

Inside The Lionel Trains Fun Factory

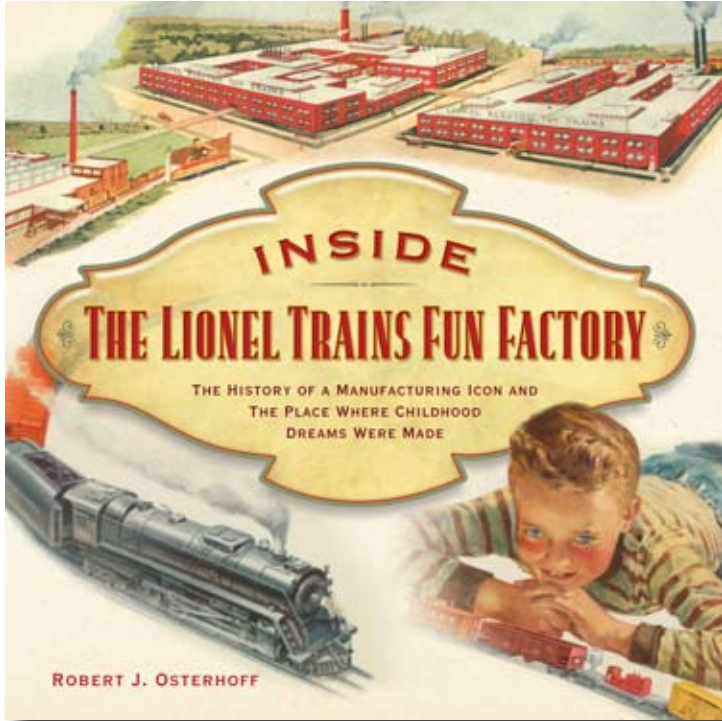
by Robert J. Osterhoff

10" x 10", 248 Pages

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Reviewed by Dr. Joseph Lechner



"Come on Boys! I'll take you for a trip thru my factory – you'll see then why Lionel trains are better." – 1917 Lionel catalog

Not so long ago, communities across the USA regarded the coming of industry as the promise of prosperity. Citizens pointed with pride to their factories and the railroads that served them. Not coincidentally, during this halcyon era, an electric train was the toy of boyhood. What, then, could be more fascinating than the factory where toy trains were built?

Lionel scholar Robert Osterhoff (author of two Greenberg's Guides) has compiled this comprehensive study of Mr. Cowen's fun factories. His primary emphasis is the prewar and postwar eras, but he also mentions modern-era facilities in Michigan and China.

Inside the Fun Factory is different from any other work on the subject of Lionel trains. You won't find calendar-sized photos of shelves filled with pristine collectible trains. Neither will you see spread after magical spread of Robert Sherman's catalog artwork. This book is about the factories where the magic was created. Indeed, it's as much about the outside of factories as their insides. It offers never-before-seen views of Lionel's manufacturing facilities – both as they looked when toy trains were made there, and as they appear today. Amazingly, all but two of Lionel's former homes are still standing in 2008.

For the record, there have been twelve Lionel Fun Factories from 1900 to present:

1. 24 Murray Street, New York NY was home to the Lionel Manufacturing Company from 1900-1904. After just four years at this address, Cowen relocated to larger quarters. Rapid growth of electric train sales provided ample reason for the move; however, Osterhoff suggests that Cowen was also concerned with this building's safety. The structure had been extensively damaged in an 1899 fire; and during Lionel's occupancy it was also home to a fireworks manufacturer; thus Cowen realized that his business could literally go up in smoke without warning. In a twist of historical irony, 24 Murray Street is located just two blocks from Ground Zero, and it sustained damage from debris of the collapsing World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It has since been thoroughly refurbished, and today it hosts a variety of tenants including a bar, a travel agency and a construction business.
2. 4-6 White Street, New York NY, just a mile north of Murray Street; 1904-1909. Osterhoff points out that the trains "manufactured" both here and at Murray Street were merely assembled from components that were made to Lionel's specifications elsewhere. The White Street property, which borders on West Broadway, is currently home to upscale apartments.
3. 122 Winchester Avenue, New Haven CT (1909-1916) was Lionel's first true "factory" and the first location to be managed by Mario Caruso. By 1913, Cowen was already looking for new quarters elsewhere. Reportedly, he grew tired of commuting between the factory and his sales offices in Manhattan; however, difficulty of securing financing in New Haven may have been a factor. The Winchester Avenue facility is currently used by an automotive parts distributor.
4. 367-371 Ogden Street, Newark NJ; 1914-1917 was the first fun factory alluded to as such in a Lionel catalog (1915); it was demolished in 2004.
5. 615 South 21st Street, Irvington NJ (1917-1933) was the first facility built expressly for Lionel. It was expanded in 1920 and again in 1923, at which point the factory's footprint extended from 600 to 615 on both sides of 21st Street. Lionel's chief rival during the 1930s was American Flyer, located (until 1938) on South Halsted Street in Chicago. Ironically, both Lionel's Irvington plant and Flyer's Chicago factory were later occupied by bedding manufacturers; and both were destroyed by fire – Halsted Street in November 1951; Irvington on the evening of April 5, 2004. Lionel LLC's #6-32905 "Lionel Factory" (1999) is lettered "603-621 S. 21st" but the model bears little resemblance to Lionel's Irvington facility.

