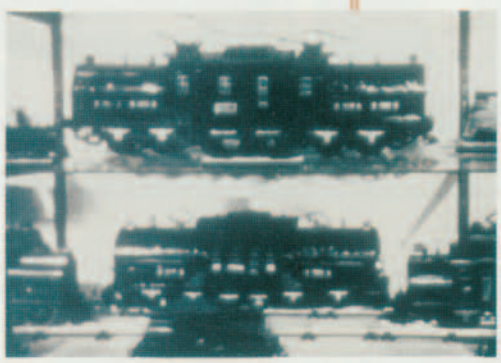
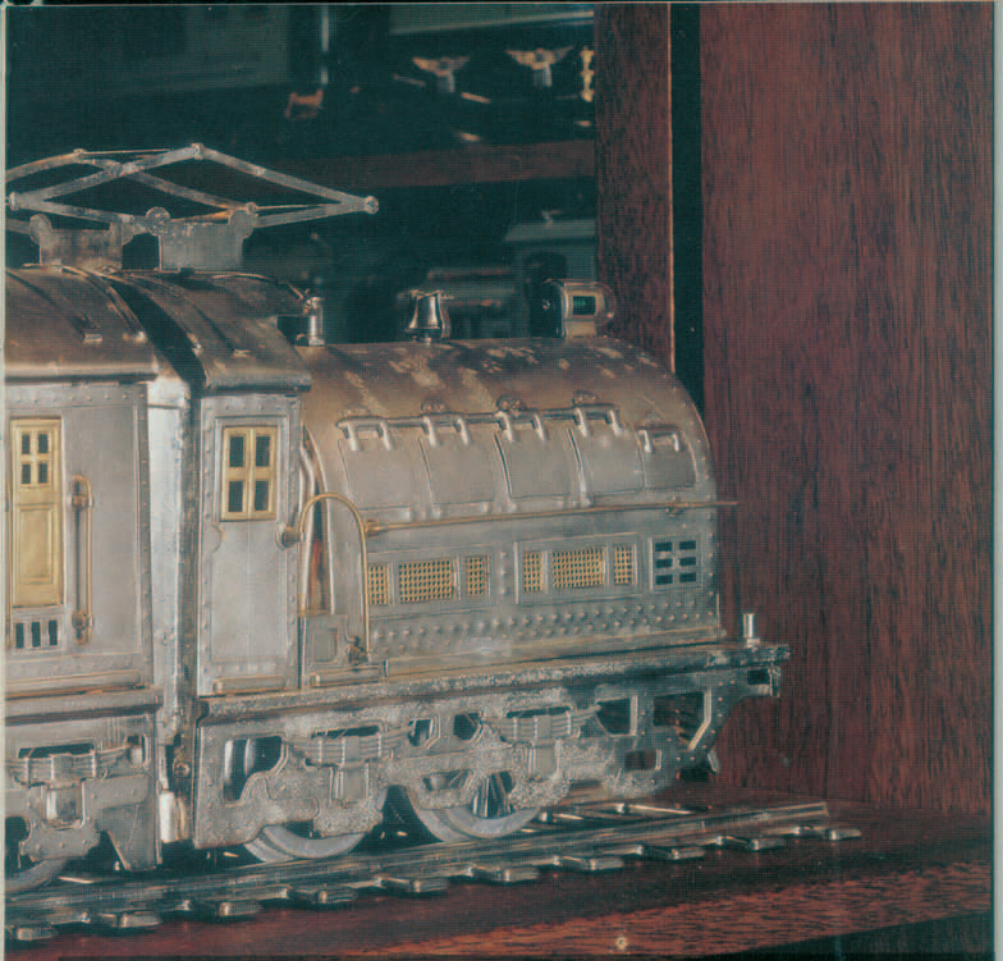
The Brute stops here

Following a famous Lionel locomotive for 84 years

by Roger Carp



In 1949, Lionel produced a short film, *Iron Ponies*, which gave an inside look at the company's main showroom and factory. The Brute dominates this still photograph from that film, with the slightly smaller Super 381 shown right below in what was known as the Lionel Museum. Courtesy Joe Mania



Toy train collectors have long coveted the Brute, this gigantic model of a Lionel no. 381 locomotive. Rejected for the Lionel roster in the 1920s, it spent three decades on display at the firm's New York City showroom. Now, after many twists and turns, it resides in Allison Cox's superb collection.

