

The Fun Factory

by **Bill Schmeelk**
RM 6643

Visiting Lionel, but in Print

The history of the Lionel® Company has always been of interest to me. No matter how much I've read about it, there have always been unanswered questions. I'm sure among many of us there has always been a curiosity that went beyond available information. Bob Osterhoff has taken those curiosities to the highest level. He has spent many years and traveled thousands of miles to research and document portions of Lionel's history that have heretofore been hidden in archival documents. In the process he has gathered a great deal of information, answered many questions, and dispelled some myths.

Thankfully for the hobby, Bob is sharing a wealth of this information in a new book due out this month. Bob's new book is titled, *Inside the Lionel Trains Fun Factory* and is being published by Project Roar Publications. Project Roar has previously published two very informative books in its Authoritative Guide series. This latest book, subtitled, *The History of a Manufacturing Icon and the Place Where Childhood Dreams Were Made*, is due out this November. The book deals with a history of Lionel through a look at the many factories they operated.

I've known about the upcoming publication of this book for some time and have anxiously awaited its release. Bob had promised that it would contain much new information regarding the company we all have such respect for. Would the final product live up to these expectations? I had many questions about the company – especially with regard to the 1960s.

Joshua as Tour Guide

But let's start at the beginning. Joshua Lionel Cowen first described his plant as a Fun Factory in the 1915 catalog. Cowen offered boys "a little trip through my factory" where he would "... show you why Lionel Trains are better." That statement was followed by six pages and many photos of the Lionel factory, explaining the superior manner in which Lionel trains were made. The theme was repeated in the 1917 catalog and expanded to ten pages.

After reading Bob's book I would venture a guess that many who actually worked at the plant might not have used the words fun factory to describe it.

From a humble beginning in 1900 in a Manhattan job shop on Murray Street in New York, Bob takes us on a journey through Lionel's constant expansion through its peak and its decline in the postwar period. From there the journey continues to present day. The level of detail is astounding. It's hard to imagine the time that Bob must have spent researching these details.

I found it interesting as Bob tracked Lionel's expansion that the need for more space for its operations seemed to be continuous. Each time they moved or expanded, the need for additional space was almost immediate. Often only two or three years passed before they again expanded or moved. The longest period from 1900 to 1929 between expansions was the six-year period between 1923 and 1929. The famous Hillside plant was built in 1929 and later expanded several times in the postwar period. At times, Lionel maintained space in additional locations. Although they moved operations to Hillside in 1929, it was not until 1944 that they sold the Irvington properties.

Presence of the Places

Another fact I found interesting is that until 2004, all of the 18 U.S. factories that Lionel occupied were still in existence. In 2004, Lionel's first New Jersey factory, located in Newark, was demolished. That same year parts of the Irvington complex were destroyed by fire. However, other than those two locations, Lionel's U.S. factory buildings have remained intact, but not producing trains now.

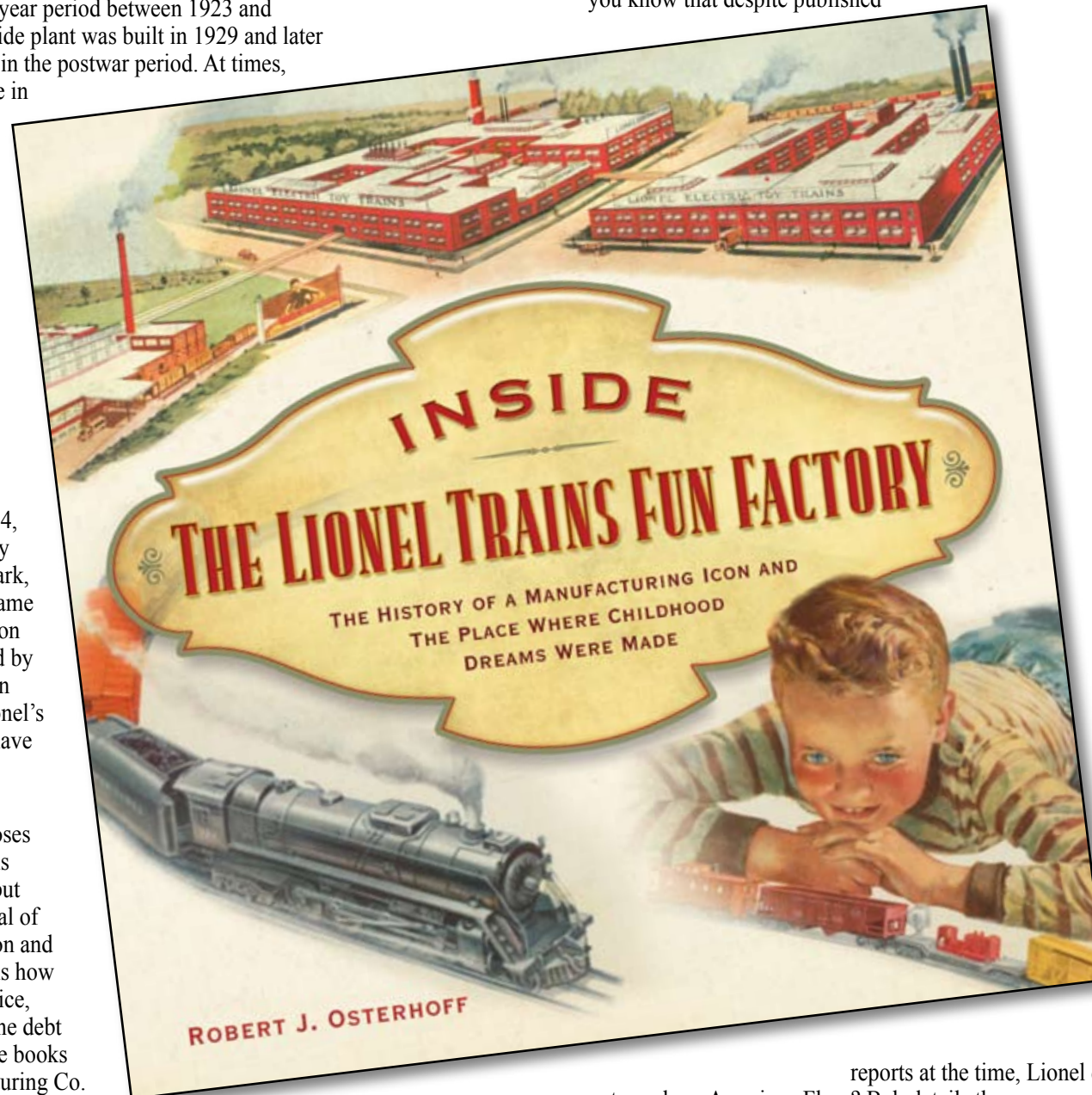
Bob not only discloses exact dates and locations of Lionel's expansion, but also provides a good deal of additional documentation and information. He explains how through smart legal advice, Lionel was able to get the debt of its new factory off the books of The Lionel Manufacturing Co. Bob points out that these practices, while commonplace today, were a pioneering approach in the early 20th century and a prudent financial tactic. For many of the locations we see actual blueprints which allow an understanding of the additions made to the Lionel plants over time.

