STARTING WITH TOY TRAINS
A supplement to Classic Toy Trains magazine

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Welcome to the enjoyable and exciting hobby of toy trains! Whether you have a train set and are wondering about the next step or you enjoyed O and S gauge trains as a child and are renewing your interest, you’ll find there’s never been a better time to build your own railroad empire featuring big, powerful, and fun electric trains. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get started!

Before going too far, we should talk about what a toy train is. You likely know what one is by seeing or holding it. A toy train is a miniature representation of a locomotive, freight car, or passenger car found on an actual railroad.

Scale model railroaders expect that representation to be a precise model of an actual piece of railroad equipment. By contrast, toy train enthusiasts don’t insist on having perfect replicas. They understand that a toy is supposed to provide joy and help kids (of all ages) escape the demands of everyday life. What could be better?

There are different ways to approach the hobby. You can set up a train on your living room floor, or you can build a special train table. Add buildings, scenery, roads, vehicles, and figures, and you have a layout.

On the following pages you’ll find plenty of information to get you started. And don’t forget to check out Classic Toy Trains’ website for additional information and helpful tips: www.ClassicToyTrains.com/Beginners.

Lionel’s O gauge trains, in particular the Santa Fe F3 diesels shown here, filled countless dreams of children growing up in the post-World War II years. You can recapture the magic today, and this handy guide will help you get started.
Starting With Toy Trains

Some of the brightest minds in our hobby are gifted with the ability to put pencil to paper and whip up an original track plan. Even though I’ve designed a fair number of plans for Classic Toy Trains magazine, I can assure you that I’m certainly not a person with this kind of raw talent. So don’t worry if your genius also falls short in this area – you’re not alone.

Like most of us looking to craft “The Perfect Plan,” my efforts at track planning require a methodical approach. In fact, even before I sit down to render any track plan – large or small, simple or complex – I work through a number of preparatory steps that help me sketch a quality design.

Since many of you have the same goal, I’ll gladly share my six-step pre-design ritual. Granted, my method and the resulting plans won’t suit every taste, so I encourage you to adapt my steps or develop your own process.

Even better, if you work through the steps and produce a plan you really like, submit a printout or photocopy (CTT Plans, 21027 Crossroads Circle, Waukesha, WI 53187-1612) for consideration in CTT’s Toy Train Track Plan series!

For most of us, a successful track plan comes when preparation and opportunity intersect. By following the six easy steps outlined here, you’ll find a practical path to developing an enjoyable toy train layout that is tailor-made for you.

**Design a layout you’ll love in 6 easy steps**

**POINTS TO PONDER BEFORE YOU DRAW YOUR NEXT TRACK PLAN**

By Kent Johnson • Illustrations by Kellie Jaeger

Some of the brightest minds in our hobby are gifted with the ability to put pencil to paper and whip up an original track plan. Even though I’ve designed a fair number of plans for Classic Toy Trains magazine, I can assure you that I’m certainly not a person with this kind of raw talent. So don’t worry if your genius also falls short in this area – you’re not alone.
1 Study your space. It’s one thing to know that you’ve got a bit of real estate to erect a toy train layout. But in addition to knowing the precise dimensions of that space, you’ll want to consider any unique characteristics of your proposed layout area. Observe and note the location and orientation of doors, closets, windows, vents, and light switches. It’s rarely a good idea to obstruct these fixed features, so you’re better off designing around them from the onset. Also consider the height and construction of the ceiling to make sure you account for new layout lighting, backdrop installation, and even exceptionally tall framework.

2 Make room improvements. After surveying your proposed layout area, you’ll want to make any essential room improvements right away. Speaking from experience, I can tell you that it’s much easier to install carpet, paint walls, hang a suspended ceiling, and add lights if you aren’t distracted by efforts to plan a layout or maneuver around sections of a layout you’ve already assembled.

Even if you never get around to building a layout, you’ll at least have made improvements that enhance the room for any use. More often than not, you’ll be so inspired by the fresh coat of paint or bright lights that you’ll immediately want to start designing a layout. But for now, hold on to that thought.

