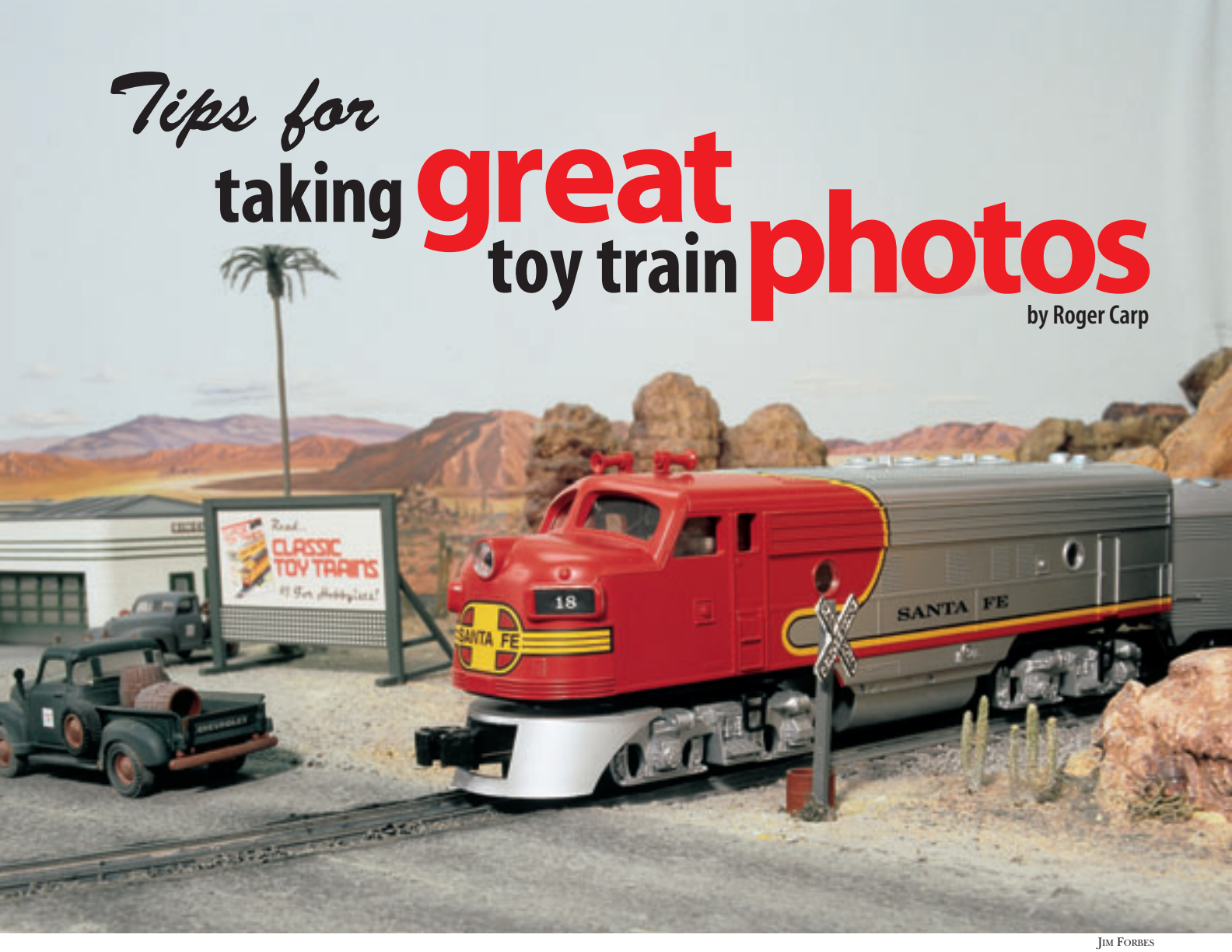
Tips for taking great toy train photos

by Roger Carp



JIM FORBES

▲ An attractive picture is the result of good composition, following basic photo techniques, and the right camera, film, and lighting. This scene has a bright center of attention (the red diesel), good depth-of-field focus (the foreground and the distant gas station are clear), and even lighting.

