



# LIGHTS, CAMERA, LIONEL® TRAINS!

A PHOTO HISTORY OF  
AN AMERICAN ICON

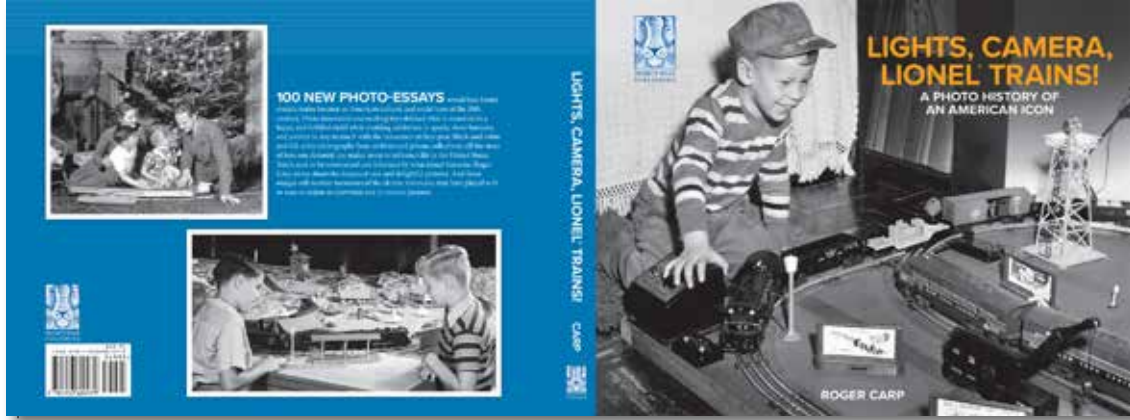
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ROGER CARP

# LIGHTS, CAMERA, LIONEL TRAINS!

A PHOTO HISTORY OF AN AMERICAN ICON

## NEW FROM ROGER CARP & PROJECT ROAR PUBLISHING



### Summary & Editions

This captivating photo history book offers a visual journey through the legacy of Lionel trains, showcasing:

- 100 stunning photo essays capturing an American icon's essence, bringing cherished memories to life for collectors and enthusiasts
- 224 pages packed with captivating Lionel train history
- 220+ full-color and black-and-white photos showcasing rare images from private collections and archives

#### AVAILABLE EDITIONS

**Regular Edition Hardcover: \$49.95** - ISBN 978-1-933600-07-9

- 11" x 8.5" beautifully crafted hardcover

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- 11" x 8.5" beautifully crafted hardcover with special cover design
- Individually autographed by Roger Carp and the publisher
- Numbered edition of 250, each with a Project Roar Publishing hologram for authenticity

### Reviews

"Richly illustrated and deeply engaging, this book belongs on every coffee table. Both train enthusiasts and non-hobbyists will enjoy discovering Lionel's profound impact on American society." —Joseph Lechner, Train Collectors Association *e-Train*

"Roger Carp and Project Roar Publishing have most certainly succeeded in providing a delightful and memorable tribute to this iconic company." —Bill Schmeelk, Lionel Collectors Club of America *The Lion Roars*

"A truly captivating perspective on Lionel's history, brought to life through stunning pictures and their thrilling stories!" —Robert J. Osterhoff, author of *Inside The Lionel Trains Fun Factory*

"I have greatly enjoyed reading Roger Carp's *Lights, Camera, Lionel Trains!* and learned much from it. ... the book brings a fresh and insightful perspective to my favorite topic. I highly recommend *Lights, Camera, Lionel Trains!*"

—Bruce C. Greenberg, Ph.D., Brinkman Publishing and former President Greenberg Publishing Company (1975–1991)

### About The Publisher

Project Roar Publishing, emerged from a father-son duo's passion for trains. In 2001, John Schmid and his father George acquired a treasure trove of Lionel Train Company documents at auction—a find that would change their lives and delight train enthusiasts worldwide.

