

# Getting started in “O” gauge trains

## A Primer

By Jeff Jacobs

O gauge or “Lionel” trains are currently produced by many manufacturers besides Lionel: MTH, Bachmann, Atlas and newcomer Menards to name a few. They all interchange pretty well and can be mixed, except that each company’s track is made a little different and requires track adapter pieces to mix the brands.

Lionel of course is the standard and you can’t go wrong buying all of your parts from them. However, the other companies have been innovative and “raised the bar” in the hobby so it is wise to look at their offerings as well. To pick one brand alone limits the fun you can have.

The beginner can buy everything needed to get going in a “starter set” but, as you might expect, some compromises are made to get everything into the box for an attractive price - more on that in a minute. To get trains running, the minimum needed is: (1) track, (2) a locomotive and (3) a power supply (transformer). Beyond those 3 items, rolling stock (cars, cabooses, etc), operating accessories and scenic details just increase the fun. The great part of the hobby is growing the railroad empire by adding items in the future. Sets begin at about \$200 (e.g., Thomas the Train) from discount shops and go up in price as more cars and track are added or the locomotive is more detailed or the transformer is larger. There are a lot of sets in the \$300-\$400 bracket. The high end sets cost as much as \$600 and up.

Everybody wants to get a deal, so what about discount shops? They offer the lowest price (but don’t forget shipping costs) and are found on the internet these days. The downside is that you don’t have a local place to return something that isn’t working. Regardless of claims, it is quite possible to buy a new loco which develops a problem after a couple hours and needs more help than “Grampa” can provide. Having said that, many of the little shops no longer have a service department in-house so what is the advantage? They will help you send the item back to the manufacturer and do the interfacing for you. These days the little shops are drying up fast however, especially in rural areas.

Although I don’t wish to endorse any dealer, a typical large ‘on-line’ store is Charles Ro in Malden Mass. You can also find stuff at: Trains on Track and

the Trainshop listed on this site and they are run by club members in New Hampshire. Look at their web-site and continue to 'surf' to other competitors such as Trainworld, Menards and Marios. You will see quite a variety, plus many sale items. Remember to focus on their "O" offerings.

You can now consider whether to buy a "set" or individual pieces. Careful shopping will tell you if the set will save money. The advantage to 'separate pieces' is that you get what you want, not a generic assortment. Experienced hobbyists do not buy sets (except as gifts), because they don't want the compromised items within the sets. The transformer tends to be minimal, there are only a few cars and the locos are real basic. By basic, I mean they have few sounds, lights, fine detail or smoke like their costly counterparts. The sets are now starting to offer wireless remote control, but a beginner can live without that feature.

So the parts required are first of all - track, the hands down winner here is Lionel's "Fastrak". It is kid friendly, found in all stores, is rugged and looks realistic. It is not cheap at about \$5 for a 10" piece. A set will often bundle up about 12 pieces to make a small oval 40" x 60". The next part is a transformer: the minimum is 40 watts at 18 volts AC. It will run one train and a couple lighted buildings. At the other end of this spectrum is a 400 watt dual control model with all kinds of buttons and meters costing over \$500. In the middle is something for about \$150 with about 100 watts of power at 18 volts AC - a logical starting point. Next we have the cars: a small set has 2 cars and a caboose. Alternatively, these can be bought on-line at shops or eBay - most costing between \$25 (Menards) and \$80. Building the RR empire 'car by car' can be a fun and interesting experience. All of the O gauge cars hook up to each other. Last, and most significant, you need an engine or locomotive to pull things: the 2 main categories are Steam and Diesels, the latter generally costing less. This article won't go into the many details available, but you 'get what you pay for' so read the details of each item and ask questions of experienced hobbyists (Maine 3 Railers members) if you don't understand the jargon. I will say that the Bachmann engines have a reputation for being 'reliable runners' without the elaborate sounds and smoke features - this keeps their cost down. Menards has introduced engines at the \$175 price point. Atlas engines are smooth, strong and reliable but cost \$400 discounted. Lionel engines are available in a variety of quality, markings and price. MTH engines are mid-priced with many neat features. A new Thomas engine will cost \$125 and up.

So if you're doing the math, an oval of track with a good transformer and an engine will cost about \$400. You can see that the sets have an 'edge' price

wise, but the quality will be better from the individual components. Choose your poison!

There is no end to what can be spent on the hobby, each car averaging \$60, so there is never a 'total cost for everything' magic number. Every hobbyist goes at it one-item-at-a-time though, making it simply a progressive expense and not a one shot cash outlay.

If you aren't opposed to "used", many fine items can be found at train shows and on E-bay. In addition to E-bay, TRAINZ.com is a source for used components at significant savings. Used Lionel items made in the '50's are typically heavily built with more metal than today's offerings (from Asia). But be sure that what you are buying works or that you are clever at tinkering. You may be able to save a bit, especially when buying used track. However, rusty or dirty rails will give you jerky or no performance from your locos. Plentiful Marx and Lionel products can be had for small money, and with maintenance, will run forever.

Here's a twist since I first wrote this article: With the advance of modern electronics, Lionel has introduced a new series of "starter sets". These all have LionChief in their description with prices beginning at \$300. The sets include engines with tantalizing features and remote control. The details of the models and the number of cars are limited and a wall plug-in power pack replaces the traditional costly transformer. Still, the sets get you into the hobby at modest cost and they run fine plus allow for expansion.

I hope this gets you started, but everyone's tastes are different so don't feel constrained by others' thinking. Model railroading is about imagination, so let yours take off in this exciting hobby.