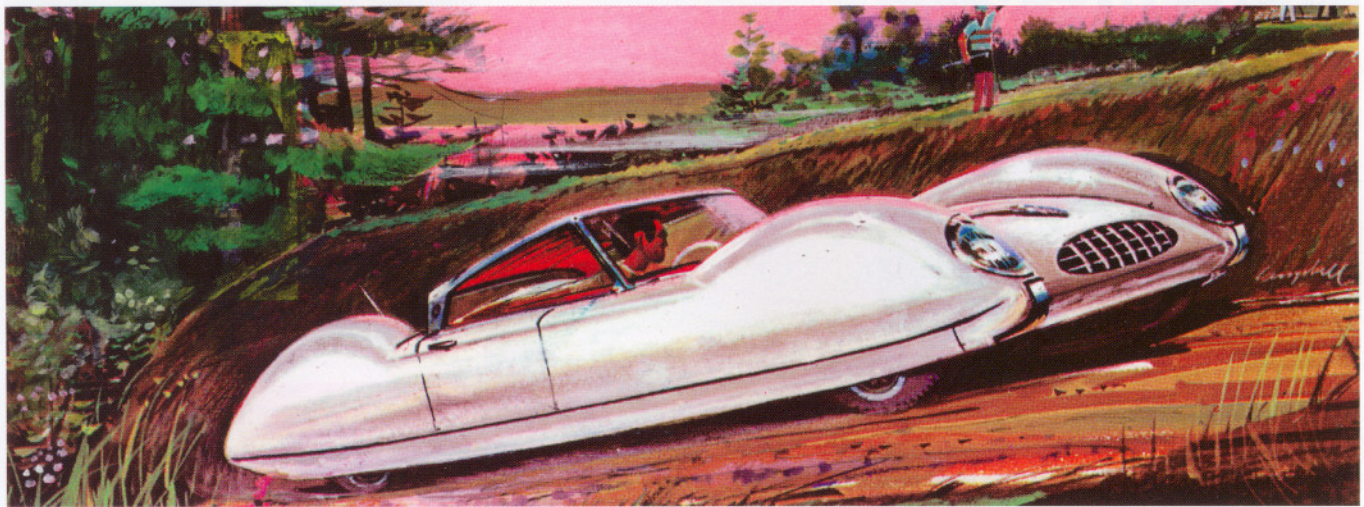
Original illustration for model boxtop, *Hiawatha*



Apache Sports Roadster, 1962



Bonnie Buggy, 1962



Original illustration for Hawk Model boxtop, "*Bobcat*" Sports Roadster, 1962

gram that led to the development of the atomic bomb, was taking place on the squash court below our band room. It's where the first sustained chain reaction of an atomic pile took place."

In 1943 Bill was inducted into the Army, and after basic training he ended up at Camp Fannin in Texas, creating maps and training charts. While on leave, he headed back to Chicago and got married, then spent two whole days honeymooning before heading back to the camp, where his wife later joined him. But America was now in the war, and before long Bill was shipped out to Italy on a troop ship. He was seasick all the way.

"I caught up with my ultimate unit after the fall of Pisa," says Bill. "We then went to Florence and up highway 65. All the bridges were destroyed over the Arno except the Ponte Vecchio—because Hitler loved it. Maybe he had some taste after all."

While in Italy, Bill's creativity came in handy when his regimental commander asked him to produce a memento of his unit's first year in combat. "I made a drawing of a GI in full combat gear marching along a road," Bill recalls. "He was passing all the important combat points we'd encountered: Rome, Futa Pass, Pisa, Arno, and on through Trieste. In my zeal to do something a little different than the usual hectograph, I suggested a color cover."

Of course, they were still in a war zone, which introduced several challenges. "In the Army, hands are plentiful," says Bill. "But getting material is something else. We managed to get hold of a German parachute from a paratrooper division on our right flank, and used the silk for screens. We found some paint that's normally used for color-coding bullets, but it was too thin. So we sent a Sergeant (Bernie Smith, who became a writer/director for Groucho Marx's

