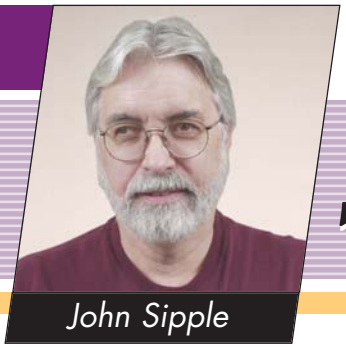


John Sipple

Sipple on Trains

Bachmann's New Gondolas

Here's an accurate side door car for garden or large-scale railroads.

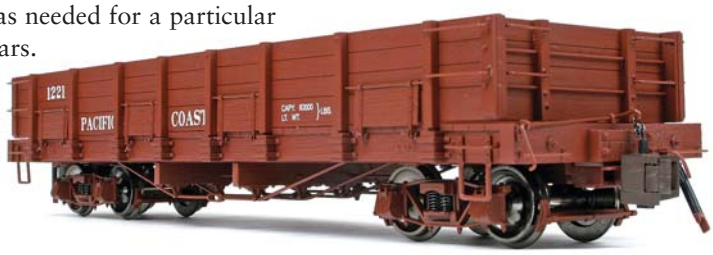
HM's two samples show the Florence & Cripple Creek No. 0525 from Central Colorado and the Pacific Coast No. 1221 from the South Pacific Coastal region. Both are truss rod type side dump-style gondolas, typically built from 1890 to 1910.

Pacific Coast Railway Gondolas

Not to be confused with the South Pacific Coast or the North Pacific Coast Railroads, the Pacific Coast Railway was a three-foot narrow gauge, found in the area around San Luis Obisbo and getting over to Orcutt, Los Alamos, and Los Olivos, all just north of Santa Barbara on the Pacific Coast. The line operated from 1876, providing access to mountain-bound San Luis Obisbo, and handling agricultural and general merchandise as well as passenger.

In 1900, when oil was found in the area of what is now Orcutt, the line was extended into that area. An electrified branch was built to serve the sugar beet industry from Santa Maria to Betteravia, six miles west. This, of course, would be the prime use for my side door gondola.

A gondola is a simple extension of a flat car, created by adding sides and ends. Many railroads would remove the ends, the sides or both, as needed for a particular job in the days of wooden cars. The side doors facilitated unloading whatever loose commodity was piled in the car at loading time. Simply kick open the doors and let the load slide out.



This 3-quarter A-end view shows the authentic step straps and how the narrow gauge trucks are tucked underneath. This is a pre-coupler conversion shot with the cut bar connected to the lift pin on the Bachmann coupler. The air hose is a wonderful bit of business.

A car like this could be used for ballast or gravel, dirt or ore, and all manner of agricultural products. Sugar beets are often dumped on a low trestle into conveyors or troughs, and are then directed into the manufacturing process. After the majority have run out by gravity, workers with scoops jumped into the box area and encouraged the remainder of the beets to run out through the side hatches. The train would pull forward to the next car and the process would be repeated.

Bachmann's Side Door Gondolas

Bachmann has a Florence & Cripple Creek version, too. F&CC was a mineral road in central Colorado, but could easily have found work for such cars. I have a macabre sense of humor, and can vision a pair of these cars rolling down a track in a *Pirates of the Caribbean* episode, when suddenly the side doors pop open and cannons fire a broadside at a competing railroad. Bizarre, sure, but fun.

In addition to the two versions mentioned, Bachmann offers unlettered versions painted in oxide red and brown. The side doors do give these cars a wonderfully funky look, even if you don't actually use them for piracy or unloading commodities. It would have been easier to produce a plain gondola, but railroading of this period really was more likely to produce side dumps, drop bottoms and the like, so as a result, Bachmann's cars are really more authentic.

The side doors are attached by strap hinges using the sort of hardware that would have been appropriate for that era of design. Everything looks and works very much as the prototype hardware did, but lacks the same positive latching, so the doors tend to just swing loose most of the time. If the doors staying shut becomes important to you, you could glue them using CA for a fairly permanent solution, or use rubber cement for something you can change later.

View from the B end shows the cross rods that support the sides and keep them from bowing outward under load. You can also see the wealth of detail in the brake and draft gear. This particular car has already been converted to Kadee couplers.

As with the prototype, the sides and ends of the gondola are actually pressed into sockets on a flat car, making it possible to remove the sides, ends or both as the situation warranted. Cross support rods run from the top of one side across to the other, since the wooden sides would bow outward without them.

Braking is nicely represented on all of these new Bachmann cars. The trainline is a real rubber hose with a gladhand on the end and a modeled angle cock. On the B end of the car is a hand brake wheel, complete with a ratchet wheel and locking pawl. The coupler lift pin has a bail that circumnavigates the handbrake gear as it actually lifts the pin on the Bachmann coupler. These new Bachmann couplers are at the correct height, though they have a set of couplers included for those who prefer the older, low-head design.

Operation

When you look at the trucks, they seem so wonderfully ornate that you might wonder if they would actually run well. I found these cars to run very well indeed. They run just fine on 8-foot diameter curves, but I wouldn't expect them to handle anything tighter than that. The Oregon Pine Belt has minimum curves of 10-foot diameter, so these cars there and can be backed in long trains.

When empty and fairly clean inside, a gondola was a good place for a hobo to ride. The figure in the picture is Jethro from Railroad Avenue's collection, and is sold separately. Because he's a 1:20.3-scale figure, Jethro helps to show the scale of the car.

As with all but the hopper cars, these 1:20.3 cars represent 30-foot freight cars, which works out to around 18-1/2 inches from coupler to coupler. The gondolas weigh 39.8 ounces each without any cargo. It is my opinion that the cars have such a low center of gravity that they ride well and aren't tippy. Having the couplers up where they belong helps, but having the weight well down in the car is a big part of the solution.

Part of the fun of owning these cars is devising interesting loads. Keeping the load light is challenging. An easy load would be hog fuel, a term used to describe sawdust

John Sipple uses four characters to hold open two side doors. On the left is Ben, who's got that door on his shoulder. Jack is doing the same on the right. Slim is standing in the middle, but it only looks like he's doing something. Freddy tossed down his bundle of laths and sat on them. When the shutter clicked, he was asking Jack if he'd help him carry them the rest of the way. These guys are Railroad Avenue figures, sold separately.

or wood chips collected at a mill and taken somewhere to burn for heat or steam energy. Use rubber foam as a lightweight base for any sort of load to give it a heap structure, then glue a thin layer of commodity on top of it. Wheat berries could be glued on to look like sugar beets, and you might also consider adding some weathering. Wooden cars didn't stay pristine very long.

Wrapping it up

My ongoing march through Bachmann's Fn3 freight yard is only partially through. As you keep adding to your string, you can quickly build a pretty impressive old-time train. This isn't a gaudy, bright-colored circus train, but a mountain-crawling narrow gauge freight hauler that brings your garden to life and puts the light in your eyes. Stay tuned, 'cause I've got a lot more to come. **HM**