

# Lionel trains — a long-time treat

By Linda Ann Chomin  
special writer

**A**MERICANS HAVE maintained a love affair with trains since the first "iron horse" rode the rails in 1830. Miniature trains modeled inch for inch after these five-ton giants of the track came into being shortly thereafter.

Since the turn of the century, Lionel model trains have traveled beneath holiday trees decked with popcorn and with walnut shells wrapped in sparkling foil.

Founder of Lionel, Joshua Lionel Cowen started this holiday tradition in the early 1900s as part of a shrewd marketing strategy, hoping customers would link Lionel trains with Christmas forevermore.

"There's a lot of nostalgia connected with the Lionel name. A lot of people buying sets today had Lionel when they were children. Now they're buying trains for their children," said Bob Reckinger, co-owner with wife Bonnie of Plymouth Yard Hobbies and Gifts, an authorized Lionel sales and service center.

**BUYING A** model train, whether for fun or as a serious collector, requires thorough research and reading as well as the help of a knowledgeable model train buff. Becoming a model train roaster is no easy task.

"The best way to learn is to read,"

Bonnie Reckinger said. "We've got a good selection of books, how-to books, books with layout plans. We try to help them from beginning to end, building their layouts."

Lionel recommends you seek help from one of its authorized sales and service centers before making any model train purchase.

"When they come in for a Lionel, we ask the customer who they're buying it for and why they're buying it. Is it a toy for a child? Or is it for a collector?" Reckinger said.

After deciding who the train is for, you need to make an informed decision on buying the correct scale or gauge.

Scale is the proportion in which the train is modeled. When a model is built to scale, it is in exact proportion to the full-size train it's modeled after. Gauge is the distance between the rails of the track.

**THE SMALLEST-SIZE** train available is Z scale, next largest is N scale, then HO scale, S gauge, O27 scale, O gauge, G scale and, finally, standard gauge.

"In our shop, the most popular size is O27; so kids can handle it and they are durable. The smaller gauges don't last too long with kids," Reckinger said. "Traditional trains are O27. They are less expensive, more affordable than the collectors."

Whether you are buying a train as a gift for a child, a collector or the entire

family, Reckinger recommends buying a starter set. Starter sets include the locomotive, rolling stock (includes cars other than the engine), transformer and tracks.

"It's more economical to start off with a set. If bought individually, it would cost more," Reckinger said.

A traditional Lionel train set can range in price "anywhere from \$100 to just under \$400 for engine, rolling stock, track and transformer."

**ALONG WITH** searching for a durable product at a fair price, service is an important consideration when buying a model train.

"Lionel has a good service network. We usually can remedy or repair any problem they may have. We've had 70-year-old engines in here that still run," Reckinger said. "That's something unique with Lionel."

Reckinger believes there's hidden educational value for children owning and operating a train.

"It teaches kids a lot of skills, carpentry, electrical, they learn respect for electricity. They learn how to layout and plan," Reckinger said. "It builds artistic skills. There's a lot of painting involved and paper-mache mountain building."

According to Reckinger, more women are buying trains today. Initially, they buy an "iron horse" with puffing

smokestack to run through and around the ceramic villages, they've placed under a holiday tree.

**BONNIE RECKINGER** has some final words of advice for people who are considering the purchase of a model train as a gift this holiday season: "Be well informed what they're buying. Make sure it's appropriate. Look for quality. You only get what you pay for. If you go out for the cheapest thing, you'll be disappointed."

"If you're still unsure about purchasing a model train, the best thing is to get a gift certificate."

Plymouth Yard Hobbies and Gifts is in authentic surroundings within the Plymouth train yard alongside the east-west tracks running through Old Village. It is housed in the 100-year-old Plymouth freight house.

"There's always a train going through here. It's one of the busiest interchanges in the state. The kids who come in here with their parents are nuts about trains," Reckinger said. "They all want to see the trains go by. This shop can be packed. A train goes by and they all empty out onto the porch."

Authorized Lionel sales and service centers: Plymouth Yard Hobbies & Gifts, 904 Starkweather, Plymouth, 455-4455; Train Center Hobby, 4508 N. Woodward, Royal Oak, 642-3710.

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