hawk

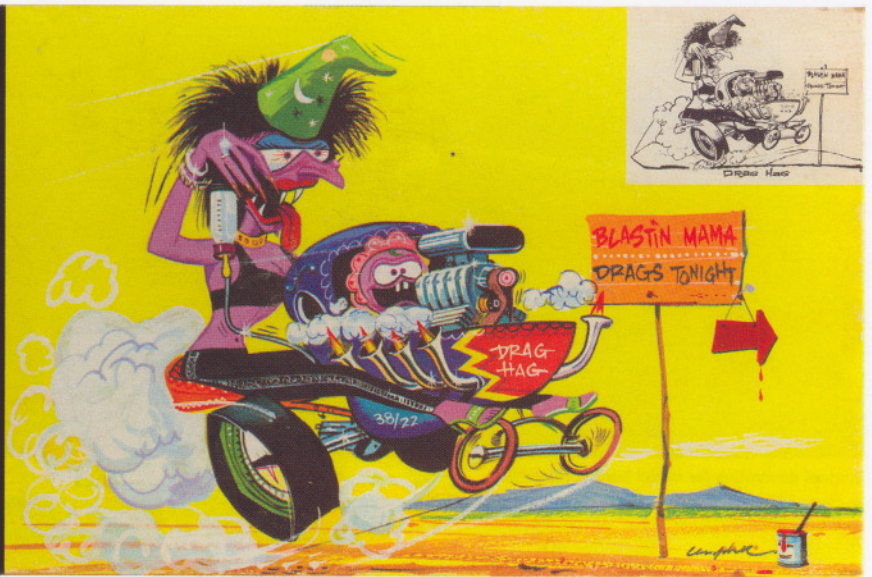
Weird-ohs
CAR-ICKY-TURES

DRAG Hag

THE BONNY, BLASTIN' BABE

CUSTOMIZE YOUR OWN
WILD, WACKY MONSTER

**39 HORRIBLE BRITS OF FINE
MOULDY POLYSTYRENE**



Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Drag Hag," c. 1963

hawk

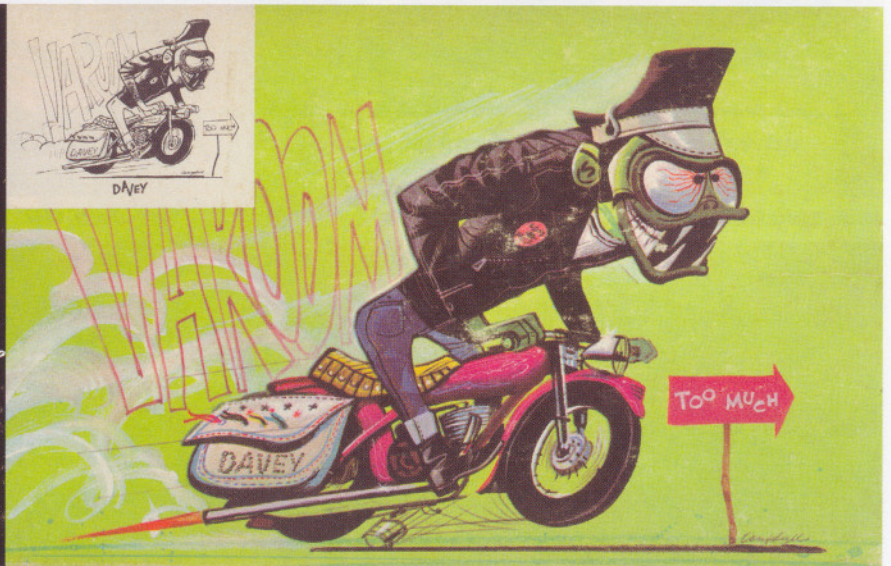
Weird-ohs
CAR-ICKY-TURES

"DAVEY"

