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MRH ... QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, TIPS



Model Railroad Hobbyist | December 2018 | #105

compiled by **JOE BRUGGER**



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Tank cars and covered hoppers for a small layout

Q. I'm designing a 60" x 16" HO scale switching layout. I'd like to model an LPG distributor like Walthers' Central Gas & Supply and a cement distributor like their Medusa Cement Co. The time frame is the 1970s into the 1980s. I need some help identifying suitable tank car and covered hopper models for both industries. I'd like the cars to stay around 50 feet long or shorter due to the limited space.

—Mark L.

A. Jeff Shultz: The covered hoppers you need are perfect for a small layout. An appropriate one might be the ACF two-bay Centerflow covered hopper, at just under 3,000 cu. ft. Several hobby manufacturers have produced them. Older two-bay Pullman Standard covered hoppers are also available. On either type of car, check that the unloading gates are of the proper flat sliding type for cement service.

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As for LPG cars, I think your hunt is going to be more difficult. I'm finding 11,000-gallon ones built in the '50s and very long 33,000-gallon ones from the '90s.

Tim Garland: For your era I would go with Athearn or Intermountain two-bay covered hoppers for cement and Atlas whale belly LPG tank cars.

Some propane dealers are seasonal and buy in bulk. These typically do not get cars on a regular basis. If you like tank cars you might want to consider a general chemical plant that would receive regular shipments. Athearn and Atlas make some good tank cars that would fit this era.

Joe Atkinson: If the propane dealer doesn't work out, another option involving similar cars would be an anhydrous ammonia



1. Atlas produced whale-belly 33,000-gallon tank cars stenciled for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) service which carry build dates between March 1964 and September 1969. They can be found at swap meets and from online sellers. Walther's offered a "65' LPG Tank Car" lettered with an 11-68 build date. *Graham Line photo*

transload. You can find an article on modeling one in the July 2016 MRH at mrhmag.com/magazine/mrh2016-07-jul/modern-tankcar-transload. Unfortunately, while that Tanner facility was switched regularly, it wasn't switched frequently. Tanner only got about one car a month, but they got them like clockwork.

Unless you're really a fan of the long 33K-gallon tank cars, for a smaller layout I'd suggest going for a chemical or oil distributor, or something similar that uses smaller cars.

Mark L. (the Original Poster): I like both tank cars and the propane tanks and piping of a typical LPG dealer. Can you give me some examples of general chemical plant types that would be good for modeling, what types of inbound and outbound loads they would have, and what tank cars they would utilize?

I'm getting some ideas. Walther's Magic Pan Commercial Bakery says it could be used as a chemical distributor. It has tanks and piping which I like, and it could be combined with Walther's Plastic Pellet Transfer kit to create a more complex, er, complex. I think something like this could generate traffic of both tank cars and covered hoppers.

Barry Karlberg: Most plastics companies don't get tank cars, only plastic resin pellets in large covered hoppers. The holding tanks for pellets aren't the same as those that handle liquids or products like grain and feed.



J. Brugger

PLANNING:

We're sneaking up on a good idea here. In Mark's limited real estate, one large, complex industry may be more plausible than two or three small ones.

Tim mentioned that LPG is seasonal, but that depends on where, and what season. Vacation areas often take more gas in the summer, and cold climates use it in the winter. Many new installations have large storage capacity and store gas when the price is low. New distributor facilities have sprung up in the northern part of the country to take advantage of lower rail rates. There often isn't enough pipeline capacity to handle LPG because they are shipping more crude oil.

Smaller chemical plants I switched received tank cars 40 to 65 feet long depending on the commodity and whether they were set up to receive a gas or a liquid. Food processors take non-hazardous tanks of cooking oils and sweeteners, along with covered hoppers of dry ingredients, and even a few boxcars. I can think of one industry in Illinois that gets oil and sweetener in tanks, and other products in covered hoppers and plain old 50-foot boxcars to make pizza mix.

Walthers makes it easy to simulate a tank car industry with their four loading/unloading/inspection platforms that are small and easy to build. All four platforms can be built as loading/unloading ones because they include extra piping. Add a storage tank or two and you're in business. If a food processor is your wish, then add a low-relief trucking warehouse with boxcar doors. If you place a large cooling unit on the roof it can also handle chilled goods to load in or from reefers.

