

# Fun Time

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Last time we explored what historical era might be most interesting to you and which railroads you might want to model. Now let's discuss some practical model railroad issues.

## Where Do You Buy?

Scale model railroad enthusiasts have a number of retailers in the Southern California area from whom to purchase trains; for a list of the most popular retailers, see the entries under *Resources* below.

Of course, no brick and mortar business can stock everything. As you might expect, there are a number of vendors with a large on-line presence that offer a wide variety of products. And, if you are looking for items that are currently out of production or used, then eBay is a good source. In fact, eBay is the main marketplace for many of the more specialized items like brass locomotives.

## Mass Produced and Specialty Products

Which brings us to the discussion of small production run, specialty items compared to mass production items. Certainly, mass production products, typically made mostly of plastic, have substantially improved in appearance and performance in the last 15 to 20 years. In most cases, if you want a product that was mass-produced fairly recently, you will be satisfied with the price, appearance, and performance.

An exception to this may be passenger cars. Prototype passenger cars were often produced specifically to the designs of each railroad, whereas mass-produced model cars are more generic, except for their paint. They resemble cars for a number of railroads, which makes their production cost effective, but they are not exactly accurate for any railroad. This is problematic for collectors and static modelers, whereas many operators are more interested that the train looks representative rather than exact as it rumbles past. Again, this is another area that depends on the modeler's priorities.

And, as you would expect, different companies produce products to different price points. The price of the model typically correlates to its accuracy and performance, but this is not always the case, and varies product by product. This is another good reason to join a model railroad club or a Yahoo group for the railroad or product you plan to model. More experienced modelers will know not only how accurate the models from different companies are, but also how well they generally run and how to fix them if there are problems.

Specialty items are usually made as multi-media kits or are brass. These are typically models of products that are not available as mass-production products, such as less popular locomotives and cars, especially those for unique to a particular railroad. Or, they are more accurate models of prototypes than are available from the mass manufacturers. Multi-media kits are generally of structures and railroad cars, especially passenger cars; short production runs of locomotives are usually made of brass for durability and operability.

## **Brass**

Brass items, and especially brass locomotives, are worthy of a short discussion themselves. Initially, some brass locomotives and railroad cars were produced in the US, but starting in the mid to late 1950s Japanese producers took that market by producing good quality (for the time) products at much lower prices than US producers. Product quality and accuracy improved with the experience of the brass manufacturers and with the accuracy of the reference material provided to them by their American importers. Generally, the American importer would provide detailed drawings and reference photos to the Japanese manufacturer, who would then produce a production run of the model for that importer. In some cases, an importer would commission a production run of a locomotive from a manufacturer who had already produced this locomotive for another importer. In these situations, the manufacturer would often produce essentially identical models for the second importer.

Later, Japanese products became too costly and production migrated to Korea. Now some brass products are manufactured in China, as are most plastic products.

Generally, newer brass products are more accurate models than older ones. However, most are so pricey that they are aimed more for collectors than operators. In these cases, accurate appearance takes priority over reliable operation; any compromises in appearance needed to achieve smooth, reliable operation are not made.

So, if you just want to run trains, an ever-growing variety of accurate, smooth running plastic steam and Diesel locomotive models is available for your enjoyment. If you want to model a specific railroad, especially specific steam locomotives or rare Diesels, then you need to consider brass. If collecting is your priority, then the newer, more expensive brass models are definitely worth a look. If operating is your priority, then you need to consider mass-produced locomotives and older, less expensive brass models. Older brass may not look quite as stunning as a new brass model, but it may actually run better and be sturdier, with fewer delicate parts to damage during operation. And it will probably be much more affordable. However, brass generally requires some fine-tuning to run well; for smooth operation a good, mass-production locomotive is your best bet unless you need a locomotive type that is only available in brass.

## **Computer Control? Sound?**

Like most other areas of life, the computer revolution has also impacted model trains. Your father's train set ran on DC (direct current) from a transformer, and many locomotives sold today do the same. However, more and more locomotives are available with computer control. Known as DCC, for Digital Command Control, this is an industry (NMRA – National Model Railroad Association) standard that essentially all manufacturers comply with so all the equipment is compatible. In addition to simplifying layout wiring, DCC also enables much more realistic operation.

Furthermore, many locomotives with DCC also have sound. And that makes running trains much more realistic – and fun! The saying in the model railroad community is, if you have 20 locomotives and one has sound, you really have one locomotive. And as a result of all the sound work done for DCC locomotives, more realistic sound is now available for newer DC locomotives. Furthermore, recordings of actual steam and Diesel locomotives in operation are available from various sources, and at least one

commercially available sound decoder (from LokSound) allows you to download sounds for use in your model.