THE WAY OUT CYCLIST

CUSTOMIZE YOUR OWN
WILD, WACKY MONSTER

**39 HORRIBLE BRITS OF FINE
MOULDY POLYSTYRENE**



Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Davey," c. 1963

hawk

Weird-ohs
CAR-ICKY-TURES

**FREDDY
flameout**

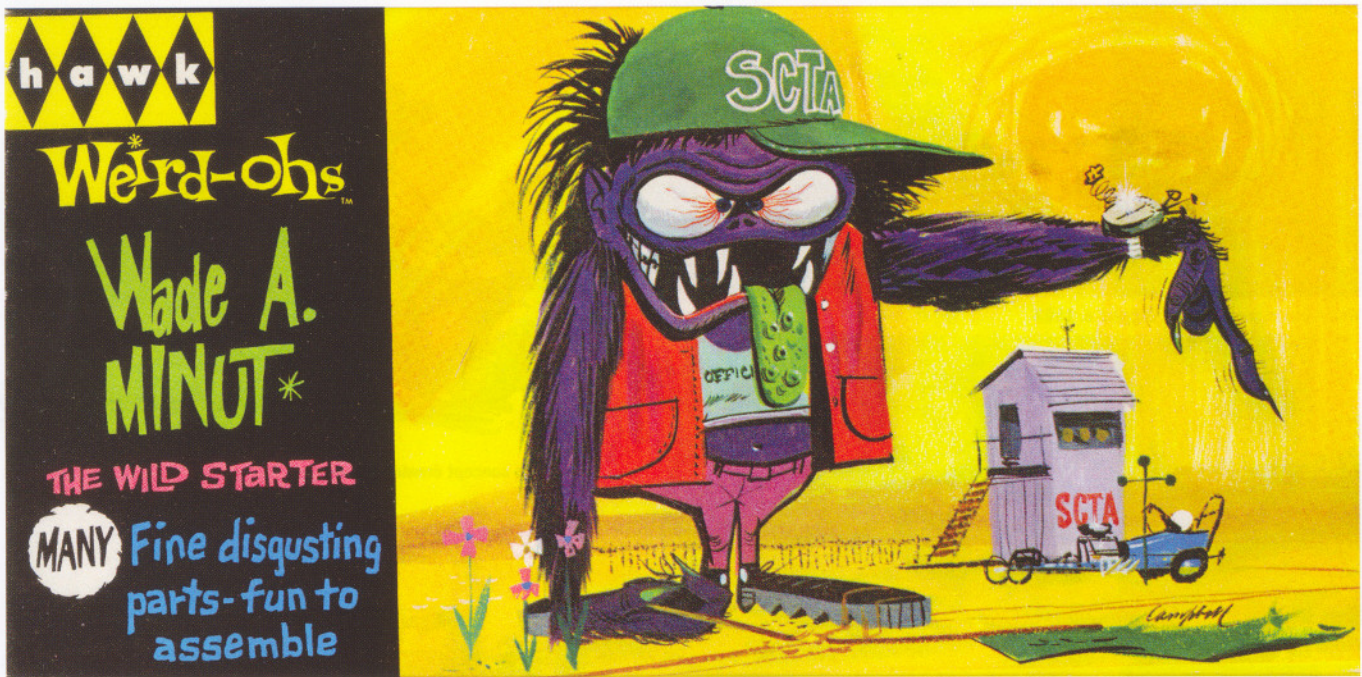
THE WAY OUT JET JOCKEY

CUSTOMIZE YOUR OWN
WILD, WACKY MONSTER

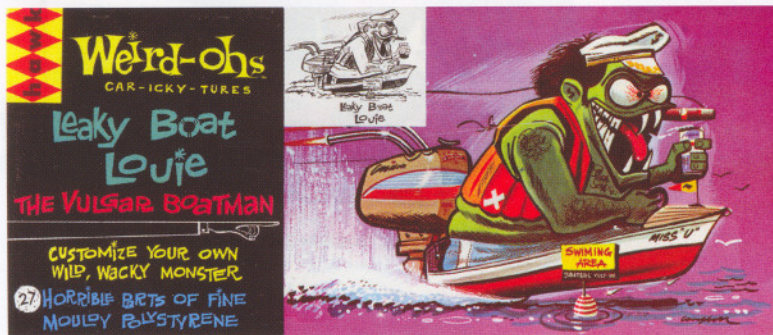
**35 HORRIBLE BRITS OF FINE
MOULDY POLYSTYRENE**



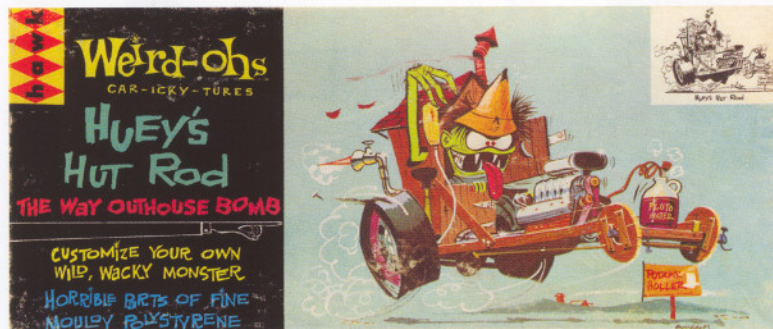
Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Freddy Flameout," c. 1963



Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Wade A. Minut," c. 1963



Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Leaky Boat Louie," c. 1963



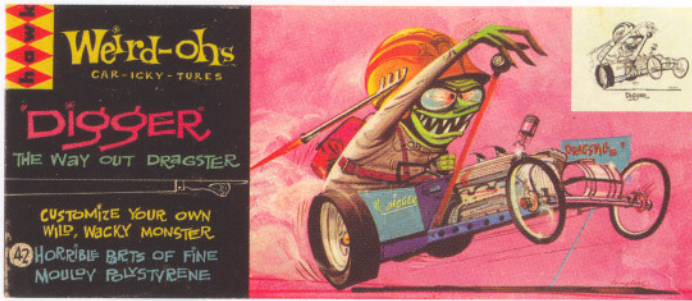
Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Huey's Hut Rod," c. 1963



Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Killer Mc Bash," c. 1963



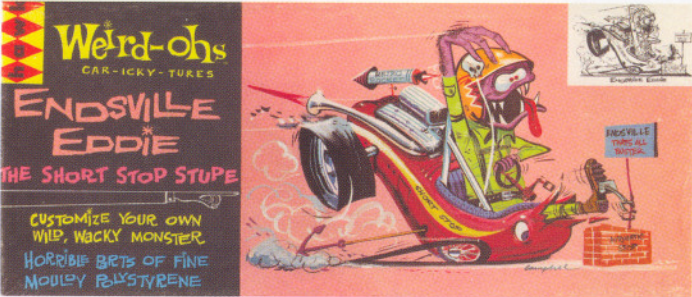
Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Sling Rave 'Curvette,'" c. 1963



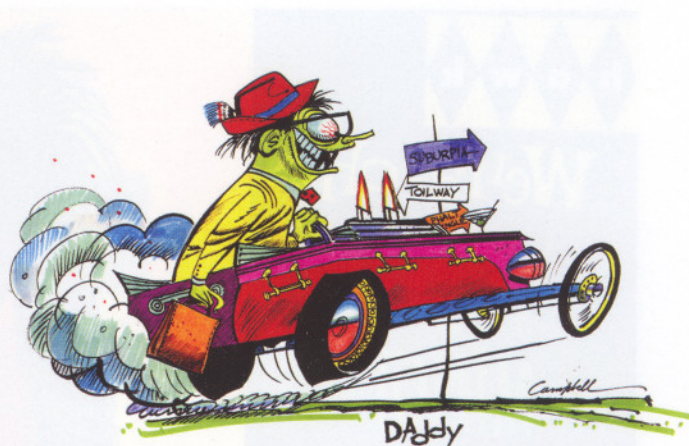
Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Digger," c. 1963



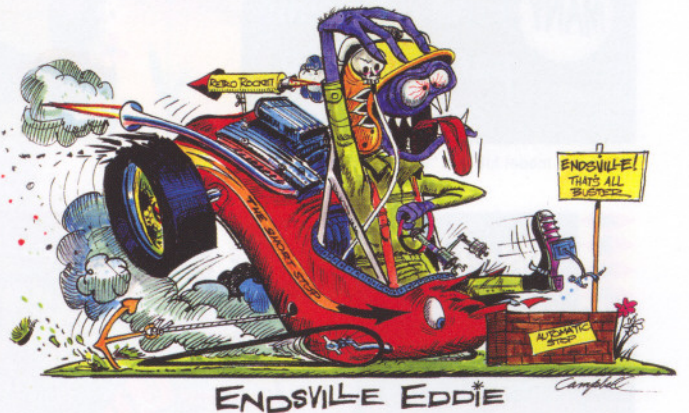
Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Daddy," c. 1963



Weird-Ohs model kit box, "Endsville Eddie," c. 1963



Weird-Ohs concept drawing, "Daddy"



Weird-Ohs concept drawing, "Endsville Eddie"



Weird-Ohs concept drawing, "Draggin' Drac"

You Bet Your Life) to division headquarters to con the cooks out of all the cornstarch he could get his hands on. We used it to thicken the paint.

"I cut the resist for the screens out of stencil paper we used to identify ammo boxes. We screened the three colors in register, and the key color we laid down in black. We had borrowed a mimeo machine from Division, and as the certificates were pulled, we laid them out on the hillsides to dry. You have to wonder what the German observation pilot we nicknamed 'Bed Check Charlie' thought on his regular eventide flyover when he saw thousands of white papers blanketing the hillside. Probably something like 'What are these crazy GIs up to now?'"