3 Draft a room sketch. While great layouts have begun with something as simple as a sketch on a paper napkin, I prefer to have a more formal drawing of the space for my design. Typically, I’ll start by drawing a pencil sketch of the room on graph paper. After defining the walls, I record each of the previously noted room features. When I’m satisfied with this sketch, I make at least a half-dozen photocopies I can use for doodling out various layout designs any time an idea strikes.

4 Take stock in your toy train inventory and hobby interests. Though it may seem like an inconsequential step, this is often the make-or-break point for many designs. In fact, this step was so significant to John Armstrong, the author of hundreds of track plans published in Kalmbach books and magazines, that he rarely began a sketch without completing his “Givens and Druthers” – a list of layout design criteria. Case in point, when my father first considered building a new layout, I asked him to survey his collection. That’s when he realized his latest acquisitions were mostly command-controlled locomotives marked for the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy RR. Hence, the basis of his new layout – a design that reflects the Burlington Route along the mighty Mississippi River (see “12-by-25 rec-room railroad” in the July 2006 issue of Classic Toy Trains).

Additionally, never discount the importance of dreaming up a layout that reflects you – not your friends, family, or the latest trend in the hobby. As the chief operating engineer, you’ll be much happier with the resulting layout.

5 Choose your track. The type of track you choose for your layout will influence your design. The cost of each brand is certainly an important consideration, but you’ll also find that the physical characteristics and geometry of the various track types may dictate how it fits into a space.

For example, consider the track plan for CTT’s Retro Railroad (see the September 2009 issue of Classic Toy Trains). The builders of this 4 x 8-foot O gauge pike opted to use tight-radius O-27 track to accommodate a layout scheme that wasn’t feasible with broader curves. As you consider the many track options now available, be sure to reference Bob Keller’s tips for selecting the right track, also found in this special section.

6 Pencil and paper … or PC and printer. Many layout builders still prefer using a pencil, some paper, an eraser, and a few drafting tools and track templates to develop a sketch into a detailed track plan. My preference is to use my personal computer installed with RR-Track layout design software (www.rrtrack.com). Featuring multiple libraries of track, operating accessories, structures, and even scenery elements, this is the most robust design software available to toy train layout builders.

These features are ideal, but the real bonus is the provision that RR-Track includes for printing a full-scale (1 inch equals 1 inch) plan using a standard computer printer. These black-and-white printouts on 8½ x 11-inch paper can then be placed on a layout tabletop to test-fit a plan – all without the expense of purchasing track sections first.
Here at Classic Toy Trains magazine, just about every story we do on selecting track has one thing in common. It results in a surge in calls and emails from folks asking, “Which track should I buy?”

We can’t tell you which is the best brand to buy because we don’t know what you want on your railroad. Adopting a sort of Zen-like-Kung-Fu-sage-wisdom approach to the hobby will help.

There are many paths to toy train enlightenment and happiness. Once you realize that there are few rights or wrongs in the toy train world (well, except for stuff dealing with fire hazards and our friend, Mister Electricity), things become easier. Why?

It is all about you. Or at least it’s about your vision for your railroad. What you want for a layout. What you have room for. Which trains you want to run on your railroad. And since everything has a cost, what your budget can handle. Find the right mix, and you’ll be happy. Yin and yang, folks.

You can just run out, buy a big box of track, and start putting down straights and curves to see what happens. This is a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants stage.

But think ahead and plan ahead, and you’ll have a better railroad, and you may even spend less money.

The big “why” of getting ahead of the game is that while buying track isn’t the most expensive thing you’ll ever do, you can easily drop $1,000 before you know it. Here are some questions to ask before you get going:

Consider your space, your trains, and the overall look you want to achieve before committing to a track brand. Rear to front are traditional postwar-style O gauge tubular track by Lionel and a postwar no. 2018 2-6-4 steam locomotive. In the center is a Williams GP9 riding on Lionel Fastrack, and in front a Lionel LionMaster diesel poses on GarGraves flextrack. Jim Forbes photo.

