The 9 greatest Lionel F3 freight sets

...and one that should have been
Alan Bloore’s collection spotlights some fantastic O gauge outfits

by Roger Carp

Did you know that every year during the height of the postwar era, Lionel offered at least one freight set led by an F3 locomotive? From the time that classic diesel made its debut in 1948 until toy trains waned in popularity after 1966, every catalog showed a colorful and exciting outfit pulled by an Electro-Motive F3.

Acquiring and studying these top-of-the-line freight sets challenged Alan Bloore. Pictures from his collection, along with information and insights shared by postwar expert Joe Algozzini, make it possible to examine what may have been the nine best of these O gauge outfits. There’s also a 10th outfit that Lionel should have made.

Treasures galore

The place to begin, if you want to understand the history of Lionel’s F3s and the sets they headed, is Joe Algozzini’s book, Lionel’s Postwar F3’s. Besides detailing how these diesels changed in appearance and operation between 1948 and 1966, this volume contains information on the maintenance, restoration, and packaging of these locomotives.

Joe’s book also lists the contents of 49 differently numbered Lionel outfits that included an F3 combination (A-A, A-B, or A-B-A). That total grows because in 1948 and ’49 the sets with New York Central diesels were assigned the same number as those with Santa Fe diesels. We’ll also add those outfits carried over from one year to the next that retained their number.

If we consider all of these individual sets, then Lionel offered 59 such outfits, pulled by F3s wearing nine of the 11 railroad paint schemes that were adopted. Of those 59 sets, 43 came with operating and non-operating freight cars.

Selecting nine of those freight outfits as the best takes a lot of nerve. Diversity of road names on the diesels, appeal of the rolling stock included, and appreciation of the play value in a set influenced the choices, which are described in chronological order.

“You can’t have them all,” Alan states, “so you might as well go for those F3 sets that catch your eye and provide the most enjoyment. Those were criteria that guided me in my search to obtain outfits that have become personal favorites.”

2227W from 1954

You may be surprised – even shocked – that nothing from the first six years of cataloged F3 freight outfits makes this list. Sorry, but the rolling stock packed with the New York Central and Santa Fe diesels between 1948 and ’53 is hardly the stuff to write home about. About the best are the no. 3464 operating boxcars in 1949-51, and that’s only because their road names usually match the A-A units pulling them.

Then came the magical year of 1954. For the final time, Lionel gave consumers a choice of the New York Central or the Santa Fe F3 A-A units with the same cars in two outfits. The rolling stock is among the best yet: four near-scale, colorful cars (two were new to the line) and a porthole caboose with Lionel Lines markings (no. 6417-25).

Which to choose? Well, both Alan and I grew up in Los Angeles, where the Santa Fe reigned. So I selected the no. 2227W, which boasts the nos. 2353P/T on the point.

Frankly, set no. 2207W from 1953 almost knocks out this one because it
2231W from 1954 (top) combines the stately beauty of the Southern diesels with the fun of five cars, including the no. 3482 automatic refrigerated milk car.

2239W from 1955 (second from top) features a lot of red to complement the chocolate and orange of its Illinois Central F3 A-B lash-up. Sets courtesy Alan Bloore; photo by Jim Forbes

has a no. 2353C Santa Fe B unit to go with the two A units and four nice freight cars.

However, the fun of the no. 3562-25 barrel car in the 2227W surpasses the more limited animation of the no. 3484 Pennsylvania operating boxcar in 2207W. The elegance of the no. 6468 Baltimore & Ohio automobile boxcar and the scarcity of the yellow-lettered no. 6456-75 Lehigh Valley hopper raise the 2227W above its predecessor.

2231W from 1954

The brand new no. 2356 Southern F3 units – all three types – drive this five-car outfit (the only cataloged set to feature them). As in 1953, Lionel packed a pair of A units and a matching B unit in its top-of-the-line freight set. The length and colors of this lash-up can’t help but impress.

The rolling stock isn’t bad either. Of the five cars, the nos. 3482 automatic refrigerated milk car and 6417-25 Lionel Lines porthole caboose were new additions to the line. The nos. 6415 Sunoco triple-dome tank car and 6511 pipe car came out in 1953 as parts of Lionel’s campaign to upgrade its roster with near-scale, detailed models.

Having an operating car enhances the appeal of the 2231W; another would only improve it. Too bad Lionel didn’t substitute a new no. 3620 searchlight car for the no. 6561 flatcar with cable reels. Even sharper would be a no. 3461-25 operating log car – its green paint job would complement the hues of the Southern F3s.