GEORGE HALL PHOTO

LEGENDS DON'T JUST spring forth, and they don't necessarily stand still.

Lionel's one-of-a-kind "Brute" locomotive, named for its size and heft, has crossed the Atlantic on a steamship, held a place of honor in Lionel's New York showroom, and been stripped of its paint to fight rust. Today, it resides in a father-and-son collection on the edge of the Pacific.

Bipolar personalities

The legendary Brute was born and nurtured far from Lionel's then sprawling factory in northern New Jersey – thousands of miles and an ocean voyage away.

Craftsmen living in Naples (in southern Italy) and working under the direction of Mario Caruso (then Lionel's works manager) first breathed life into the Brute.

The story begins in 1923, when Caruso, using funds invested by Lionel, launched La Societe de Meccanica Precisa in Italy to produce tooling to make Lionel trains. He did so with Joshua Lionel Cowen's blessing to provide Lionel with detailed tooling at costs below what Americans would have charged. Once finished, these tools crossed the Atlantic and ended up at the New Jersey Lionel plant to be used for mass-production.

Among the first projects completed at La Precisa was tooling for a Standard gauge replica of the bipolar locomotive that the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad had introduced in 1922. The no. 380 measured 13½ inches long and featured an 0-4-0 wheel arrangement powered by a large-gear Super Motor.

The 380 was the first Lionel electric based on a prototype that wasn't a New York Central locomotive. It was cataloged from 1923 through 1927 in Mojave, maroon, and dark green.

Impressive sales of the 380 sparked the development of a smaller and less-expensive model in 1925. The no. 10 remained in the line through 1929 and was available in Mojave, gray, peacock, and red. Eventually, versions of both electrics equipped with a reversing mechanism made their debut (nos. 10E and 380E).

Further emboldened by the brisk sales of the 380, Lionel's leaders considered a deluxe version of the bipolar, one that would boast moveable front and rear trucks and a pair of patented Super Motors. But they ended up cutting back on their plans. The large electric finally cataloged in 1928-29 as the no. 381 was 18 inches long, had a 4-4-4 wheel arrangement, and came with a single Bild-A-Loco Motor and manual reverse.

Here's where the Brute comes in. In the course of putting the finishing touches on the 381, designers, in the mode of Dr. Frankenstein, created two enormous models of a bipolar.

The larger of the pair, too large for Standard gauge track, originated in Naples. Whether its smaller Standard gauge twin came from Italy or New Jersey can't be ascertained.

Neither can we say for certain when the two models were made. One source claimed that the larger model dated from 1924 and suggested that its companion came later, perhaps not until 1927.

Regardless of where and when the bipolars first saw light, both were intended to give Cowen's firm locomotives so big and powerful that such rivals as American Flyer and Ives wouldn't try to outmatch them.

Caruso, who spent several months in Naples each year overseeing production at La Precisa, likely watched as the larger model was packed in preparation for shipment to New York. Frank Pettit, who was hired at Lionel at the end of 1924, remembers going to the docks to pick up the behemoth. He recalls the excitement felt by everyone at the company's headquarters as workers used crowbars to take apart the crate holding the model.