Ken K.: Modelers can confuse plastic manufacturers where the pellets, plastic sheets, etc. are produced, and raw plastic consumer manufacturers who produce milk jugs and other items. The Dow Chemical, formerly Rohm and Haas plastic plant in Knoxville, Ky. has spots for over a dozen tank cars supplying raw materials (acids, petroleum bases, glycerin, etc.).

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Tim Garland: Tank cars can handle a lot of different products, but users avoid contamination by shipping only the exact same product for the service life of the car. For instance, corn syrup tanks are designed to haul corn syrup and chlorine tanks are designed to haul chlorine.

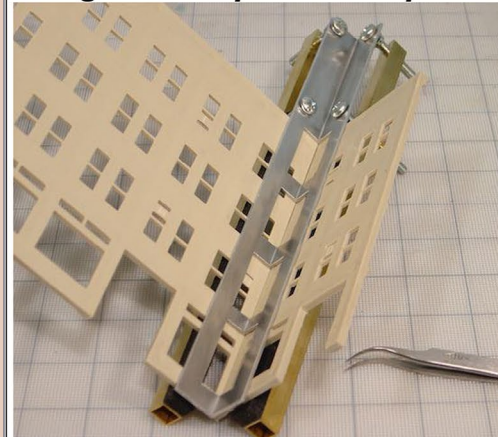
A lot of chemical-related industries will receive tank cars carrying multiple types of products. One example is an industry we switch called Nexio Solutions, which bought out Ashland Chemical. This facility has multiple car spots that require tanks carrying specific commodities to always be unloaded from a specific spot. Pipes carrying the product from each spot go to different storage tanks that can hold the product until they are either transferred to tanker trucks or large drums. Often, these products will go out to various industries that produce things such as cleaning supplies.

Scott Chatfield: Here in America in your time frame propane distributors that are rail-served generally only deal in propane. That's been true since at least 1970. Fuel dealers, formerly known as bulk plants, got liquid fuels like gasoline, kerosene, and diesel. After 1970 most fuel dealers have gotten their deliveries by truck from pipeline terminals, not by rail.

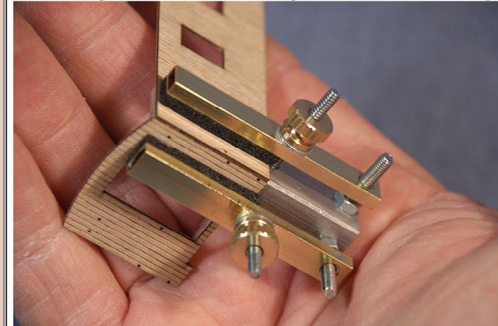
Propane started to be shipped by rail in large quantities around 1940, and the Atlas and Kadee 11,000-gallon tank cars are both propane tanks. They also can be used for anhydrous ammonia, one of the few cases in the modern era where the same car can be used for two different commodities.

However, starting in the mid-'60s, a new generation of 100-ton propane/AA tanks were built. The earliest ones were the "whale-bellies" like the Atlas model. By 1970, after a few accidents, the railroads and government decided whale-belly pressure tanks

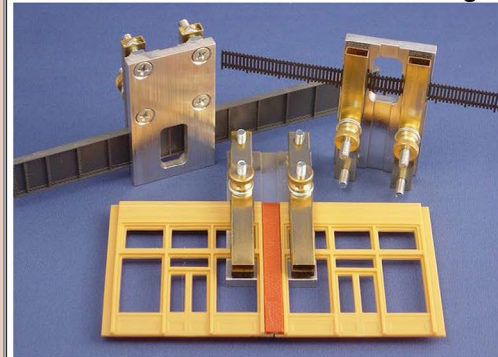
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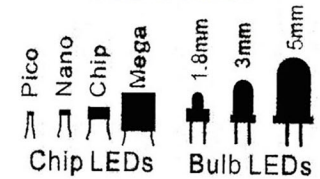
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were not the best idea, and all subsequent pressure tanks built have been straight-body tanks.

The Walthers and Athearn Genesis 33,000-gallon tanks are post-1970 propane/AA tanks. Only a few other commodities ship in these cars. Please note that Athearn also makes some post-2000 versions of these cars. Those have the ladders offset from the man-way, and newer graphics and reflective conspicuity stripes.

