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INTRODUCTION

To kitbash or not to kitbash?

When I needed a two-story depot typical of those found along the Western Maryland's coal branch to Elkins, W.Va., I found what I needed lurking inside a Faller farmhouse kit (now sold by Walthers as the Lancaster Farmhouse, No. 933-3333). The lesson here is to form a clear image of the desired structure in your mind, then look not at the labels but at the photos of commercial kits. The prototype structure is at Kerens, W.Va.

That is indeed the question, as well as the subject of this book. Like any other aspect of scale model railroading, there needs to be a well-understood method to our madness, a *raison d'être*, before we commit our aspirations to hardware. My objective is therefore to offer guidance on how to recognize good—and bad—kitbashing prospects, and to provide tips on choosing commercial kits or even built-up structure models that can be modified or combined to satisfy specific needs and desires.



Jim Boyd

Defining our options

The first thing you'll discover as you page through this book is that it's an idea book, not primarily a set of step-by-step how-to instructions. Had I chosen to follow the latter path, it would have reduced the scope of this book to perhaps a half-dozen specific structure projects. The odds of finding one that appealed to you would have been slim indeed.

To be sure, there are several kitbashing projects explained in sufficient detail for you to follow along, and quite a few more for which a photo or two and a menu of base kits should be sufficient to point you in the proper direction. But in some cases models I kitbashed years ago are now available in kit form, or the kit(s) I used are no longer commercially available, although an eBay search will usually bear fruit.

Before we get into such nitty-gritty aspects of modeling, however, we'll take time to review what makes kitbashing a viable approach to structure modeling, when it's worthwhile to consider kitbashing as well as when it may not be, and—as we discuss in some detail in Chapter 1—why you shouldn't pay too much attention to the label on the box.

Taking the easy way out?

Some of you may view kitbashing as something less rigorous than scratch-building. I'll do my best to demonstrate to those who may hold this view that kitbashing is indeed a legitimate alternative. It may simply be a placeholder, a stand-in for an accurate model of a specific prototype that you hope to build later on. Or a kitbashed structure may turn out to be a rather decent model of a specific prototype, one that may not need to be replaced any time soon, if at all.

Of course, a kitbashed structure, like many commercial "craftsman" kits, may be solely a product of our imagination and not based on a specific prototype at all. The resulting building may satisfy the entrepreneurial spirit that resides in most of us, an idealized expression of how we see the world or wish it to be.

The drive to kitbash structures may even come from the desire to creatively cash in on the sizable larder of structure kits now residing on our storage shelves by using them to fill holes in our scenery with something more aesthetic than folded 3 x 5 cards that announce, ever so hopefully, "Future site of Danville Lumber Co." or whatever.

Developing a strategy

As readers of my previous books or *Trains of Thought* commentaries in *Model Railroader* are well aware, I see scale model railroading as a way to replicate in miniature not only the sights and sounds of full-size ("prototype") railroading but also the ways the railroads went about their business. It's akin to war gaming, or even chess with motorized "men." So too should we have a strategy as we contemplate what structures we need to represent carload origins and destinations while adding interest and plausibility to our railroads.

Two hints before we get started: I highly recommend acquiring the Walther's catalog for your scale. No other reference illustrates so many structure kits, making it a primary research tool for the kitbasher. And don't overlook their catalogs for other scales; Bill Neale used an O scale bridge kit on his HO railroad (see Chapter 7), and Rix N scale grain bins are similar in size to the diminutive bins seen after World War II when used on HO layouts.

And note that an apparently discontinued kit may later appear in another company's product line. Review the listings of all popular brands before assuming a particular model is no longer available.



CHAPTER ONE

Do not read the label on the box!

If you were planning to build a model of a soybean processing plant, would you have looked inside the box of a kit labeled “cement plant”? But as I explain in Chapter 8, most of the needed parts for that structure were indeed found inside the Walthers Valley Cement kit.