Instead of keeping this historical goldmine to themselves, the Schmid's embarked on a mission to share these treasures with the world. Their goal? To give back to the hobby that had brought them so much joy, fostering a sense of community and preserving a unique slice of Americana.

Today, Project Roar Publishing has released four meticulously researched books that celebrate Lionel trains, capture childhood nostalgia, and showcase the evolution of American culture. Their latest release, *Lights, Camera, Lionel Trains!* by Roger Carp, takes readers on a captivating journey through time, appealing to train enthusiasts and anyone longing to relive their youth.

### About The Book

**100 NEW PHOTO-ESSAYS** reveal how Lionel electric trains became an American cultural and social icon of the 20th century. Those innovative and exciting toys defined what it meant to be a happy and fulfilled child while enabling celebrities in sports, show business, and politics to stay in touch with the innocence of their past. Full-color and black-and-white photographs from archives and private collections tell the story of how one dynamic toy maker arose to influence life in the United States. You're sure to be entertained and informed by what Lionel historian Roger Carp writes about the dozens of rare and delightful pictures. And those images will nurture memories of the electric trains you may have played with or seen in action on television and in motion pictures.

### About The Author



**ROGER CARP** has been fascinated by Lionel trains and the people who created them since he received a small steam engine and some freight cars as a youngster in 1956. His interest directed him, after earning a Ph.D. in American history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to *Classic Toy Trains* magazine, where he has served for 20 years as senior editor.

Roger has written or edited more than 20 books and special-interest publications about Lionel—its trains and accessories, its leaders and workers, its showrooms and displays, and its legacy. Among them are *The World's Greatest Toy Train Maker* (1998), *Classic Lionel Display Layouts You Can Build* (2000), *The Art of Lionel Trains* (2003), *Authoritative Guide to Lionel's Postwar Operating Cars* (2005), *Authoritative Guide to Lionel's Promotional Outfits 1960–1969* (2007), *Inside the Lionel Train's Fun Factory* (2008), *Collectible Lionel Classics* (2017), *Lionel Trains of the 1950s* (2019), and *Lionel Trains of the 1940s* (2022). He also oversees production of the annual edition of *Greenberg's Pocket Price Guide to Lionel Trains*.

A native of Los Angeles, Roger lives near Milwaukee with his wife and Lionel trains.



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PROJECT ROAR<sup>®</sup>  
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To the memory of my parents, Robert and Bee Gee Carp,  
who gave me my first Lionel train and taught me  
how to appreciate the beauty in photographs.



The adults in this still from *Dante's Inferno*, a motion picture released in 1935, feel the pleasure a little boy takes from his Lionel Standard gauge train. The No. 390E locomotive and tender humanize stars Spencer Tracy (left) and Claire Trevor while helping young Scotty Beckett seem more mature. Lionel Standard gauge trains, as shown, used three-rail track with the outer rails  $2\frac{1}{8}$  inches apart and were generally 6 to 8 inches in height.

Image Credit: Everett Collection

# INTRODUCTION

**G**enerations of children understood that no toy surpassed in fun and excitement a train powered by the magic of electricity. Little wonder that memories of these treasured playthings never fade. Decades may pass from the time a boy or girl played with the train, but even as adults they recall dropping special white pellets into the smokestack of a miniature steam engine and watching billows of smoke puff out. Or turning a handle on a transformer to blast the whistle or blink the lights.

People can't help but smile when remembering how just by pressing a button they brought to life small cows that vibrated through a corral and up a ramp into a cattle car or set into action a tiny worker who tirelessly pushed shiny cans out of a model of a refrigerated milk car. The animation delighting them could also dump lumber, unload piles of coal, or even launch a small satellite or missile from a flatcar.

No one forgot the thrills of watching a hefty metal toy locomotive pull brilliantly colored railcars, thanks to the miraculous electrical current dashing through thin wires. Folks reminisced about the loud noises and the bright lights. They talked about the odors of the smoke and the lubricants. And they spoke wistfully about how they would switch off all the lights in their bedroom

and lay down next to the track so they could truly experience the wonders of the train whizzing past them in the darkness with its beaming headlight casting a spell.