Some good-sized bakeries are served by rail, some big enough to have their own Trackmobile. They get flour and sugar in Airslide hoppers (the short one-bay and boxier two-bays – each version has been made by several manufacturers). They could get corn syrup or liquid sugar in tank cars. Before 1995 these were mostly 16,000-gallon insulated tanks (Atlas and Walthers), and vegetable oil in longer insulated tanks, back then mostly 23,500-gallons and again, look at Atlas and Walthers.



2. Covered hopper and Airslide cars for carrying dry commodities have been produced by several model companies. From the left, Kadee 2003 cu.ft. PS-2, Walthers 2600 cu.ft. single-bay Airslide, and Athearn 2900 cu.ft. ACF two-bay. Other makers include Atlas, Eastern Car Works, Kato, Tangent, and Con-Cor. *Graham Line photo*



3. The annual fertilizer train in Stayton, OR., with three cars of phosphoric acid solution and one of anhydrous ammonia. *Jeff Shultz photo*

If you lean toward the '70s use the single-bay Airslide for flour and sugar, and no syrup tanks. For an '80s layout, go with the twin-bay Airslide for flour and some sugar, and add the syrup tanks.

A liquid fertilizer plant is similar in set up to an asphalt terminal, except it doesn't need steam lines. It uses the same size or slightly smaller cars, depending on the chemical. The Atlas and Walthers 23,500-gallon tanks are good. The Athearn "62-foot" tank is a bit too long but can be used as a stand-in.

Cement is a low-margin commodity that's made all over the continent, and the railroads hate to interchange it.

Several railroads bought the two-bay Center Flows starting in the mid-'60s. The earlier ACF 1,958 cu.ft. rib side cars (Bowser and Intermountain), General-American 1,958 cu.ft. (Kato), and Pullman 2,003 cu.ft. PS-2 (Athearn, Atlas, and Kadee) lasted into the '90s on many lines that couldn't afford fancy new cars for a low-margin business.

Clark Propst: Covered hoppers in cement service ping-pong back-and-forth between the manufacturing plant and the distribution facilities. These cars would be owned or leased by the railroad providing service to the plant. If more than one railroad served the plant, the cars would stay on home rails. There are always exceptions. But the basic rule is ALL covered hoppers should be from the same owner.

Note: Of course, on a '70s Burlington Northern layout, this could include cars from the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, Spokane, Portland & Seattle; and the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy.

Jeff Shultz: A local fertilizer plant here in western Oregon used to get one train of liquid fertilizer (four cars) each year. One car of anhydrous ammonia, and three of phosphoric acid solution. After a storm weakened a bridge, the rail line got embargoed.

The interesting thing is that they also brought in, by truck, a "reactor" where they made the fertilizer out of the AA and phosphoric acid, accompanied by billowing clouds of vapor. Once a year. Covered hoppers of dry fertilizer came in a lot more often.

Wilson: I live near a potato chip and snack food manufacturer. They get most of their raw material by rail. They receive tank cars of vegetable oil, ship out waste oil in tank cars. They receive bulk dry corn and flour in covered hoppers, and raw potatoes in box cars and open

gondolas depending on the season. Most of their finished product is shipped by truck.

Find more information, real-world experiences, and photos at mrh-mag.com/node/33406.

Look at the GATX freight car guide at www.gatx.com/wps/wcm/connect/GATX/GATX_SITE/Home/Rail+North+America/Products/Equipment+Types.

Swapping out N couplers

Q. I have a very small N scale 0-4-0 dockside switcher that has the old style Rapido couplers. I'd like to swap them out for a newer knuckle style coupler. Not sure if it's possible, but if so, how difficult is it?

—Tim S.

A. Fishnmack: Try a Micro-Trains 1133 Coupler conversion kit. The package specifically mentions Bachmann locomotives and cars . The 1130 will work, but it has a long shank coupler that would look odd on your little locomotive – unless you really need it for tight curves. Just take your time and carefully read the instructions. Even the package advises you to read through the instructions at least once before you begin!

Detailed instructions for converting N scale rolling stock to use Micro-Trains knuckle couplers are at www.micro-trains.com/index.php?route=information/information&information_id=10.

