Why I model 1906

Smaller engines, cars, and structures mean more railroad in a given space

By Gerald D. McGee
Photos by Todd McGee

Most things were smaller 100 years ago. Locomotives and cars were tiny compared to what was to come, factories and structures were generally smaller, and horses were certainly smaller than automobiles. So modeling 1906 can offer more railroading in a given space as well as an opportunity to become immersed in history and Americana.

The following paragraph by Lucius Beebe from the foreword to his book *When Beauty Rode The Rails* (Doubleday) sums up my love for turn-of-the-century railroading:

It is no accident of circumstance that the most beautiful devisings and artifacts in the American record have all been associated with motion and movement, the transport of things and people all going somewhere else. In their final aspects and fullest development, they might be incredibly debased by the putrescences of progress and the indignities of improvement, but in their original concept, all agencies of travel and transport, even aircraft as represented by the free balloon, came trailing clouds of beauty and wonderment to the human spirit.

Many of us are fascinated by early railroading and railroad equipment, yet little of these early times is modeled. In fact, the further back we go from the latter days of steam railroading (the late 1940s and early 1950s), the less popularity there seems to be.

Even so, I contend there is a latent interest in modeling the historical. Often this shows in our fascination with narrow gauge railroads and the "yee haw" Old West town tucked away in a corner of many layouts. But if you are truly interested in things historic, why not model real history, or at least give it some consideration as you are planning your dream pike?

While there are many fascinating time periods to model, I chose the early part of the 20th century, specifically 1906, for a few key reasons:

Less space required

A mainline train of 1900 typically would have a Ten-Wheeler (4-6-0) or Consolidation (2-8-0) pulling 20 34- to 40-foot cars. Such a train in HO scale would be about eight feet long whereas even a shortened modern double-stack or unit coal train has to be about 16 feet long to look right.

True, passenger cars in this era ran up to 80 feet in length and there were a few 60-foot freight cars. As a rule of thumb though, you can count on at least three 1900-era cars fitting into the space of two modern, or even 1950s-era, freight cars. This means you can have more cars to operate within a session.

Most lineside structures were smaller too. For instance, grain elevators were of the picturesque wood-bin variety suitable for loading a few cars at a time, rather than the large concrete and steel monsters of today that are designed to load unit grain trains.

Greater variety

Steel was just coming into its own as a building material in the early 1900s. Wooden cars with truss-rod underframes were the most common type, but steel underframes and even all-steel cars were not uncommon. Many cars had a 19th-century look, but modern appliances such as knuckle couplers and air brakes were mandatory for interchange service. This means that Kadee or other brands of knuckle couplers are prototypically correct.

Placement of ladders and steps on freight cars was being standardized, yet there was still plenty of variety to make things interesting. Freight car trucks included archbar, Fox, and Andrews frames as well as some oddballs that defy description.

Road names included most of the familiar Class 1 carriers and a broad spectrum of regional and shortline roads. Many of these local lines were quite prosperous with active traffic patterns that are perfect for modeling.

Steam locomotives were undergoing a great transition during this period. The ubiquitous 4-4-0s, 4-6-0s, and 2-8-0s became larger. Some even grew two-wheel trailing trucks, becoming early Atlantics, Pacifics, and Mikados.

1. Gerald McGee's HO scale Puye & Phui RR is an excellent example of how craftsmanship coupled with research into another era – in this case 1906 – can result in a unique model railroad.

Passenger accommodations could be anything from a sleeper on a 100-mph limited to a bench seat on the lowliest way freight. Tiny, open platform passenger cars mixed with huge, luxurious Pullmans, steel Harriman cars, and even some early gas-powered cars.

Most of the popular lineside structure kits that are often seen on more contemporary layouts are excellent for use in this era. Design Preservation, Walthers, City Scenes, and others produce brick-and-stone buildings that are based on turn-of-the-century designs. They need no modification other than a period paint scheme to fit into the layout. Most of the structure detail parts from Grandt Line, Scale

2. Horsepower in 1906 came on four legs. The horse-drawn streetcar makes an interesting addition to the layout and is a type of transport rarely modeled.