## Cultural icon

Such sensations and experiences defined childhood and left many lasting memories for countless Americans in the twentieth century. They elevated the electric toy train from a cherished plaything to a cultural icon both shaping and reflecting dominant social values, engrained gender roles, and shared hopes and dreams.

The electric toy train stands amid a handful of other cultural icons of the past 100 or so years. This popular plaything, like fast cars, baseball caps, rock 'n' roll singles, blue jeans, and



Smiles and gazes testify to the fascination felt by these boys in the middle 1950s as they watch an O gauge train pulled by Lionel No. 2353 Santa Fe F3 diesels on a layout at the firm's New York showroom. The two pals seem mesmerized by the speed, color, dynamism, and magic of what they're seeing. And the experience tightens the bond between them. Lionel O gauge trains, as shown, used three-rail track with the outer rails  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches apart and were generally 4 to 6 inches in height.



Everything that made an electric toy train an American cultural icon—its attractive design, technological sophistication, speed, and status—stands out in this photo created by the Lionel Corporation in 1933 to promote its latest models. Lionel dominated the domestic toy market through most of the twentieth century.

leather jackets, has become a symbol of the freedom, creativity, leisure, and status widely prized. It blends youthful exuberance with adult sophistication, speed with elegance, relaxation with productivity, liberty with cooperation, simplicity with precision and complexity, tradition with hints of rebellion, and the pleasures of everyday life with the festivities of Christmas.

Like other cultural icons, an electric toy train can look as right with a child as it does with a grown-up. Viewed as an expensive household appliance, a toy train causes a youngster to seem older and more serious. Viewed as a play-

thing, it helps an adult operating the engine and cars appear easy-going and approachable, boyish yet not childish.

The electric toy train, much like fast and sleek automobiles, ballgames, or denims and boots, breaks down barriers artificially separating people of different races, genders, and classes. As Americans have discovered time and again, it invites diverse individuals to share in the pleasure associated with operating a plaything that miraculously and mysteriously moves on its own via household current. The toy train welcomes them to join others, especially family members during the holiday season, in play that helps them establish meaningful and enduring traditions.

No wonder newspapers, magazines, television programs, and motion pictures regularly portrayed kids enthralled by miniature engines and railcars while publicizing star athletes, popular performers, and national politicians playing with—or at least observing—model trains. Mass media took delight during the previous century in mentioning how adults from all walks of life, including people at the top of their professions, eagerly indulged another side of their personality—the childlike part passionate about toy trains. No one, not even presidents and popes, was exempt from being linked with the dynamic toys. And they did so

without hesitation or embarrassment. Why? Because serious adults discovered what kids grasped naturally: An electric train made everyone better.

### Importance of photography

Of course, the power a toy train exercised in transforming children and adults was best captured in photographs. Newspaper and magazine editors, advertising designers, and publicists relied on photography to show precocious youngsters and respected entertainers, decision-makers, entrepreneurs, and ballplayers having fun with electric toy trains. They trusted black-and-white and full-color pictures, more than words, to communicate to viewers of all ages and backgrounds the joy and fascination felt when watching little steam or diesel engines and rolling stock speed along without a hand needing to touch them.

What made perfect sense generations in the past retains meaning today. A photograph could, of course, convey the beauty of an electric train. But it could also suggest the dynamism and appeal of that sophisticated plaything by posing the toy train with a youngster or adult whose facial expression showed how happy he or she was to be touching or operating it. The person's eyes, smile, and hands interacted with the little engine, freight and passenger cars, and



Photographs of electric trains, no matter their intent or context, will always be characterized by fun. Like other cultural icons, they inspire joy and hope in kids dreaming of playing with the engine and accessory shown as well as smiles in the adults nostalgically recalling what they had enjoyed in the past.

