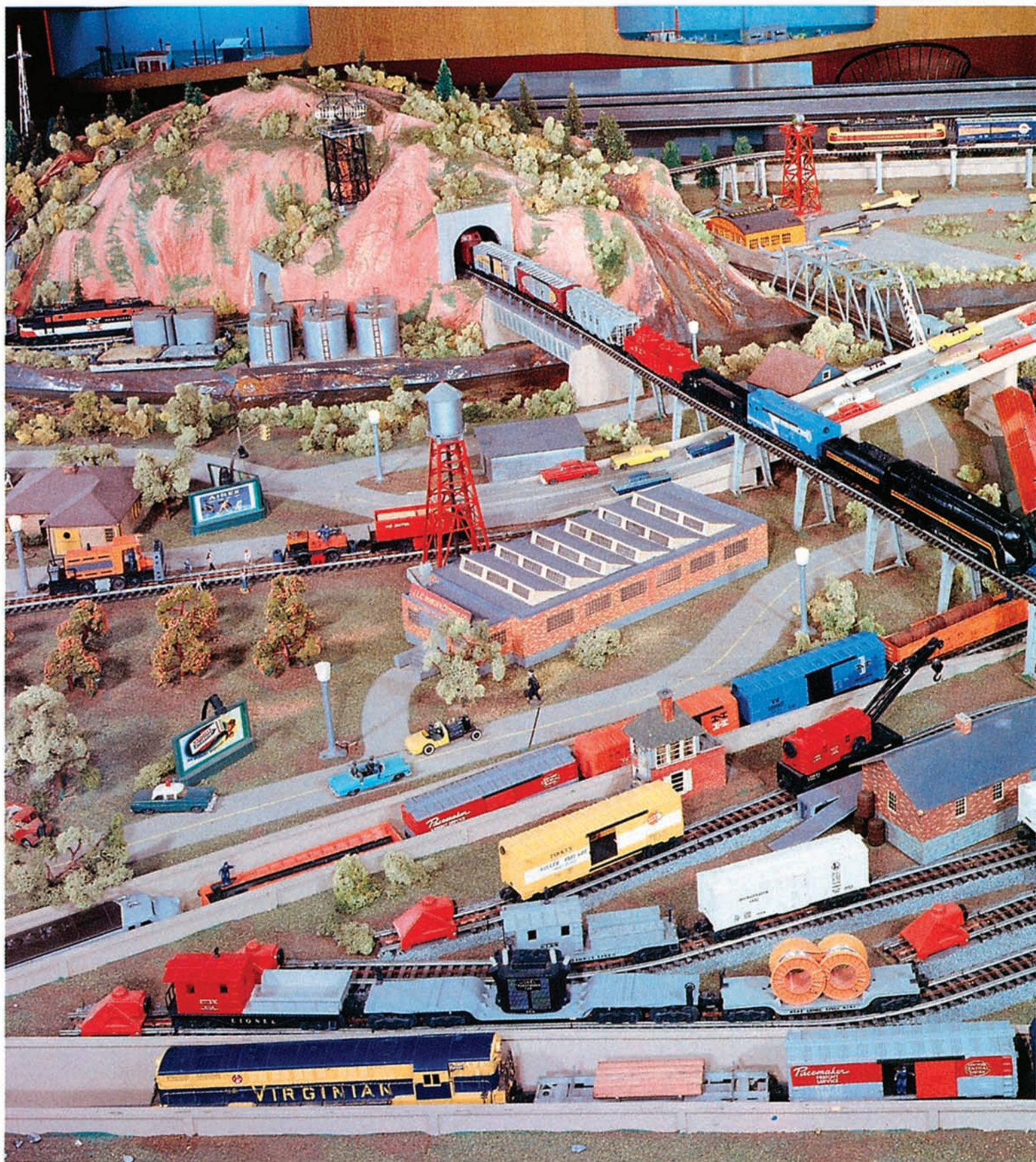


# The last of Lionel's



# postwar glories



*Views of the Super O  
Layout built in 1957*

BY ROGER CARP

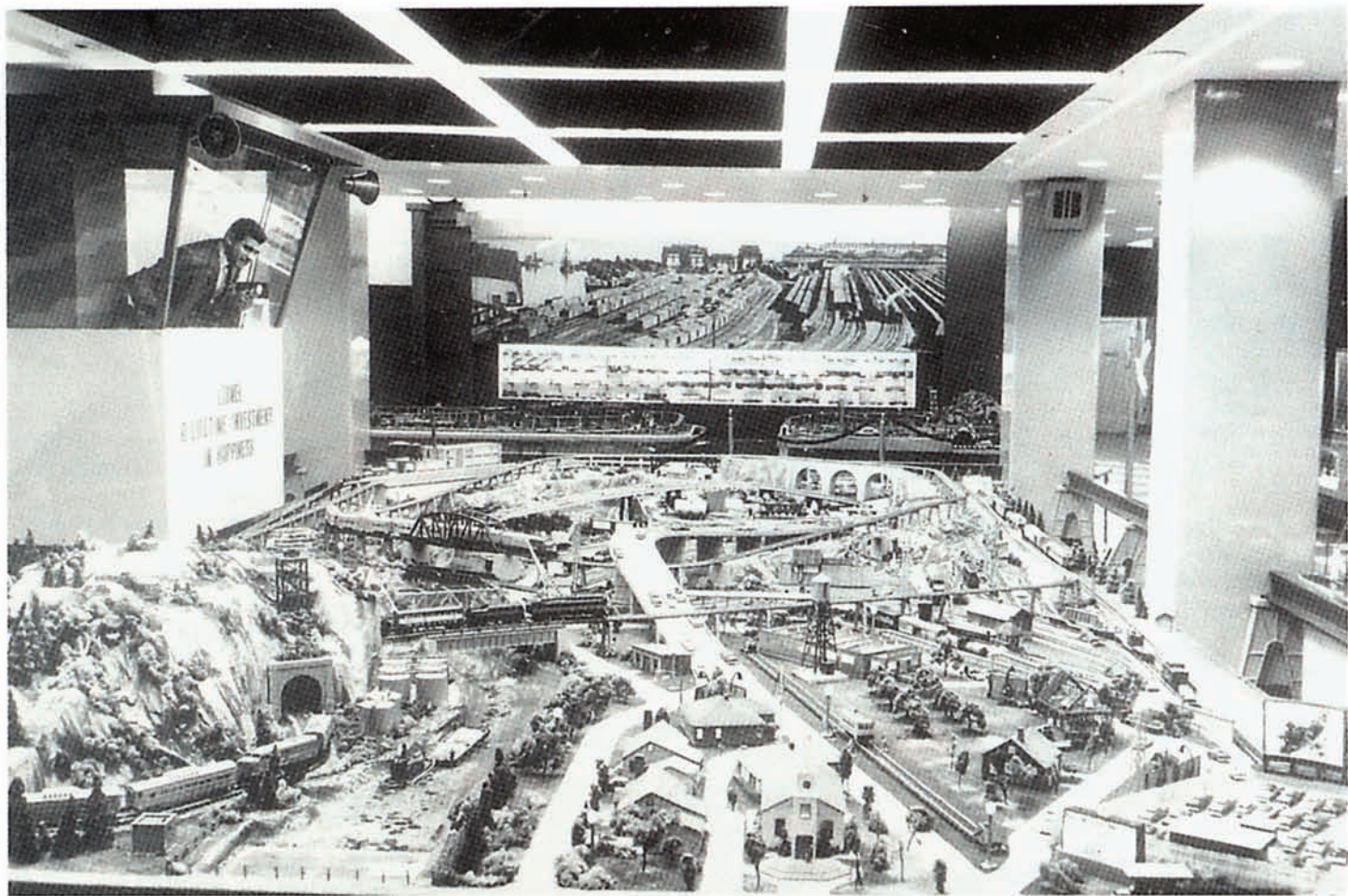
**D**on't you envy guys who grew up in New York City during the 1940s and '50s? They had just about everything! Start with sports. The Yankees, Dodgers, and Giants captured league pennants and world championships while fielding teams that boasted future hall-of-famers Joe DiMaggio, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Duke Snider, and Mickey Mantle. When it was football season, the other New York Giants trotted out such legends as Frank Gifford and Y. A. Tittle. And think of all the memorable Ranger games and championship prize fights that took place at Madison Square Garden.