It’s easy to be misled, even unintentionally. Labels, for example, create expectations. If you find a box marked “Cheerios” in the local supermarket, you can reasonably expect to find that familiar cereal inside the familiar yellow box. But such expectations can lead to assumptions that get in the way of the kitbasher. If during a visit to a local hobby shop or while perusing a catalog or website we see a kit labeled as a cement plant, it may never occur to us that there is actually a soybean processing plant hiding inside that box (see 1 and Chapter 9).

“Kit-bashing”?

Before we delve too deeply into the pros and cons of kitbashing structures, let’s take a look back at the origins and implications of the term “kitbashing.” I credit the term, or at least popularizing the term, to Dave Frary and Bob Hayden back in the 1970s during my tenure as editor of *Railroad Model Craftsman*. Like the evolution of the word “to-day” into “today,” “kit-bashing” soon segued into “kitbashing.”

I recall some alternative terms such as “kit-mingling,” but none caught on. The irreverent nature of the idea of bashing two or more kits together to create something else, much like nuclear fusion, adds just a hint of the whimsy that is inherent in the slightly preposterous notion that we really can re-create the aural and visual dynamics of full-size railroading with our relatively puny scale models.

The late Art Curren gets credit for expanding our horizons when it comes to creative structure kitbashing. He also gets credit for applying the same degree of creativity to the “punny” names he applied to his work; “Frenda Mine” (2; see also December 1976, January 1977, and February 1978 *Railroad Model Craftsman*) comes readily to mind. Other classics: Jenerick Metal (June 1996 *Model Railroader*), and Hardley Abel Mfg. Co. and Perry Shibel Fruit & Produce (both from the now out-of-print book *Kitbashing HO Model Railroad Structures*).

Prototype-based projects

Scale model railroading has sufficiently broad shoulders to accommodate almost any modeling interest and preference. But for the purposes of this book, I’m going to assume that you’re seeking not only tips and techniques for kitbashing models but also guidance on how to make those models more closely resemble actual structures, and on when and why to kitbash rather than use a stock kit or ready-built model, or even to scratchbuild. We will embrace freelancing to some degree, but always with our sights trained in the direction of full-size structures found on one or more prototype railroads.



Frenda Mine was just one of scores of creatively kitbashed structures from the fertile mind of the late Art Curren. It’s easy to see the basics: the Freight Station kit then sold by AHM (No. 5831) and later by Tyco (No. 7785), among others, atop Bachmann’s HO Coaling Station (160-45211). Art Curren

Why kitbash a structure?

Before we can make a knowledgeable choice about buying or building a structure that has a specific role to play on our railroads, we need to give considerable thought as to the importance of that role. Some buildings are what we call “signature structures,” buildings that will help to set the stage for the railroad as a whole—the stars of the show.

On my former HO model railroad, the freelanced Allegheny Midland, for example, I modified the term “freelancing” by adding the words “prototype-based.” The old saw about this being my railroad for which I make all the rules was quietly retired, and instead I looked to regional prototype railroads as patterns for how the railroad looked and operated in various time periods.

When Jim Boyd showed me a color slide he had taken of the Chesapeake & Ohio’s yardmaster’s office at Quinimont, W.Va., I decided on the spot that AM lineside structures would be based on C&O prototypes. QN Cabin on the C&O thus became BJ Cabin on

the AM, 3, and the C&O’s historical-landmark depot at Thurmond in the Mountain State became South Fork on the AM, 4. These were both signature structures on the Midland Road, and I therefore scratchbuilt both of them to ensure that I captured the prototypes’ distinctive features.

A potential downside is that I also painted them in C&O’s two-tone gray, so a knowledgeable C&O fan might have become confused as he saw familiar structures with odd names in unfamiliar locations. Perhaps I should have created a unique AM paint scheme, but the operational theme was based on the premise that the Midland Road eventually became an extension of the Nickel Plate Road into the central Appalachian coalfields, and all AM locomotives and rolling stock were painted to match NKP standards. I could therefore have adopted the NKP structure paint scheme, but the NKP also painted its depots two-tone gray. That’s why the mix of C&O architecture with NKP everything else seemed to be plausible, but it didn’t resolve the

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9

This Walther's Trainline-series kit, Whistle Stop Station, is typical of small-town depots across the continent. It makes an ideal candidate for a freelanced railroad's standard depot.