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# TELLING THE LIONEL STORY

The photograph opening this collection of essays should somehow tell in a single shot the story of Lionel. But what is that story? On one level, Lionel exemplifies notable developments that transformed American life in the twentieth century. Its story captures the widespread use of electricity for manufacturing and enjoyment; the shift in production of consumer goods from metals to plastics; and the transition in production from skilled artisans crafting individual pieces by hand to assembly lines characterized by division of labor churning out items by the thousands. Perhaps, then, the opening picture should have presented trains being made at Lionel's factory.

Keep in mind, however, the story of Lionel involved, on yet a second level, advances in marketing and the forms of mass media used to promote sales of the firm's toy trains. The evolution from print and artwork to photography and television, all increasingly based on extensive research into financial and demographic trends. The most effective and meaningful opening picture might, as a result, have shown an executive, probably Joshua Lionel Cowen, holding a classic locomotive in a Lionel showroom or at a civic event. Or it might have depicted a celebrated entertainer or athlete operating an O gauge set in a motion picture or on a television program.

As good as any of those proposals were, none of them hit on why a Lionel toy train became a true American cultural icon. The initial picture must convey its wonder and magic so we can understand the extraordinary appeal and meaning that sophisticated toy had for generations of children in the twentieth century. It should convey what it meant to own and play with a Lionel train—it ought to record the experience, which for millions of little boys entailed sharing their train set with their father.

In December of 1954, one little boy believed a Lionel set with a steam engine and tender, a couple of freight cars, and a cheery caboose was the answer to all his dreams. The smile on the face of four-year-old Gary Steven McKnight leaves absolutely no doubt that he was correct.

But this photo, printed in newspapers around Gary's hometown of Topeka, Kansas, before Christmas, shows the mystical connection

Lionel trains nurtured between boys and their fathers. Throughout the prewar and postwar eras, photographers and artists aimed to depict the love, trust, and faith kids felt for their dads because they had been given a set to enjoy together.

Look carefully at the smiles on the faces of Gary and his father and then take in the way they gaze at each other. Then multiply this moment of love and dignity by the millions, because through much of the previous century kids and parents experienced this wondrous moment. For some youngsters, the gift of a lifetime came from a beloved aunt or uncle, big brother, or grandparent. Often, though, it was Dad who had picked out the Lionel outfit, helped with the wrapping, and then made absolutely sure his son understood the train was the catalyst for a deeper relationship.

The elder McKnight, working on behalf of Santa Claus, bestowed on his boy the No. 1477S, an introductory freight set cataloged two years earlier with a basic steamer and three cars, rather than the big diesels and expensive operating models at the peak of the line. He knew that Gary, wise beyond his few years, understood how every Lionel outfit promised pleasure while helping a boy mature. And the two of them would treasure every moment together with the new train. This, above the economic, technological, and marketing aspects and shifts, was the Lionel story.

Lionel steam freight set No. 1477S, cataloged in 1952, two years before this photo of Gary McKnight and his loving father was taken, offered plenty of fun for a lad blessed with a vivid imagination.



# DAD BECOMES A BOY AGAIN

**A** Lionel Standard gauge passenger set featured in a brand-new motion picture! Not a short film either, but a full-length movie with sound. It was big news for the company when Paramount Pictures released *Husband's Holiday* in 1931. So, Lionel made sure to brag about its latest accomplishment in the magazine it had launched the previous year to promote to youngsters both its electric trains and the developing hobby of model railroading.

Not much is worth remembering about the 70-minute drama being viewed in darkened theaters more than 90 years ago. Movie buffs may recall Clive Brook, the British actor shown holding a Lionel block signal, as the star of several silent and sound movies. A few knowledgeable fans will spot Dickie Moore, the young boy, as having been in some of the *Our Gang* comedies. Otherwise, little about *Husband's Holiday* commands attention these days.