What else did New York have? It was the center of television production for much of the 1950s. For my parents, that meant Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and Ed Sullivan, all "live from New York." My tastes were different; *Howdy Doody* and *Mr. Wizard* were my favorites. Programs produced at NBC and CBS studios in Manhattan made Buffalo Bob Smith and Captain Kangaroo household names. Yes, it was all there, along with the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. Little wonder every kid dreamed of calling Gotham his home.

We toy train enthusiasts know what else made New York City great. Boys living in its five boroughs could buy electric trains from such fabled stores as Madison Hardware, Polk's Model Craft Hobbies, Model Railroad Equipment Corp., and Hobby-Land. At the holidays, they could venture downtown to admire displays at Macy's and Gimbel's department stores. Best of all, kids in "Noo Yawk" could return to the Gilbert Hall of Science and the Lionel showroom to see fabulous model railroads.

For that last reason alone, I, a youngster living 3,000 miles away in Los Angeles, envied my counterparts in New York. Our local department stores put toy trains in their windows at Christmas, but I suspected that the engines looked better and the

This spectacular photograph of the Super O Layout was taken in 1958 by the late David Eisendrath Jr. He captured the wonder of this 16 x 32-foot model railroad, which delighted visitors to the Lionel showroom from 1957 to 1962.



lights were brighter in the Big Apple. It just didn't seem fair that New York had everything I wanted. Eventually, we Angelenos stole the Brooklyn Dodgers; to my disappointment, however, we never got around to transporting the Lionel showroom to the West Coast.

#### ONLY MEMORIES SURVIVE

Today, nothing remains of Lionel's offices at 15 East 26th Street and its layouts except a handful of photographs and the memories of the people who worked there and the toy train enthusiasts who visited. Whenever I'm around collectors who went to the showroom and can recall its glories, I feel the same mix of emotions I have when reading about the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It's thrilling to learn about the Colossus of Rhodes and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, wondrous architectural achievements that vanished centuries ago. But at the same time, I'm sad because those marvels have vanished and I'll never be able to gaze upon them.

So, short of inventing a time machine, I'm resigned to visiting the Lionel showroom only vicariously. That's why I go out of my way to ask fellow enthusiasts if they were ever there and what they remember about the displays. My passion for displays was ignited by the pictures published in *CLASSIC TOY TRAINS* five years ago, when we celebrated the O gauge layout constructed at Lionel's New York office in 1949. Then

The best-known picture of the Super O Layout is this panoramic shot, taken not long after it was finished. Jack Kindler, who created the track plan and supervised construction, looks over his masterpiece from the control tower. Among the highlights at this end are the drive-in theater, town square, tugboat on a river with real water, and the mountain.

I did my best to learn about its predecessors, notably, the landscaped display assembled in 1938 to promote Lionel's T-Rail track and the near-scale locomotives and rolling stock being added to its line. That layout survived for almost a decade until it was replaced after World War II. Scenes based on popular attractions, including Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, were added, giving prominence to what then became known as the Panorama Layout.

The layout designed by Robert Sherman and built by his colleagues at Diorama Studios in 1949 survived more than twice as long as the Panorama Layout did. Over the next few years, modifications were made and additions to the Lionel line were featured. Even so, by the mid-1950s J. L. Cowen (the company's founder) and his son, Larry (its president), were taking a hard look at the layout and envisioning a successor.

They turned for help to Jack Kindler, Lionel's chief demonstrator and a whiz at building layouts to promote electric trains in department stores and on television shows. This imaginative "Jack-of-all-trades" dreamed up an immense layout that would appeal to children in a different way. The 1949 layout had been given a realistic appearance to impress the scale modelers

that executives viewed as Lionel's major customers after the war. Jack and others on the sales force wanted something grander and more toylike that would capture the attention of a younger audience.

#### START OF SOMETHING BIG

As Jack recounts, construction of a new layout intended to highlight Lionel's Super O trains and track began at the end of 1956, after a lot of planning. Reading his recollections of how this last showroom layout came together is a thrill. It was finished for the American Toy Fair, held each spring in New York. Distributors, wholesalers, and buyers were the first to inspect the new model railroad. After they left, Lionel reopened its showroom to the public. For the next five years, visitors were welcome to tour what Lionel called "the biggest little railroad in the world" and hobbyists refer to as the "Super O Layout."

Reactions to what might more accurately be called "Kindler's Creation" were mixed, as first-hand accounts make plain. Skip Natoli, today a dedicated operator of postwar Lionel trains, was among the thousands of kids who stopped by the showroom in the late 1950s. He remembers those annual pilgrimages as though they

happened last week and describes in detail what he insists was the peak of Lionel's glory. Skip and his good friend Joe Sadorf provided a wealth of information about the Super O Layout. Joe reminded us that notable details were listed on the stock certificate awarded to members of the Lionel Rail Road Co. in 1960. The knowledge he and Skip shared vastly improved our presentation of this memorable layout.

Ron Antonelli, a tireless researcher into the history of Lionel advertising and promotion, also visited the showroom as a boy. He sent a letter in 1993 that gave a perspective different from Skip's. Doubly fortunate because he went there during the early 1950s as well as later, Ron can compare the 1957 layout with its predecessor.

