N-Circle Railroad Update 9 – October 2, 2021

This update describes the on-going development of structures for the N-Circle Railroad. I will discuss building three different plastic kits of very different vintage, techniques and quality and will discuss various modelling opportunities and challenges.

Passenger Station

The Atlas Passenger Station kit is intended to be a “focal point” for the N-Circle Railroad. Sited at the corner of Main Street and Railroad Avenue, it will serve passenger trains in the North Yard, and also as a bus station. Its design is sufficiently classic to be used in all of the N-Circle’s operating scenarios, with sign changes serving to set the scene for 1950s versus 1980s; Vermont versus Louisiana.

N-Circle_21-08-22_Atlas_PassengerStation-1

I built the kit to plan without structural modifications. It comes with parts to build two complete platform extensions. I only needed one, but built both and personalized the sign on one for Maple Corners, Vermont and the other for Lake View, Louisiana. Since they are not attached to the main station, I can just swap the platforms for the two regions.

This kit is definitely more “advanced” than the Life-Like, Model Power, Pola and Heljan kits I have discussed in previous updates. It has much finer details in the moldings and a lot of very small pieces that require any flashing at sprue attachment points to be filed off carefully for parts to fit correctly. It then requires very careful alignment of tiny parts for cementing. It is a good quality kit, all the pins align to the holes in the parts they mate to very precisely, but you have to be patient and love N-scale to assemble it well, or you will just throw it across the room! It took me about 15 hours over 7 days, allowing drying periods between the many stages of adding pieces.

Assembling the platforms by the kit’s directions is nearly impossible – I did it their way on the first one. The directions say to glue the roof supports into the base first, then attach the roof later. This requires aligning the four roof supports into eight notches into the underside of the roof, holding them all aligned correctly until the glue sets – nearly impossible. For the second platform, I glued the supports into the roof first and let it sit for a bit, then the four posts into the base before the cement fully set. Still not easy, but at least possible, so the second platform came out better. Unfortunately, neither is perfectly straight and true. Because the supports are tilted a small amount away from the station, it results in a gap between the station roof and platform roof when their bases are abutted. An annoyance, and quite noticeable in the post-assembly photos, but it will probably not be all that noticeable when the station is integrated into the layout. Another “looks good from ten feet” structure...! If I were to build the platforms again, I would come up with a way to align and hold the roof in place after cementing. Atlas sells a version of this kit with the platform extensions only without the main station, so maybe I will redo them someday. But on to more necessary builds for the N-Circle layout first!

I painted the windows, doors and trim green, brush painted with Polly acrylic, so the brown plastic shows through some, giving a “weathered” appearance. I added a dark grey on the roof shingles, and a watery dark gray wash on platform floors, which brings out the cracks molded in the floors.

This kit requires an intricate attachment of the window glazing – the clear glazing has to be cut to the exact size of the inside of the frame and be attached with MicroScale Krystal Kleer in order to have the window frames fit into the wall openings. You cannot just cut a large piece of window glaze and glue it across the back of the window unit, like in lower-quality kits where the window unit extends well beyond the window opening.

I added Blair Line signs for the ticket agent window, baggage and waiting room doors, and a large train schedule board. I used a Dave’s Decals Greyhound Bus Depot decal on the street corner, as this station also serves as the town bus terminal. I added the signs before installing the station roof and realized afterwards that the roof overhang blocks the view of most of the signs unless one is down at eye-level with the track, which will not be the case for most viewers, as track height for the N-Circle layout is about 25 inches.

I also added a cardboard floor between the first and second floor, white-glued to pieces of sprues cemented to the inside corners of the walls, to block seeing first-floor windows when looking in second floor windows, as I have done on previously described kit builds. The piece of

cardboard can be seen in the following construction photo, before attachment of the roof assembly.

N-Circle_21-08-22_Atlas_PassengerStation-4

The following photos show the completed project, first in close-ups on a display panel, then integrated into the layout.

N-Circle_21-08-24_Atlas_PassengerStation-1

N-Circle_21-08-24_Atlas_PassengerStation-4

N-Circle_21-10-02_Atlas_PassengerStation-1

This final photo of the station on the layout includes a Canadian National passenger train just pulling into the platform! The Kato CN F3 A-B-A lash-up was purchased from Green Mountain Trains (Paul Allard and Dick Merriam) in 1990 and was running fine here for the first time in 31 years! The Con-Cor passenger cars were purchased used at the 2003 NMRA National Convention in Toronto, and are running here for the first time too, after reworking the trucks and couplers. It's great to finally have a passenger station to service this old train set!

