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Northern Pacific East Helena Depot

Into

In this article, I will describe how I built a HO model of the East Helena Northern Pacific depot as it might have appeared in the late 1960s. I based the model on the JL Innovative kit "McDougal Telegraph Office," however I modified the kit heavily. I was unable to find any pictures from that period, so some details are "best guess," but that's just the way it is sometimes. Overall, it was a fun little project.

The Prototype

Back in Dec 2003, Dan Stinson posted to the Yahoo NPModelers discussion group that the JL Innovative telegraph kit might make a good convention kit, as it's nearly correct for several depots such as East Helena. It got me to

wondering about the kit and just how accurate it was. Well, this question was quickly answered by studying the kit and the following Standard Plan on the NPRHA web site:
Telegraph Office with Living Rooms, Standard Plan M-44-10
Link to scan of plan

The kit is pretty much an exact reproduction of this standard plan, right down to every window and door location. Both are 24 by 18 feet, as is the East Helena depot. The station class for East Helena was TLFX, and its number was 1189. (Does anyone know what TLFX stands for?)
Then in April 2005, I happened to be in Helena and went out to take some RR photos. Working hard not to trespass, I took about a dozen photos of the prototype. My photos of the East Helena depot can be found on the NPRHA web site at this location.

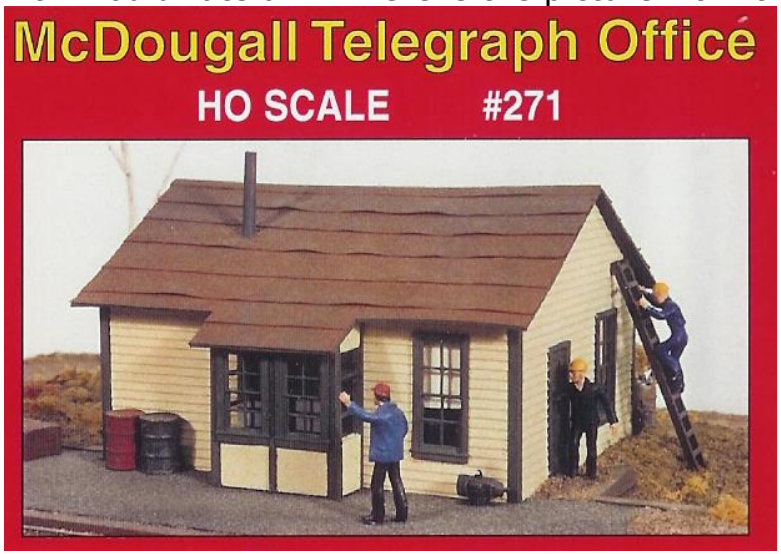
Here is one photo, just for reference:

Now I had some photos to work with, and a standard plan that might provide some insights into the original construction. The only thing I did not have was a photo from my modeling era (late 60s), but efforts to secure any of those proved fruitless. I also asked for info in the Yahoo NP modeling discussion group. Dan Stinson had two observations: 1) the East Helena depot is a mirror of the kit, and 2) that the depot was potentially moved from Louisville after the original East Helena depot burned. And Jon Bratt made a pretty convincing argument that the roof could be shingles or asphalt and either could have been prototypical based on many variables.

So, it was time to start modeling.

The JL Innovative Kit

As mentioned above, the JL Innovative kit is great for the standard plan, but not exactly for East Helena. About the only variations from the Standard Plan that I noticed with the JL Innovative kit is that the prototype had a brick chimney vs. a simple pipe, and it specifies using shingles whereas the kit provides paper to simulate tar paper rolls. So if you are modeling a depot that is close to the standard plan, the JL Innovative kit is great. Of the parts of the kit that I did use, generally it's a pretty good kit. The only part that's a bit "lame" are the sides of the cupola in which you have to essentially fabricate the windows with strip wood and it's non-trivial to get it looking decent. The instructions are not as good as say, an American Model Builders kit, but they are OK. I would rate it a B- kit, whereas the AMB NP kit I would rate an A. Here is the picture from the box of what the kit looks like when assembled.



Modifications

For me, I wanted to get quite a bit closer to the prototype at East Helena vs. the straight-up JL Innovative kit. So I made several modifications. The one thing I did not model was the sloped, partial wood foundation under the structure. I will deal with that when I install it on my future layout. I also did not model an interior, save for some window shades.

Walls

I cut four new walls to accommodate the different window and door locations. I used 1/16th x 1/16th scribed siding from Northeastern instead of the clapboard siding in the kit, as that's what was on the prototype depot. It's pretty

simple to cut the replacements. Just put the originals over the stock and trace/cut out a new wall. Then, I "eye-balled" the door and window locations and cut the new openings. Well, that's a lie. I did buy myself a digital caliper for Christmas and thought I would put it to use and try and get some windows where they were supposed to be.