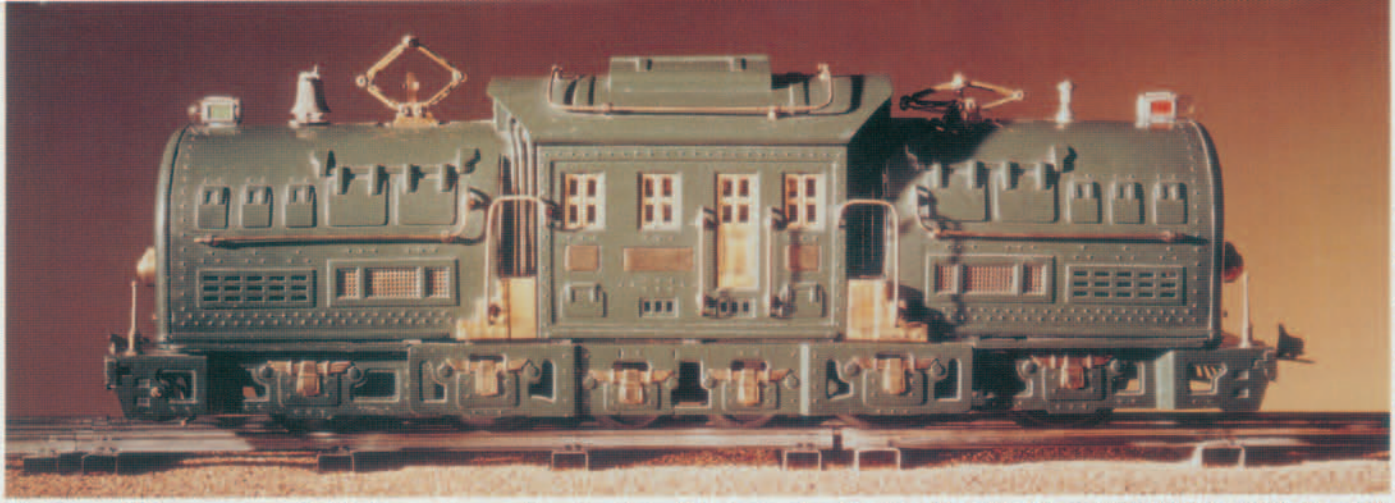
Excitement turned to disappointment as Cowen and his assistants tried to pick up the locomotive. Any thought of using it as a prototype vanished when they realized how bulky it was. No boy could be expected to lift something so heavy and place it delicately on the track.

The gargantuan bipolar and its equally hefty Standard gauge companion seemed like immense dinosaurs – hopelessly out of proportion and unable to survive. All a crestfallen Cowen could do was have the two giants put on display at Lionel's headquarters in midtown Manhattan. Perhaps visitors would find them amusing.

Centerpiece of the museum

Which is exactly what happened. The two white elephants became the chief attractions in an exhibit of Lionel models dating to the company's earliest days.

Pettit, who designed some of the finest operating cars and accessories of the late prewar and early postwar eras, had



COURTESY FRANK HARE OF IRON HORSE PRODUCTIONS

The Super 381, now housed with Larue Shempp's collection at the Lycoming County Historical Society in Williamsport, Pa., still has its original rich green paint. The larger Brute arrived at Lionel in the same colors, but in the 1960s Bill Vagell had the paint stripped and a layer of cadmium coating applied to prevent rust damage.

launched the display in the mid-1920s. As his duties increased, he passed responsibility for filling what became known as the "Lionel Museum" to Irving Shull, a childhood friend who came to work at Lionel.

For the next three decades, until his death in April of 1960, Shull administered the Lionel Museum with loving care. He lavished lots of TLC on the two huge bipolars.

The smaller locomotive, striking in deep green with brass details, earned the nickname "Super 381." Its big brother, stepping in at a whopping 28 inches long and 8 inches high, was called "The Brute."

Decorated in green, the Brute had three articulated sections (like the Milwaukee Road prototype), each with its own motor. It lacked a pickup plate for operation on three-rail track. Maybe engineers planned to have it operate on 3¼-inch two-rail track in imitation of one of the immense models put out at that time by Buddy "L."

The Brute and Super 381 seemed destined to reside at Lionel forever. Then along came Roy Cohn.

A grand-nephew of the elderly Cowen, he gained control of Lionel in 1959 and seemingly shared none of Shull's respect for the past. When staring at the vintage locomotives and rolling stock in the Lionel Museum, Cohn saw only merchandise ripe for selling to the highest bidder.

