

Micro-Trains Body Style 108: Drop-Bottom Gondola with Woodchip Extension

Review and Photos by Phil Scandura

40-foot Drop-Bottom Gondola with
Woodchip Extension, MSRP: \$22.40

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MICRO-TRAINS has done it again: another new body style for the N-scale community. Taking their Drop-Bottom Gondola introduced in November 2007, they have added side extensions, transforming the car into a woodchip car. Based on a Pressed Steel Car Company design, the new Micro-Trains model features fine-grain wood detail, wood chip load, a detailed underframe, accurate markings, and is equipped with Magne-Matic couplers. The gondolas were originally built in 1948 for the Denver & Rio Grande Western, and were later purchased secondhand by the Spokane Portland & Seattle railroad for conversion into woodchip cars in the mid-1960s.



The basic gondola, side extensions, and load are separate parts as seen on the left. The assembled car is shown on the right.



As we've come to expect from Micro-Trains, the painting and lettering are crisply applied and prototypically accurate. This is very apparent when looking at the car-builder information.

The Prototype

Drop-bottom gondolas of this type were built by a variety of car manufacturers in the 1940s and 1950s, including General American Transportation Corporation (GATC) and the Pressed Steel Car Company. A 40-foot car such as this one typically had a capacity of approximately 1,950 cubic feet. When the railroads needed to haul more volume than the car could handle, they added side extensions to increase its capacity. Fabricated out of wood planks and braces because they were cheap, easy, and lighter than steel, side exten-

sions were typically referred to in terms of the number of 12-inch-wide planks added to create the extension. Three- and five-plank extensions were common on railroads such as the Southern Pacific, who used the method extensively for their sugar beet gondolas. In the case of a 40-foot gondola, the addition of a 5-foot extension nearly doubled the capacity of the car.

The ability to safely increase gondola capacity in this manner hinged upon the limitation that the products carried were lighter than those typically carried in gondolas. For example, wood chips



The car bottom is highly detailed, including the unloading doors, hinge points, and hardware, as well as a full brake system.



Micro-Trains has added another new body style to their line of N-scale rolling stock. Based on the Drop-Bottom Gondola introduced last winter, the new car includes wood side extensions and a load transforming it into a woodchip car from the mid-1960s.

and sugar beets weigh much less and pack less compactly than gravel or scrap metal per cubic foot of volume. With the addition of the extensions these cars could carry larger loads, generating important revenue for the railroads.

The Model

Using available prototype scale drawings and photos of a GATC drop-bottom gondola, the Micro-Trains model matched all major dimensions and spotting features. The interior width is about one foot narrower than the prototype, most likely to account for the thickness of the sidewalls. If Micro-Trains had tried for prototype sidewall thickness, no doubt they would have sacrificed sturdiness of the model.

The side extensions measure five feet high, consisting of eight planks. Some quick math indicates the planks are

about 7 to 8 inches in width, as opposed to the more typical 12-inch width. Of course railroads tended to use whatever materials they had on hand, so it is reasonable that some may have used narrower planks.

The wheel sets are correctly gauged, when measured with the NMRA Mark IV standards gauge. The car uses the standard Micro-Trains truck design, i.e., one-piece wheels and axles, molded in black plastic, with truck-mounted couplers. The wheel flanges are of the “pizza-cutter” size, too large for Code 55 track. For operation on Code 55 you’ll need to purchase low-profile wheels from Micro-Trains. The coupler and trip pin height matched the Micro-Trains coupler height gauge.

NMRA Recommended Practice “RP-20.1 Car Weight” specifies that N-scale cars should weigh 1/2 ounce + 0.15

ounce per inch of body length. Based on this recommendation, the gondola should weigh approximately one ounce, however it is slightly underweight at three-quarters of an ounce. The car alone weighs a half-ounce and the extension and load weighs a quarter-ounce. Since the extension is removable, it would be easy to add weight to the gondola under the extension.

Another Winning Body Style

Modelers of sugar beet and lumber operations should enjoy this new body style from Micro-Trains. The addition of side extensions follows the prototype practice of taking an existing car and giving it a new purpose. My hat’s off to Micro-Trains for following in those same footsteps. 