Windows & Doors

The East Helena depot has quite a few more 8 pane windows than the kit, but fortunately the JL Innovative kit uses Grant Line windows so I just bought more of them. (It is Part #5029.) And as mentioned, because the depot is a mirror of the standard plan, I moved the door to the other end. I also hacked together a small window for that East end based on Part #5250 from Grant Line. The window glass is cut out of plastic provided in the kit, but you have to cut each piece out of the bulk piece, which is a pain after a while.

The doors in the back are total hack jobs just using scraps of 1/16th scribed siding, turned on their side. I put trim around the edges to cover the joint and make it look like an actual door.

Roof

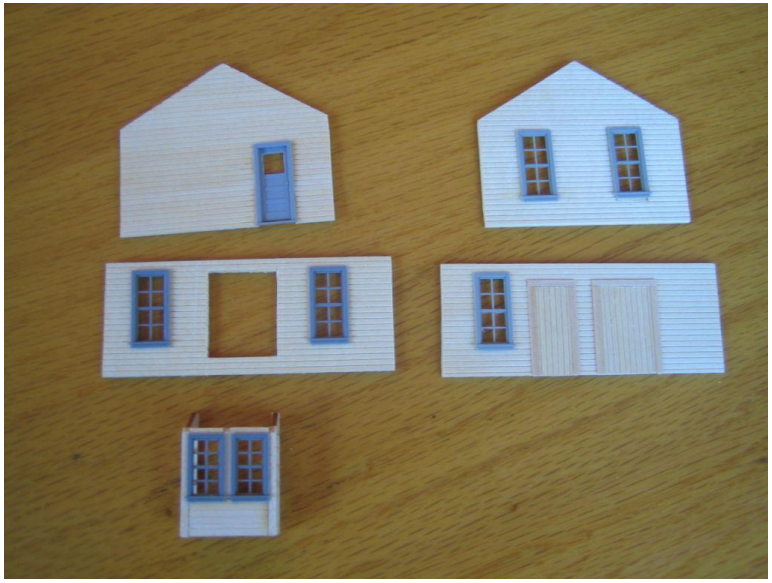
Rather than use cardboard as the kit suggested for the roof structure, I used scribed siding. I figured it would paint better, warp less, and it also provided rows for me to align my roof surface to.

I went back and forth on wood shingles vs. an asphalt roof, and finally just went with a whim and put on a shingle roof. I went with that mostly because I knew how to install a good looking shingle roof using Crystal River shingles. The asphalt roof on the current depot would have been the other logical choice; who knows how old it is. And photos I have of Avon and Elliston depots in that era show asphalt or tar paper rolls. But I have yet to come up with a good technique for that type of roofing detail, so shingles it was.

I used "Silver Wood" by Builders in Scale to stain the roof, lightly sanding after the dye had dried.

The simple chimney is an American Models Builders metal casting that was pretty darn close to the prototype.

Here are some "under construction photos."



Painting and Details

Once I had the building assembled, I painted it and then installed the roof. I used Floquil paint in the following formula for the main station color:

1 part Floquil Foundation

3 parts Floquil Reefer White

I did use an airbrush to paint the structure, for better or worse. Also, note in the one of the photos that I stained the walls with Silver Wood before I painted it. This gives the paint a nice "uneven" look like it's on top of real wood.

I added a few electrical conduit details on the front and East end. And I also added Grant Line outdoor lamps above the doors just like the current prototype, figuring those have probably have not changed in decades. I also added the odd box on the East end. Extra credit if you can figure out what that was for.

After the roof was installed, I weathered the structure slightly with chalks. I made the station signs in Microsoft Word, with the font set to Arial Rounded MT Bold, 7pt. in white text, set on top of a dark brown box.

Bill of Materials
JL Innovative – McDougall Telegraph Office, Kit #271
Northeastern Scale Lumber – 1/16"SCR x 1/16" TH x 11"
Grant Line – 8 Pane Window, Part #5029
Grant Line – 4 Pane Window, Part #5250
American Model Builders – Single Chimney, Part #281
Crystal River Products – HO Shingles HO 501-11 (www.crystalriverproducts.com)

Final Thoughts
Well, I learned a few things:

1. It can take my local hobby shop over a month to order and receive scribed siding from Walthers. Whereas ordering directly from Northeastern was lightning quick. Both arrived the same week. Ugh.
2. The JL Innovative kit is very close to the NP Telegraph Office Standard Plan.
3. As usual, nothing beats having lots of photos of the prototype your modeling. Does anyone have photos of the Helena Freight depot? ☺
4. Fabricating windows out of small strips of wood is a pain in the rear.

Photos
Here are photos of the finished model.
This first photo compares the size of this standard plan depot to the AMB model of the Class A/B/C standard plan depot. It was surprising to me the size difference.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