



A trio of workers position a conveyor in preparation for unloading the hopper load of coal that's just arrived. Clark Propst makes sure the figures on his HO scale model railroad don't just stand around, but interact with the railroad.

Every figure TELLS A STORY

Don't just place figures on your layout – tell stories with them

By Clark Propst • Photos by the author

When it comes to figures, it seems most modelers fall into one of two camps. Some use only figures in static poses, like sitting or standing. The others enjoy making active scenes, like busy station platforms or marching bands.

I don't remember putting very many figures on my previous layout [featured in *Great Model Railroads 2016 – Ed.*] I guess I just never considered them important. But when I was detailing my present layout [*Model Railroad Planning 2018* and *GMR 2019*], I thought I would use figures to help tell the stories of my rail-served industries. I wanted to help the viewer

understand what went into loading or unloading the freight cars I spotted there.

I wanted at least one such vignette in each of my three towns. Since I started building the layout at the end of the line and worked toward the beginning of the branch, I did the same with my figure scenes. I started at Story City, placing three little storytelling vignettes there, then made one at Roland and two more at Zearing.

Good looking miniature figures can be expensive. Make thoughtful decisions so their placement will help tell a story that will enlighten viewers.



CHURNING THE BUTTER (TUB STAVES)

THE FIRST FIGURES I PLACED were inspired by a photo of the crew at the Story City (Iowa) Butter Tub Co. factory back in the day. The photo shows a line of employees standing by a horse-drawn wagon near the train tracks. In the background to the right, a fellow is stirring the vat where spruce staves soak in preparation for bending into the basket-like tubs made to hold bulk butter. Because the vats I built were taller than the ones in the photo, I had to stand my figure on the top step of a ladder. The figure I chose was looking into the distance, rather than down at his work, so I had to give him something to look at. I therefore placed another figure in a second-story window for him to be chatting with.



SHOVELING SPILLAGE

MY LAST VIGNETTE in Story City is at Jensen Concrete Products. I added a couple conveyors to transport material: one to unload aggregate from hopper cars and another to feed the batch mixer. Since Jensen uses a backhoe to move this material, there are plenty of chances for spills. Having worked around conveyors for years, I have some knowledge of where the spills would occur. The scene at Jensen's has a couple of workers shoveling spillage from loading the hopper at the end of the conveyor belt into a tractor bucket. The figures add life to an otherwise mundane area.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

MY NEXT ATTEMPT was also inspired by a photo. That photo, of a boxcar being prepared for grain loading, included a tractor with a box mounted on its hitch holding tools to aid in the installation of wood grain doors. I copied the idea, adding a box to the rear of a tractor and filling it with tools and a chain for moving cars. I placed a figure of an elevator employee explaining to a day worker how to install grain doors on the just-spotted boxcar. I also placed a stack of wood grain doors nearby, along with a ladder to get in and out of the car while installing them.



COAL FOR THE CONVEYOR

I ONLY PLACED ONE GROUP of figures in Roland, at Marshall Canning. These fellows (seen in the lead photo on the previous page) are jockeying the conveyor around so it will dump coal where they want it now that the next carload has arrived. These conveyors, from Wm. K. Walthers, come three to a package, so I also used them in another scene at Karlberg [MR March 2021 – Ed.] I piled coal on the ground here, too. But unlike in the Roland scene, I had the crew just showing up for work, rather than work in progress.



SPECIAL LCL DELIVERY

ACROSS THE STREET IS my favorite storytelling scene. I bought a package of detail parts at a Trainfest train show in Milwaukee. When I opened the package, I saw that the appliances that were labeled as trash would actually be new at the time I model. Why not use them to highlight less-than-carload lot (LCL) traffic? I dug through my detail parts and found a two-wheeled cart and figure that could be pushing it. I adjusted the arm on another figure so he looked like he was opening the back door on a van.

The van, salvaged from a depot seen on my previous layout, was originally painted for Railway Express Agency.

I have a list of all the businesses in Zeiring for the time that I model. I found one that could have sold appliances and designed a sign for it on the computer. After printing it on regular printer paper, I cut it to fit the side of the van and glued it on. Some friends in an internet modeler's group told me appliances would have been shipped in wooden crates in my era. So I used some dimensional wood strips to make a couple shipping crate bases and strewn several more lengths of lumber around, along with some tools our delivery men will pick up later.



HOIST THAT POLE

AT ZEIRING I HAVE two areas of activity close to each other. I'd rather have placed them farther apart, but that wasn't to be. One is at the utility company's pole yard. I built a Tichy stiff-leg derrick kit to pick up poles from flatcars or gondolas and place them on a storage rack. Instead of having the derrick just stand there, I thought I could add some life by having a crew actively moving a pole. Unlike the coal unloading crew at Marshall Canning in Roland, this vignette doesn't look realistic without a car to unload, so I just force myself to ignore it when no car is present.



FILL 'ER UP!

LASTLY, I HAD ONE FIGURE that was in a very strange position, crouching down with his head turned to the side. I found he would work great for loading a fuel truck, holding the nozzle in one hand while watching the meter on the loadout platform. I didn't like the original gray-and-red paint job on the Mini Metals truck, so I painted it all red. I then made a Standard Oil sign on the computer, printed it out, and cut it to fit the sides of the tank. [MIR](#)