Structures Ltd., and others are from the Victorian era and are well suited to modeling this era.

More operating possibilities

In 1906 almost everything moved by rail: long haul, short haul, bulk shipment, less-than-carload lots, mail, express, perishables, livestock, and people. During this period rural roads were ungraded and unpaved. A trip of 12 miles by wagon was considered a good day's work. With an almost total lack of competition, railroads thrived like no other time in history.

In my home state of Iowa it was not uncommon for a town of 1,500 to be served by two or three rail lines. Loads were often originated and terminated in towns only a few miles apart, much like we tend to do on a model railroad. Slow speed drag freights were common (remember that slow speed creates the illusion of distance on a layout), and way freights stopped at every little burg along the line. Add to this the mix of frequent passenger, express, and mail service and we can obtain an active traffic pattern on a modest sized layout.

History and geography

Modeling an early era requires research and an understanding of the time being modeled. This is a real plus for those of us who are history minded and lets us combine both interests into one hobby. Modeling a specific era requires research that I enjoy. Good sources of information are local museums, old postcards, library books, photo collections, and county and area plat maps. For me, it also provides yet another excuse to visit local celebrations, museums, and festivals.

This golden age of railroading also was the era when many railroad names reflected the geographic area they served: names such as the Iowa Central; Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern; Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul (with no "& Pacific" yet); or the Iowa, Dakota & Eastern. These road names are much more specific than today's CSX and pinpoint the geography more exactly.

Including cars on your layout with names of railroads that operated in the region you're modeling will locate even a free-lance road on a map. In my case these cars help me reinforce the idea that I'm modeling northeastern Iowa.

Individuality

Modeling railroading as it was in 1906 allows me the freedom to experiment. I can indulge my interest in scratchbuilding, which in turn stimulates creativity. On my layout many of the buildings and much of the rolling stock are scratchbuilt or highly modified kits. This is one of my favorite aspects of the hobby. Having lots of scratchbuilt equipment makes my layout unique. I know that what I build will look different from what fellow modelers have on their layouts.

Such building projects stimulate my resourcefulness as I look for the many needed items that are not available commercially. Standard details for my region and era, such as buggies, box wagons (which were the farmers' pickup trucks of the day), and farm machinery are not available commercially and must be scratchbuilt. I feel a great sense of satisfaction when I look at each of the models on my layout for I can truly say "I built it."

Less expensive

I really didn't think that modeling this era was less expensive until I visited my local hobby shop. You know those beautiful F unit sets by Stewart, Life-Like's Proto 2000 FAs, and the excellent Kato locomotives out now? I would have had several of them when I was modeling the 1950s some years ago. They fit my operating scheme then. Now I can just walk by them on my way

3. A farmer waits with his wagon loaded with milk cans as the local arrives. The horse and wagon and the steam tractor help pinpoint this scene's place in history.

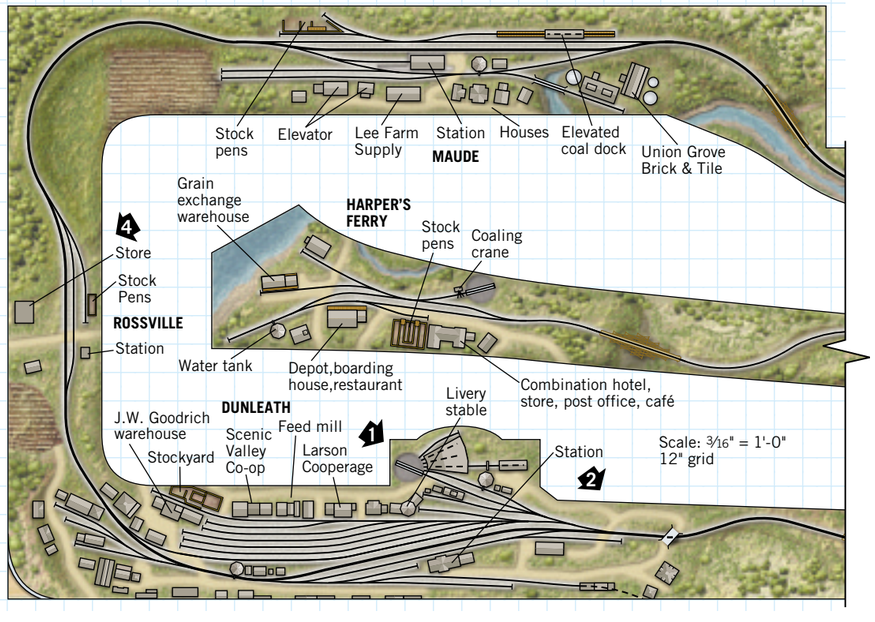
U. S. HISTORY

DID YOU KNOW THAT IN 1906 ...