So, do you choose DC or DCC? Sound or no sound? If you just plan a seasonal Christmas layout or a static collection, then don't bother with DCC. DC is cheaper and simpler to set up and learn to operate. However, if you plan anything more than a small or seasonal layout, look seriously at DCC. If you join a model railroad club, see if they are using DC or DCC. Many clubs have either converted to DCC or are planning to do so. DCC is becoming ever more popular and, in my opinion, is the system of choice for serious operators. And if you have DC equipment, it can be converted to DCC with decoders that are available from several manufacturers.

Many current production locomotives are available in two versions, DC and DCC with sound. These are almost always labeled "DCC ready", which means that you can easily convert them to DCC by installing a DCC decoder into a socket in the locomotive.

Converting a locomotive to sound is a little more challenging due to the need to find a place for the speaker. You want to install the largest speaker that will fit because, in general, the larger the speaker the better the sound quality. If you are converting a locomotive that was also available as a version with sound; there is generally a space with mounting holes already drilled for the speaker that makes this job easier.

### **Summary**

You now have the basic information and resources needed to check out model railroading and get started if you are interested. Have fun!

### **Resources**

#### **Model Railroad Retailers:**

- <http://www.milepost38modeltrains.com>  
Mile Post 38 Model Trains  
5757 B. East La Palma Avenue, Anaheim, CA 92807  
714-970-3751
- <http://www.morgansbigtrains.com/>  
Morgan's Big Trains  
7390 Center Ave  
Huntington Beach, California 92647  
714-887-0777
- <http://www.thewhistlestop.com/>  
The Original Whistle Stop  
2490 East Colorado Blvd.  
Pasadena, CA 91107  
626-796-7791
- <http://www.reeds-hobbies.com/>  
Reeds Hobbies

8039 La Mesa Blvd  
La Mesa CA 91941  
619-464-1672

- <http://www.alliedmodeltrains.com/>  
Allied Model Trains  
4371 Sepulveda Blvd.  
Culver City, CA 90230  
310-313-9353

### **Railroad Books & Videos:**

- *Basic Model Railroading: Getting Started in the Hobby* by Kent J. Johnson, Kalmbach Publishing Company (November 1998), ISBN-10: 0890243344
- *Guide to North American Steam Locomotives* by George H. Drury, Kalmbach Publishing Company (December 1993), ISBN-10: 0890242062
- *The DCC Guide* by Don Fiehmman, Kalmbach Publishing Company (October 2007), ISBN-10: 0890246769
- *The Model Railroader's Guide to Passenger Equipment & Operation* by Andy Sperandio, Kalmbach Publishing Company (May 31, 2006), ISBN-10: 0890246203
- *Maintaining and Repairing Your Scale Model Trains* by Jim Volhard, Kalmbach Publishing Company (May 1999), ISBN-10: 0890243247
- *The Brass Train Guide Book* by Dan Glasure, Brass Guide 2008, ISBN Number: 1882727134 / 9781882727131

### **Websites and Online:**

- Brass train retailer: [www.brasstrains.com](http://www.brasstrains.com)
- Brass trains on consignment and new, mass-produced trains: [www.cabooshobbies.com](http://www.cabooshobbies.com)
- How do you make your brass steam locomotive run like a charm? See Mark's brass clinics at: [www.markschutzer.com](http://www.markschutzer.com)
- DCC retailer, online DCC and sound tutorials: [www.litchfieldstation.com](http://www.litchfieldstation.com)
- Java Model Railroad Interface for more advanced users: [www.decoderpro.com](http://www.decoderpro.com)
- General model railroad reference: [www.trains.com/mrr](http://www.trains.com/mrr)
- Yahoo groups on prototype railroads and model railroading, such as:
  - Southern Pacific Railroad: [Espee@yahoogroups.com](mailto:Espee@yahoogroups.com)
  - Union Pacific Railroad: [up\\_modelers@yahoogroups.com](mailto:up_modelers@yahoogroups.com)
  - DCC: [DCC4EVERYONE@yahoo.com](mailto:DCC4EVERYONE@yahoo.com)

- Re-powering and re-gearing older locomotives: [repowerandregear@yahoo.com](mailto:repowerandregear@yahoo.com)
- Passenger cars: [PassengerCarList@yahogroups.com](mailto:PassengerCarList@yahogroups.com)
- Brass model trains: [brasscollectors@yahogroups.com](mailto:brasscollectors@yahogroups.com)