



Pacemaker Freight Service was the New York Central RR's name for its less-than-carload-lot (LCL) freight service. The railroad's fleet of distinctive red-and-gray LCL boxcars were kept in captive service on home rails. J. David Ingles collection

What roads had merchandise service cars?

Q I model the Missouri Pacific and am familiar with its fleet of dedicated Eagle Merchandise Service boxcars. These cars were not to be used in interchange service and remained on home tracks. How many other railroads had a similar service, and what were they called?

Carl Storms

A While relatively few railroads had fleets of captive-service boxcars decorated for the purpose like MoPac did, virtually all common-carrier railroads had their own version of less-than-carload-lot (LCL) service. Also called merchandise, package, and break-bulk freight, LCL service would ship small consignments – anything from a single case of breakfast cereal to a keg of nails to industrial equipment weighing several tons – via a network of depots, freight houses, and transfer terminals.

Such small shipments required a lot of personnel and handling, and merchandise cars often ran less than half full. But these parcels were billed at a much higher rate than carload freight, which meant that LCL was often an appreciable profit center for the railroads.

Merchandise freight operated on a hub-and-spoke system much like modern-day parcel services such as UPS and FedEx. Consignments would be collected at the local freight house or combination depot. From there, the daily local freight would pick them up along with parcels from other depots along its route and take them to the nearest large transfer depot. There, the boxcars would be offloaded and the parcels sorted for their destinations. They were then bundled up and sent off to the transfer house closest to the destination. There, the bundles would be broken down, sorted again, and shipped out on the daily local to be dropped at the freight house, depot, or team track closest to the destination.

Many railroads outfitted certain boxcars with special fastenings inside to secure the smaller parcels and containers. These cars were lettered for merchandise service and kept on home rails. A few larger railroads, like the MoPac with its Eagle Merchandise Service, came up with names and paint schemes to advertise their LCL service. Among those were New York Central with its Pacemaker service, Baltimore & Ohio's Timesaver, and Southern Pacific's Overnight service. Pennsylvania RR simply called its Merchandise Service, but still gave their LCL cars an eye-catching paint job.

For more information about LCL operations, check out Jeff Wilson's book *Express, Mail & Merchandise Service*, which is available at the Kalmbach Hobby Store.

Q I have re-entered the hobby after many years. My layout will be in a spare bedroom. As I plan my layout, I've seen various materials discussed for layout scenery, such as old newsprint, paper towels, foam board, screen, etc. I've not seen any mention of the concern for fire spread potential. Is this a concern for model railroaders? If so, what are the best practices?

George Brooks, Mount Vernon, Wash.

A Unfortunately, most of the materials we use to build model train layouts these days – lumber, extruded-foam insulation board, cork, Homasote, stripwood, ground foam, dried plant material – are flammable. I'm afraid there's not a whole lot that can be done about that, either, as the days of dyed asbestos ground cover are rightfully behind us.

However, I can't imagine that a model railroad is any more of a fire hazard than an equivalent mass of living-room furniture. And we can take some reassurance in the fact that today's model railroad electronics, including sensitive circuit breakers, make the risk of electrical ignition unlikely.

As long as we follow sensible precautions – build our layouts to follow current electrical codes, give a wide berth to heat sources like furnaces and water heaters, design aisles to allow safe and easy exit in emergencies, install emergency lighting, mount a fire extinguisher nearby, and shut down the power when unattended – we can rest easy.

Q How can N scale track that's already anchored to a layout be cut for block separation? What are the pros and cons of any methods suggested?

Pete Testa

A Track that's already fixed to a layout has to be cut very carefully to avoid pulling the rails out of the delicate plastic spike heads that hold it to the ties. With N scale, that's even more important. Don't use your rail nippers here; they'll leave a pointed end on one side of the cut and might displace the rails enough to cause them to pop out of gauge. I wouldn't recommend using a cutting disk in a motor tool either. Since the body of the tool is wider than the cutting disk, it's impossible to cut the rails

Send questions and tips to associate editor Steven Otte at AskMR@MRmag.com.