6. 28 Sager Place, Hillside NJ (1929-1967) was expanded in 1940, 1941, 1950 and 1952; and in 1961 Lionel leased storage space in an adjacent warehouse. This facility was served by a spur of the Lehigh Valley Railroad; according to Ron Hollander's *All Aboard!*, Lionel engineers made recordings of passing LV trains when developing the air whistle. Korber Models' "Lionel Factory" was based on 1928 blueprints that differed from what was actually constructed at Hillside. The 1983 Korber model (and a Lionel-licensed 1990 reissue) approximate the appearance, but not the size, of Lionel's postwar fun factory. A much-compressed handmade model of "JLC Manufacturing Co.," seen on both the 1949 and 1957 showroom layouts, depicted the skylighted roofline of Lionel's original 1929 Hillside factory and its 1940 addition.
7. 127 Long Meadow Road, Hagerstown MD (1968-1969) was the home of Porter Chemical Company. Lionel acquired Porter in 1961 and began marketing its Chemcraft chemistry sets. The 1968 train line was assembled and packaged in Hagerstown using Hillside inventory as well as some Japanese-made parts. According to Osterhoff, the only toy train item actually manufactured there was tubular track.
8. 50925 Richard W. Boulevard, Mt Clemens MI (1970-1988) and adjacent 50725 Richard W. Boulevard (1976-1988) were the manufacturing facilities for Fundimensions, a division of General Mills.
9. Tijuana, Mexico (1983-1985) was a Fundimensions cost-cutting disaster that Lionel fans would rather forget. Components were shipped across the border from San Diego, assembled by low-cost Mexican labor, and returned to the USA with minimal import duty.
10. 50625 Richard W. Boulevard, Chesterfield MI (1988-2001) was home to Lionel Trains Inc. under Richard Kughn, and Lionel LLC under Wellspring Associates, until all remaining production was moved to Asia in 2001.
11. Samhongsu began producing high-end models for Lionel at its Seoul, South Korea facility in the late 1980s.
12. Sanda Kan Industrial Ltd., with headquarters in Hong Kong and manufacturing facilities throughout southern mainland China, produces not only Lionel trains but also Williams and MTH.

Osterhoff has included facilities that weren't "factories" but were nevertheless significant milestones in Lionel's history.

You'll see the Potter Building (38 Park Row, New York NY) which housed the law offices of Hubert A. Howson, where Joshua Lionel Cowen, Harry Curtis Grant and Michael R. Conley incorporated the Lionel Manufacturing Company in 1902.

You'll read about 67 Cortlandt Street, New York NY, where a storekeeper named Robert Ingersoll bought Cowen's first electric train as a window display, but quickly discovered that his customers were more interested in the train than its cargo.

You'll learn about 381-383 Broadway, two blocks east of the White Street factory, where Lionel set up offices in 1909 at what would become known as "the Toy Corner". In contrast, little is said about Lionel's best-known corporate headquarters and showroom on East 26th Street in Manhattan.

Osterhoff (an MBA) has also chronicled the people who designed and built trains, the equipment they used, and Lionel's corporate structure. He introduces Fritz, the cafeteria chef. He describes prosthetic devices that were invented for the benefit of Lionel's 160-some handicapped employees. He shows examples of non-train military products made during both World Wars, as well as defense-related items (such as Geiger counters) that Lionel continued to manufacture well into the 1960s. He discusses employee-relations items such as service pins, identification badges and the company picnic.

This book debunks at least one "collectible" that is purportedly a relic of the Lionel Corporation. Some recent online auctions have offered miniature glass bottles with the name LIONEL molded-in, claiming that these were once used as salt-and-pepper shakers (and perhaps vinegar cruets) in the fun-factory's cafeteria. Not so, says Osterhoff; they are liquor bottles marketed by the Chicago-based Lionel Distilled Products beginning in 1934. The name "Lionel" was also used by firms selling shoes, draperies, perfume, sewing machines and more – none of them connected with Joshua L. Cowen or the fun factory that bore his middle name.

Inside The Lionel Trains Fun Factory: The History of a Manufacturing Icon and The Place Where Childhood Dreams Were Made by Robert J. Osterhoff. Available from Project Roar Publishing, P.O. Box 599, Winfield, IL 60190. To order, visit www.projectroar.com or call 630-653-ROAR (7627). 248 pages, 575+ color photos and images, Hardcover \$34.95 (ISBN 978-1-9336-0005-5), Publisher's Limited Edition Hardcover \$69.95 (ISBN 978-1-9336-0006-2). It is also available at your local book seller, hobby retailer, bn.com and Amazon.com.



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Project Roar Publishing
P.O. Box 599
Winfield, IL 60190
www.projectroar.com



PHONE: 1.630.653.ROAR (7627)



FAX: 1.630.665.6595



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