2239W from 1955

Some people think the nos. 2363P/C Illinois Central diesels are as dull as a wheat field in the Land of Lincoln. Other toy train fans praise the chocolate-and-orange paint scheme with its yellow stripes as looking sharp like the suits at Marshall Field’s department store in Chicago.

Count me among those who love the Illinois Central F3s (cataloged in 1955 and ’56). They pull just a single cataloged outfit in 1955, the no. 2239W four-car freight train. It includes two models introduced in 1955 that add more than a hint of red to the set: nos. 6414 Evans auto loader and 6517 Lionel Lines bay window caboose.

Rounding out the 2239W is a no. 6464-125 New York Central Pacemaker boxcar (still more red). This striking car never appears in another cataloged set, while the no. 6672 Santa Fe refrigerator car is a component of only one other.

1567W from 1956

Alan and Joe concur that Lionel’s lineup for 1956 stands out as one of the best of the postwar era. So many terrific outfits to drool over, including the O-27 gauge freight set (no. 1561WS) that I received and which launched my love affair with Lionel. Of course, mine comes with a steam engine and tender, and we’re talking about F3s here.

I was prepared to shine a light on no. 1563W, because it showcases the single-motor nos. 2240P/C Wabash F3s, new in 1956 (the no. 2367 dual-motor Wabash F3s were new in 1955). Two operating cars (nos. 3562-50 barrel car and 3620 searchlight cars) and the 6414 Evans auto loader (new in 1956) come in this five-car set. A definite winner, so much so that Lionel reissued 1563W as part of its Postwar Celebration Series in 2003.

Then Alan calls to my attention his no. 1567W, and my sentiments begin shifting. He displays a great example of this five-car outfit, the top-of-the-line O-27 set for 1956 (only three of the 12 O gauge sets for that year exceed its retail price of $75).

Numbers 2243P/C Santa Fe A-B units supply the power for the 1567W. They pull a splashy group of cars, each new for 1956, except for the no. 6672 refrigerator car. Still, the reefer earns points because its Santa Fe markings complement the F3s.

Two members of the 1567W win me
over. No other O-27 set ever comes with a no. 3356 operating horse car and corral. That item promises a barn full of fun by itself. But remember that this outfit also includes a no. 3424 Wabash brakeman car. The sight of the figure rising and falling has pleased onlookers for almost 50 years.

2269W from 1956
Now we’ve reached the big leagues! Many true F3 aficionados easily rate the nos. 2368P/C Baltimore & Ohio A-B combination as the most attractive Lionel produced during the postwar era. Like me, they wish designers had put blue stripes on some no. 2530-series aluminum passenger cars and created the most beautiful O gauge streamlined train ever.

But the fine minds at Lionel had something else on their agenda for 1956. They picked five of their best pieces of freight rolling stock, including three new items, and assembled no. 2269W, which postwar fans agree is one of the premier freight outfits of the era.

Greatness begins with the motive power – the B&O A and B diesels are cataloged for this year only and lead just this one set. The no. 3361 operating log car entertains with realistic action. The no. 6518 double-truck transformer car boasts 16 wheels and seems to need all the power the F3s can muster to pull it. Still, did Lionel think of substituting one of its two B&O boxcars cataloged in 1956 for the 6518?

Two big cars complete the 2269W. The no. 3356 operating log car entertains with realistic action. The no. 6518 double-truck transformer car boasts 16 wheels and seems to need all the power the F3s can muster to pull it. Still, did Lionel think of substituting one of its two B&O boxcars cataloged in 1956 for the 6518?

2273W from 1956
What some folks say about the 2363 Illinois Central F3s – drab, drab, drab! – expresses my view of the nos. 2378P/C Milwaukee Road diesels. The gray scheme doesn’t boost my pulse, not even with orange bands and yellow stripes. I live in Milwaukee and should be enthralled by its road, but these F3s leave me as icy as a Blatz beer in January.

So why did I select the only outfit that the Milwaukee Road diesels ever pulled? Because, with three operating cars and a cool accessory packed inside, no. 2273W is an unbelievable set. Lionel could have used its weakest, ugliest switcher as the motive power, and the rolling stock here would be enough to land this terrific set on this list.

1567W from 1956 (third from top) offers loads of play value, thanks to its two operating cars, including the no. 3356 horse car and corral (new in 1956).