Farm House

The AHM American Farm House kit is intended to go with a farm scene on the west end of the N-Circle Railroad. It is an old-style two-story house, with a wrap-around porch. The style should be generic enough that it can be used for both the 1950s and 1980s; Vermont and Louisiana, with no "personalization" required like for other structures discussed in these updates.

N-Circle_21-08-29_AHM_FarmHouse-1

This is an old kit I bought from NWV donations sales a couple of years ago. When I opened it, I was surprised to find it was a “snap-together” kit – supposedly one simply lines up the tabs to the holes among the various pieces, and everything just goes together…

Before assembly, I painted the exterior walls white, then applied a watery dark gray over them, to add “weathering” and highlight the contours of the clapboards. I painted the roof dark gray, more realistic than the brown plastic of the kit, and added window glazing, which did not come with the kit. I also added a cardboard floor supported by sprues between the first and second floors, like previous kits, so one cannot look out the first-floor windows when looking in the second floor windows.

Upon closer examination, I realized the “snap-together” construction was not going to work and assembled it like a standard kit with liquid cement. The tabs on the bottom of the walls were supposed to “snap” into the base, but I had to file them to make them fit – the pressure required otherwise would probably have broken something. Unfortunately, I did not take any progress photos showing the tab-in-hole intended assembly of the structure. The wrap-around porch railings and roof overhang are also supposed to snap into place, but it was immediately apparent that the pins and holes did not align at all precisely like the Atlas Passenger Station kit described above. Being L-shaped, this assembly would require aligning parts in two dimensions, which would be difficult even if the pins did align correctly. Therefore, I just cut off

all the pins with a sharp knife and glued the assembly together like a traditional styrene kit. Fortunately, the top of the porch rails assembly fit into a groove in the underside of the roof overhang which thus aligned these pieces, so gluing to the base and side of the building squarely was then fairly straightforward. There was still a gap between the roof and the siding, which I filled with white glue and paint.

To finish, I added a white metal chimney from a bag of leftover parts purchased on eBay. The kit cover shows a chimney on the house, but there is not one in the kit. I painted the chimney with boxcar red, then added light-colored mortar and wash, and dark gray smoke residue on the top.

N-Circle_21-08-29_AHM_FarmHouse-3

N-Circle_21-08-29_AHM_FarmHouse-4

The railings and details are a bit over-sized in this kit, the base extending from the two non-porch sides doesn't make sense, but is there to allow the "snap-together" construction, and there are issues with the roof alignment. But it makes a good starting home for the farm, perhaps I will build a better one someday, there are many higher-end country home kits available. The farm house eventually will be incorporated into a scene with a large barn and other out buildings, as well as many pieces of farm equipment and animals. The barn probably will not get built until winter, as the kit is a laser-cut wood structure, which can be built indoors without styrene cement vapor issues.

Grain Unloading Shed

After completing the grain mill project described in the August 14, 2021 N-Circle update, I decided to add a covered track shed for unloading covered hoppers at the grain silos. Through on-line research, I determined the PikeStuff Rix Products Atkinson Engine House could be modified to create this structure.

