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 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 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 “tarpits” of the time – the tiny firms that eagerly sought niches missed by Lionel and its chief rivals. Those companies developed specialized cars and more.

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.

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 Electric locomotive.

Lionel’s 2332 GG1 electric-profile locomotive (front) and A.C. Gilbert’s 370 American Flyer G77 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.

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 post-war 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 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.

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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 prestigious 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 postwar era. The Alco’s PA and Electro-Motive’s GP7. For the S gauge line of American Flyer 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 1/4” O gauge models as the 492 in 1941. Company designers modified the 104”-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 Car 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 small 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 steel stand secured to the base of the 713 Special Rail Section that also came with every mail pickup car.

Whatever happened with Lionel, we know that Gilbert was the victor with operating passenger cars. The 718 revealed how collaboration between a clever craftsman and trained engineers injected realism and whimsy into the American Flyer line.
When Jack Ferris, the guiding light of 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. The Pennsylvania RR’s key-zen a manner, railroads did little more than embellish private freight cars in so bra-
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 eyeball-
ing 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 makers added a line of larger and more realistic roll-
ing stock in 1951. Already, that small firm in Indiana had seized the lead when it came to producing models of contemporary extruded-
components that already ran superbly. In this case, they resumed its journey, its lamp illuminated until being shut off the same way.

The AMT line of boxcars, which Kusan would continue to produce after buying the company 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 repre-
ent 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 mail shipping. Besides the blue and yellow markings emblazoned across the sides, each car boasted a decalset herald that consisted of black, blue, and yellow elements.

Add in the metal brake wheel, die-cast 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, wait-
ing for designers to bring something new and realistic. Until then, they were content to limit their roster of models with a flood-
light on the 3650. They’re all worthy of mention, though few chose to include them in their collections.

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, wait-
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lighting the attention of onlookers or shoppers and help observers distinguish one railroad from another. Even the heralds might be missed. So a handful of ambitious execu-
tive floodlights on a toy railcar had been much of interest.

Lionel, aware of AMT’s triumphs, vowed to enhance its O gauge boxcars, and you had a stunning model that became part of Kusan’s line.

Engineers went on fine-tuning the model until they finished one whose opera-

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 opera-
tion. The remote-control aspect of turning the floodlight on or off enhanced the 6520. But the fact that the light could be maneu-
vered 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 short-
carriers. Each was based on an actual piece of rolling stock. They repre-
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"466096" was on actual B&O car

Of course, boxcars and gondolas painted the same drab shade of brown didn’t grab

values: $25 (good), $55 (excellent)

The 6520 Operating Searchlight Car

Lionel 3520 Operating Searchlight Car

Good to know

ACME 1950s Milk Car

Number “466096” was on actual B&O car

values: $25 (good), $55 (excellent)
surprised by that decision, and they controlled accessories. Executives and engineers to imitate what they saw in rail yards, these coal loaders, which enabled young-age hopper. The load flowed down the chute into a car on an adjacent track. Rather than stick with its established moribund motive power. The 377/378 combination of powered and unpowered Geeps. Judged on beauty, performance, and acclaim, it was the best American Flyer road train. The masterminds at Gilbert moved beyond a fanciful GP7 wearing demonstra- tor and toy insignia in their search for a good-looking prototype. They looked far from the Atlantic Coast and in 1954 fast- tened 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 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 21½” 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 DieselBlast. 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 (cata- loged as 3778 and then 21908) attested to the deep belief in realism – scale propor- tions, authentic paint and lettering scheme, and special effects – held by Gilbert’s chiefs.

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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 quintessen- tial 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 young- sters 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, cranky coal.

By satisfying everyone, Lionel indirectly rewarded Lionel and its peers. When Lionel’s leaders set out to resurrect their train line after the war, they planned to do more on trains and accessories, which more to do with their trains while their

**American Flyer 752A Seaboard Coaler**

Good to know

**Prices:**

- $15 (good)
- $200 (excellent)

**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)

**Texas & Pacific GP7 Diesels**

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)

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