You'll find a brand-new feature in this CLASSIC TOY TRAINS. Reader Showcase allows you, our readers, to show off photos of great-looking layouts, classic models, and more. We'll publish the best of the photos we receive in each issue. Instructions on where to send your photos are on page 64.

To help you submit your best photos, here are some tips, many from our staff photographers, Jim Forbes and Bill Zuback, to make your trains and layout look as good on film as they do in person.

Prepare the scene

A great picture depends on the right camera and film, adequate lighting, proper techniques, and an attractive scene.

Before you take out your camera, prepare the scene. Remove any dust and dirt on the roofs and horizontal surfaces of locomotives, cars, structures, and scenic details. A clean, soft-bristle 1-inch paintbrush works well as a train duster.

Be sure the locomotives or structures have no obvious flaws that a picture will magnify. Check for missing or broken parts, damaged track, bare plaster, falling trees, and chipped paint and rust. Be sure all wheels are on the rails!

Next, set up the camera, look through the lens, and evaluate the composition of your picture. Have you created an image that's appealing? Add something colorful as a point to focus on, but don't overwhelm the image with too many items and clashing hues.

Be careful that elements with similar colors don't blend into one another. Avoid a silver diesel on a silver bridge or a black steamer in a dark tunnel portal.

Look at the background of your scene through the camera lens. The camera angle may magnify the presence of a water heater or furnace pipe. Hang a dark, solid-colored sheet or blanket in front of any room distractions to mask them – it makes a big difference in the final photograph.

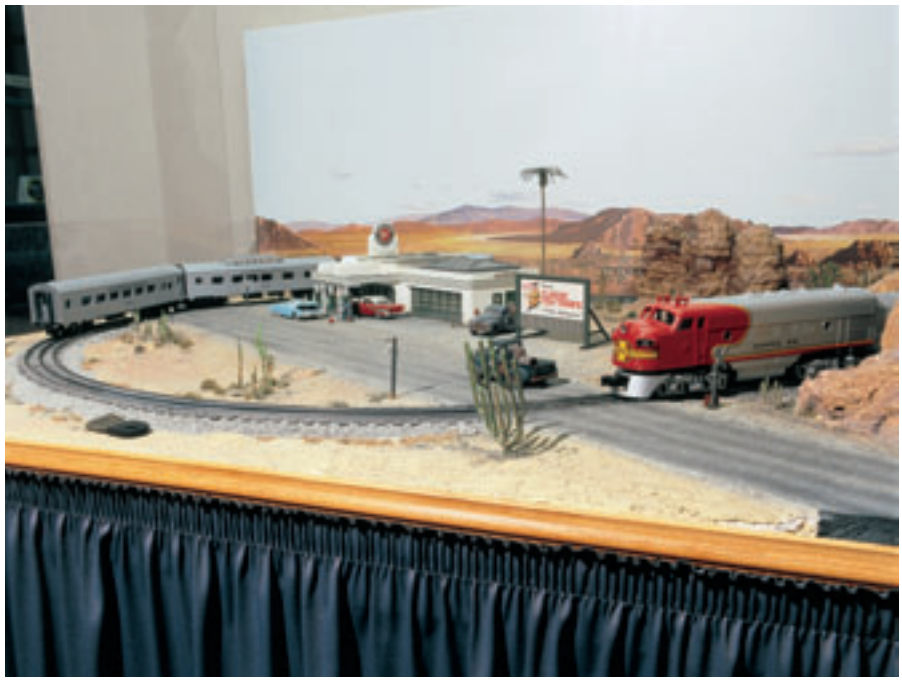
Avoid a few common problems when setting up your picture. Leaving out a train or making it inconsequential rarely leads to an eye-catching shot. Cutting off the nose of a locomotive or showing only the middle of a freight car also weakens a photo. Use figures and vehicles to inject human activity amid the railroad technology.