All the same, the plot of the film reveals a notable use of the Lionel No. 409E set and its relationship with the children and Brook, who was playing their father. Don't forget that electric trains were still new to Hollywood when *Husband's Holiday* hit the silver screen. Few earlier motion pictures had used one as a prop, the finest of them undoubtedly being *The Electric House*, a comedy from 1922 starring Buster Keaton. Bewitched by the novelty of electricity, the brilliant comedian had hooked up a toy train to deliver food from the kitchen to the dining room, where stuffy guests sat around a table. A funny concept became downright hilarious when the train suddenly accelerated, dumping bowls of soup on outraged diners.

The writers of *Husband's Holiday* planned a different use for the electric train. As though playing off a prevailing message in Lionel's advertising, they wanted the serious and somber Brook to become so distracted by his son's toy that he wished it were his. The script called for the father to take command of the outfit. Dad was going to revert to acting like a silly child, casting aside his responsibilities to have fun.

The idea that a Lionel set might liberate solemn and distant fathers, encouraging them to enjoy life by pretending to be boys again, boosted sales from the 1930s into the 1950s. Joseph Hanson, hired in 1930 to serve as the company's advertising manager, pitched the notion throughout his career at Lionel, beginning in issues of *Lionel Magazine*, which he had successfully pitched to his superiors.

Hanson, like Joshua Cowen, must have been gratified to see the concept broadcast in a talking picture. It advanced in an ingenious manner the appeal of Lionel's trains.

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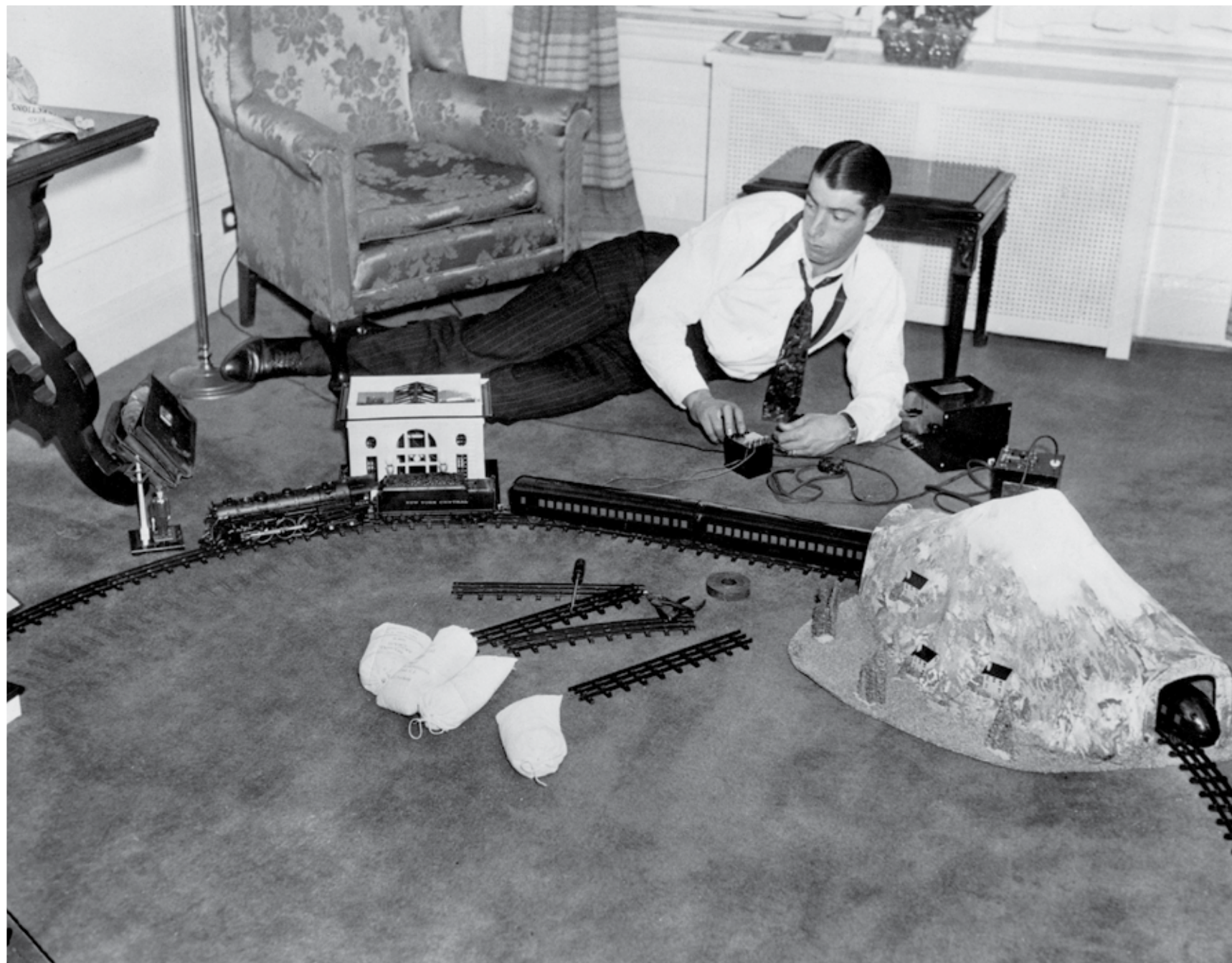
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# THE YANKEE CLIPPER LOVED LIONEL