2269W from 1956 (bottom) wins favor with its Baltimore & Ohio A and B units and a consist that includes a pair of exciting operating cars. Sets courtesy Alan Bloore; photo by Jim Forbes

PRICES FOR LIONEL’S 9 TOP F3 FREIGHT OUTFITS

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<td>2555W</td>
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Surprisingly, four of the five cars in this set were not new in 1956. While the B&O outfit features three new items, 2273W reprises the nos. 3359 twin-bin dump car, 3562-50 barrel car, 3662 automatic refrigerated milk car, and 6517 bay window caboose. All terrific cars – the first three operate – but each is a carryover from 1955.

Making this outfit special, though, is the one item – really, a pair – that does belong to the Class of ’56. Packed inside the set box is a no. 6342 culvert gondola that’s used with the included no. 342 culvert loader. This represents the first time Lionel packed a large accessory with one of its outfits since it inserted a no. 97 coal elevator with the no. 4110WS Electronic Control Set in 1949.

2507W from 1958 (below) offers two cars decorated for the New Haven as well as the handsome A and B units.

2517W from 1958 (bottom) is led by Denver & Rio Grande Western diesels and comes with four cool cars and a matching caboose. Sets courtesy Alan Bloore; photo by Jim Forbes

2507W from 1958

Tough choice here. I have no hesitation about designating one of the two outfits led by the nos. 2242P/C New Haven A-B combination for this team of all-stars. But do I feel torn between the rolling stock in no. 2507W from 1958 and 2537W from 1959.

Admittedly, the later outfit has two operating cars (nos. 3435 traveling aquarium and 3650 extension search-light car) while the first comes with one (no. 3444 animated gondola). Yet the contents of the sets still strike me as similar, down to having the same number of pieces of curved and straight track.

Swaying my decision to go with Alan’s 2507W is its blend of toy-like and real. The nos. 3444 and 6424 flatcar with autos are the finest of playthings. The nos. 6464-425 and 6468-25 boxcars, wearing different versions of the New Haven’s black-and-orange scheme to go with the F3s, heighten the accuracy. This balance of elements reflects Lionel’s desire to appeal to all sides of the hobby.

2373W from 1956 boasts three great operating cars and an operating accessory (no. 342 culvert loader). Add in the Milwaukee Road F3 A-B combination, and you truly have an O gauge set for the ages. Set courtesy Richard Wargowsky; photo by Darla Evans

2517W from 1958

Another quandary. The nos. 2379P/C Rio Grande A and B units head only two outfits, but both are phenomenal trains that epitomize what we love about the best sets – namely, stunning locomotives pulling great-looking cars that perform an array of tricks.

The no. 2291W from 1957 helps inaugurate the Super O line, and it’s a honey of a set. Three excellent operating cars, along with the new nos. 6464-525 Minneapolis & St. Louis boxcar and 6657 illuminated SP-type caboose painted to match the A and B units.

Nonetheless, one glimpse of Alan’s no. 2517W and I know that it’s the Rio Grande outfit for me. Besides having the matching caboose, it comes with four cars that offer an intriguing mix of shapes, functions, and colors.
Alan Bloore has one of the smallest train rooms of any collector I’ve visited – just three walls of shelves in an upstairs area sandwiched between a den and a bedroom. Yet on those walls he displays the finest F3 and GG1 outfits that Lionel produced during the postwar era (the component and set boxes are stored in an adjacent area).

Alan has intentionally kept his collection small and focused. His goal over the past 25 years has been to find only pristine, boxed examples of Lionel’s top outfits. Then, with guidance from his wife, Kay, he has arranged these classic trains so visitors can appreciate their finer points and argue, in a good-natured way, about which are the best.

If, that is, they can hear themselves above the tick-tock of dozens of antique clocks that Alan also prizes. Those timepieces, which once hung on the walls of schools, offices, factories, and churches, soothe Alan with their constant ticking.

“Precision instruments fascinate me,” he explains. “I put Lionel trains in the same category as clocks and value them because they were always so well made.”

So Alan views his Lionel sets and his many clocks as birds of the same feather. Other toy train collectors indulge a secondary interest in vintage automobiles, rifles, jukeboxes, or pinball machines for the same reason. They appreciate the way these diverse “machines” were expertly designed and assembled to work in a precise manner.

Alan came to this appreciation of Lionel’s products as a collector of Standard gauge trains. He studied the superb operation of items cataloged in the 1920s and ‘30s.

Eventually, Alan, who grew up after World War II, realized that he was a postwar kid. As much as he treasured locomotives and signals made when Herbert Hoover lived in the White House, he had come of age during the Eisenhower years, when rock ‘n’ roll was young, cars sported chromed fins, and "Dragnet" and "I Love Lucy" ruled the TV airwaves.