Select your track

Hey, it is all about you • By Bob Keller
1. What “look” do you want your layout to have?

**Traditional toy-like:** The only less complex look would be to put the track down on the living room floor. The objective is to re-create the layout we had when we were 10 years old.

More often than not, the trains are vintage, perhaps augmented with some traditional toy-like locomotives and rolling stock from the modern era.

Track is basically screwed down on benchwork. Track may be placed on top of some cork roadbed, and perchance some ballast is added. Structures and accessories will be postwar-style products by Lionel or Plasticville. The aim is nostalgia to the max.

Trackage you may want to consider as the best candidates for a traditional layout include tubular styles by Lionel, K-Line, and Williams. I’d also include track systems with a plastic roadbed base (Atlas O’s Industrial Rail brand, Lionel’s FasTrack, and MTH’s RealTrax). All of these work if just dropped on the layout, without any attempt at scenery integration.

In the S gauge world, I’d include traditional postwar Gilbert American Flyer track and S gauge track by GarGraves (flexible tubular with large wood ties). K-Line also offered traditional-style tubular track.

**Toy-rail:** Toy-like trains and structures, but integrated into a realistic scenic setting.

Just as often as not, trains can be modern, scale-type models or vintage postwar outfits. The main difference between a toy-rail layout and a toy-like layout is the look of the scenery.

Many toy-rail layouts we’ve seen use traditional tubular track, but include additional ties and extra ballasting to improve their appearance. Track brands for this type of layout include the better tubular track sections by GarGraves and Ross Custom Switches, which feature tubular rails mounted on more prototypical ties. There are also the roadbed-mounted Atlas O Industrial Rail, Lionel FasTrack, and MTH RealTrax systems but with additional weathering or the integration into the scenery.

In the S gauge world, GarGraves offers flex sections of track with large wood ties. Other candidates are American Models’ Universal system (solid-rail track mounted on plastic ties) and American S gauge brand track made by Classic Trains (solid rail mounted on plastic ties). MTH plans to offer the S-Trax system (solid rail mounted on a plastic base) originally developed by S-Helper Service.

**Hi-rail:** Scenery, track, and trains focus on realism (while, of course, ignoring that third rail!).

Candidates for this are tubular track by GarGraves, Ross, solid-rail track by Atlas O, and MTH’s ScaleTrax system.

In the S gauge world, the top three contenders are the solid-rail roadbed system by S-Helper Service and the solid rail mounted on ties systems by American Models or Classic Trains. You may want to consider GarGraves.

2. Your diameter of curves

Everyone wants O-72 or wider curves, but many of us can squeeze in only O-27 or O-31.

Although O-36 seems to be the new “entry diameter of choice,” you can still find ample supplies of tighter-diameter track on the market. Also, most brands offer a wide variety of track lengths and curve diameters. And don’t forget that several brands offer flextrack sections so you can customize your curves.

Don’t simply focus on the widest diameter you can squeeze in. I mean, if you plan on having two O-72 main lines side by side, recognize that this eats up a fair amount of real estate—not just in the curves, but also in the distance between the lines.

Maybe a single track of O-72 would be better. Or, depending on your track plan, you may be able to have more running fun with tighter curves.

Think about all aspects of operation before you buy that box of track!

3. How many switches do you plan?

Because of their price, I’ve always held the number of my switches to a minimum. A couple to shunt cars off to a station or a small yard, and that’s enough for me. But inside, aren’t we all really empire builders?

I incline toward picking the same brand of track and switches. You can make a case for spending either more, or less, and mixing up the brands.

The spending “more” involves buying more exotic switch combinations. For example, if you need a double crossover, you may want to buy a Ross no. 8 double crossover. They look and work great and it’s just one of many switch designs available.

