

Introduction

Some books come together as fast and as smoothly as a sandwich. The author knows from the moment the first words appear on paper how the story will start and end. Then it's merely a matter of loading those two slabs of bread with all the good "stuff" that will go between them to make up a tasty yet simple meal.

Other books resemble a pot of soup. The writer envisions serving a hot and satisfying blend, but must decide which ingredients to add and how best to let them simmer in order to fill each bowl with something flavorful and filling.

This book has turned out to be more soup than sandwich. All along, I knew what I wanted readers to derive from a look at a number of the most memorable toy trains ever made – I just needed help in deciding what to present.

Going beyond "Collectible Classics"

Having long contributed to the "Collectible Classics" department in *Classic Toy Trains* magazine, I initially considered developing a

Lionel's 2332 GG1 electric-profile locomotive (front) and A.C. Gilbert's 370 American Flyer GP7 road diesel (rear) were, without question, significant additions to the post-World War II roster of American electric trains. Both could have earned spots on my list of the 101 greatest toy trains of that era. They did not, however, because later incarnations of these path-breaking engines surpassed them in appearance and performance.

book that included a number of those one-page feature articles about special yet affordable American toy trains.

A good idea, except that I quickly concluded that I ought to do more. Rather than collect essays already published in *Classic Toy Trains*, I suggested to Mark Thompson and Randy Rehberg in the Books Department at Kalmbach Publishing Co. that I write new, in-depth looks at specific toy locomotives, rolling stock, and accessories I thought were worth owning.

Mark and Randy suggested that I showcase only those O and S gauge locomotives and cars associated with the so-called postwar period of 1945 to 1969.

(Toy train enthusiasts define that era as opening with Lionel's resumption of electric train production after World War II.

They mark its end with that firm's decision to lease to General Mills the rights to manufacture and market its line.)

Limiting the book to models associated with the postwar era struck a chord with me because those 25 years witnessed the creation of many superb trains and accessories. As important, the models made then still have enormous appeal.



Rating the 101 best

Once I had agreed to focus on postwar models, I imagined the ingredients in this pot of soup were just right. Then came a brainstorm: Why not rate the trains I intended to spotlight? In other words, I wanted to do more than just devise a list of powerful locomotives and neat accessories folks should buy and operate.

Influenced by books about motion pictures people should watch or natural wonders they had to visit before they died, I decided to compile a list of what I believed were the 101 most colorful, significant, and fascinating toy trains produced during the postwar era. These were babies everyone should own.

Then I'd creep out on a limb and rank these models according to criteria I would set forth and let the world know what I considered to be the cream of the crop.

I shared this concept with Carl Swanson, Kent Johnson, and Bob Keller, my colleagues at *Classic Toy Trains*. They, along with our publisher, Terry Thompson, liked the idea. "Your neck will be the one on the chopping block," Bob said with a smile, remembering how opinionated toy train collectors can be.

What to include in the list

Undaunted by the prospect of being the target of widespread abuse and ridicule from my fellow hobbyists, I grabbed stacks

Train sets had to be included because certain models cannot truly be appreciated unless they're seen as part of a unique train. Take, for example, Lionel's 1591 O-27 outfit from 1957. The three flatcars carrying military vehicles made by Pyro Plastics look their best when coupled to both the 212 U.S. Marine Corps Alco A unit and the 6017-50 caboose that Lionel painted and lettered to match the diesel locomotive.



Out of fairness to readers who may want to add the trains described in this book to their collections, preproduction items, including engineering mock-ups and paint samples, are not profiled. One of the most beautiful of these rare items is this special version of Lionel's 2350 New Haven EP-5 electric-profile locomotive, which was used to promote that brand-new O gauge model at toy fairs in 1956.

of old Lionel and Gilbert catalogs and started making my choices. From there, I turned to dog-eared issues of model railroading magazines from the late 1940s and '50s. I next perused the reference guides to postwar trains, sets, and accessories that have been published in recent years.

Naturally, it didn't take long to compile a list of more than 200 models produced by just the giants of the toy train industry (A.C. Gilbert, Lionel, and Louis Marx) during the postwar decades. To that I soon added a few dozen pieces made by the "raptors" of the time – the tiny firms that eagerly sought niches missed by Lionel and its chief rivals. Those companies developed specialized cars and more.

Whittling down my massive list to less than half its original size took time and thought. I paced the floor night after night, trying to figure out what to drop.