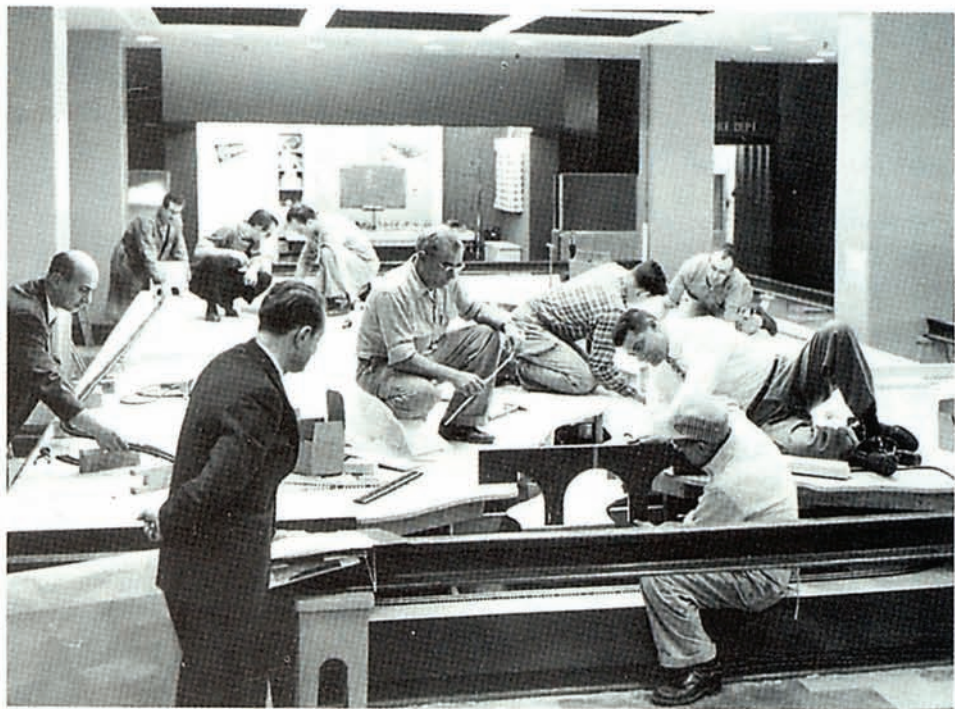
### UNEXPECTED PICTURES

Among the finest sources of pictures of the layout is an article that appeared in *True* magazine in 1958. For guys now in their 40s or 50s, mentioning *True* brings back memories of what being a man was supposed to be like in postwar America. That magazine, like its peers, *Saga* and *Argosy*, was found in barbershops and similar male havens. Stories about wartime heroism, big game hunting, sports cars, and loose women filled its pages, along with garish artwork and racy pictures. The late David Eisendrath, a pioneering freelance photographer based in New York, received an assignment to shoot whatever was necessary to illustrate an essay about Lionel. The pictures he took, printed here through the generosity of the Eisendrath family, bring the Super O Layout to life.

Equally as valuable are the images obtained from other sources. Ed Prendeville, proprietor of Train Collectors Warehouse, kindly loaned pictures from his collection of toy train memorabilia. Ray Fetzner, a respected paper expert, shared photos that Ron Antonelli and he had discovered in obscure business publications. Joe Sadorf recommended that I look for pictures in later editions of *Model Railroading*. Lionel's introduction to the hobby. He also pointed out that film of trains running on the Super O Layout had been used in *The Wonderful World of Trains*, a 24-minute TV program that Lionel produced in 1960.

While I searched for a clean copy of *The Wonderful World of Trains*, Frank Pizzaia shared with me film of another sort. He also had visited the Lionel showroom as a kid and dug out a reel of 8mm color film that his father had shot there in 1958 or '59. Although poor lighting made it difficult to see the trains, this home movie captured the sheer pleasure children must have felt as they watched Lionel's finest sets roll through that layout. Black-and-white photographs taken by Stephen Beane when he was young conveyed the same sense of excitement, and I appreciate his sending copies of them to me.

The best-known photographs of the



Work began late in 1956. Jack Kindler, in a tie, checks on the riverbed. Over his left shoulder, Joe Donato Jr., supervisor of the Display Department, handles another task. Holding a tape measure in the center is Carmine Quatraro, one of Lionel's carpenters.

Super O Layout date from its first year or two of operation. In fact, few record its appearance in the early 1960s. Unlike its predecessor, few changes were made from one year to the next. The sole exception to this generalization was the new rolling stock being substituted for old on the rails. For example, Dennis Brennan, a CTT contributor, recalled that in 1960 the featured cargo was the new Harnischfeger power shovel and mobile construction crane on the nos. 6827 and 6828 flatcars. Also popular was a train of no. 3376 Bronx Zoo cars. The yellow giraffes on those blue cars elicited laughter as their heads ducked in and out. The following year, who knows? Guesses for 1961 would be the nos. 3370 Animated Sheriff and Outlaw Car, 3545 Operating TV Monitor Car, 6416 Four Boat Transport Car, and 6445 Fort Knox Gold Bullion Transport Car, all of which were making their debut. Meanwhile, the same locomotives – Santa Fe F3s, Virginian Train Masters, Norfolk & Western Js, and New Haven or Milwaukee Road electrics – provided the muscle to pull these cars.

### RESTING IN PIECES

At the close of 1963, top management decided to vacate the showroom at 15 East 26th Street after almost 40 years at that location. Although they also shut the doors on the company's offices in Chicago and San Francisco, executives had no intention of deserting New York. Instead, they joined the many toy manufacturers and distributors quartered in the famous Toy Building at 200 East Fifth Avenue. Already there was Lionel's rival, The A. C. Gilbert Co., which had closed its Hall of Science in 1959.

Dominick Greco, who had worked with Jack Kindler and Joe Donato Jr., on the 1957 layout and other displays, supervised the dismantling of the showroom. His memories of taking apart the Super O Layout leave no doubt about its fate. With that, a heritage that dated to the 1920s ended.

Missing from Greco's account is a neat digression about what happened to the layout during the holiday season of 1962. I've discovered that, almost in anticipation of closing the New York showroom, Lionel disassembled the display and rebuilt it at the New York Coliseum in Manhattan. Sixteen tables supported the layout, which was an attraction at the Christmas Circus and Holiday Festival. Perhaps executives wanted to make it accessible to larger crowds than they could handle at the showroom.

Even more intriguing was a note in the January 1963 issue of *Playthings* magazine, stating that from New York the layout was destined to leave on a cross-country tour. Whether the scheduled tour took place remains a mystery. Greco implies that the display was back in New York when Lionel vacated the showroom at the end of 1963.

*Playthings* estimated that 3 million people admired the 1957 layout in its first five years of existence. Sooner than many of those boys and girls could believe, the showroom and its wonderful display were gone. But memories survive. Thanks to the accounts and photos shared here, and the track plan Robert Wegner created using original preliminary drawings borrowed from Lou Niederlander, more memories of the Super O Layout of 1957 can thrive. They remind us of how splendid Lionel's electric trains once were. Enjoy!

# Present at the birth of the layout

BY JACK KINDLER

Forty years is a long time, but I can remember those exciting days when every day at Lionel was a special experience. After the 1956 Toy Fair, a meeting was held in J. L. Cowen's office at Lionel's headquarters. Members of the engineering staff; Sam Belser, the national sales manager; and a number of salesmen joined President Larry Cowen and his father, J. L. [the company's founder], in attendance.

