

January 5, 2021

Article Re:

Department 56 Buildings on model RR Layouts

Who am I as a modeler?

I began modeling as a young boy gluing together plastic cars, boats, airplanes etc. The first customization I did was to model cars. I used a wood burning iron to melt plastic and form it into how I wanted it to look. I also started noticing what already existed that I could use to represent something I needed to add to a model in scale. Best examples are drinking straws became exhaust pipes for 1/25 scale cars and pins became radio antennas on 1/25 scale cars. Also I kit bashed by taking grills from different cars and substituting the into other car front ends. Another example is scratch making fender skirts for model cars. I would also take ballpoint pen springs out of them and use them as suspension springs on model cars chasses.

History in Hobby?

How I learned to build?

Initially as a youngster, my dad showed me how to glue, sand, screw, drill etc. Using fine motor skills is critical to shaping some things into a scene of something. I must admit that as a senior person now I must use magnification and extra light to create most things accurately. Another challenge as an older person is holding something still for gluing, shaping etc. Vises with gator clips that hold things steadily are invaluable.

Again, as a kid, I was totally fascinated by the shoe boxes with miniature scenes inside them with a light slot cut in the back to simulate 3D depth! This fascination continued for me in 3D wall hanging rooms or doll house rooms. Kids back in the 1950's had "View Finders" that reinforced my love for 3D simulation.

Did I have a mentor?

Fortunately my mother was a professional artist in oil, water colors and sketches. She did still lifes, portraits, landscapes etc. She painted many nautical scenes combining land, water the boats/ships etc. I watched her assemble related items to make each painting make sense.

My father custom built furniture as a hobby and could make many things from wood. His patience with shaping and sanding remains with me to date. He could envision how something should look.

My goal is always to recreate model railroad dioramas and vignettes to capture as much realism as possible no matter what the scene I am composing is.

My mother's profession (Interior Home Design) allowed me to observe her blend textures, shades and tones of color and architecture to make a space look its best. She always background sketched human portraits and landscapes etc. I usually sketch out my plan before building anything.

What scale and why?

My attraction to a particular scale was influenced mostly by my first trains. In 1952 Dad's bought O gauge trains for their children. HO was scarce or didn't exist then (not sure). O was big enough that it could be aligned on the 3 rail tube track easily, and if it fell off the platform, usually it was not damaged. I liked the heft of O and its durability (not many plastic bodies back then). $\frac{1}{4}$ " per foot is easy to remember and I see things in scale easily. If I'm at a flea market or estate sale or auction or garage sale, I see things that match O gauge easily. My wife is an artist also and sees scale automatically. She finds things that are perfectly in $\frac{1}{4}$ " scale places if I'm not there, she shoots me a photo on her mobile phone and I say yes or no if I need it for a vignette in process.

I have 2 small G scale trains displayed separately and I use ON30 and HO for trolley cars and coal mine and gold mine railways.



Figure 1 me at age 4 with my first layout my dad built in 1951

Incorporating Department 56 as part of my hobby:

Way back in 1975 I noticed how close to ¼” scale Department 56 buildings were. I was especially drawn to the snowy, Christmassy structures and accessories. I started to collect then and saved the collection with plans of assembling a large layout when I retired. I retired in 2003 but still didn’t start the layout. I did continue collecting though.

My adult son was home for Christmas in 2017 and said, “Dad, you’re not getting any younger, you better build your model RR layout now before its too late. I’ll help you get started.” Thus we started opening boxes and the rest is history. Fortunately the bench work was done just waiting for tracks and structures etc



Figure 2 the first Department 56 Christmas snowy houses I put on my layout in 12-2017



Figure 3 the first Department 56 winter camp site accessories on my layout in 12-2017

What area will I help other modelers by mentoring?

Although I am constantly learning new things to improve my own skills, I will mentor other modelers with bench work construction, kit building, scenery, landscaping, diorama creation, what scale to put where, soldering, making trees etc.

I do not do technical tasks like track plans, electronic troubleshooting or repairs, locomotive repairs.

Integrating brands other than Department 56

I integrate other brands of buildings and accessories if the product represents what I want to depict. My layout has some Plasticville, Lemax, Artista (figures) Woodland Scenics etc. My intent was never to use exclusively Department 56. It is a coincidence that when I began to collect I was attracted to their snowy and Christmassy buildings and accessories. One note – Department 56 figures are not 1/4" scale like

Artista, however ¼" scale figures look totally believable with their buildings in term of door jam heights, etc.

Photo of me:



Photos of my models:

What's important in photo?



Figure 4 Department 56 animated Ski Gondolas, ski hill and sled riders



Figure 5 the Department 56 Ski hills and Lionel Ski Train



Figure 6 Close up of Department 56 Gondolas, sledding hill, ski hill (in the background) and added porch for skiers getting on the Gondola lift



Figure 7 less background light with Department 56 houses illuminated



Figure 8 Department 56 Winter Camp Site trees and streams and Lionel Ski Train



Figure 9 Department 56 Winter Camp Site Trees & streams & Ski Lodge by tunnel



Figure 10 Department 56 Flatiron Building & St. Nicholas Cathedral



Figure 11 Department 56 St. Nicholas Cathedral with wedding scene



Figure 12 Department 56 Stone Trestle Bridge Christmas

Who took photo? David S. Bayne