The first to go were preproduction engineering mock-ups and one-of-a-kind paint samples. These unique models – cool examples of innovation and beauty in miniaturization – were never made in quantity. Executives concluded that mass-production would be too costly or difficult and so did not add them to their product lines. Listing these models seemed unfair if readers wanted to own them.

Out went two favorites, models I would practically sell my soul to own. How I wish I could spotlight the Lionel 2350 New Haven

Unique Art Rock Island Diesels



The postwar era for toy trains really began in 1948, when Lionel announced its first diesels. Those full-sized locomotives, celebrated for their curved bodies, sleek lines, and striking hues, symbolized the technological prowess and confidence of postwar America.

Once Lionel pushed ahead with its path-breaking O gauge Electro-Motive F3s, other firms followed. In 1950, Marx heralded its replica of an FT diesel while Gilbert introduced S gauge models of Alco's PA and Electro-Motive's GP7.

Interestingly, the most attractive of the miniature diesels produced during the postwar era may be a pair whose decoration depended on a process associated with the prewar era and scorned by Lionel and Gilbert. The Rock Island diesels produced by Unique Art Manufacturing Co. of Newark, N.J., represent the last hurrah for tinplate lithography.

Good to know

No product number appeared on the diesels or their box

Sold separately, not a set component

Values: \$75 (good), \$150 (excellent)

Clever marketing and stunning tin lithography had been Unique Art's hallmarks since its founding in New York City in 1916 and later move to Newark. Under the direction of Sammy Bergman, it produced a variety of mechanical toys, including Jazzbo and Ham and Sam, two of the most popular playthings of the 1920s.

Stiff competition from Ferdinand Strauss and Louis Marx gave Unique a run for its money, but somehow the company survived the Great Depression and World War II. Its first smash of the postwar era was a windup toy based on the Li'l Abner comic strip.

Unique Art expanded into clockwork trains in 1949. In addition to developing its own tooling, it purchased dies owned by the Dorfan Co., another Newark firm, which had marketed electric trains in the 1920s and early '30s before going out of business. Now Unique could launch a full-fledged line to compete with Marx for the low end of the market, a tactic that destroyed Bergman's friendship with Marx.

The most celebrated of Unique's handful of sets was a circus train introduced in 1949. Collectors prize the brightly colored cars and special caboose that came in this beautiful O gauge set. Connoisseurs of tin lithography paid tribute to the steam engine and tender and the wildly detailed freight and circus cars offered by Unique.

Nothing from the Unique line surpassed

the powered and unpowered Rock Island diesels released in 1950. At 14", each was longer than any other O gauge diesel on the market. And their lithography – red, yellow, purple, and gray – was spectacular.

The Rock Island units had a working headlight and a single power truck and reversing mechanism. Rubber tires were placed on parallel wheels on the power truck to increase traction. All of these features were expected to bolster sales, but Bergman was smart enough to realize that many of his potential customers owned Lionel trains. That's why Unique locomotives came with diesel coupler adapters compatible with Lionel's.

Sadly for Unique, its diesels looked too much like toys to captivate boys under the spell of Lionel. They also lacked the power to pull more than a few lightweight cars.

If Lionel ignored what Bergman and his company were doing, an irate Marx did not. To avenge what he saw as a betrayal, Marx rushed to expand his lines of tinplate and plastic trains. Under no circumstances would he concede the market to Unique.

Not long after the Rock Island diesels disappeared in 1951, Unique Art went out of business. Its engines and freight cars were all but forgotten, as was the firm's mascot, Unique Artie. That emblem of a juggling clown appeared at the back end of each diesel. Charming he was, but postwar boys demanded realism and so averted their eyes.

American Flyer 718 Operating Mail Pickup Car



Every major postwar manufacturer – American Model Trains, Gilbert, Kusan, Lionel, and Marx – felt pressed to fatten its roster with passenger trains, even though it was common knowledge that families preferred freight trains when buying a first set. Interestingly, only Gilbert took the next step, giving its American Flyer heavyweight fleet a car that did something automatically.

The concept of an operating passenger car originated beyond the gates of the New Haven plant less than a year before the outbreak of World War II.

Richard G. Smith, a carpenter from upstate New York who loved to tinker with toy trains, had previously shared his inventions with Lionel. This time, he brought a functioning model of a mail pickup car to Gilbert, which accepted and paid for what entered its line of $\frac{3}{16}$ " O gauge models as the 492 in 1941.