Depot kit (No. 538-501) that, if built per the instructions, one would expect to find gracing trackside in a major metropolitan area. The catch is that the rear of the depot faced the mountain-side on the AM, but on Ted's railroad, it resides in a prominent location where it's readily visible from all four sides.

Fortunately, I did use the kit's back wall; unfortunately, I moved many of the rear window moldings to fill openings in the modified front wall and to create a second story. Since Ted plans to replace the model with an exact-scale scratchbuilt version, the need to find extra window moldings will shift to the next modeler to find a home for the building.

If you compare the image on the kit box to my model, you'll see where major alterations were made. Obviously, the multi-dormered mansard roof had to be replaced, and the central entrance door harks back to the kit's roots as a European structure. I replaced the doors with

windows borrowed from the unseen (or so I thought) rear wall and added a freight door and new entrance doors.

I converted the second story into the yardmaster's office. The bay window is a set of soft-metal castings of unknown lineage, but a similar bay could be kitbashed from various detail parts or window castings.

Painting the ornate stone trim brick color helped to tone it down. And molded plastic eave brackets from a long-forgotten source added a bit more American flavor; each bracket could easily have been made from three short strips of Evergreen styrene.

Adapting European kits

I doubt that you'll have a need for a duplicate of this depot, but I shared it with you to point out how it's feasible to modify a structure into something closer to your needs. Indeed, this and other kits' European heritage does not preclude them from being used "stock"

in North America, as Europeans brought their architectural preferences with them when they immigrated to this continent. Certain details such as window sashes may need to be changed, the roof shapes may need to be altered, and some of the ornate trim may be deemed excessive, but many kits from Heljan, Kibri, Vollmer, and others can find suitable jobs to perform on this side of the Atlantic.

Old railroad cars and other structures

Railroads often repurposed old rolling stock as storage sheds, diners (13), even depots (14). Such cars-cum-structures are among the easiest of kitbashing projects, and the variety of prototypes to emulate is almost infinite.

Depots and freight houses are the railroad's keystone structures, but other lineside buildings such as interlocking towers add considerable atmosphere to a layout, as we'll discuss in Chapter 3.

and ditched the too-rugged shingled roof in favor of one made from basswood and covered with strips of typing paper painted grimy black. The stone chimney at one end was totally wrong for a company house, but not using it left a bare area on that end, which I covered with climbing vines made from ground foam. Some Grandt Line porch railings and support posts complete the model, save for some details such as old sofas and figures.

Next up was a simple modification to Grandt Line's Reese Street Rowhouses (No. 300-5903). The paired windows are not typical, but by cutting down the steep roof pitch and making a few other mods, and especially by painting them a dull gray, **10**, they'll pass for company houses.

Last up were several Rix one-story house kits, 628-201. The paired windows are a liability and the roof pitch is a bit steep, but otherwise this kit is easy to convert to a company house, **11**.

A company store

The kit box said "store," and I needed a store, but not the typical downtown structure that the kit represents.

What I needed was a large, brick company store to provide a place to shop for the miners and their families who lived in Low Gap, W.Va., on the Allegheny Midland. Company stores are typically big wood, brick, or even stone boxes with large windows across the front and stairs leading up to a front porch, **12**.

This proved to be an easy kitbashing project using two Smalltown USA Hardware Store kits (No. 699-6006), but several kits in this line would have worked equally well. All that was required was to blend in the cornice of the front wall, hide the joints where wall sections were glued together with downspouts, and build a front porch. It's an easy one-evening project.