**B**rilliant ideas for promoting Lionel trains were the stock in trade for Archer St. John, advertising manager at Lionel from 1933 through 1941 and again in 1943 and '44. Launching *Model Builder* magazine in 1937, soon after the demise of its predecessor (*Lionel Magazine*), counted as one of his finest accomplishments. A second stroke of genius was inviting Joe DiMaggio, the star center fielder for the New York Yankees, to pose for the cover of the December 1939 issue. This candid shot of him relaxing with the trains between the formal takes was another of St. John's triumphs.

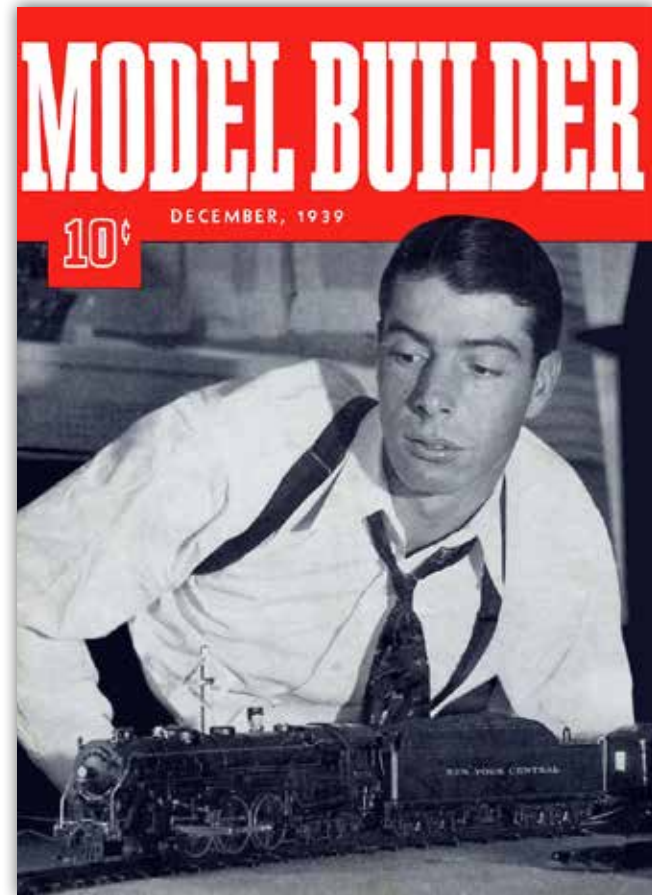
Of the celebrities from the worlds of entertainment and sports photographed with Lionel trains during the prewar and postwar eras, none surpassed the legendary DiMaggio in the genuine love he felt for the trains and the people who made them. This print captured him far from Yankee Stadium, his mind focused on preventing the No. 700E scale New York Central 4-6-4 Hudson steam locomotive plus the four Rail Chief passenger cars filling out cataloged set No. 709W from careening off a loop of T-Rail track.