In the next few months Bill's unit chased the fleeing German troops out of Italy, until VE Day finally came on May 8, 1945. But with Japan still refusing to yield, he faced redeployment in the Pacific for an invasion of that country that would have resulted in thousands of Allied casualties. Fortunately, fate intervened. "We were passing through Rome on the train when the newsboys came along yelling 'La guerra finito,' the war is finished." Bill would live to see his new baby.

"During my tour in Europe, my wife Connie gave birth to our first daughter, Pam," says Bill. "So it was a meeting for the first time. Coming from a rigid Army schedule to a free-form time factor isn't an easy thing to do. I had to develop a new portfolio in order to get back into the art business." Bill settled back into civilian life with a series of jobs at various companies until landing at an agency called Promotional Arts—but fate wasn't through with him yet.

"One day a call came in from Millprint, a huge printing company in Milwaukee," Bill recalls. "They printed the boxes for the Hawk

Model Company, and their box artist, a guy named Dick Wellman, had just had a heart attack. They first asked Paul Maxwell, a co-worker and wonderful illustrator, if he'd like the job. Paul wasn't interested, but told them 'Why don't you ask Bill? He's got a great portfolio of aircraft illustrations.'

"So I took my illustrations out to Hawk and met the owners, Dick and Phil Mates, who were brothers. They asked me if I could return the finished artwork—I believe it was a McDonnell Banshee—in one week. I said yes, and it was the start of a beautiful working arrangement."

Bill signed on with Hawk on a contract basis, and it turned out to be a creative bonanza for the young illustrator. "Hawk was a very eclectic producer," says Bill. "They were risk-takers—there wasn't anything they wouldn't try. In the course of my relationship with the Mates brothers, I produced more than 250 box tops of various items including insects, ground-effect machines, Studebaker Larks, cable cars, Zeppelins, and parachute infantry. The grist for the mill was varied and unique, to say the least."

It was at Hawk where Bill first met John Andrews, a model designer and producer who was destined to play a large role in his career with the company. Bill and John hit it off immediately. Both men were free thinkers, always willing to challenge the status quo. "The minute I stepped into his office, it was off to the mind races," says Bill. "It was never about the job, but some way-out idea that had been rolling around in his fertile brain. Maybe he just wasn't challenged by the people around him, because I seemed to be a good backboard for him to bounce ideas off of."

Bill and John both agreed that the model industry's offerings, with few exceptions, had become stagnant. "Most model companies

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were churning out the same old thing, aircraft after aircraft, and I felt that a new direction was called for," Bill remembers. "One morning I sat down at my drawing board and did some off-the-wall stuff. First off was a sketch of a fellow in a dragster done in wild colors, with the rear wheels burning rubber and the front wheels airborne. The head was oversized to put the emphasis on his vampire teeth, while his helmet sported a flame-throwing exhaust pipe. The helmet was decorated with somewhat convoluted graphics."

Bill had just created Digger, the ghoulish creature that would later quicken my adolescent heart. He went on to sketch a few more madcap characters that day, and presented them to the Mates brothers. The response was underwhelming. John Andrews later revealed that no one at Hawk quite knew what to make of Bill's creations. They were unlike anything the company had ever produced, and represented a huge gamble.

But Hawk was a gambling company. What's more, the young sales force felt that Bill had his finger directly on the pulse of the all-important pre-teen male demographic. With a nudge or two from John Andrews, the Mates brothers finally agreed to produce the kits. But the little demons still lacked a name. What, they asked Bill, should we call them?

"I just call 'em a bunch of Weird-Ohs," Bill responded. And Weird-Ohs they were.

But time was of the essence; the annual Chicago Hobby Show was coming up soon. "The Hobby Show opened on Sunday,"

Andrews recalled. "The hobby buyers came down the aisle to our booth, but they wouldn't come in—they viewed the models from a respectable distance, as if they had a fungus they were sure to catch if they got too close."

By the end of the show, however, the Weird-Ohs were red-hot. Hawk was forced to crank up their production capacity just to keep up with the torrent of orders. "They told me that 247,000 of these things were ordered at the first go-round at the Chicago show," says Bill, "and I said 'Oh, here we go.' Then the company went into full 24-hour production to get them out. Then they asked me to do some more, and we went into sports themes because we were running out of car ideas."

