

EVERYTHING I NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT

COMPRESSED AIR CARS

I LEARNED FROM *HEM AND AMY*

...also known as...

GAS BUGGIES

1926 – 1927

by Frank Hemensley Beck

Look Out, Amy!



Having Fun at the Expense of Air Car Inventors

A daily cartoon strip about an inventor who wants to get rich with an air car? About a self-fueling air car with a self-filling air tank? Who would think of such a thing, and why 1927?

The social and technological environment that Frank Beck wrote for was ripe for this sort of thing. Technology was exploding and everyone wanted to be the next Edison or Bell. Cars were suddenly everywhere so naturally the common complaint became the cost of paying for their fuel and upkeep. Back East especially, and most especially in the oil and coal fields of western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, trains were everywhere and everyone knew a brakeman or lived next door to one. Compressed air was essential to both hauling coal in mines and stopping big trains; without compressed air, the technological blossoming of the late 1920s would not have happened in the way that it did.

Frank Hemensley Beck lived in Tacoma, Washington and so did the cartoon character “Hem” that he named after himself. Hem’s creator was a perceptive individual and the appeal of his comics is that he saw all sides of things and made fun of literally everyone. The fact that he appears to be scolding his poor namesake daily for wanting to build self-fueling air cars doesn’t mean that he necessarily was belittling the idea or the many inventors who were trying to make it work back then. I don’t know but my guess is that Hem’s creator was sympathetic with his character’s cause—why else would he have given him his name? And cartoonist Frank H. Beck’s own foibles might have found their way into his character’s feisty, impractical and grandiose temperament. I am only guessing as I have not been to the library where his papers are stored to read his correspondence. I don’t know what Beck was like except that he was a stable family man.

I do know that the oil and gas industry was not interested in competition; it goes without saying. And we know that Frank Beck was aware that censorship could happen to him (and that could threaten his financial stability). I believe that he carefully crafted his 12-month focus on self-filling air tanks to appear as if he were ridiculing the whole idea and anyone who would try it, in order to avoid trouble from the powers that were becoming. At the same time I can guarantee you that every wanna-be air car inventor in America in 1926 and 1927 turned to the funny pages first when the paper arrived each day, to see what their hero Hem was up to next. Especially the father of the self-fueling air car, the elderly Louis Kiser of Decatur, Illinois, must have looked forward to the daily goading from a cartoon strip that he probably both loved and hated. The boy who delivered his Decatur Herald must have gotten an earful or two. I can hear it now: “Did I tell you I was the inventor of the New York Air Brake…”

My biased opinion is that Frank Beck *wanted* to motivate inventors to try harder and come up with something that could compete against the noisy, dirty, gas-gulping money eaters that were filling the landscape and becoming the be-all and end-all of modern life. He had to frame it as a hearty teasing of a die-hard dreamer to avoid being edited off the page, but I can only gauge his intentions by the effect that Hem & Amy’s exploits have on me: despite Hem’s many goofs and delusions, his good intentions make me want to get out in the garage and try again. Like all good humorists, Frank Beck knew a lot about human nature, and he knew what it was like to be a grandiose, temperamental dreamer or he could not have written so accurately about one.

Where he got this information I haven’t got a clue; but if he was writing about himself then I can only guess, based on my own experience of reading this comic strip, that he was writing about me and you too.

Mr. Aircar

Wanna-be airhead since 1969