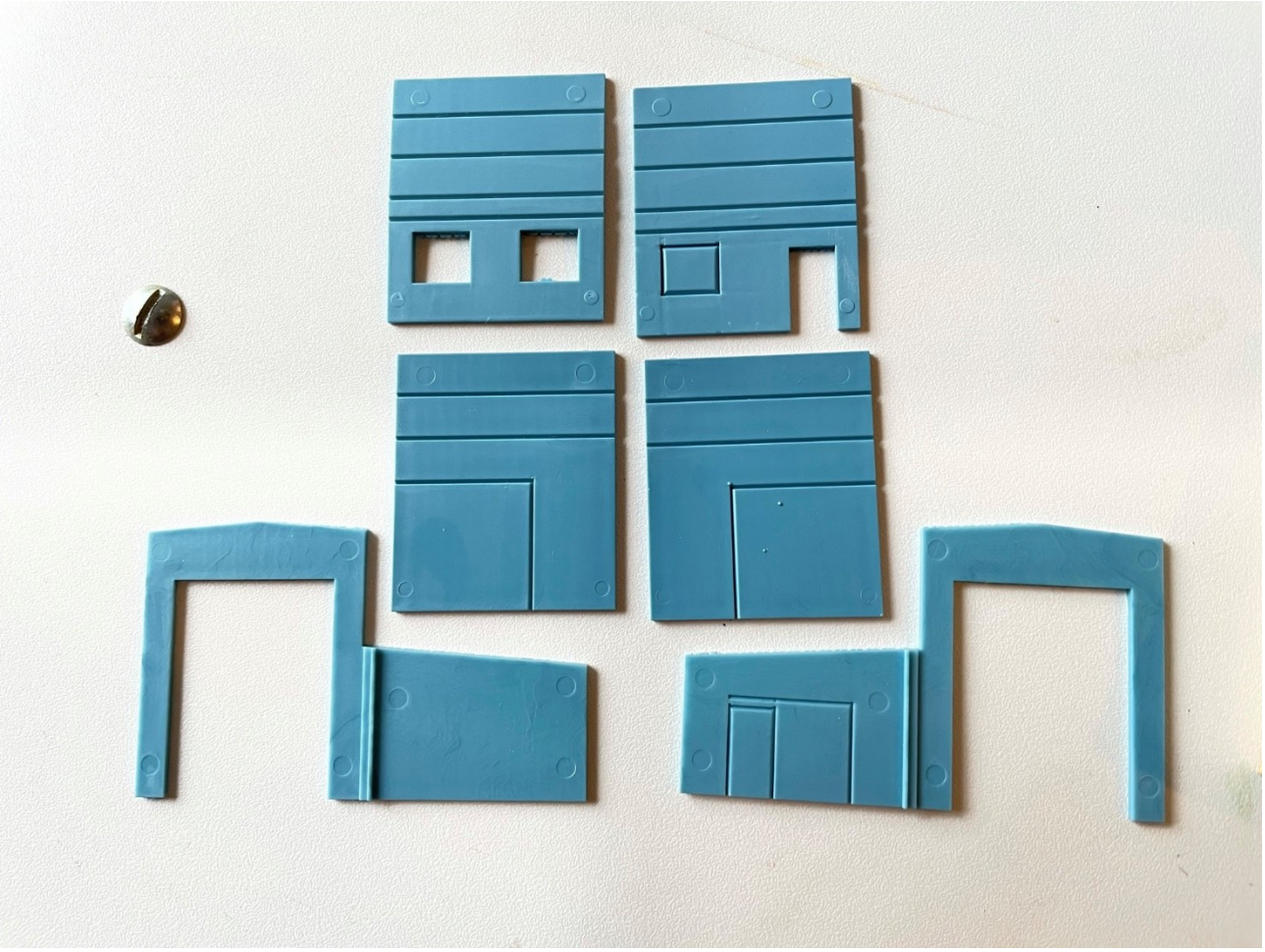
N-Circle_21-08-29_Pikestuff_GrainShed-1

This kit is very interesting, as it is designed to allow building many sizes and configurations of the structure, with options in both the overall height and length, as well as wall configurations.

I chose to shorten the structure to 40 scale feet, to accommodate one older-style hopper car, and not visually over-power the grain mill scene. The following photo shows the back of the building side panels before modifications, with the scoring allowing additional doorways to be

cut out, and sides to be shortened for the outside wall of the extension on the back. It was fairly easy to cut these pieces using a sharp hobby knife.

N-Circle_21-08-29_Pikestuff_GrainShed-2



When I bought the kit, I thought it would be a quick build to add to the Grain Mill scene. But, like the Rix Products grain silos described in the earlier N-Circle update, this kit requires a lot of complex building steps. The kit can be built 80 scale feet long if all four side panels are used. For my 40-foot structure, only two panels were needed. By the time I was 2/3 of the way through the build, I was glad I was only building the two-panel version!