The spending “less” involves scrounging bargain bins and checking out used switches and blowouts of older ClassicToyTrains.com | 7
new stock. Used switches can save you some dough-re-mi, but I’d never walk out of a shop with one without having the dealer test it for me. When you start laying down track, be sure you have an idea of how many switches you want in your track plan. If you get the track bolted and ballasted in place, it can be a mess to excavate the area for a new switch. So, if you want 16 switches, but can afford only six or eight today, make the sites for future installation less permanently finished.

If you just want storage, you can create a yard of “fake” switches. Trim each curved section at an angle to complement a yard feeder track. Place it close enough to the feeder line, and nobody will notice that there isn’t really a switch there unless they look very closely.

4. Can you mix and match? Yes indeed, you can. Through buying transition sections or transition pins, you can easily mate virtually any O gauge track brand to another brand or style for segments running in the distance, and transition section or transition pins, or you may want to consider installing a central bus line of heavy gauge wire with a network of feeder lines to the track. Never save money by opting for thin “doorbell-type” wiring. Performance will be lacking, you may run the risk of pushing too much power through inadequate wire, and, ultimately, you’ll just end up having to do it all over again with better wire.

Where you can, scrimp on track to get something running. But, and I can’t stress this enough, spend the cash and get the right wire for the job. You can swap out the track later if you want; the power grid will continue to serve the new track just as well as the old brand.

Plan ahead by selecting the right power source for the main line and the right power source for accessories and the wiring. Install an adequate number of lockons, or you may want to consider installing a central bus line of heavy gauge wire with a network of feeder lines to the track. Never save money by opting for thin “doorbell-type” wiring. Performance will be lacking, you may run the risk of pushing too much power through inadequate wire, and, ultimately, you’ll just end up having to do it all over again with better wire.

Where does that leave us? Deciding on the sort of look you want narrows the choice of track brands considerably. Knowing the diameter of curved track, the number of switches you want, the complexity of the track plan, and the extent of your budget will guide you to the right choice – for you and your vision!

After that, you can focus on buying and installing the track and doing the wiring. Before you know it, you’ll have your trains high-balling.

For more practical information on trackwork for your O gauge railroad, see Trackwork for Toy Trains by Peter H. Riddle. To order call 800-533-6644 or go to www.KalmbachBooks.com
Move over plywood! A host of foam-based products is poised to take over as the preferred material for building toy train layouts. While use of dimensional lumber will never cease, a variety of foam materials, ranging from thick insulation board to the fine foam foliage used for model trees, is becoming increasingly popular among layout builders.

So what’s the big advantage of using foam products for constructing framework and making scenery for a layout? Versatility is the short answer. Unlike traditional lumber products, which are primarily used to frame a layout, many forms of foam construction material can be easily shaped into realistic landforms, such as riverbeds, valleys, berms, hills, and mountains.

But that’s only half of the story. In addition to providing a versatile foundation for a layout, foam products make up a large share of the commercial materials used to add authentic scenery colors and textures.

The following pages feature an overall photo of CTT’s Cascade & Timber Trail Railway. I detailed construction of this 4 x 8-foot O gauge railroad in the December 2008 through July 2009 issues of Classic Toy Trains magazine. Turn the page to learn about the many uses of contemporary foam products on a toy train layout. The materials used on the C&TT Ry. are equally effective on larger layouts, including my 14 x 48-foot O gauge basement empire.

There are even more foam products, clever techniques, and handy tools that just won’t fit in the space available for this special section. As always, you can find other instructional features in the pages of Classic Toy Trains.

If you have helpful suggestions that you think other readers will appreciate, be sure to submit them for consideration in CTT’s Tips, Tools, and Techniques column (see any issue for submission guidelines).
Making the grade.
Along with wiring a layout, creating a change in track elevation is a task builders have come to fear. Such trepidation is one reason I built my home layout without a single grade change.

For builders with more courage than I have, the Woodland Scenics SubTerrain incline and riser components offer an easy solution for adding grades as great as 4 percent. These flexible foam sections are the ideal width (2½ inches) and density to support O or S gauge track; they're also handy for making steep and winding roads. I typically affix these flexible foam sections to a flat surface using either hot glue or Woodland Scenics no. ST1444 foam tack glue and then use no. ST1432 foam nails to temporarily hold things in place.