Coal country churches

A visit to central Appalachia still affords a look at times past: abandoned or repurposed company stores, rows of company houses (often upgraded by current owners), and churches of modest proportions and architecture, usu-

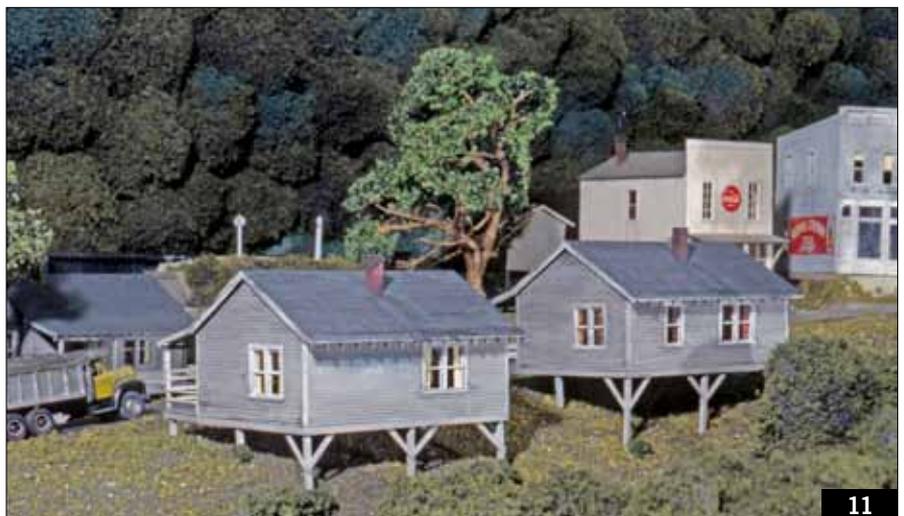


Grandt Line

Grandt Line's Reese St. Rowhouses (above) can be converted into company houses by lowering the roof pitch, adding sheet-styrene tarpaper roofs with rafter tails, removing the ornate eave and window trim, and adding "stilts" as required (below).



10



11

The Rix one-story house is easily kitbashed into company houses by reducing the roof slope and adding a tarpaper roof and porch. Most such houses were built in narrow valleys on undulating terrain, so support posts were common.



CHAPTER FIVE

Lineside industries

Dennis Daniels assembled this modern grain facility in HO starting with a length of 12" PVC pipe for the larger bin and covering it with corrugated panels from several Rix grain bin kits. The short bins on the left are Walthers grain bins built with only eight instead of ten rings; the taller bin is built per kit instructions. He used a Walthers conveyor leg shortened to fit below the upper deck of his railroad; the other legs are also Walthers kits. The office is from the Walthers bulk transfer conveyor kit (No. 933-3519). Dennis built the car-loading platform from Tichy's open grate platform plus Plastruct stairs and handrails. *Dennis Daniels*

The rewards offered by creative structure kitbashing go well beyond the enjoyment of the finished model. When the end product is clearly defined in advance and you find one or more commercial kits that closely resemble key components of the desired structure, it's truly a "Eureka!" moment. Such was the case when Dennis Daniels needed an HO model of a large elevator complex but not one upgraded from the steam era, 1. The largest bin is indeed kitbashed but not in the usual sense: He wrapped corrugated panels from Rix around a length of 12" PVC!



Virtual kitbashing

Taking digital photos of models and combining and editing the images can be a great help in kitbashing, allowing you to virtually kitbash a model without picking up a hobby knife. Most cameras and computers come with photo-editing software. I prefer Adobe's Photoshop Elements. It's powerful but not expensive—it sells for less than \$100.

For this project, I placed the tower next to an Atlas Maywood depot I had on hand and shot a photo (top). Using Elements, I erased the left end of the depot to shorten it, then used the rubber stamp (clone) tool to recopy the depot portion of the image so that it abutted the tower. Touching up the interface was done using the clone and paintbrush tools.

To correct the color mismatch, I used the Enhance > Adjust Color > Replace Color tools to change the buff and brown to two colors of gray. This same tool would have

allowed me to “repaint” the tower and depot into any color scheme to see how it would look. This can be especially helpful for a freelancer who is trying to decide on a railroad structure color scheme.

The new image showed several concerns: The siding on the depot and tower didn't match, which prompted me to dig out the Valley Depot kit I actually used, and the chimney on the bay-window side of the structure really looked out of place. If I had had a tower kit rather than the built-up version, I could have swapped the front and rear walls to correct the latter concern.

The altered photo also showed that the tower windows facing the depot roof would have to be shortened. Kit builders could simply swap a piece of Evergreen siding for the visible part of this wall.