- Theodore Roosevelt was president
- Population was 85 million
- A first-class stamp cost 2 cents
- The unemployment rate was 1.7 percent
- The Chicago White Sox beat the Chicago Cubs in the World Series

The layout at a glance

Name: Puye & Phui
Scale: HO (1:87)
Size: 34 x 16 feet
Prototype: free-lance
Locale: northeast Iowa
Period: 1906
Layout style: point-to-point walk-around with hidden staging yards
Layout height: 50" to 54"
Benchwork: L girder
Roadbed: ½" Homasote over ½" plywood
Track: handlaid code 70 and code 55 rail
Turnout minimum: no. 6
Minimum curve radius: 32"
Maximum grade: 1.25 percent
Scenery: hardshell
Backdrop: hand-painted ⅛" hardboard
Control: DC cab control



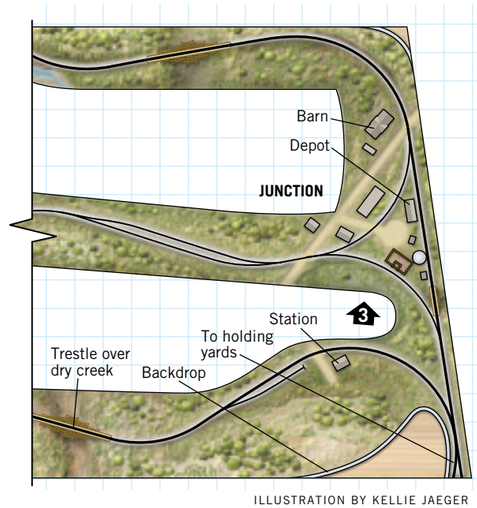


ILLUSTRATION BY KELLIE JAEGER

▲ Notice the size difference between a turn-of-the-century 4-4-0 American with a single passenger car in tow compared to a typical mainline Santa Fe steam locomotive of the 1940s.

▶ **4.** In this era the railroads handled all the freight for even the smallest towns like Rossville. This town spans just over five feet on the author's layout and yet has a stockyard, gristmill, and a store.

to the stripwood display and the detail parts section.

While there is a good selection of models available for use on a 1906 layout, there are not nearly as many temptations. A partial list of equipment I've found useful is included in the "Getting started" sidebar below.

Pure nostalgia

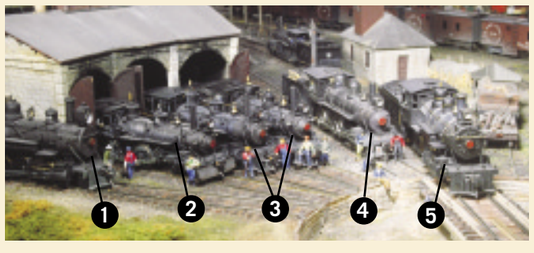
Again quoting Beebe, this time from *The Lucius Beebe Reader* (Doubleday):

Blow, hogger, high on the right-hand cushions, aloof as an earl without strawberry leaves, an earl in denim cap and goggle; blow for the grade crossings of remembrance; wind a trump for the yard limits of Bangor and Schenectady, La Junta, Cheyenne, Burlington, Walla Walla, Billings and El Paso. Blow for the green from the signal towers of destiny. Blow down the long vistas of American consciousness and for the order boards of eternity.

Now that's my kind of railroading! ✪

Gerald McGee is a retired Methodist minister living in Glenwood, Iowa. His son Todd shares the hobby and took the photos. Other MR articles by Gerald McGee were published in the February 1990 and April 1992 editions.