The new track was shown and described. All of us liked it. Then we were asked to come up with a name. I believe it was Larry Cowen who came up with "Super Track." We all thought that was an excellent name, and it was the birth of Super O. Soon, we had details about switches, crossovers, and other special pieces for the new line of track.

Several months later, Sam, J. L., and Larry asked me to come up with a suggested layout for the showroom. Since I had a drafting table in my office that I used constantly to design new layouts for department stores and display tables for the trade, it was a very exciting assignment. Incidentally, I still have and use the table, which is in my attic studio.

Following the Christmas rush, I submitted a plan, which was approved by J. L. The existing display and table were dismantled. Two curved outer rails of the old display became the legs of a coffee table at home — my memento.

After several meetings with Joe Donato Jr. and his staff in the Display Department at Lionel's New Jersey plant, we detailed the job. They were very enthusiastic about the new layout. Included in the plan were all the most dramatic things I wanted to show: running water, towns, streets, railroad spurs and yards, and even a drive-in movie.

The carpentry was supervised by Carmine Quatraro, who was a master carpenter and a pleasure to work with. The overall supervision was by Joe Donato Jr. General detail was handled by Frank DiMartino, who worked under Joe, along with an older carpenter and a young chap named Jackie. The fiber

glass for the river proved to be a problem, but the guys did a beautiful job. In an effort to modernize the display, we replaced the outer rails with simulated T-rail with a metallic finish that was supported by angled trestle-type supports.

Once work was under way, I submitted a sketch for a control tower to J. L. and Larry. The tower contained the transformers, switch and accessory controls, and on-off switches for the yard, spurs, sectionalized area tracks, and gang cars.

Both Cowens, Sam Belser, Ed Zier [Lionel's comptroller], and members of the sales staff were constantly checking on the progress. They loved watching the men from the Display Department add trees, shrubbery, gravel roads, and other scenic effects. The mountain was made out of Celastic, a material that resembled cheesecloth or burlap. It was soaked in acetone and draped over a wood frame to harden. Then it was painted and decorated with lichen. Working with the Display Department was a blessing. Those guys could handle any detail that came up, and they broke their necks to finish the layout by the time Toy Fair opened.

We made sure the guys in the Service Department at the showroom also helped. Irving Shull [manager of the Service Department] and Tony Xifo [the chief assistant] supervised the wiring of the layout, done by their top men working under the table on "crawl boards." I picked up most of the buildings and toy automobiles at Polk's over on Fifth Avenue.

A short time after the layout was completed, J. L. Cowen gave me a beautiful Bulova watch in appreciation for my work. I couldn't have been happier with his gift and the layout we had created.

Our man Jack handles the controls again in this picture, which indicates how the layout fit into the Lionel showroom and its wall displays in 1958. Besides depicting the opposite side of the viaduct, this shot reveals a baseball diamond in the lower right-hand corner and an enormous factory near the nos. 138 Water Tower and 450 Signal Bridge to the rear.



# Tour Lionel's Super O Layout

BY SKIP NATOLI

Beginning in 1956, when I was 3 years old, my parents took me to New York City each year during the holidays to tour the Lionel showroom. Although I was there in 1956, I have no recollection of the layout built in 1949 that was still in operation. What I do recall is the Super O Layout built in 1957.

After getting bounced around on the cobblestone West Side Highway, my family and I made our way through the canyons of buildings until we reached Madison Park. That almost triangular park is sandwiched on the east and west by Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue, and on the north and south by 26th Street and 23rd Street. Lionel had its Manhattan headquarters and showroom at 15 East 26th, across from the north side of the park.

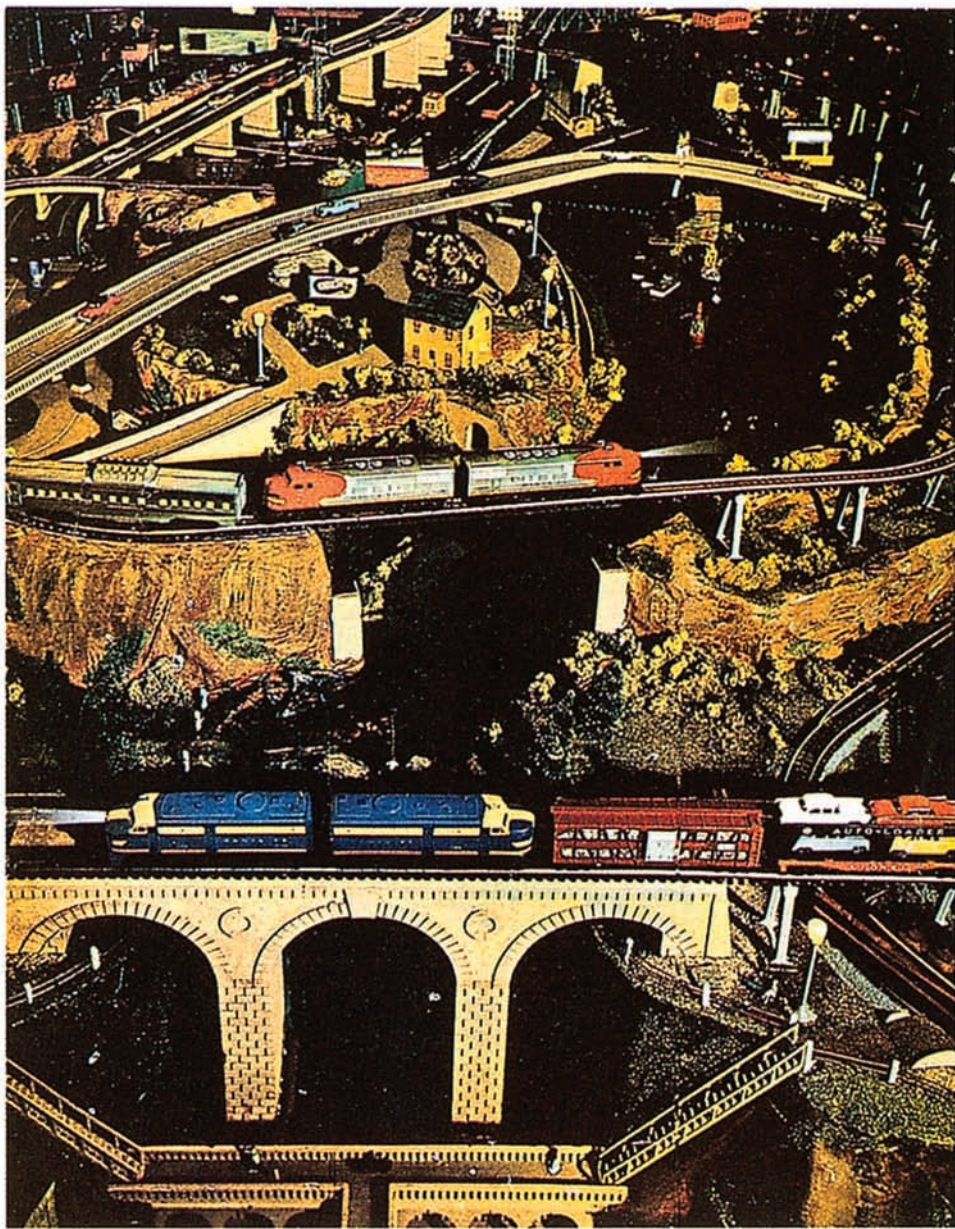
After parking the car, my parents and I made our way to the building where Lionel's office was located. We boarded the elevator for a quick ride to the second floor. As the doors opened, I saw the entrance to The Lionel Corporation.