Don't let the loosened tie and suspenders fool you; the 24-year-old ballplayer spread out on the floor with one hand on the transformer could

easily be a kid 10 or 15 years younger. Boys idolizing Joltin' Joe related to his relaxed posture and concentrated gaze. They looked just like that when playing with their Lionel set.

Why was DiMaggio, the reigning Most Valuable Player in the American League, so enthralled by Lionel trains in 1939? He never provided an answer, so we must speculate. Perhaps DiMaggio had dreamed of owning one as a poor boy growing up in San Francisco and could satisfy that wish only after earning a ballplayer's salary. Maybe a Lionel set offered escape from the demands on his time and the never-ending pressure for perfection on the field. Or the smooth and graceful performance of the train reminded him of the elegance he strived for when batting or throwing a baseball.

A Lionel electric train symbolized for DiMaggio the financial rewards granted by athletic achievement. His success and connection to Lionel inspired other Americans of Italian descent, particularly the immigrants and their offspring working at the Lionel factory. That Joe DiMaggio, an All-Star in every sense, enjoyed the products they were manufacturing tightened their bonds with him, especially after he visited the plant and greeted employees. The Yankee Clipper, like a Lionel train, had come to represent greatness to all Americans.



A different photo of Joe DiMaggio from the same session struck Advertising Manager Archer St. John as perfect for the cover of the December 1939 issue of *Model Builder*.



Image Credit: Everett Collection

# LUCY AND LIONEL PULL SOME FAST ONES

**G**reatest Generation and Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and Generation Xers, right down to Millennials—members of every demographic recognize the Ricardos and the Mertzes, the families who left millions laughing every week on *I Love Lucy*. They may have forgotten other television clans from the 1950s, such as Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and their sons and Stu and June Erwin from *Trouble with Father*. Why, they may not have been born when this photo was offered to *TV Guide* for its issue of December 25, 1954. But long after the six-year run of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz's pioneering situation comedy ended in 1957, people still recall their faces and smile at their antics, especially when Lucy hatched one of her "plans" and "schemes" that usually amounted to pulling a fast one on another member of the cast.

The finest testament to the comic genius displayed by Lucy and Desi as well as Vivian Vance and William Frawley (who played their landlords and best friends) was knowing how one peek at this Christmas scene would suffice to figure out what was happening. Study the posture and facial expression of each actor at the tree with gifts at their feet and the components of Lionel's new No. 1520W *Texas Special* F3 diesel passenger set in the hands of the men.

Focusing on those elements suggested that Lucy had been scheming (surely with her pal, Ethel Mertz) to tempt Ricky with the train if only he would let her sing or dance with his orchestra at the Tropicana Club. And she probably needed to borrow cash from him to finish paying for the fancy set! An alternate scenario would

have Fred Mertz scoffing at the new set as he bragged to Ricky how much better trains were when he was a kid. Still, he might plead with his buddy for time at the transformer so he could play locomotive engineer.

Now here's where we realize that someone at Lionel, maybe Advertising Manager Joe Hanson, was as clever and sneaky as Lucy when it came to devising schemes. There was no rationale for this publicity shot; it didn't reflect anything being filmed at that moment for the country's favorite TV show. Lionel had coaxed Lucy and her pals to gather around a Christmas tree with a new train. Better yet for Lionel—even slightly cunning—was getting another product in the photo. Look carefully at the base of the tree to spy the yellow-and-black box with one of the firm's Linex stereo cameras (shown on page 18). Darn good marketing by Lionel!