Company designers modified the 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ "-long sheet-metal shell built for the 494 baggage car, which had been introduced in 1940. The 492 was painted Pullman Green, Tuscan Red, and bright red.

For the S gauge line of American Flyer trains on the verge of production in 1946, engineers abandoned the sheet-metal bodies used for heavyweight cars before the war and opted for plastic. They kept the

mechanism refined previously to go inside a baggage car that simulated a mailbag being picked up or tossed off.

The 718 New Haven Operating Mail Pickup made its debut as a red car on a plastic frame. By 1947, a die-cast metal frame and an unpainted thick red plastic body were the norms. Later came a red-painted plastic shell on a sheet-metal frame.

Collectors associate both types of red cars with 1949-54 production. The same years also had green (painted or unpainted) plastic shells on die-cast frames.

Shells and frames might differ, but each 718 operated the same. A large opening on one side revealed a stamped-metal arm that, when activated by remote control, swung back and forth. One of the two green, red, or white American Flyer Lines bags packed with each car could be hung on that arm. The other sack was hooked on a metal stand secured to the base of the 713 Special Rail Section that also came with every mail pickup car.

Now S gaugers could simulate the daily activity of a train picking up and dropping off sacks of letters. They coupled the 718 to their train and sent it off. When the car approached the stand, they pressed a button on the controller and the arm on the pole hurled a mailbag into the open door. Simultaneously, the sack on the protruding

arm of the heavyweight baggage car was snapped onto the stand.

The animation was entertaining – putting a figure aboard the car would have enhanced the illusion. All the same, youngsters loved the effect and made the 718 with link couplers – and the 918 with knuckle couplers – very popular.

So popular that Lionel must have considered something similar. Two photos in its archives show a prewar passenger car alongside a mail stand like the one Smith developed. Dated 1946, these pictures suggest that Lionel had at some point investigated a delivery device. Perhaps the one photographed was Smith's, and Lionel had rejected the prototype before he took it to Gilbert.

Whatever happened with Lionel, we know that Gilbert was the victor with operating passenger cars. The 718 revealed how collaboration between a clever carpenter and trained engineers injected realism and whimsy into the American Flyer line.

Good to know

Cataloged 1946-54 as a set component and a separate-sale item (\$5.95 to \$6.85)

Values: \$30 (good), \$70 (excellent)

American Model Toys 9003 Baltimore & Ohio Boxcar



When Jack Ferris, the guiding light at American Model Toys, decided to develop a line of near-scale freight cars, he had no idea he was about to change the face of toy trains. Yet the AMT models of modern rolling stock, especially boxcars like the 9003 Baltimore & Ohio, would influence every other postwar manufacturer.

American railroads had tended to keep their freight cars simple and plain through most of the 20th century. The major exceptions were the billboard refrigerator cars famous for the graphics slapped across them.

After the federal government prohibited embellishing private freight cars in so brazen a manner, railroads did little more than paint their heralds and slogans on the sides of rolling stock. The Pennsylvania RR's keystone, the Northern Pacific's yin-yang, and the Seaboard's heart became familiar sights to anyone, young or old, who delighted in watching a freight roar past a crossing.

Good to know

Included in AMT and Kusan lines
Number "466096" was on actual B&O car
Values: \$20 (good), \$35 (excellent)

Of course, boxcars and gondolas painted the same drab shade of brown didn't grab the attention of onlookers or shippers or help observers distinguish one railroad from another. Even the heralds might be missed. So a handful of ambitious executives ordered crews to decorate some of their cars in bright colors, especially if those cars offered special treatment or expedited service for shippers.

Suddenly, children counting the freight cars passing by them lost track because they were agog at seeing rolling stock painted blue, green, orange, silver, or another color. And they read about "Pace-maker" service and "Overnight" transport.

Model makers were no less impressed by the changes than were the kids eyeballing freight trains in their hometowns. Pioneering firms in the HO and O scale fields introduced replicas in the late 1940s. Too bad that Lionel and Gilbert seemed content to offer plain, undersized cars, particularly boxcars. Yellow and brown dominated the color palette, with minimal decoration on the freight cars.

Sensing that the O gauge market was waiting for something better, AMT heralded a line of larger and more realistic rolling stock in 1951. Already, that small firm in Indiana had seized the lead when it came to producing models of contemporary extruded-aluminum streamlined passenger cars. Now, Ferris and his staff were eager to make further inroads and win customers from Lionel.