Through the doors was a reception area with cashier windows, where children of all ages could receive a copy of the new catalog. Along with it, we usually received a sheet of billboards or a button with the Lionel lion on it. One time I even got an engineer's cap. To the left was a portal. There stood a mock-up of the front end of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Turbine locomotive. Beyond it we saw the entrance to the showroom. I could sense the excitement as we passed through the anteroom that led to the trains. The crowd, the noise, the lights were too much to handle calmly.

## FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE LAYOUT

The Lionel showroom was approximately 48 feet wide and 64 feet long. In the middle, set like a fine stone on a ring, was the large Super O Layout, situated between six supporting pillars. It measured 16 x 32 feet. Thirty-inch-high versions of no. 111 trestles supported a railing that surrounded the layout to keep inquisitive little hands out of reach. The corner nearest the entrance was usually crowded, so I made my way to the middle of the long side of the layout to the left of a pillar.

My eyes were drawn first to an elevated track in the middle of the layout. I gazed at the smoke billowing from a no. 1872 *General* steam engine negotiating an incline. Just then, a no. 2350 New Haven electric locomotive with a freight train came whizzing out of the "subway" tunnel under my nose. Across the layout was the mountain with a no. 197 Rotating Radar Antenna



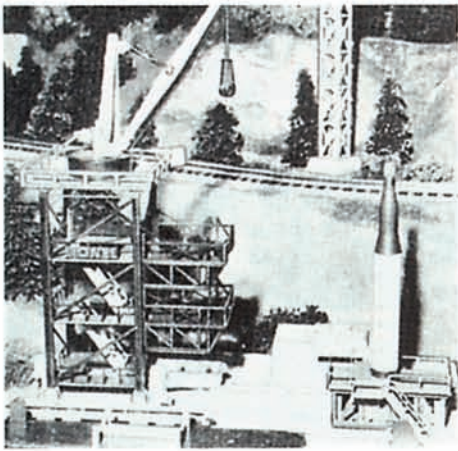
A view of the viaduct and elevated line. The highways that rise and descend through much of the layout feature dozens of toy vehicles. A cropped version of this photograph, credited to Union Carbide Corp., appeared in the December 1959 issue of *Plastics World*. This view, showing more of the layout, was in the October 1958 issue of *Bakelite Review*.

on top; facing me was a tunnel portal with a long straightaway coming at me.

Suddenly out of the tunnel came the "Grand Daddy of All Steamers" (or so the catalog boasted), the no. 746 Norfolk & Western J-class Northern. It was pulling a string of boxcars. The headlight looked menacing as the engine barreled straight at me before turning sharply to the right. I followed the train's porthole caboose as it passed down the tracks. Then I focused on a diesel servicing facility and yard, where, under the eyes of men in the no. 465 Sound Dispatching Station, two no. 2379 Rio Grande F3 diesels were taking on fuel.

Next, I gazed at an elevated section of a large roadway filled with miniature automobiles. I heard it referred to as "the turnpike," probably because of the toll booth near its source, directly in front of me.

Meanwhile, to my right at the end of the layout, the *General* was slowing down and coming to a stop. A man in a jacket and tie then swapped that locomotive for another *General* he was holding in his hand. He gave the thumbs up sign to a man in the control booth, and the train was on its way. Not for long, however! This *General* was in big trouble as it came around the middle of the layout and



The sixth and seventh editions of *Model Railroading* contain four close-ups of scenes on the layout. The best of these showcases the rarely seen "space center" in a corner behind the mountain as a no. 175 Rocket Launcher swings into action.

started to climb the grade. I could see its wheels spinning furiously, though its progress had come to a halt. The man in the jacket and tie jumped onto the layout and, after trying to nudge the locomotive along, decided to put back the original locomotive. Another thumbs up to the booth, and it was on its way.

Then a no. 2331 Virginian FM Train Master appeared from under the turnpike overpass. As that diesel passed in front of a

pair of no. 156 Station Platforms, it began to descend into a tunnel that carried the track below eye level. I moved to my left to get a closer look at the descending train. In front of me was the J. L. C. Manufacturing Co., with a no. 193 Water Tower with Blinking Light alongside. Behind the factory, which was built for the 1949 layout, a no. 60 Lionelville trolley bounded back and forth on track adjacent to a suburban street, one of two such roadways formed by the turnpike when it reached ground level.

#### ANYTOWN, U. S. A.

Along these streets sprawled a cozy little town illuminated by numerous no. 71 Lamp Posts. Some no. 410 Blinking Billboards were flashing as I continued to move to my left. At the corner was a drive-in theater with about 30 cars watching a cartoon featuring "Tootle," a mischievous steam engine made famous to baby boomers by a Little Golden Book of the same name. The theater's marquee had been fashioned from the top of a no. 334 Operating Dispatching Board. It read, "2 Features 5 Cartoons."

As I walked along the far side of the layout, I marveled at the glimmering town, which included a church at the end of the street. A river of real water ran the length of the layout, winding its way under viaducts, roadways, and bridges. At this end of the river, just to the right of the mountain, I noticed a tug escorting a barge. Along the

river at the foot of the mountain, a line of track emerged from a tunnel, only to enter another portal about four feet later. Out of the near portal two Alcos emerged pulling four Vista-Domes and an observation.

Sitting on the corner of the layout below the mountain was a no. 175 Rocket Launcher serviced by a dead-end siding. On the mountainside above, a no. 50 gang car passed back and forth between bumpers buried within two tunnel portals. About the same time that I noticed the launcher, the Train Master rushed out of the underground tunnel and made its way around the far side of the mountain.

Looking farther ahead, I spied an airport to the left of the mountain. A single line of track on trestles approached the mountain from the left, passed over the climbing Train Master, and entered an elevated mountain portal. On the outside of this line, another track surfaced from an underground tunnel. I couldn't help asking, "Which trains are going to appear on the two lines?" Aha! Answer no. 1 was chuffing down the elevated line. It was the Norfolk & Western steamer. It entered the elevated portal and reappeared on the straightaway that crossed the width of the layout after exiting the front side of the mountain. Shortly thereafter, answer no. 2 appeared to my left. I saw the headlight of the New Haven EP-5 as that handsome electric made its way to the ramp leading down to the tunnel on the subway line.

