

CABOOSES

A caboose is a non-revenue car, used to carry crew members. Once a common sight on the rear of most freight trains until the 1980's, they have now been almost totally replaced with electronic end-of-train devices called "FRED" (flashing rear-end device). FRED and lineside hot-box detectors have reduced the crews required to be carried on a freight train, to the point where everyone can fit into the locomotive itself.

Real estate is always an issue with model railroads, and not having a caboose on a train will allow an extra revenue car to be carried. Also, it will be easier to switch cars if there is no caboose to get in the way. It is therefore strongly urged that you forgo the caboose completely on all but the largest layouts, or at least restrict them to very long distance "through" freight trains that will remain intact and not be switched while on the layout.

Real Railroads

On a real railroad the caboose functions as the office for the Conductor (the trains' "captain"), and a sheltered spot from which the rear brakeman can watch the cars on the train for problems. They are usually lightweight cars, outfitted with supply lockers, a table, seats, toilet, sink, lighting and heat (often a coal stove). Bunks were included in a caboose intended to be out on the road for long periods. While freight cars still had roof running boards (before the 1970's), the caboose was equipped with ladders to the roof.

All trains are required to hang warning lamps on the rear car of the train (this is why the brakemen carry red lanterns). The caboose was usually placed on the rear of the train, so that the rear brakeman could watch the whole train without having to keep turning around, and so that he could visually assist the engineer when the train was running backwards (such as in transfer service). As such, the caboose was often equipped with permanently mounted rear marker lamps and an open rear platform.

The early "bobber caboose" was tiny, made of wood, and ran on two axles like many European freight cars. The poor quality of the rapidly laid American tracks however unstabilizes two axles train cars, so the caboose soon adopted the now standard four wheel freight car trucks. Wood bodies were eventually replaced with steel for safety during an accident. Safety is also why the caboose is usually required to be shifted behind a pusher locomotive, so that the people inside can't be accidentally crushed.

To assist the brakeman's ability to watch the trains cars from the rear, the "standard caboose" is equipped with a cupola that protrudes above the roof. Its position varies, with eastern railroads tending to prefer it in the center, and western railroads more towards the end. Attaching a caboose to a train with the cupola more towards the front or the rear makes no difference, as the viewing seats are reversible. With the coming of taller freight cars by the middle of the 20th century, the side-bulging "bay window caboose" was invented, which allows viewing along the sides of the train. The "extended vision caboose" is a standard cupola caboose that has had its cupola sides extended beyond the sides of the caboose, so that it too can offer train side viewing.

A "crew car" is a specially configured caboose (sometimes made from a retired passenger car) used to feed and rest off-duty train crew, which must by rule be changed during a long distance trip. They are usually coupled directly behind the locomotive.

A "drover's caboose" is a combine caboose that is configured as half a standard caboose for the train crew, plus half a coach for the cowboys that manage the live cattle on a long distance stock car train.

A "transfer caboose" is a flatcar with a small shed attached. It is used on short trips to provide a sheltered lookout platform, and lacks any cooking, sleeping or toilet facilities.

Toy Trains

The standard caboose is over represented in toy trains, as almost every train set comes with one. Far less commonly available are the bay window and the rare extended vision caboose. Often, to save money, the standard caboose included in cheap train sets was manufactured with couplers on one end only. It is suggested that you forgo these, as it is not difficult to find nearly exact equivalents that have couplers on both ends.

Because the interiors of the toy standard caboose is normally unfurnished, there is no way to tell if they are configured to be a regular caboose, drover's caboose, or a crew car. You can therefore justifiably claim that the caboose in question is the type you require (for clear differentiation on your layout, you could proclaim the long bay window cabooses to be crew cars, and only use the other types for regular caboose duties).

Although difficult to find a truly prototypical toy transfer caboose, one of the many flatcar based fantasy "work caboose" or "crane tender" cars that are equipped with a shed for the work crews could perhaps be substituted.

Railroad owned cars are typically labeled with the owning railroads logo. Unfortunately, many toy car types are only labeled in a few names. One could assume some pooling of equipment with other railroads in the region, but that still leaves many gaps. As the object of playing with toy trains is to be model railroaders rather than railroad modelers (in other words, to move simulated goods rather than attempt to accurately model an actual prototype), we should simply ignore the labeled road name, and mix-n-match road names from different regions of the country, or even include fantasy road names such as "Lionel". What is important though is that a car type (real or fantasy) with the same road name have a different number, so that we can play at freight car forwarding.

Layout Ideas

The most obvious destination for the caboose in most peoples minds would be a switch yard. Yards typically had one or more double ended storage tracks in which the caboose was dropped at the end of a line awaiting another assignment. Large division yards even had separate sets of caboose tracks on both sides of the yard, to accommodate trains arriving from either direction.

Regardless of the nearly ubiquitous inclusion of yards in track planning books, having a dedicated yard on a toy train layout, except in the case of large club layouts and such, is *not* recommended. Dedicated yards assume a need to accommodate many trains. This means a large roster of locomotives, which is an expensive proposition. If older toy train locomotives are used, there is also the difficulty of controlling them in close proximity. Yards also use a lot of switches, which are costly to purchase. Remember that the yard is not for storing trains, but rather a place for gathering cars together for a long distance transfer. As such, efficiently run yards will be practically empty, and therefore taking up a lot a real estate which could be better used for modeling actual customer destinations.

A fun way to play with a moving caboose is to equip one inside sidewall with a small magnet. In fact, you can put magnets on both inner sidewalls of every caboose you own. Now place a "Mail Pickup Set" accessory on the through track of a rural station. While the caboose is slowly passing the accessory, the arm swings out a mail bag which will be captured by the magnet on the caboose. Real railroads once similarly had crew hook mail bags, because it is more efficient to not fully stop a moving train for just one bag.

You can park a drover's caboose or two on a siding in a large stock yard. No special track is needed, as the caboose can just share the same siding as empty stock cars.

An interesting layout area for your caboose collection is an industrialized slum. Here, surrounded by weeds and run down brick buildings, is a diverging spur that once serviced some of these old buildings. This abandoned track is where you can now store your caboose or crew car. This spur could also be used to store any of your other infrequently used non-revenue rolling stock, such as track maintenance cars, or cars (such as grain hoppers) that are only required during certain seasons.