The AMT line of boxcars, which Kusan would continue to produce after buying the inventory and tooling from Ferris in 1954, featured 12 superb models. They tended to be dark brown with white lettering and railroad heralds. Each was based on an actual piece of rolling stock. They represented a notable cross-section of lines whose trains could be seen throughout the United States and Canada.

The most beautiful of these O gauge models was the 9003, which came painted blue and silver for the Baltimore & Ohio's Sentinel service of rush shipping. Besides the blue and yellow markings emblazoned across the sides, each car boasted a decal herald that consisted of black, blue, and yellow elements.

Add in the metal brake wheel, die-cast Liftomatic knuckle couplers (compatible with Lionel's), and detailed trucks that were standard equipment on AMT boxcars, and you had a stunning model that became part of Kusan's line.

Lionel, aware of AMT's triumphs, vowed to enhance its O gauge boxcars. The 6464 series debuted in 1953, and three years later added a Baltimore & Ohio Sentinel car. The 6464-325, while a gem with the correct two-color doors, still fell short of AMT's car. Only the latter accurately reproduced the lettering, number, and data found on the full-sized boxcar. Chalk up another victory for Jack Ferris.

Lionel 3520 Operating Searchlight Car



Every kid growing up during the post-war era begged for a searchlight car. Just a matter of which type of operation he wanted: the stationary light on Lionel's 6520 and 6822, the automatically rotating beam on the 3620, or the removable floodlight on the 3650. They're all worthy and fun; I happen to prefer the 3520.

Mounting one or even a pair of miniature floodlights on a toy railcar had been the "Eureka moment" for Frank Pettit in 1931, when he was employed in Lionel's showroom in midtown Manhattan. Joshua Cowen loved the concept, and searchlight cars brightened the Standard and O gauge lines for years to come.

Interestingly, corporate executives decided right after the war not to revive the prewar toy-like floodlight cars with on/off switches on the sheet-metal frames. The Gilbert Co. followed that path by slightly updating its old 488 and releasing the 634 Chicago & North Western in 1946.

Lionel's leaders bided their time, waiting for designers to bring something new and realistic. Until then, they were content to limit their roster of models with a floodlight to a version of the die-cast metal work caboose introduced in 1946.

The 6520 Operating Searchlight Car answered Lionel's prayers. Engineers borrowed the die-cast metal depressed-center flatcar they had developed for the 2461 Transformer Car and installed an injection-molded replica of a General Motors diesel generator.

All this heavy, imposing model needed was a modern metal floodlight that, like the generator, seemed to be in the right proportion to the car. Securing it to the flatcar yielded the 6520 in 1949. Running that model over a special track section and pressing a button on a remote-control device turned on the light. The 6520 resumed its journey, its lamp illuminated until being shut off the same way.

The only drawback to Lionel's first postwar searchlight car related to its operation. The remote-control aspect of turning the floodlight on or off enhanced the 6520. But the fact that the light could be maneuvered only by hand did not.

That limitation frustrated and inspired the company's electrical engineers and model makers. Fascinated by the process of innovation and driven to improve their work, they continued to refine what they had achieved.

This aspect of Lionel's legacy shouldn't be taken for granted because it enabled the corporation to upgrade operating cars and accessories that already ran superbly. In this case, the 3520 elevated the searchlight car to greater heights.

To no one's surprise it was Pettit, the godfather of Lionel's searchlight cars, who discovered an easy solution to the shortcomings of the 6520.

Tinkering with a vibrating motor activated by an electrical coil, he adapted that mechanism for the searchlight car. Then he

glued to the base of the floodlight housing a rubber driving washer that had tiny rubber fingers on one surface.

Energizing the driving coil on the car by remote control generated vibrations that moved the fingers and thereby caused the housing to revolve.

Talk about realism! The improved Operating Searchlight Car, which Lionel numbered 3520 and introduced in 1952, promised more control over how the light went on and off and where it shined. Now every element was under an operator's authority.

Engineers went on fine-tuning the model until they finished one whose operation had nothing to do with remote control. The 3620, which superseded the 3520 in 1954 and was cataloged for two more years, depended entirely on track power to illuminate and swivel around a darkened room. Definitely neat, but taking control from kids undermined the appeal of this timeless operating car.