## Sorry – not even close

To: Roger Carp

From: Ron Antonelli

Date: November 25, 1993

**A** published account of Lionel's 1957 Super O showroom display is likely to ring nostalgic bells for middle and late baby boomers. Unfortunately, as an early boomer, I saw it as the first in a long line of disappointments that defined the Lionel Experience during the latter part of the postwar era. What should have been a convincing showcase for the new line of Super O track turned out to be a parody of big-time model railroading.

For starters, the entangled track plan conveyed few of those viewer-friendly features that we identify with mega-layouts: sweeping parallel main lines, isolated villages, and, most of all, the crafty interfacing of rail service with local industries. Instead, viewers were expected to imagine the outcome of potential disasters, such as a turnpike spanning the outer runway of an airport or a tugboat navigating a commercial waterway lined with shoals! Other scenic effects were similarly bogus. The traditional excitement of trains barn-storming tunnels was lost on some rather predictable routing and the overuse of no. 111 trestle piers.

Structures were another lost opportunity, as most of those on the layout had been pilfered from the 1949 display. Those

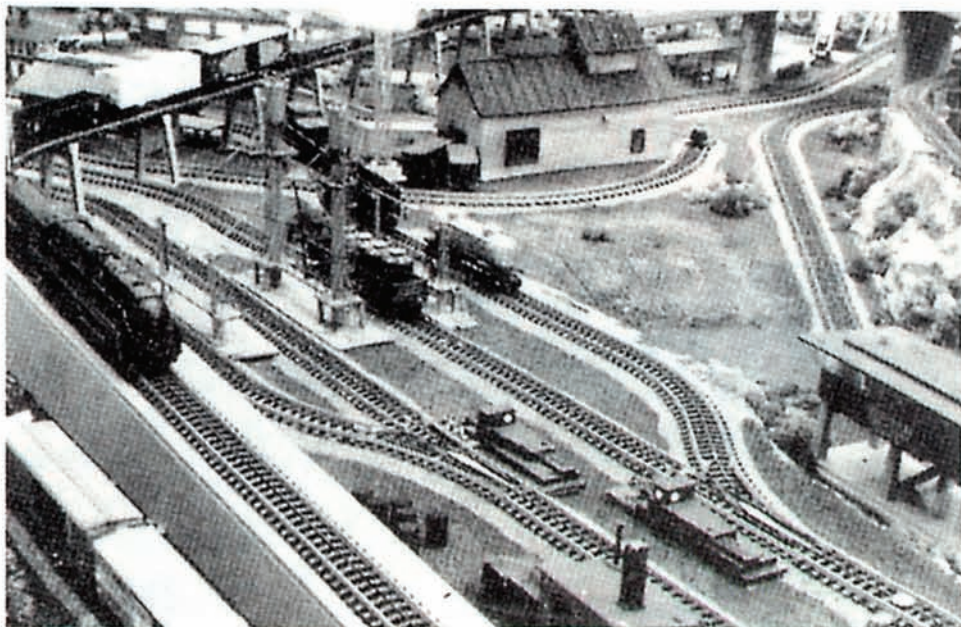
superb models now had the appearance of being squeezed into every available plot. Call this an undesirable bit of realism, which had become an all-too-familiar sight in the 'burbs.

The topper, however, was that massive kitsch art control tower. Sure, the best-known picture of the Super O Layout shows Jack Kindler looking happy enough up there in the booth [page 62]. Still, if you think about it, that tower was a marketing and public relations blunder rolled into one. Remote control was, and still is, the most compelling aspect of model railroading on any level, yet the designers of this layout chose to hide the control components upstairs, essentially out of public view. Didn't anyone previously take notice of the visitors crowding the guard rail behind the control panel of the 1949 layout?

I could go on, but my bias is showing. Besides, we all know that nothing is ever as black-and-white as first impressions. Nowadays, I'd be more inclined to judge the effort by first considering time and budget constraints. The point is for real. Mr. Art Zirul, who helped construct the 1949 layout as an employee of Diorama Studios, has often stressed that management didn't care to repeat the process. In further fairness, Lionel's failure to produce a Super O-72 curved track section was a fundamental compromise that would haunt both the showroom layout and the marketability of Super O for years to come.

Wishing you luck with the project,

Ron



This photograph of the diesel-servicing yard appeared in the December 1958 issue of *Model Trains* magazine. It accompanied an article on the realism of Super O track.

### CONTROL TOWER AND BEYOND

My progress around the layout was interrupted by the presence of the control tower. Entered from the rear, this elevated platform with a large, angled window overlooking the layout was made to resemble Lionel's no. 465 Sound Dispatching Station. Two speakers, hung at the corners of the under portion of the roof, faced opposite ends of the layout. Inside and below the window were two angled shelves on which were mounted no fewer than eight ZW transformers. Those mighty sources of power had their green lights glowing.

On the far side of the control tower I caught a glimpse of a Santa Fe streamliner approaching by way of a no. 214 Plate Girder Bridge spanning the river. The train passed under a highway bridge and zigzagged to the outside of the layout, heading toward the corner to my left. It passed a factory by way of a yard, where passing sidings held various freight cars.

On elevated trackage, the *General* traversed the river across a no. 332 Arch Under Bridge. Below this structure I could see a waterfall. The *General* passed from left to right in front of me, heading over the highway and back across the river again. This time the old-time train crossed a no. 321 Trestle Bridge as it made its way to the far side of the layout. At the point where the highway crossed the river it also straddled an island, complete with fishery and lighthouse.

Moving around the corner, I could see the Santa Fe sweep around the factory, pass under a double-track line, and head back to the middle of the layout. Once there, it reached and continued over an impressive arched viaduct. The *General* passed from left to right, followed seconds later by the New Haven electric.

At the foot of the viaduct, in the river

valley between two bluffs, was a passenger platform. Below what had been ground level a single track exited a tunnel portal on one bluff and re-entered a portal on the opposite bluff. Two sets of stairs led from the tops of the bluffs down to a platform that sat about 6 inches above and behind the track. From this platform a footbridge crossed the track and two more sets of stairs completed the descent to track level. A Pennsylvania Railroad GG1 pulled the *Congressional* through the station at slow speed.

