



Building a Credible Freight Car Fleet on the Cheap!

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Many of us have operating model railroads or dream of someday having one. Once work on the layout begins it soon becomes apparent that you no longer have time for super detailing and building craftsman kits. Time becomes a premium commodity. I found myself in this situation when I began work on my New York Central Michigan Division layout five years ago. Working a full time job and tending to family needs leaves little time for the hobby. So, what is the solution?



Accurail AAR 41' Steel Gondola.

The hobby today has evolved away from shake-the-box (blue-box) freight car kits to super detailed ready to roll freight (RTR) cars – or so many people would have you think. Yes, I have my share of RTR cars on my layout too. Problem is, they are expensive and I need about 250 freight cars to operate my layout. I cannot and will not spend \$8000 on freight cars! Yes, that is what it would take to fill my roster with RTR freight cars.

Because of this I have looked elsewhere for most of my rolling stock. This is when I rediscovered Accurail and a few other sources for freight cars and cabooses. Years ago I had dismissed Accurail and others because of molded on detail such as grab irons and ladders. That was a mistake. I apparently thought too highly of myself and paid too much attention to our hobby's nit-pickers and rivet counters.

More recently faced with the problem of putting together a 250-car fleet for the layout I reconsidered those manufacturers I had dismissed. Starting with Accurail, I was pleasantly surprised with what I found. Most of Accurail's freight car kits are of much newer tooling than the old Athearn and Roundhouse shake-the-box freight car kits, some of which were tooled in the 1950s. The level of detail fidelity on most of those old cars leaves much to be desired. However, Accurail models are of much more recent tooling and the detail fidelity matches that of the finest RTR freight cars, with the exception of molded on grabs and ladders.

Most of the models pictured in this article are Accurail kits I assembled and weathered in less than an hour of my time. When I mix them in a train with RTR models they blend right in. In fact, when I ask guests to pick out their favorite couple of freight cars on my layout, the Accurail cars win most of the time. Hmmm . . . something to think about.

Before you jump on the bandwagon agreeing with me or start pooh-poohing me for lowering my standards, consider the following. Most of my freight cars are "stand-ins" for specific prototypes and not truly accurate models of any particular prototype freight car. At one time I was a so-called prototype modeler. Yes, that sounds good, but being a strict prototype modeler ties your hands limiting what you can do when building a layout.



Here is another Accurail AAR 41' Steel Gondola. The brake rigging comes with the kit and consists of

My philosophy is that I build realistic-looking freight cars that may or may not accurately match a specific prototype. I care, but don't really care about adherence to a specific prototype. Most modelers I know wouldn't know the difference anyway! Instead, I direct my attention to fit and finish, and most importantly, to the weathering applied to my models. I have long said that weathering is the most important detail you can add to your models. I believe this more firmly than ever. The models pictured in this article have little to no added detail, but all are weathered using acrylic paints applied with paint brushes. I didn't even use an airbrush.

My layout is set in the summer of 1943 when America was fighting for its survival against the war machines of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany. At the time there remained many older freight cars of wood construction. This setting made the need for single sheathed (outside braced) and double sheathed boxcars crucial for me. Accurail has a nice variety of the more common cars of this type. I have added more than three dozen Accurail wooded boxcars to my roster. For several of these cars I made one detail change. That is, I replaced the fish-belly frame with twin C-channel frame and added the one-piece brake rigging to the Accurail AAR gondola – available separately from Accurail for a small price. Otherwise, the cars are box-stock Accurail models.

Weathering is brushed on as an acrylic wash diluted with Windex window cleaner. Excess is wiped off with paint brushes and cotton swabs. I do not use an airbrush of this process. Not needed as most anybody can apply weathering in this way.



This is an Accurail outside-braced wooden boxcar. The fish belly frame was discarded to the scrap box and a straight frame installed using Evergreen 1/8" C-channel installed back-to-back into the slots for the fish-belly frame...



The one-piece brake rigging is cemented to the Evergreen straight frame sills. This is the extent of the underbody detail.



Above is an Accurail double sheathed boxcar.



This model is a nearly thirty year old Front Range kit that has the one-piece Accurail brake rigging installed and a light coat of acrylic wash weathering.



This is a Roundhouse RTR model of a 36' boxcar that was common from about 1910 to 1950. It is weathered with Acrylic washes.



Above is my most recent Accurail model. I added the extra door to make a so-called door-and-a-half boxcar. I also replaced the fish-belly frame with a straight sill frame, and then added Accurail's one-piece brake rigging. Otherwise the model is a factory painted Accurail CB&Q kit.

Here are the paint brushes that weathering is applied with. The boxcar and brushes are in the same photo so you can see their relative size.



Here are the acrylic artist's paints used for weathering and paint touch-up. Paints and brushes were purchased at Hobby Lobby.



This is an Accurail model with the fish-belly to straight frame modification and one-piece Accurail brake rigging installed. The model is weathered, but weathered somewhat clean. I recommend you avoid over-weathering.