By Tony Koester

Good enough for now?

It took Steve Holzheimer roughly 8 hours to build N scale mock-ups of Goodyear's synthetic rubber plant in Akron, Ohio, from thick club-store cereal-box cardboard. He feels that figuring out how to compress the structures and still get the right feel was not a waste of time. Now when an operator switches the plant, it's evident what he's doing. Steve Holzheimer photo

Steve Holzheimer recently finished a mock-up of Goodyear's Akron, Ohio, synthetic rubber plant. "The parts I'm able to fit on the layout, anyway," Steve said. "Now the tank cars I recently finished have a destination that's not just a siding on the brownfields of Akron. A detailed model of that facility will be a fun build. Someday."

Matt Goodman suggested that Steve "hit them with some gray or red primer, and they'll be a bit more satisfying, unless your goal is to encourage the Someday-build sooner."

To which Clark Propst cautioned, "That's the problem with mock-ups. They put off Someday."

I've heard other arguments for and against mock-ups. Bill Darnaby, whose Maumee Route is now complete, feels they waste time, money, and materials. But he's an engineer, and efficiency counts in his world.

Others with a more artistic bent have made a case for mock-ups as a way to tell whether a planned structure will actually fit and look good in the allotted area. Photocopies of scale drawings or of kit walls can be used to make trial cuts to reduce the structure's size. This lets a modeler ensure the final structure will still convey the basic appearance of its prototype before cutting the actual kit.

My take is that I'd rather switch, and ask my crews to switch, a mocked-up structure or a kitbashed stand-in than have them delivering and/or picking up cars from a bare spot on the ground. I think a bonus this accrues is that the railroad tends to look more finished a lot sooner than it actually is.

As I was writing this, I thought about my Nickel Plate layout. It has finally reached the stage where very few industrial stand-ins are still present. There's a stockyard and a Marathon Oil dealership at Charleston, Ill., that are stand-ins; I don't have much information on either one, so I've dragged my feet on anything permanent.

At the other end of the railroad in Frankfort, Ind., is Kramer Bros. Lumber, switched by a dummy spur off the truncated Pennsylvania RR (cars are moved on and off of it by hand). Walthers kits serve as stand-ins, but I think I have enough information to build a decent model.

I need to be careful, however, as it's way too easy to keep improving the stand-ins to the point they become permanent. They won't be really good renditions of the prototypes, or they wouldn't have been regarded as stand-ins in the first place. That happened in several locations on the Allegheny Midland, although since it was a freelanced railroad, with no prototype to represent, perhaps this was a lesser crime.

Some modelers use a trackside photo or drawing of a structure dry-mounted to heavy cardstock and propped up alongside the industrial spur the final model will one day serve. It's close to Bill's philosophy of not wasting resources on mock-ups, and it does tell the local's crew what sort of industry they're switching. I'd call it a good compromise.

You could even plop down a 3 x 5 card folded in half labeled "Jordan's Dairy" or "Danville Brick & Tile" to help a crew with a car billed to either of those destinations figure out where to spot that car. It wouldn't do much to enhance the realism of their job or your railroad as a whole, but it would allow them to accomplish their work without much head-scratching.

The main objective here is to inform your crew members about what they have to do and where they have to do it. If visitors can also glean a better understanding of what your railroad does for a living, that's a nice bonus.

If you have time to build the correct structure at the outset, that will save time and money in the long run. It's almost always a good idea to get a head start on painting and lettering locomotives and rolling stock prior to the beginning of layout construction, which will consume most of your modeling time. That same thinking applies to structures; build the key ones as soon as you have determined the space they can occupy. MR

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