Peering over the viaduct I could see a retaining wall on the left bank of the river. On top of the wall was another small town glowing with no. 71 Lamp Posts. The highway

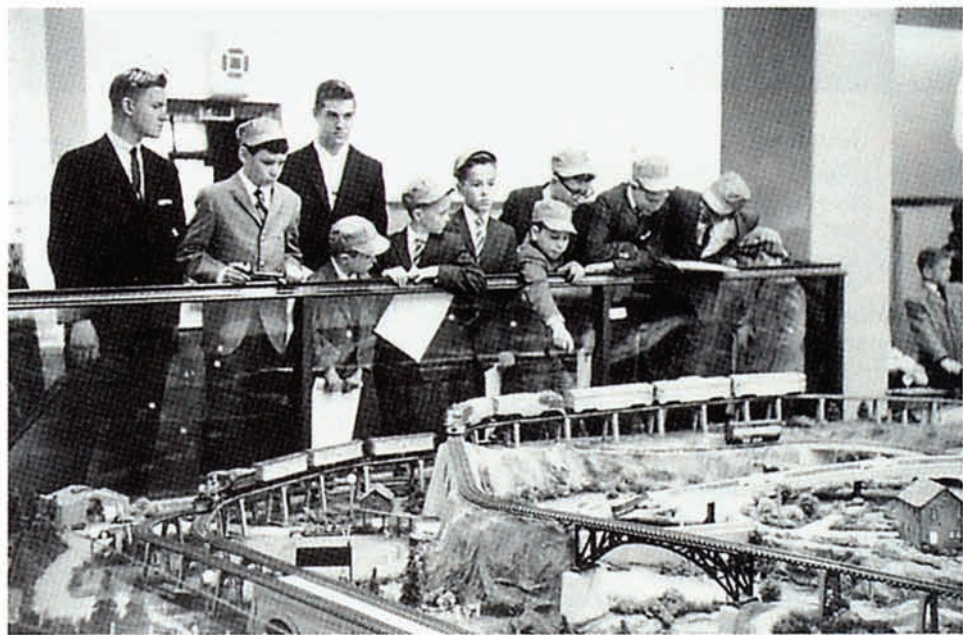
passed over the town, ran alongside a gravel quarry, and connected with a service road that led to the tollbooth at the turnpike's entrance near the left corner. The service road went under a viaduct with three arches before passing by the corner where a gasoline filling station had been built.

### LOOKING BACK 40 YEARS

Having circumnavigated the layout, I made my way back to a few selected spots to enjoy the trains again. Eventually I was ready to step away from the display and turn my attention to the dealer layouts on the perimeter of the showroom. I recall asking my dad if it were possible to do a similar layout in our four-room apartment. He smiled and said that maybe we could give it a try. How I would have like to have taken a section of Lionel's layout home!

In retrospect, the Super O Layout was unique. It represented a break from the concentric circle approach that had characterized the track plan of its predecessor. The charm of the 1957 layout stemmed largely from my inability to follow a train's progress through the entire course without completely losing sight of it. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how many trains were running. Once I counted seven.

Finally, my father would tell me that it was time to leave. Although I hated to go, I never did so empty-handed. I always walked out with a brand spanking new catalog in my hand. Then, while Dad drove home, I thoroughly consumed Lionel's wish book and tried to decide which of the trains and accessories I would request for Christmas. Little did I realize that, thanks to my catalogs and those wonderful visits to the showroom, I was acquiring memories that would last forever.



Trustees of the Lionel Rail Road Co., a group sponsored by Lionel, received a private tour of the showroom in 1960. Did you notice that a clear Plexiglas barrier had been erected to keep out inquisitive hands? Also, a no. 1872 *General* steam engine and tender pulling three Civil War-era coaches had joined the trains on the Super O rails.



# The final glory



**T**he scene is easy to imagine. Sometime in the spring of 1958, probably not long after returning from his annual winter vacation to Hawaii, J. L. Cowen sits in his office at Lionel's headquarters in Manhattan. The showroom is quiet and all but deserted now that Toy Fair has ended and most of the salesmen are on the road. Cowen, well into his seventies, struggles to fill his days with activity. Then his secretary walks in and reminds him that "the photographer from *True* magazine will be here soon to take your picture."

Cowen likely grumbles about how much he hates having his picture taken, though inside he's glad to have something to relieve the boredom. While he waits, his thoughts turn to the latest additions to the line. The bright, colorful Minneapolis & St. Louis GP9 and New Haven F3 please him; the Rocket Launcher and Atomic Energy Disposal Car probably don't ("too

A poorly cropped and slightly retouched version of this picture accompanied the article on Lionel and its history that appeared in the December 1958 issue of *True* magazine. Once more, David Eisendrath's skills enabled him to convey the magnitude of the Super O Layout and the beauty of Lionel's locomotives and rolling stock from the 1950s.

much like war for children"). Then the "Old Man," as he was affectionately known, remembers the blue and yellow no. 2329 Virginian Rectifier. He wants to be sure to mention it to the visitor as an example of how Lionel continues to modernize its trains. Just as he begins daydreaming of what he and his wife, Lillian, will do when they get to their summer home in Palm Beach, the photographer arrives.

## PIONEER WITH A SHUTTER

Over the years, especially since World War II, when toy trains became so popular, J. L. Cowen had his picture snapped dozens of times. Rarely, however, was the man behind the camera as respected in his profession as was the case with the photographer

from *True*. David Eisendrath Jr. was no hack. Perhaps some of his peers turned up their noses at the kind of sensationalist articles that appeared in the pages of what boldly proclaimed itself to be "The Man's Magazine." None of them, however, would have disparaged Eisendrath. His distinguished career as an industrial and scientific photographer and the innovative techniques he devised to capture a variety of subjects on film earned praise from even the most demanding of his colleagues.

The 43-year-old Eisendrath probably knew exactly what he wanted to shoot by the time he introduced himself to Mr. Cowen. Thorough preparation was typical of this consummate professional, who had taken up photography in high school and

refined his craft at the University of Chicago. Soon after graduation he took a job at one of the papers in the Windy City, only to head for New York in 1940 to work on the path-breaking newspaper *PM*.

Eisendrath honed his photographic skills and developed a taste for writing during the war, when he worked for the Department of State and the Office of War Information. The diversity of his experiences persuaded him to join the ranks of free-lancers in the late 1940s, and he flourished as a technical and industrial photographer. An engaging personality coupled with a willingness to share what he had learned about shooting complicated subjects made Eisendrath popular in his competitive field.

### TREASURE TROVE OF PICTURES

What occurred during the few hours Eisendrath spent at Lionel requires a good imagination. Key details, such as whether he was accompanied by George Scullin, the author of the *True* story about Lionel, can't be determined. Neither can anyone state with certainty that Cowen engaged the photographer in conversation, although it seems likely considering how much the Old Man enjoyed talking and joking with younger men and reminiscing about the early days of the firm. So regardless of whether Eisendrath arrived alone or with his collaborator, he would have been hard pressed to avoid personal interaction with the elderly, garrulous man he was about to photograph.

In the course of Eisendrath's visit, he snapped a number of black-and-white "candid" photographs of Cowen as well as color pictures of several examples of notable 2 7/8" and Standard gauge models from Lionel's early history. The portraits are significant not only because they show Cowen holding the engineering prototype of the Virginian Rectifier but because these are the last reported pictures of him taken at the headquarters of the business he founded in 1900.

Before the year was out, the somewhat tired yet still alert gentleman Eisendrath photographed would announce his retirement as chairman of Lionel's board of directors. Nine months later, in September of 1959, Cowen sold all his stock in the company to Roy Cohn, his grand-nephew and a former aide to Senator Joseph McCarthy. In doing so, he enabled Cohn to consolidate control of the firm at the expense of Lawrence Cowen, who was Lionel's president and J. L.'s only son.