GETTING STARTED



LOCOMOTIVE ROSTER	
1 Roundhouse 2-8-0	**4** Rivarossi 4-4-0 *Reno*
2 PFM 4-4-0 *Reno*	**5** Roundhouse 2-6-0 converted to 4-4-0
3 PFM Centennial Set engines	

I suggest you begin by visiting a well-stocked hobby shop. Plan to spend some time searching – it will take more than a casual stroll through the shop. What you are looking for are not necessarily the top sellers, but if you look closely, you may find many useful items. I strongly recommend avoiding the overly cute or too colorful models that are so often used to represent the era.

Here is a partial listing of common items I have used and believe represent the standard equipment of the early 20th century.

Locomotives

Roundhouse. The 2-6-0s and 2-8-0s in the Old Timer series are great as is or you can rebuild them as I do with a NorthWest Short Line regear set (no. 1806) and a Sagami can motor (no. 1225) equipped with Timewell flywheels.

Bachmann. The 4-4-0 and a 2-8-0 offer possibilities for rebuilding but I have not tried them. The three-truck Shay is ideal for a logging or mining operation.

Rivarossi. The 4-4-0 *Reno* and *Genoa* locomotives are large for their prototypes but suitable for rebuilding. Mine are older models, and I had to turn down the flanges to run on code 70 and code 55 rail. I also redetailed the locomotives and added can motors.

PFM. My smaller and preferred 4-4-0s are rebuilds of PFM's brass *Renos* and Centennial Set locomotives. I have upgraded them with NorthWest Short Line's 36:1 gearboxes and Sagami motors. I've also made many detail changes including new extended smokeboxes, stacks, electric lighting systems, and airbrakes. These engines are smaller and more delicate looking than Rivarossi's.

Freight cars

Roundhouse. The Old Timer series is a good way to quickly build a roster. There are boxcars in two styles (the plain boxcar is preferable to the billboard style), reefers (avoid the cute and overly colorful billboards), stockcars, a passable tank car, and several types of cabooses. I either use these cars as-is or repaint them, followed with lettering using Clover House's excellent sets.

LaBelle. This company makes excellent wood craftsman kits that fit the era well and have been standards for period modelers for years. The line has many Upper Midwest prototypes.

Westerfield. This company offers craftsman kits for many suitable early steel and wood-and-steel cars.

Central Valley. This line of craftsman kits is long out of production, but usable. I still buy these cars if I find them at a flea market. They are enjoyable to build.

Funaro & Camerlengo and **Ye Olde Huff-N-Puff** also produce suitable cars. Many are reissues of the old Red Ball line and other out-of-production manufacturers.

Passenger cars

Roundhouse. It manufactures a line of 50-foot wood passenger cars and 80-foot Pullman Palace Cars. The company also makes steel Harriman cars that were first produced in 1906. I avoid the 30-foot Overton series because not many prototype roads owned them and they appear toy-like in most settings. I also avoid the bright, multicolor livery cars.

LaBelle. The company manufactures excellent craftsman kits of open platform and closed vestibule cars. Again, these are largely models of Midwestern prototypes, but are generic enough to represent passenger cars used throughout the country.

Structures

Most of the product lines of popular manufacturers such as Design Preservation, Magnuson, Campbell Scale Models, Classic Miniatures, Dana Models, Gloor Craft, Funaro & Camerlengo, Woodlands Scenics, Finescale Miniatures, and others are based on turn-of-the-century prototypes. Why? I don't know, because most model railroads are set in the 1950-1970 time frame. By this time many of these turn-of-the-century structures would have been remodeled or torn down. Whatever the reason, the plethora of these kits is a boon to the period modeler.

Vehicles

There are many models of horse-drawn equipment on the market, but few are really standard items for North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many are models of European prototypes or are too large or fancy to be appropriate.

The common horse-drawn vehicles in the United States were the retractable-top buggy and the farm box wagon. Neither of these are available in model form. Of the available products, Jordan wagons can be modified or parts from them used to make the more common prototypes. Scale Structures Ltd. also makes the wheels I use to build farm wagons. – *Gerald McGee*