Sometime in 1960, after taking control of Lionel's day-to-day operations, Cohn demanded that buyers be found for the contents of the museum. Hurt and disgusted by the order, Shull nonetheless felt he had no choice but to obey his new boss.

From sea to sea

The toy train hobby's elite jockeyed to get the choicest pieces, with the Super 381 and the Brute commanding a great deal of attention. In a matter of months, Standard and O gauge models, even some of the ancient 2⅞-inch gauge items from the 1900s, all but flew out the door at Lionel to make their way into notable collections of the time.

As for the Brute and its cousin, Shull reportedly contacted the toy train historian Louis Hertz and promised he could have them for $700. Hertz, who devoted his life to studying the history of toy

Bill Vagell was a legend in two hobbies

Why didn't he keep it? That question arises after hearing that Bill Vagell quickly sold the Brute after acquiring it in the early 1960s. His outstanding collection of Lionel Standard gauge would only have been enhanced by retaining this one-of-a-kind model. Further, Bill didn't need the money, not with business thriving at his Treasure House hobby shop.

To gain an answer, we need to understand Bill, as much a legend in toy train circles as the Brute. At heart, his sons recall, he was a showman – and a generous one. If selling the Brute added to his reputation and made another collector happy, Bill saw no reason not to do so.

Bill's career as a storekeeper and his enthusiasm for Lionel trains took off only in middle age. This gregarious man, born in 1900, made his name as a magician in the decades between the two world wars. As "Mystic Craig" he played theaters everywhere and, after the vaudeville circuit waned, became the opening act for big bands as they performed in deluxe nightclubs and hotels.

Bill Vagell, here at the Treasure House, holds one of the early Lionel models he cherished.

Bill moved his "Fashions in Magic" act to the great ocean liners of the interwar period and mystified tourists aboard the Queen Mary and the Ile d'France. His reputation soared in England, where he left Prime Minister Winston Churchill dumbfounded by changing a cigarette into one of the big stogies Churchill loved to puff.

Once the United States entered World War II, Bill devoted himself to entertaining the troops. While stationed in Great Britain, Bill grew friendly with band leader Glenn Miller, and they often traveled together. Bill was scheduled to join Miller on the flight in 1944 when the latter's plane disappeared over the English Channel.

trains, reluctantly declined the offer. Lionel found another buyer.

Over the next couple of years, the Super 381 and the Brute changed hands twice. As much as each buyer desired the bipolars, the temptation to sell them for greater profits proved too much to ignore.

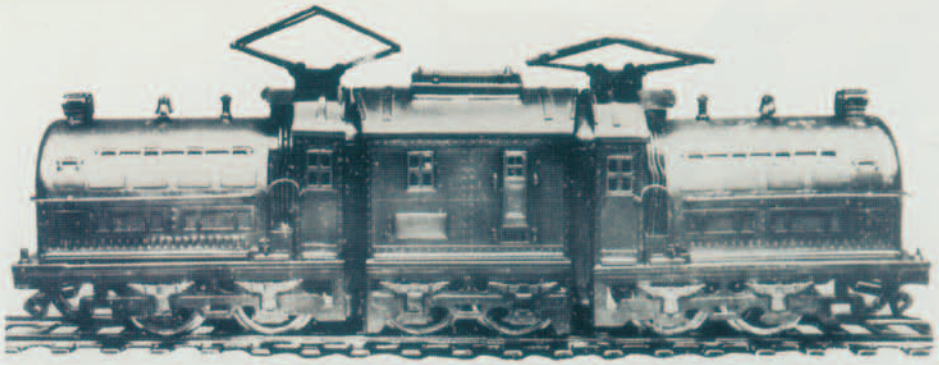
About 1962, Bill Vagell claimed both models. A fascinating character who loved to entertain audiences with magic tricks, Vagell was the proprietor of a hobby shop in Garfield, N.J., not far from the Lionel factory, and a friend of Joshua Lionel Cowen's.

Vagell, as explained in the accompanying sidebar, owned a number of desirable Standard gauge models and was pleased to add these two to his stash, at least temporarily. By nature a wheeler-dealer, he just couldn't resist soliciting offers.