While Eisendrath switched cameras and loaded color film, Cowen or an assistant removed a number of historic models from what was informally referred to as the "Museum." Over the years, both extremely old and highly desirable trains had been collected and put on display in a showcase. Eisendrath wanted to photograph a few of them so *True's* readers would get a good idea of how Lionel trains had looked in the first 20 years of the century and which



Eisendrath photographed many vintage and contemporary models for *True* magazine. This shot of some new locomotives wasn't published at the time, but collectors should enjoy seeing preproduction samples of the no. 212 U. S. Marine Corps Alco and its matching no. 6017(-50) caboose, along with the no. 2242 New Haven F3. Even the no. 2348 Minneapolis & St. Louis GP9 differs a bit from the production model.

items had contributed to the firm's success in subsequent decades.

He quickly took pictures of some early trolleys, a couple of colorful yet common Standard gauge locomotives, a *Blue Comet*, and a Mickey Mouse handcar. This is fortunate because, not too many years later, Cohn insisted on selling these and other unique pieces in Lionel's museum in order to raise money for his cash-strapped company. With his rash action, all trace of these special models disappeared.

As important to today's enthusiasts, Eisendrath also photographed the Super O Layout, although regrettably not from a variety of angles and vantage points. In fact, only two transparencies could be located in his files after his death in 1988. Taken as Eisendrath faced the control tower, they are identical except for the positions of a freight train crossing the viaduct and some of the automobiles on the elevated turnpike. Both photographs present a panoramic view of the model railroad and feature seven trains being put through their paces amid assorted structures and accessories. Better than almost any other picture, they convey the blend of whimsy and realism that characterized this layout and help contemporary viewers assess the quality of its scenery.

Only one of the photographs that Eisendrath took of the Super O Layout was published in *True*. Even that one is a bit disappointing because the art director designing the article "cropped out" key details, notably the control tower in the rear. Unintentionally, he also chopped off the front of the Norfolk & Western J in the



J. L. Cowen posed for Eisendrath proudly holding the prototype for the no. 2329 Virginian Rectifier. Behind stand shelves with examples of the Super O outfits cataloged for 1958. Look carefully and you'll observe two preproduction models of the no. 6434 Poultry Dispatch and one of the no. 6519 Allis Chalmers Car.

foreground! Both images have been reproduced in their entirety here, and they leave wonderful impressions of how the color, complexity, and activity of this layout could enthrall youngsters like Skip Natoli.

We can be grateful that someone as skilled and resourceful as David Eisendrath Jr. had the opportunity to photograph this legendary model railroad, while lamenting that he lacked the time or inclination to take many more pictures and provide a complete record of its glory. — Roger Carp

# Many strings attached

Lionel's advertising executives and sales staff just couldn't wait to get started pushing the new space and military items in 1960. They knew the nos. 3820 and 3830 Operating Submarine Cars would generate excitement, while the no. 6544 Missile Firing Car gave kids something new to use to detonate the no. 6470 Target Launching Car. Assorted other trains and accessories left everyone at Lionel confident that 1960 would be a good year. All that was necessary was the right vehicle to promote the Super O and O-27 lines.

Enter Jacques Zuccaire. Lionel's advertising manager was skilled at promotion. Besides capitalizing on the consumer catalog, he persuaded television producers to put Lionel outfits on their shows and magazine editors to print articles about electric trains and their educational benefits. For 1960, he had a bigger idea: Why not have Lionel underwrite production of a feature film to launch its advertising campaign?

Thus was born the plan that soon led to *The Wonderful World of Trains*, a 24-minute program that relied on some

Japanese marionettes, a charming young boy, and some incredibly trite dialogue to promote Lionel's growing line of space and military trains and accessories. The story was simple yet cute. A boy playing with his electric trains falls asleep only to awaken in a land populated by marionettes, notably a hobo on the run from the police. Algernon P. Caboose, as the tramp calls himself, teaches his chum all about trains as they cavort on a large, sparsely landscaped layout. Amid their adventures, filmed scenes of the Super O Layout were shown to suggest that this immense model railroad was part of their world.

Although the script and acting leave plenty to be desired, the film of the showroom layout is worth seeing; actually, the same four or five scenes appeared more than once during *The Wonderful World of Trains*. Thanks to Al Gasperini, a former Lionel salesman who owns an original print that he kindly let me borrow, some of those scenes can be shown here to give yet another perspective on the Super O Layout. — Roger Carp



## The sad end to the story

What happened to the Super O Layout should be easy to figure out, as the events in question took place less than 35 years ago. Not so. Mystery surrounds the fate of Lionel's last postwar display. Even the testimony of an eyewitness named Dominick Greco, who removed the layout and helped dismantle the showroom, doesn't quite clear up the uncertainty.

According to the January 1963 issue of *Playthings* magazine, the leading trade journal of the toy industry, the Super O Layout had been taken apart and reassembled at the New York Coliseum during the previous holiday season. From there, it was going to be shipped to cities around the United States and put on display. So far, so good, except that no information about this tour surfaced in later issues.

So we must jump ahead to the last few weeks of 1963. Skip Natoli recalled going with his father to a Lionel exhibit at the New York Coliseum in late November or early December. What they saw ("mostly racing cars and science kits") left them disappointed, particularly since electric trains had such an inconspicuous presence there.

"There wasn't a layout," Skip pointed out, supporting the notion that Lionel had not rebuilt the Super O Layout again at the public facility on Columbus Circle.

Meanwhile, Lionel's leadership was looking for ways to save money. Shutting down the showroom would do just that. Greco, who had divided his nearly 20 years at the firm between the New Jersey plant and the New York showroom and built layouts for stores and TV, was given the job.

Greco reports that the Super O Layout was moved from the showroom and put in the New York Coliseum in late 1963 or early 1964. If he is correct, then it made a second seasonal appearance there. "After the layout came out of the Coliseum," he adds, "we framed it, two pieces together, with 2 x 4s on the cross." Workers next placed it into a warehouse, where presumably it remained for an unspecified time. "We never used it anymore because we had no place to put it." From there, who knows?

Next, Greco and his crew cleaned the office before Lionel vacated. They moved file cabinets filled with correspondence, invoices, and bills to the factory. Once there, members of the Display Department

guarded the cabinets until, four or five months later, they were instructed to dispose of the contents as fast as possible. Trying to dissuade his superiors from taking this drastic step was futile, Greco realized, so he joined the others in opening drawers and throwing away whatever was inside.

When the men came across old catalogs, however, their instinct to preserve took over. Greco remembers discovering stacks of catalogs dating to 1916. He tried to keep complete sets of them. The same thing occurred when he found copies of *Model Builder* magazine, which Lionel had published in the 1930s and '40s to attract interest in toy trains, and *All Aboard at Lionel*, its newsletter for employees.

A few other treasures also survived. He retrieved from the garbage an oil painting of Lawrence Cowen, perhaps the one done for *Business Week* in 1947. There was a picture of a Hudson steam engine and tender that had been displayed in J. L. Cowen's office and an experimental version of the O gauge no. 773 Hudson designed to run on only 6 volts. Whatever else passed through Greco's hands was, like the Super O Layout, lost forever. — Roger Carp