Good to know

Cataloged 1952-53 as a set component and a separate-sale item (\$7.75)

Generator was always unpainted orange plastic

Values: \$25 (good), \$55 (excellent)

American Flyer 752A Seaboard Coaler

The variety of materials loaded and dumped by operating accessories from the postwar period astounds. Logs and barrels, blocks of ice and oil drums, scrap metal and culvert, even automobiles and rockets. Further reflection puts coal above the rest as the quintessential item associated with railroads. The greatest loader of coal was the Seaboard Coaler, a part of the American Flyer line.

Lionel's engineers launched the parade of innovative loaders in 1938 with nearly identical manual and remote-controlled accessories. They refined the 96 and 97 Coal Elevators, which remained in the catalog through 1942.

Designers grasped the sales potential of these coal loaders, which enabled youngsters to imitate what they saw in rail yards, but without the mess. Kids liked having more to do with their trains while their mothers and dads appreciated Lionel's using chunks of Bakelite plastic rather than dirty, crumbly coal.

By satisfying everyone, Lionel indirectly encouraged families to build three-rail empires. As people deepened their commitment to model railroading, they spent more on trains and accessories, which rewarded Lionel and its peers.

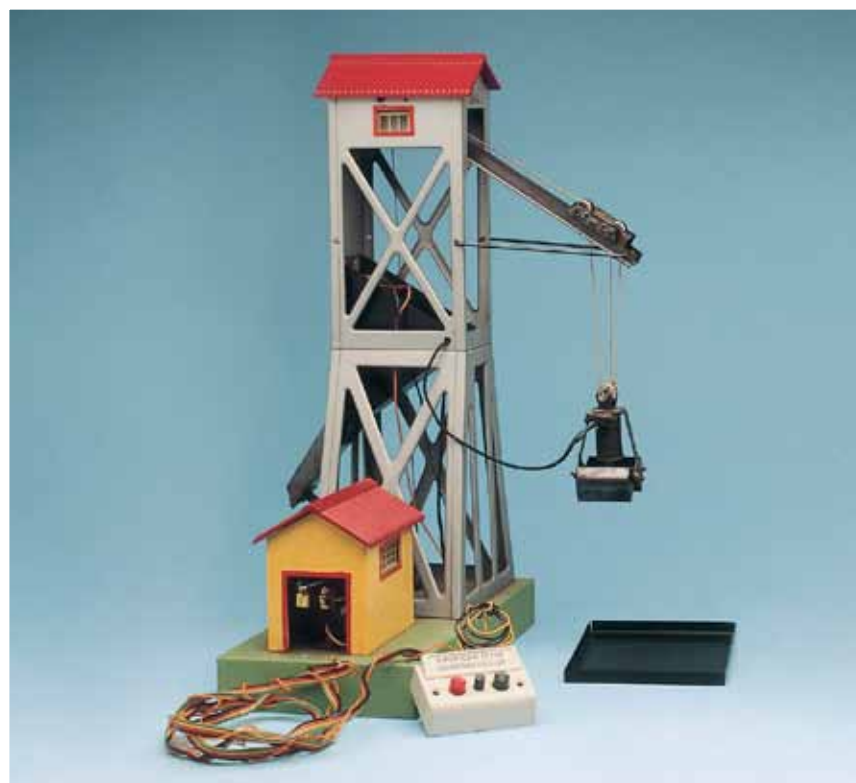
When Lionel's leaders set out to resurrect their train line after the war, they planned to bring back the 97 and other large remote-controlled accessories. Executives and engineers at the Gilbert Co. couldn't have been surprised by that decision, and they

Good to know

Priced at \$18.95, it was the most expensive American Flyer accessory

Came packed with a metal tray and a 23 bag of artificial coal

Values: \$115 (good), \$200 (excellent)



embarked on a campaign to bolster the American Flyer line.

The consumer catalog Gilbert put out in 1946 represented the debut of an impressive item whose look was influenced by a coal loader shown in advertisements for Gilbert's illustrious Erector Set back in 1924. The 752 Seaboard Coaler added "spectacular realism to your railroad system," observed the catalog's copywriter. (The coaler was named for the business in New Haven, Conn., that supplied Gilbert with coal.)

Although shown in 1946, the Seaboard Coaler did not arrive in stores until the next year. Flyer experts blame the delay on a strike that halted production of Bakelite. Gilbert needed that plastic to produce the bits of coal as well as the roofs perched on the 16"-high tower and the shack below that concealed the motor.

The sheet-metal base of the 752 came painted light green. The sheet-metal tower was gray, and the shack was yellow. Windows were outlined in red.