House made of foam.
None of the three little pigs was wise to this idea, but there are plenty of hobbyists who use foam-core board to assemble large and sturdy, yet inexpensive layout structures. When constructing a foam-core structure, be sure to add plenty of interior bracing to strengthen the design. If you decide to paint foam-core board, apply a very light coat to both the exterior and interior walls to minimize warping.

Noise-reducing roadbed.
One of the best ways I’ve found to reduce the noise generated by metal wheels clanking over metal rails is to insert soft foam material between the track (ties) and layout surface. Woodland Scenics offers O scale Track-Bed foam in 2-foot strips or 24-foot rolls, but also consider using foam carpet padding or flooring underlayment for larger applications.

A few manufacturers, including Scenic Express (www.sceneryexpress.com) and Mini Highways (www.walthers.com), produce a similar foam rubber material to simulate asphalt roads. Typically, these roads feature self-adhesive backing and painted roadway markings.

Ground foam.
Thanks to tiny colored bits of ground-up foam material, we’ve left the lichen behind and now create scenery with far superior color and texture. Manufacturers such as Scenic Express and Woodland Scenics offer a comprehensive spread of foam-based ground covering that ranges from extra fine to clumpy textures. It’s a real challenge to find a color in nature that you can’t match or blend to a match for your model railroad.

There are just as many ways to apply ground foam as there are colors. For easy application, spread a thin layer of white glue over a layout surface and use a jar with a shaker lid to shower on the foam.

Foam framework.
Even though a standard 4 x 8-foot sheet of 2- or 3-inch-thick pink or blue insulation board is much lighter than a comparable sheet of ½-inch plywood, this foam can easily support the weight of a toy train layout. I’ve built layouts supported solely by insulation board and a pair of sawhorses, but it’s best to double the thickness or add wood framing to protect and support the foam.

For quick-assembly foam framework, check out the module kits in the Woodland Scenics (www.woodlandsценics.com) MOD-U-RAIL system. Also consider foam panels coated with stone aggregate (www.styro.net) that represents an instant scenery base. There are adhesives made specifically for use with insulation board, but full-strength white glue also bonds foam.
Foam-compatible paint. When it comes to covering up stark white foam core or pretty pink foam-insulation board, be sure to use a paint that’s specifically compatible with the material. If you don’t read the labels carefully, you may find that the paint you just applied has initiated a nasty chemical reaction that’s begun to dissolve and pit the surface.

The same holds true for adhesives. When painting any kind of foam, I prefer to apply low-odor latex house paint. It’s even better (less mess and clean-up) if I can find the right color in a spray can.

Let it snow. While some builders opt for a full dose of artificial snow on their holiday layouts, others want only a subtle suggestion of the ground covering that comes with winter. If you’re part of the latter group, you’ll be pleased to learn that genuine Dow Styrofoam (www.styrofoamcrafts.com) craft foam sheets can be easily torn into shapes that resemble large patches of melting or drifted snow. Look for this type of foam (not insulation or bead) at crafts supply outlets.

Foamy foliage. Trees for your layout don’t need water, but they can use a thin covering of fine foam to enhance their appearance. Some commercial trees, such as Bachmann SceneScapes (www.bachmanntrains.com) no. 32203 conifer trees, come with this detail already secured. Otherwise, I douse my trees with hair spray before showering a green shade of ground foam over the branches. Shake off any excess before planting the trunks into a foam base.

Gonna build a mountain. Mention “foam mountains” and I immediately think of the postwar Lionel no. 121 landscaped tunnel. These tiny formations measure less than 12 inches high – hardly the dimensions of an impressive mountain. Make a bigger impression on your layout by stacking Woodland Scenics no. ST1419 profile boards into towering peaks. After interlocking and gluing the sections, I use an electric knife, hot knife, or hot wire cutter to carve a realistic slope.