Eventually, 12 Weird-Ohs kits were produced. Then artist Bob Allen approached the company with his idea for a line of model kits to capitalize on the '60s surfing craze, and the Silly Surfers were born, with Bill's art adorning the box tops. Allen also created the Frantics, a line of rock 'n roll-themed kits for which Bill also created the illustrations. In the years to come, the Weird-Ohs were reborn time after time in various incarnations, and even became a short-lived computer-animated TV show. Unfortunately, the characters bore little resemblance to Bill's original vision.

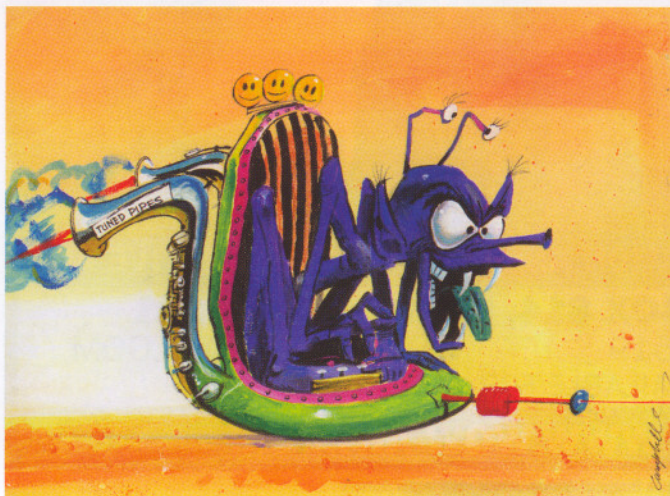
Since Bill was a freelancer for Hawk, he worked for other studios as well. One was the Charlie Chaplin Studio in Chicago, where he toiled as a writer and storyboard artist for a short time. On one particular evening, a co-worker in the next room was working on a script for the Army detailing the workings of the Redstone rocket.



Astro-Nuts concept drawing, "Claude's Cranium Cruiser"



Astro-Nuts concept drawing, "Freddie Freeznickle (Spacecop)"



Astro-Nuts concept drawing, "Hooter's Scooter"



Astro-Nuts concept drawing, "Knuckledragger Newt"



Sketch of Baron Von Blitzhoven und his Eindecker for the Weird-Oh line, later adapted for Aer-O-Toons.



Aer-O-Toons model mock-up. Col. Hellbent Forleather, "Out on a Tiger Hunt."



Aer-O-Toons model mock-up. Lt. Deadeye Demke, "Top Gun in '31."

“Since we were working in military training films, we had to have FBI clearance before we could access the locked files,” Bill recalls. “My clearance hadn’t come through yet, so I was working on commercial stuff. My colleague walked in, saying he was hung up on a detail of the Redstone rocket motor gymbals.

“It so happened I was working on a boxtop of the Redstone for Hawk, so I reached into my briefcase and pulled out a complete set of blueprints for the rocket,” Bill laughs. “So much for national security.”

Today, Bill Campbell is enjoying a well-deserved retirement after a varied career that touched a multitude of lives. In contrast to the larger model companies who had access to a whole stable of artists, Bill was Hawk’s sole illustrator during his tenure there. How does he feel about being known mainly as the Weird-Ohs creator? “I guess I’m like the old veteran actor who hopes he’ll be remembered for his Hamlet, when my true 15 minutes of fame is in those strange classics,” he chuckles. “Who would have thought I’d be remembered for those funny, quizzical bug-eyed monsters after all this time?”

John Andrews passed away in 1999. His last years were spent at Testors where he continued to design imaginative model designs for the company. “I owe a lot to John,” says Bill, “who saw worth in a crazy idea and turned it into a production that made the Hawk Model Company a name in the plastic model industry.”

Bill also feels indebted to those illustrators who inspired him early in his career, and to his contemporaries who shared the late nights, impossible deadlines, and sheer love of the craft that made his years in illustration so memorable. “There was a golden age of box art created by artists such as Jack Lynnewood, Jo Kotula, James Bama, John Steel, Roy Huxley, and John Amendola,” says Bill. “There are many others whose work has graced the tops of boxes, and if their names don’t appear in that lineup, it’s only because their addition would take pages and pages.”

The 84-year-old illustrator still paints every day, as Monet and the other Impressionists did until well into their later years. “But please don’t compare me to those guys,” he laughs. What’s Bill’s secret to enjoying life, no matter what your age? It’s really very simple, he explains: “I think the secret of life is to find something that’s worth getting up every morning to do.” 🍷

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Amparito Roca, 2004

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