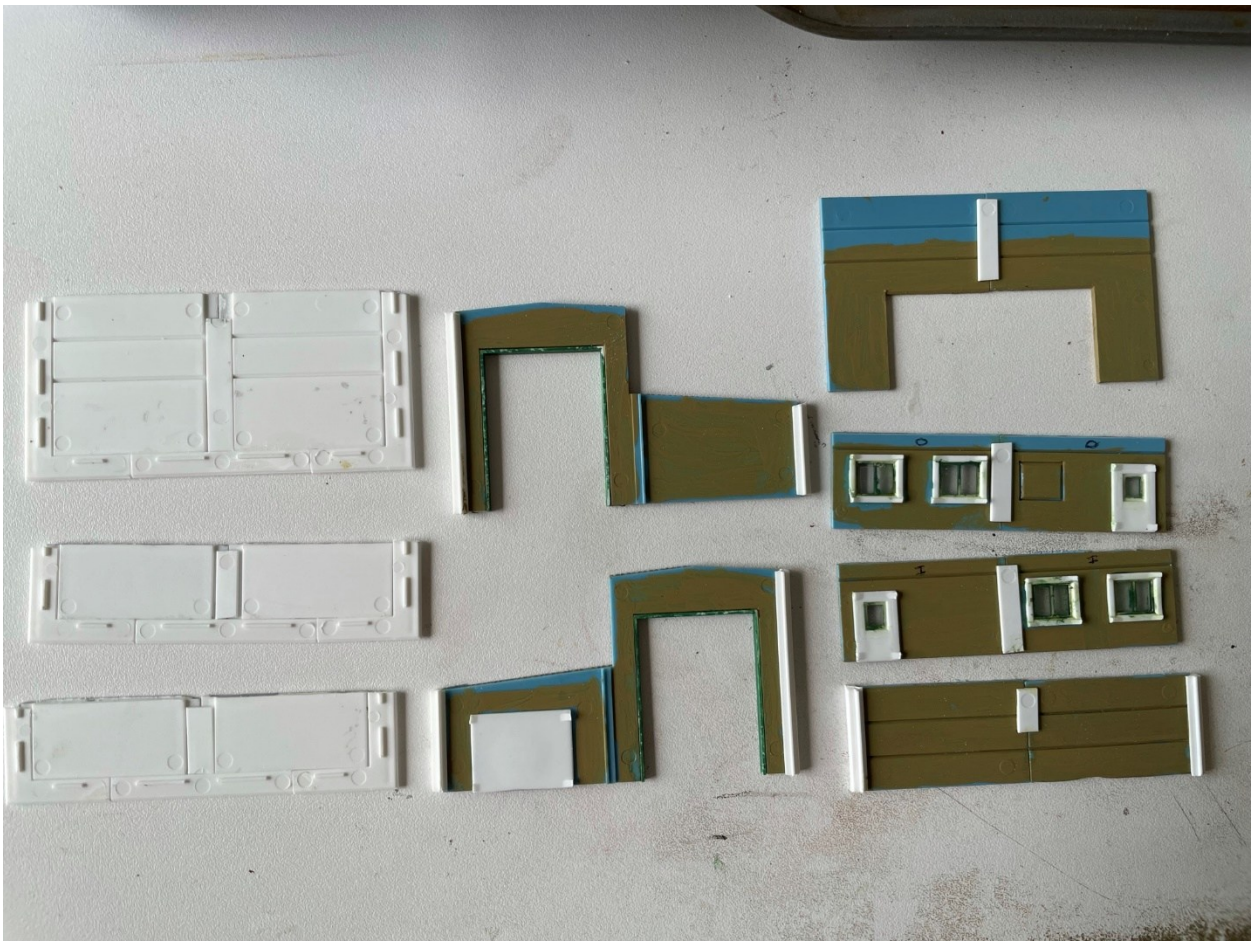
This kit was much more complex than similar Micro Engineering steel-sided building kits that I built years ago, but they did not allow the extensive configuration options.

I painted the steel sides a mud brown, to be visually compatible with the main grain mill building and painted the door and window frames with a dark “Vermont Green” to go with the trim on the main grain mill building. I also added window glazing, which did not come with the kit.

The following photo shows all the side and roof panel subassemblies before final assembly and painting. Here you can see the extra edge pieces that have to be glued around the edges of the roof panels, with “glue tabs” between the panel sections. The sides have corner posts that engage the corners of the building and again “glue tabs” between the panel sections. If you

decide to paint the building to colors other than the original plastic, all these parts require a lot of paint steps, initially on the sprues, then a final coat to integrate all of the roof pieces together, and make sure the siding corner posts are consistent with the sides without gaps. I also had to paint the interior walls of the open shed, as they will be visible.

N-Circle_21-08-29_Pikestuff_GrainShed-3



The entire build took about nine hours, over many sessions to allow paint and cement to dry between steps. This kit would have been very difficult to build indoors if I had to install the door fume vent for each gluing session!

Here is the final assembled shed, with Wayne Feeds signs and other warning sides added. The enclosure attached to the shed houses the equipment for the unloading augers to feed the grain over to the elevator for the grain silos, which will be placed adjacent to this structure. The garage door on the end allows access for servicing this equipment.