No one at Lionel had needed to pull a fast one on Lucy and Desi the year before, however. For an episode of *I Love Lucy* broadcast in May of 1953, the producers had asked Lionel for a train and plenty of track. Lucy, trying to trick her husband into moving to a bigger apartment, had stuffed the living room with toys. After Ricky flew down a slide and landed on a sofa, Lucy bellowed, "Watch out for the *Super Chief*!" O gauge Santa Fe F3 diesels pulling aluminum passenger cars (all supplied by Jim Stewart from Lionel's San Francisco office) roared past the startled Ricky. Shaken by the sounds and sights, he could only imagine what else Lucy had up her sleeve. We might wonder the same about the smart guys at Lionel involved with setting up the unforgettable full-color photo.



Arranging for a Lionel streamlined passenger train to be used on an episode of *I Love Lucy* in May of 1953 had been the responsibility of salesman Jim Stewart.



## About the author



**ROGER CARP** has been fascinated by Lionel trains and the people who created them since he received a small steam engine and some freight cars as a youngster in 1956. His interest directed him, after earning a Ph.D. in American history at the University of

North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to *Classic Toy Trains* magazine, where he has served for 20 years as senior editor. Roger has written or edited more than 20 books and special-interest publications about Lionel—its trains and accessories, its leaders and workers, its showrooms and displays, and its legacy. Among them are *The World's Greatest Toy Train Maker* (1998), *Classic Lionel Display Layouts You Can Build* (2000), *The Art of Lionel Trains* (2003), *Collectible Lionel Classics* (2017), *Lionel Trains of the 1950s* (2019), and *Lionel Trains of the 1940s* (2022). He also oversees production of the annual edition of *Greenberg's Pocket Price Guide to Lionel Trains*.

A native of Los Angeles, Roger lives near Milwaukee with his wife and Lionel trains. He can be reached at [Rcarp904@gmail.com](mailto:Rcarp904@gmail.com)

# EPILOGUE

Feeling content and yet a bit sad, we have arrived at the final pages of the book. We may want to sing *My Way* with Frank Sinatra—he was, after all, a Lionel enthusiast—about having a few regrets at this point and wishing there were more pictures. For the photos shared in these pages have carried us back many years and deepened our respect for the trains and the people who made them. We have come to understand how the locomotives, rolling stock, and accessories were much more than toys. They

were guideposts through life, able to inspire personal growth while bringing pleasure and uniting generations.

For this reason and others outlined here, Lionel toy trains should never be forgotten or their cultural importance minimized. Let these photos and others yet to be shown and studied strengthen our appreciation of what one innovative business did to improve life for millions of Americans of all ages during the twentieth century.

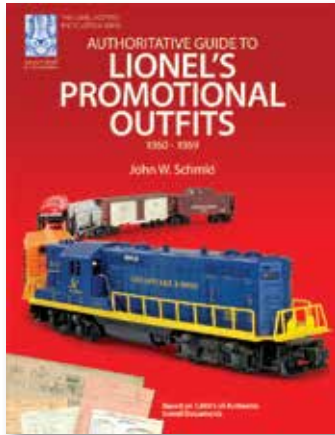
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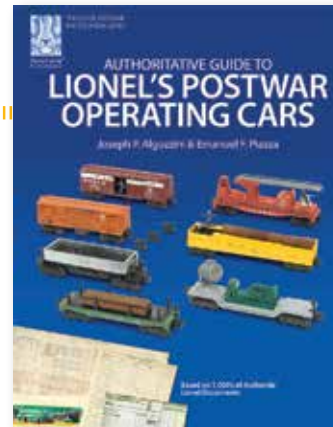
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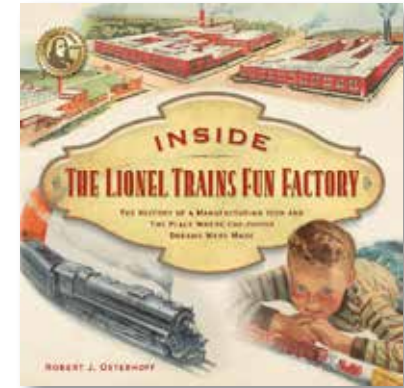
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