The 752 (cataloged through 1950) came with a two-button controller. The 752A (cataloged in 1951-52) had an improved, three-button model.

Pressing the green button on either version lowered the clamshell bucket to a pile of coal poured out by hand or ejected by a 716 Automatic Dump Car. An operator then used the red button to close the jaws of the bucket over the coal. As soon as he fully pushed down the button, he succeeded in raising the metal bucket into the sky-scraping tower.

Releasing the red button opened the jaws, so coal dropped into the tower's storage hopper. The load flowed down the chute into a car on an adjacent track.

The 752A Seaboard Coaler advanced the process with a third button that closed the hopper. Now a child could wait to unload the coal into a hopper or dump car until ready.

The realistic and spectacular operation of the 752A, combined with its majestic height and array of colors, made it the greatest of all postwar accessories. Gilbert might have been responding to Lionel rather than charting unexplored waters when it developed this coal-loading item for the American Flyer line, but it climbed amazingly high with the Seaboard Coaler and created an icon for the era.

American Flyer 377/378 Texas & Pacific GP7 Diesels



A year after Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers shattered the color barrier in baseball, Lionel broke the diesel barrier in postwar toy trains by introducing its Electro-Motive F3 in 1948. Just as other teams then felt they had to sign African-American players, so did Gilbert and Marx feel compelled to develop their own diesels or risk falling behind. In time, as the American Flyer 377/378 showed, their efforts would bear delicious fruit.

Initially, executives at the New Haven toy manufacturer could do little more than vow to catch up with Lionel. Before Gilbert could do so, Lionel struck another blow with its NW2, the first diesel switcher from a major toy train producer.

Rather than stick with its established roster of steam locomotives, Gilbert searched for a niche of diesels to call its own. Thanks to a talented and inventive corps of engineers, the firm caught the toy train world by surprise in 1950, when, in addition to an Alco PA, it unveiled a stunning S gauge model of a road diesel.

The 370 GP7 grabbed attention, thanks to its silver-painted body shell with a red-and-yellow General Motors herald and yellow "American Flyer" lettering on a royal blue stripe bordered with yellow. The color scheme and eye-catching decals, plus the operating headlights, couldn't help but impress youngsters.

Were this pioneering model not burdened by link coupler bars, it would have cracked my list. Trumping the 370 and its successors (not to mention the 372 Union Pacific GP7) was the 377/378 combination of powered and unpowered Geeps. Judged on beauty, performance, and acclaim, it was the best American Flyer road unit.

The masterminds at Gilbert moved beyond a fanciful GP7 wearing demonstrator and toy insignia in their search for a good-looking prototype. They looked far from the Atlantic Coast and in 1954 fastened onto the Texas & Pacific, with nearly 2,000 miles of track between New Orleans and El Paso. (The railway was no stranger to the Flyer line, with the 631 Texas & Pacific gondola debuting in 1946.)

The paint scheme adopted by the Texas & Pacific matched a severe black with the warm and inviting "Swamp Holly Orange" to create a unique and appealing look for its road diesels. Gilbert imitated this scheme on the 374/375 GP7s (cataloged 1954-55), down to the red-and-yellow diamond herald and sans-serif lettering.

By selling a combination of matching powered and unpowered road units, Gilbert let youngsters duplicate on their S gauge layouts what they might see every day. They could model lash-ups that doubled or tripled a train's motive power.

Then company engineers took another step that separated this 21¾" combination

of Geeps from the rest of the pack and gave Gilbert the crown here. They again equipped the T&P powered unit (renumbered in 1956 as 377) with a double worm-drive motor, a Pull-Mor rubber wheel on each side of the power truck, and a four-position reversing unit. Both it and the unpowered twin (renumbered as 378) were illuminated and came with knuckle couplers.

Where the 377/378 improved upon its predecessor related to sound. An electronic horn had been standard; now Gilbert beefed it up with Diesel Roar. The extent of realism – authentic paint scheme, double-heading units, and knuckle couplers – was enhanced by sounds produced at the touch of a button.

The Texas & Pacific combination (cataloged as 3778 and then 21908) attested to the deep belief in realism – scale proportions, authentic paint and lettering scheme, and special effects – held by Gilbert's chiefs.

Good to know

Cataloged in 1956 for \$39.95 and in 1957 for \$42.50

Led 5655RH New Sunshine Special in 1956 and 20355 Sunshine Special in 1957 (both were six-car freight sets)

Values: \$175 (good), \$435 (excellent)