N-Circle_21-09-04_Pikestuff_GrainShed-4

N-Circle_21-09-04_Pikestuff_GrainShed-5

This final photo shows this new shed integrated with the grain mill and silos from the August 14, 2021 update. I moved the whole scene to the siding in the northeast corner of the layout, swapping with the Heljan Furniture Factory building, as the addition of the unloading shed required placement on a longer spur with greater spacing to any adjacent track. We see a Rutland covered hopper delivering the first load to the new facility!

N-Circle_21-10-02_GrainMillComplete-1

In summary, these three kit builds provide some overall perspectives. The AHM farm house is representative of early plastic kits: somewhat crude molding details and non-precise alignment of parts for assembly, but these older kits can produce sturdy basic structures to fill in non-focus areas on a layout. While not magazine-cover quality, my farm house starts to fill in an area on the N-Circle layout that would otherwise be bare plywood until getting to building a better structure.

The Atlas passenger station is representative of modern plastic kits, with much finer molded details and better alignment of parts. But the finer parts can be more of a challenge to assemble to create as good a looking end-product as the kit may allow. In this case, the lack of directions on how to assemble the extension platforms to be straight and square prevents producing a good final product unless one has the experience to foresee this challenge before opening the cement jar.

Finally, the RIX Products were definitely designed by a former IBM engineer! The grain silos from the previous N-Circle update and the engine shed from this update are high quality with innovative flexibility allowing modification of the dimensions and structure of the base kit, but they are challenging to build for an intermediate modeler. They require a lot of time, patience and thought to correctly pre-paint and assemble the many complex sub-pieces.

Layout Scenery Panel Updates

Having started reworking the scenery panels for the grain mill, I ended up redoing all of them for the whole layout, rearranging most of the buildings now that so many are complete and I have their final dimensions. I replaced the patchwork of cardboard scenery panels with larger panels cut from foam core board and aligned to the edges of the underlying T-Trak modules. There are now fewer rough junctions between sections and fewer curled paper edges. However, the 5 mm foam core is a bit too thick, raising the loading docks a bit too high relative to boxcar doors on the Kato Unitrack. While easy to work with, foam core is difficult to cut with long, clean edges and not end up with small gaps. Future “final” panels may be a different material.

The buildings in the two large city blocks are placed on panels made from thin box board cardboard, which raises them to sidewalk curb height. These panels can be easily recreated to go with different building configurations, without having to change the underlaying foam core panels which define the streets.

N-Circle_21-10-02_North_Center_View.

In this “urban renewal” project, I moved more buildings to face Park Street to the south, opening up more spaces to add downtown buildings in the coming months. I also rotated the school scene so it is more visible, and rearranged the residential neighborhood, so the suburban homes are closer to the school, and the mobile homes have been moved to the outskirts of town. The new rural farm scene is just starting to take shape off-camera to the right, with the new farm house and some outbuildings. More on this scene later this winter, after we build the barn!

Anyway, not bad, given that six weeks ago I had two Wayne Feeds semi-trucks, some Wayne Feeds decals in a set of farm signs, a Life-Like Rapid Recycling Center kit I couldn’t sell on eBay, and no plans for a grain mill on the N-Circle Railroad. But with a little imagination and creativity, model railroading can take you in unexpected directions!