Use open space to help viewers concentrate on what's important in your picture. You need not fill every square inch of your photo; otherwise, it will overwhelm and confuse. Simple images, such as a single train passing through a grove of trees, are often more effective.

Cameras and lenses

Once you've set your scene, get your equipment ready. You'll need a camera and lens, film, a tripod, and lights.

► Faulty composition – trying to show too much, not having a focal point, and ignoring distracting elements like the uncoupled passenger cars – weakens this picture.



Digital cameras are getting lots of press these days. Still, as recently pointed out in the September 2002 issue of *Model Railroader* magazine, "Digital cameras – even high-end consumer models – have significant limitations that restrict their usefulness for photos intended for magazine publication."

The problem with consumer-grade digital cameras is that they tend to take small images (3 by 5 inches or smaller). That's not very big when placed on a magazine page.

Enlarging these photos exposes deficiencies because their resolution (the number of pixels per inch) isn't enough to reproduce sharply when printed on a magazine page. The result is a grainy looking photo that measures up poorly with other magazine photos.

So we still recommend a conventional film camera. A 35mm single-lens reflex (SLR) camera with a 50mm lens works well. It typically comes equipped with a built-in, through-the-lens light meter that's sufficient to take good pictures of toy trains. With an SLR camera, you look directly through the lens at what you're shooting.

When it comes to selecting a lens, you shouldn't skimp. You need a top-quality 35mm (wide angle) or 50mm (normal) lens.

Make sure your lens has "macro" capabilities and can focus at a closer distance than a regular 35mm or 50mm lens. It should let you focus at distances as close as 4 to 5 inches from the camera, which is great for detail shots.

▲ Using the wrong film – in this case, daylight film with tungsten lights – gives this picture a yellowish tint. Similar problems occur when photographing under fluorescent lighting.

Film and lights

Contributors to CTT that have taken pictures of their toy and model trains recommend color slide films that are balanced for 3200K (3,200 degrees Kelvin) tungsten illumination. Specific brands are Kodak Ektachrome 64T and Fujichrome 64T. You may need to go to a camera store to buy this film.

The "64" refers to the film speed, and "T" indicates tungsten. This is a fairly slow speed (the lower the number, the slower the film), which means a longer exposure is required.

Color prints instead of slides are acceptable, but prints are a generation removed from the original image, which in print film is the negative. That leaves the accuracy of color prints subject to a photo processor.

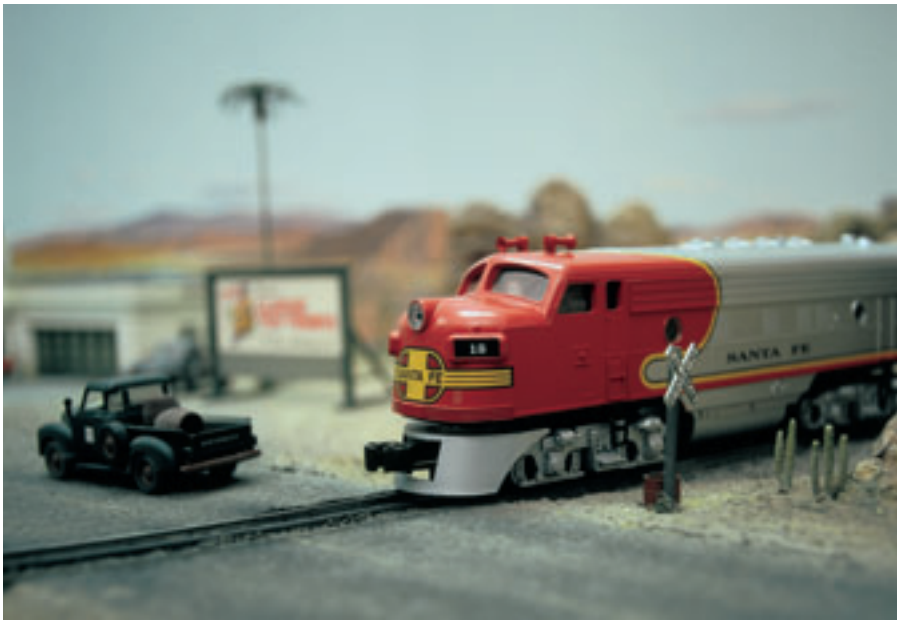
When it comes to lighting, you need to do more than just flip on the room lights and click away, especially if you use fluorescent lighting, which tends to give photos a yellow or green tint. And forget about the camera's built-in flash. Flash photography produces bright spots on shiny locomotives and murky backgrounds with dark shadows.