Rock on! Hollywood movie set creators do it all the time, so why not make your version of a rocky mountain using a variety of lightweight foam products? On the C&TT Ry. we used a combination of stacked foam risers, piled foam peanuts, and expanding foam sealant to give our mountain its rugged terrain. In addition to keeping a layout fit and trim, these products are far easier to shape and carve than traditional plaster materials. To give foam rocks a realistic texture and strata, you can use a hand-saw, steak knife, or Stanley Surform rasp. It’s hard to avoid creating lots of foam debris as you work with these tools, so keep a shop vacuum at the ready.
Buy a new locomotive

THE CHOICE IS YOURS, BUT THINK ABOUT A FEW POINTS BEFORE YOU BUY

By Bob Keller

It has happened to everyone, in every gauge. You see a new locomotive, the “I-gotta-have-it” gene kicks in, you break open the piggy bank, and the rest is history. Usually this tale of love at first sight has a happy ending, but instances of “What was I thinking?” (also known as buyer’s remorse) have been known to crop up.

While I’m all behind the concept of “If you like it, buy it,” you may want to take an extra breath or two before you plunk down those ducats.

Will it fit in?
Can your layout accommodate your new locomotive? This isn’t particularly a factor of track diameter, but physical size and the overall design of the railroad, and what you model. I own an MTH Premier line Centipede A-A diesel set. It is a wonderful locomotive. But with 24 axles and 48 wheels, and measuring 46-plus inches in length, it could not have run on the first two layouts I built as an adult. On the first layout I didn’t even have a stretch of straight track long enough to power it up. So buying a Centipede would not have entered my mind until I had a large layout.

Similarly, if you desire a scale-sized model of a large modern locomotive that will operate fine on your railroad, consider that if you have a 7 x 7-foot layout with O-72 curves, you may find the locomotive chasing the caboose.

If you want to run scale-sized locomotives on a more traditionally sized pike, you may want to focus on scale models of smaller power, such as MP15s, SW1200s, and GP7s.

But jumbo locomotives don’t pose the only challenge. Locomotives of smaller stature may have a quirk or two as well. If you have a layout with a yard that is heavy on switches, and you try using a locomotive such as the K-Line Porter steam switcher or the K-Line Plymouth diesel switcher (with fairly short distances between pickup rollers), you may need to attach a car, such as a transfer caboose with a power pickup, to supply extra juice to the motor for an assist rolling through dead spots.

Does the locomotive fit your railroad’s historical era? This doesn’t matter to me, but you may want to think about it before you buy the product.

I don’t have a problem running a 1940s-era British steam locomotive next to my modern SD90s. Similarly, if I run an 1890s-style 4-6-0 pulling a train of Overton coaches, I don’t mind stopping at a station next to the 20th Century Limited. But you may find this a bit distracting to the action on the layout.

Today’s operators can find more locomotive types, in more road names, than ever before. The trick becomes matching them to your own model railroad.

Bob’s three rules for buying a locomotive

One: A toy train is not a retirement fund.
Never buy a new locomotive as an investment. Don’t buy one thinking you can sell it for close to what you paid. You probably won’t. But if, at some point in the future you do get some of, most of, or all plus a little back, consider it a bonus. Never use the return-on-investment angle as a selling point to your spouse.

Two: Buy it because you like it.
‘Nuff said.

Three: It’s your railroad and your world to create.
Do whatever you want. Just make sure that whatever you do physically works on your line and fits your idea of what your layout should be. Then you have it made. And if that locomotive is too large, too small, too old, too modern, or has the wrong paint scheme – well, that’s what display cases are for.

And a general given: Most modern locomotives operate fairly well, and general performance is comparable in like models from different manufacturers.

As in any aspect of life you can find a clunker. Still, the quality of assembly and out-of-the-box operation is good. Some products on the lower end of the spectrum may leave something to be desired, but for every $100 dud, you can find a $100 model that is great.

So the odds are that any new locomotive that you buy will be a “runner” not a “shelf queen.”

DOES IT MATCH MY FLEET?