Perusing catalogs from the mid-and late 1950s, Alan discovered the trains that he really wanted. Goodbye to his prewar Blue Comet and Pennsylvania Limited sets and hello to Santa Fe Super Speedliner and Pennsylvania Congressional outfits.

Today, Alan owns examples of Lionel’s top postwar sets. He also likes motorized units – snowplows, industrial switchers, and more – because they pack so much power into their compact bodies. They are to his F3s what a wristwatch is to his wall clocks. – Roger Carp
The nos. 6519 Allis-Chalmers car and 6805 atomic waste disposal car (both of which were new in 1958) are in a league of their own among postwar rolling stock. They’re reminders of the technology associated with the Cold War. Also unique, though in a different way, is the no. 6434 poultry dispatch car. Toss in the no. 6800 flatcar with airplane, and you have a set sure to be desired by any youngster, even if he or she lives far from Colorado.

**2555W from 1960**

You won’t find an example of this immense outfit in Alan’s collection. To be fair, only few 2555W sets, complete with their Super O and HO scale components and packaging, have been authenticated. All the same, collectors are familiar with what they’ve nicknamed the “Over and Under” or “Father and Son” set.

The idea behind the 2555W is simple yet ingenious. Lionel, eager to promote its Super O line and bolster sales of its HO roster, decided that a set with one train in each size could accomplish these ends. Marketing the 2555W as a way for fathers and sons to interact would, executives

**TIMELINE OF LIONEL POSTWAR F3 DIESEL FREIGHT OUTFITS**

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hoped, make its $150 retail price (about $950 in today’s economy) easier for families to swallow.

Pretty clever, even if the trains themselves aren’t especially fancy. Number 2383P/T Santa Fe A units run ahead of five neat cars, including a pair of operating models. The nos. 3366 circus car and corral and 3434 operating poultry dispatch can be counted on to keep a kid occupied. The only brand-new items are the nos. 6357-50 Santa Fe SP-type caboose (exclusive to this outfit) and 6464-900 New York Central boxcar.

Beneath the Super O track perched on the 20-piece set of no. 110A trestle piers runs a nearly identical HO train with Santa Fe diesels. The smaller outfit comes in its own box; together, the two trains with their packaging are worth more than any other Lionel set from the postwar era.

**7777W from 1953**

Don’t bother grabbing a Lionel advance or consumer catalog from 1953 to check on that set number. You won’t find it because Lionel never had a 7777W.

Let me explain.

I struggled to pick a 10th great F3 freight outfit. The no. 1517W Texas Special four-car set from 1954 came to mind. So did the nos. 2523W from 1958 and 13058 from 1963 – both incredible Santa Fe five-car sets exploding with action.

Then I recalled that the nos. 2345 and 2355 Western Pacific A-A units (cataloged in 1952 and ’53, respectively) were never honored as the motive power for a freight set. A Californian by birth, I had to correct that injustice. So my final selection is a five-car outfit that Lionel should have created for its 1953 line.

As I assembled it, the 7777W features a 2355 combination at the point. Behind those silver-and-orange beauties is a no. 6464-1 Western Pacific boxcar (new in ’53). Youngsters love operating cars, which is why I included a no. 3656 operating cattle car and corral (besides, the orange paint on that car goes well with the F3s).

Something else new in 1953 would be good, maybe a no. 6415 Sunoco triple-dome tanker. But I’m a sucker for searchlight cars, so next is a no. 3520.

More fun means more action. Let’s couple on a no. 3461 log car. Think of a Western Pacific freight bringing logs to lumber mills located near Sacramento.

Time for a caboose. What if the supervisor of Lionel’s paint crew at the firm’s factory in New Jersey, enamored with the Western Pacific F3s, takes one of the new no. 6417 porthole cabooses and creates a gorgeous model to match those diesels? He shows it to Joshua and Lawrence Cowen when they visit the plant. They agree that this caboose, produced as the 6417-100, is perfect for the 7777W.

Ah, if only history had followed the path I designed. Still, reality isn’t too shabby, not with Lionel cataloging so many fantastic freight trains to run behind its classic F3s.

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### Fantasy outfit 7777W from 1953

- **Western Pacific F3s** as its motive power – or it should have. Add four of the best operating and non-operating cars available in 1953, plus a matching caboose, and Lionel would have had one spectacular set. Vision courtesy Roger Carp

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