Soon after, Vagell engineered a deal with collector Larue Shempp for the Super 381. About the same time, Vagell let it be known that he would unload the Brute for $2,000, an unheard-of amount for a toy train in the mid-1960s.

"You'll never get that much," skeptics told Vagell. He just smiled and waited ... and not too long. Soon, to the amazement of several collectors, Vagell ironed out a deal that brought the Brute to America's heartland.

Sadly, however, it was no longer a green monster. Rust had already damaged the model's façade. To combat this problem, Vagell paid for it to be chemically cleaned, a procedure that destroyed the coat of green paint. Then, to restore some of the Brute's elegance, Vagell had it cadmium-plated before the sale was finalized.



This vintage photograph shows how the Brute looked about the time that workers in Italy prepared to ship it to Lionel's headquarters in New York. Courtesy Allison Cox

The shiny old giant lived in quiet retirement far from the East Coast for more than two decades. Sometime in the mid-1980s, its owner decided to liquidate his collection, including the Brute.

The locomotive ended up in the hands of Ed Prendeville, who manages Train Collector's Warehouse in New Jersey with Bob Morgan. Business is business, but trains are also trains. Would Ed, himself a connoisseur of prewar trains, spurn all requests and keep the Brute for himself?

No – prudence dictated that Ed sell the bipolar. Prudence also told Ed to ask more than 20 times as much as Vagell had requested when he pedaled the Brute in the early 1960s.

Allison Cox stepped forward.

Over the past half-century, Al and his son, John, have assembled a truly great collection of American and European trains. Al proposed trading something from his collection rather than writing a check for the full amount Prendeville wanted. Ed asked for cash.

The "horse trading" took place after one of the semi-annual TCA divisional meets held in York, Pa. It began over dinner and concluded several hours later in a motel room. Al claimed the Brute. Meanwhile, the Super 381 resides in a Pennsylvania museum along with other trains from Larue Shempp's collection.

For the Brute, a journey that began in a workshop in Naples in the 1920s and continued with a long stay in New York has led to Seattle eight decades later. Over the Atlantic Ocean and across North America, the Brute now resides on the shores of the Pacific. Somehow, though, I have the feeling its traveling days haven't ended. CTT

Bill returned to America in 1945 to discover a country with dwindling interest in the tricks he performed. So he freshened up his act as an electrician and opened a shop in Garfield, N.J., where he repaired radios, lamps, jukeboxes, and other kinds of appliances, including old and new toy trains.

By 1948, Bill had decided to specialize in fixing and selling electric trains and accessories. Obtaining parts could be a challenge, so Bill decided the smartest move would be to drive to the Lionel factory in Hillside, N.J., and buy what he needed from William Melillo, who ran the Service Department there. On one such visit, Bill met Joshua Lionel Cowen. An enduring friendship was born.

The Treasure House, as Bill decided to name his business, flourished during the 1950s, thanks to its location in a hotbed of toy train activity and proximity to the Lionel plant. He worked on new trains, but mostly enjoyed tinkering with Standard gauge models and soon had assembled a superb collection that he displayed at the store.

Here's how the Treasure House looked during its heyday in the 1950s.

To make it easier to repair Lionel items in the 1960s, Bill sought supplies of old parts. When his searches proved all but fruitless, he began making reproduction parts. Soon he was selling surplus items through brochures (*The Train Collectors Encyclopedia*) and at train shows.

Transactions involving prewar trains eventually became Bill's main source of income. Superb Standard gauge models reached him, and he didn't hesitate to sell them.

When the Brute came into Bill's possession, he viewed it as one more unique item that he had the privilege of owning, if only temporarily, and then selling to someone who would cherish it. "I have the largest collection of top-of-the-line trains in the world...," he would boast, "...that are for sale!"

Craig and Richard (Bill's sons) agree that their father was a salesman at heart, who enjoyed negotiating and making others happy. The wheeling and dealing went on almost to the day Bill died in 1987. – *Roger Carp*