Beyond Bricks and Mortar

This is not just a discussion of buildings. The detail goes well beyond the factories themselves. Throughout the book there are about 80 sidebar stories covering a wide variety of topics. These include everything from the Lionel glassware in the cafeteria to the question about whether or

not Cowen invented the flashlight. Open the book to any page and you're bound to come upon one these sidebars. They immediately draw you into the book.

A chapter entitled The Twisted Sixties provides many answers about the downfall of Lionel in the postwar era. Did you know that despite published



reports at the time, Lionel did not purchase American Flyer? Bob details the arrangement by which Lionel acquired American Flyer. Another chapter details the selling of the Hillside factory. Another chapter details the manufacturing done at the acquired Porter factories in Hagerstown, Maryland, and the Lionel-Spear complex in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Another chapter deals with Lionel's organizational structure and the human element of the Lionel factories. Yet another deals with the methods Lionel used to protect its intellectual property. Although Lionel was granted over 360 patents, it was not successful in getting patent protection at every attempt.

In one of my favorite chapters the subject of just how the trains were made and Lionel's sophisticated standards for manufacturing are discussed in detail. Another chapter details Lionel's work in defense of America. Work for the military was an important part of Lionel's bottom line. In 1953 a substantial addition to the Hillside factory was completed, and at that time Lawrence Cowen was quoted as saying, "At present this area is being used almost entirely for defense production."

Knowing Where to Look

Bob has gained his information from a large variety of sources including former Lionel employees – some of whom offered information but preferred to remain anonymous. The book ends with three appendices containing a list of the Lionel Factory departments, a list of Lionel's patents and a very informative timeline of Lionel's factories from 1900 to the present. This four-page, 100-plus-year timeline of factory photos and dates is being made available as a 12x36-inch poster printed on heavy stock suitable for framing. The poster will sell for \$11.95, plus shipping and handling.

I could go on and on, but I don't want to take away the thrill you'll get while reading this book. Frankly, I was sorry when I reached the end of the book. Kudos are due Bob for his relentless research and to the publisher for the brilliant design and manner in which the book was published. Clearly the publisher is hoping for sales beyond those of the train collecting community. The book is available from your local train supplier or direct from the publisher at www.projectroar.com or by calling 630-653-ROAR (7627). The book is hardbound, 248 pages, with over 575 photos and sells for \$34.95. A limited-edition, collectible version with a limited-edition dust jacket signed by the author and the editors and sequentially numbered 1 to 100 is available from Project Roar Publications for \$69.95, plus S&H.

A Significant Achievement

Reading this book was like the thrill of riding a roller coaster. And what do you do as soon as the ride ends? Of course, get back on and enjoy the thrill again. This is a book that will certainly provide more thrills during a second reading.

There aren't many who would have the drive and determination to put in the time and expense to do this research. Bob has certainly set a new standard in our hobby. As much interest as I have in this material, I could never have put in the time, the energy, and the resources that Bob has obviously devoted to completing this work.

I'm sure Bob is quite proud of this book and deservedly so. Without his diligence, much of this information would have remained buried in filing cabinets unavailable and unknown to interested collectors. In my opinion, Bob Osterhoff most certainly deserves an award of merit for his efforts in authoring this book. 