Gondola Loads

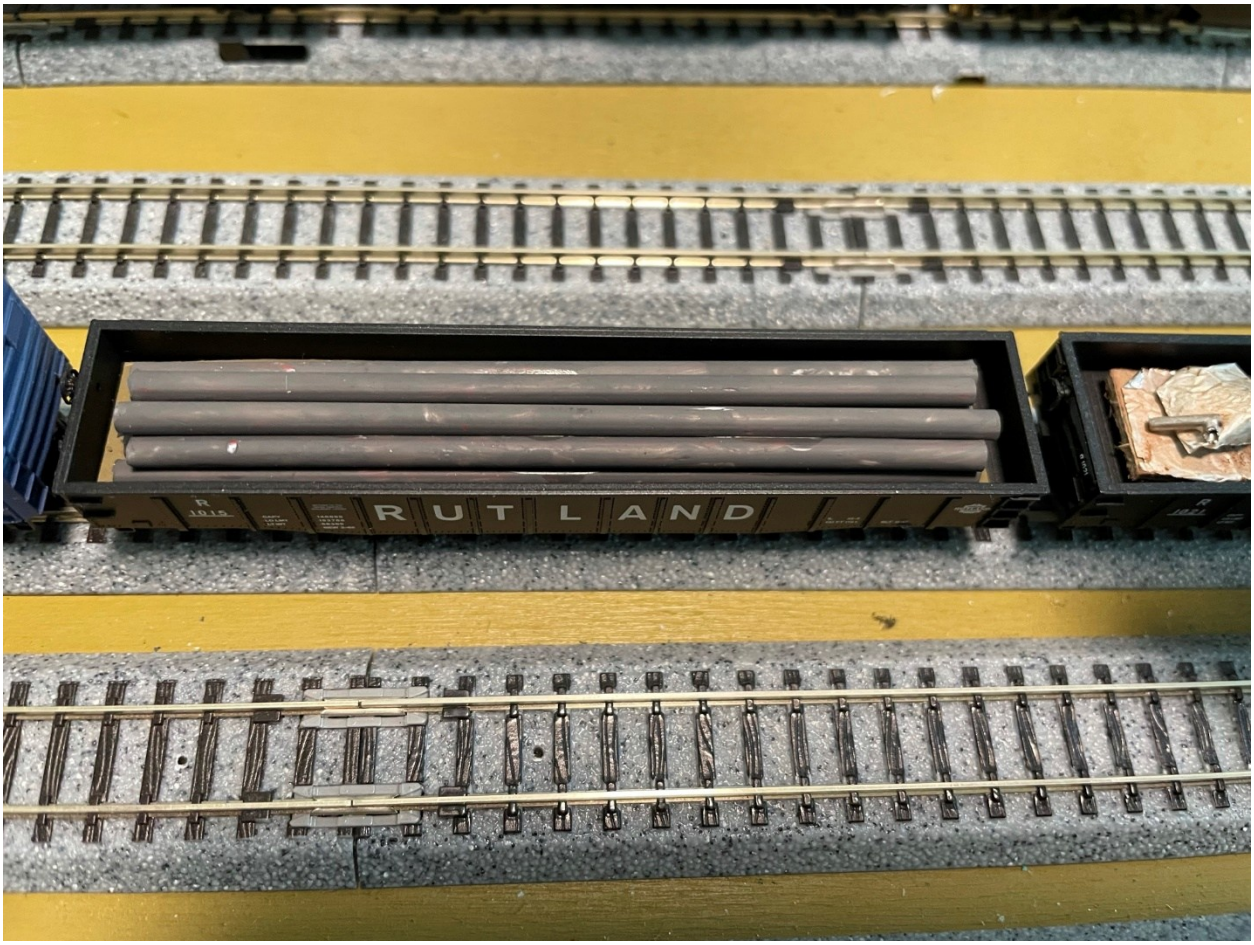
Finally, in between this scenery work, I also started on gondola loads, inspired by Paul Allard’s December 2020 article. The photo shows base plates cut from thin box board and labelled with dimensions for various size gondolas for future use. For this first load of pipes, I used magnets to align the load to the sides of the base for gluing, rather than creating jigs of different sizes as seen in magazine articles on this topic. I created this pipe load by painting plastic drink swizzle sticks and gluing them together using white Elmer’s glue.

The N-Circle Railroad is not complex enough to have loads and empties destinations for cars – if a load is placed in a gondola, it will likely circle the layout for a while until the car is removed from the operating session. Therefore, I decided not to build the loads on a magnetic base or some other technique to enable removing the load without dislodging the car from the track. In most cases, I will just turn the car over and shake out the load to store it separately, so the loads can be used in any of the N-Circle region and era operating sessions. The labelling on the underside of the load identifies the size of gondola it will fit, so it can be used with any gondola of that size and does not have to be specific to one car.

GondolaLoad_21-09-12_1

Next we see the completed load in a 52-foot Rutland gondola. One can just see the end of a scrap metal load in the gondola to the right, which I built for an NWV N-scale display years ago, with random scraps glued to a piece of aluminum foil and finished with rust-colored chalks.

GondolaLoad_21-09-12_1



I plan to build more loads using low-end vehicles weathered for scrap steel loads, and a set of wire reels from an old Bachmann flat car. And of course the classic load of freight car wheelsets.

Anyway, that's it for this month, now, on to finish cementing together a few more plastic structure kits for the next N-Circle update, before it is too cold to work in the garage!