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Today’s operators can find more locomotive types, in more road names, than ever before. The trick becomes matching them to your own model railroad.
Does the locomotive have all the command-control bells and whistles? Do you need the bells and whistles?
The good news is that all brands of O and S gauge trains on the market operate in conventional mode.

This provides an operator with basic directional and sound (if equipped) functions. You may not get crew-to-tower gabby-chatter, remote-coupler operation, or the ability to play your iPod through your F3, but you can make the engine go, stop, and toot.

Technology in the toy train world has marched forward over the past 15 years and delivers the problems and benefits of enhanced train operation. That being noted, it has taken quite a while for Lionel’s TrainMaster/Legacy systems and MTH’s Digital Command System (DCS), also known as ProtoSound 3.0, to penetrate the marketplace.

Our most recent survey of command system use by CTT readers documented that most folks operate in conventional mode only.

A fair percentage use a combination of Lionel’s systems: TrainMaster-only, Legacy-only, or Legacy and TrainMaster systems simultaneously. And about the same number use a combination of MTH’s DCS only; DCS and TrainMaster only; or TrainMaster, Legacy, and DCS systems simultaneously.

Operators who have embraced all the bells and whistles seem to demand all the options from all their trains, regardless of brand. That’s why they use multiple command systems.

Therefore, if you buy a command-equipped locomotive ask yourself the $64 question:
Do I have the needed command equipment to extract the maximum potential from this model? If not, will I be satisfied knowing I can’t use all the features I paid for?
Soon or later, you’ll be tempted to buy a vintage toy train. Maybe you want to duplicate the set given to you when you were young. Or you want an engine or accessory from the past to impress visitors.

There are four steps to take when buying a prewar or a postwar locomotive, car, or accessory. Essential for me is to never act impulsively and hand over a fist full of cash just because I catch sight of something my heart desires. I take my time and do my homework.

Four basic steps to follow

First – I figure out what I want to add to my collection before I ever set foot in a train show, make a telephone call to a seller, or peruse Internet auction sites. I study old catalogs as well as current toy train reference guides to get a good sense of what American manufacturers produced in the past.

I’ve compiled a short wish list of models from the post-World War II era that will make neat additions to my collection and at some point look good on the layout I dream of building. The locomotives are Lionel; the rolling stock is from the American Model Toys and Kusan lines; accessories and structures come from an array of O and S gauge manufacturers.

Second – I do as much research as I can about these models. The “Focus on Classics” and “Collectible Classics” articles in Classic Toy Trains are great for learning how various items look and operate. It is very important to understand how the items I want were decorated so I can determine whether what I eventually see is original.

Third – I investigate the values of the models on my list. I check the annual pocket price guides, plus final results at Internet and on-site auctions and listings from sellers advertising in newsletters published by toy train organizations.

Once I know what different models are selling for, I can make some decisions about the condition of the locomotive or car that I will hunt for. And I can determine whether or not I want that item to come in its original box.

Now I’m sure of what I want and have an idea of how much I’ll pay.

Fourth – and most enjoyable – is the search. I call businesses that deal in vintage trains (advertisers in Classic Toy Trains) and have solid reputations. I go to train shows, especially the semi-annual meet held in York, Pa., under the auspices of the Eastern Division of the Train Collectors Association.

I pay close attention to what the major auction houses are offering to see if they have what I’m looking for. I carefully check Internet auction sites, always making sure that there are ample pictures. I send the seller questions about the item and ask about his or her policy on returning the item if I’m not satisfied.

Getting what I want

Yes, I do spend a lot of time doing homework, but that usually pales when compared to how long the hunt takes. Months or even years can pass as I wait for the right example of the accessory or car I want to come along from a seller I trust. I’ve skipped on models because I refuse to compromise or take risks.

As a result of my prudent approach, my collection remains small. Yet I know how happy I am with every model in it and don’t regret any purchase. It’s too important, particularly when items can be misrepresented, to act foolishly or impatiently. Taking your time and conducting adequate research are basic.
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