For the best photos, you'll need to rent, borrow, or buy photo lamps or spotlights with ratings between 250 and 1,000 watts. Camera stores rent and sell these lamps and also sell the stands, or fixtures, on which to secure the lights.

You'll need two or three photo lamps to take effective photos. Set up your camera and tripod in front of your scene and place one light (the "main" or "key" light) on a stand 12 to 18 inches to one side of your camera. Put the second lamp (a "fill light") on the opposite side and a few feet behind.

If you have a white ceiling, aiming the fill light at it will reflect light over the scene. You can also aim the fill light directly at the scene, provided you diffuse the light. You can buy diffusing material at a camera store or make your own by stretching thin white fabric over a frame.

◀ Unless you're trying to mimic a sunset, inadequate lighting creates distracting shadows and dark areas. The rows of shadows in the foreground are from a cactus planted just out of the frame of the photo; also note the shadow of the palm tree on the sky backdrop.



▲ The locomotive and the truck may be in focus, but nothing else is, indicating poor depth of field.

Look through the viewfinder and focus the image. Check that dark items, like trucks on locomotives and rolling stock, and especially steam locomotives, are well lit. Because they are black, it can be difficult to get enough light on them to make their details visible. You can use a piece of white cardboard as a "bounce card" propped up just beyond the edge of the photo frame to reflect light into darker areas.

If shadows still exist, as is often the case when buildings and trees are close to a layout's backdrop, make sure you remember to place a third lamp atop a tall stand. That will remove them.

Depth of field

Now for what can be the greatest challenge facing a photographer: keeping objects in the foreground and background in focus. This is known as depth of field.

Three factors influence depth of field. One is the distance between the camera and what's being photographed. Reducing the distance reduces the depth of field and vice versa, but it also changes the scene.

A second factor is the length of the lens. A 50mm lens provides greater depth of field than does a 110mm lens. The latter has greater depth of field than, say, a 300mm lens.

Third is what's known as the "f-stop setting" on your camera. Turning the aperture ring modifies this setting.

The aperture is the opening in the lens that admits light to the film. Aperture sizes are measured in "f-stops"; the smaller the f-stop number, the larger the aperture opening. Large aperture openings mean the exposure will be shorter, and the depth of field is diminished.

We advise decreasing the size of the aperture. Using smaller f-stop settings (higher numbers) reduces the amount of light coming through.

To compensate for less light coming through, you have to increase the time the film is exposed. Anywhere from ¼ second to several seconds of exposure is common for toy train photography.

No one can hold a camera steady long enough to shoot such long exposures by hand – now you see why a tripod is so important.

Bracketing exposures

Before you click the shutter, check your light meter (most SLR cameras have a built-in meter). With the f-stop set to its highest number (no higher than f/32), read the meter and set the appropriate exposure time. The meter will tell you what it considers the correct setting, but it's often fooled when shooting layouts.

Experienced photographers typically "bracket" each of their pictures. In other words, they photograph the identical scene several times, each with a slightly different exposure time.

Take five shots in ½-stop increments: two underexposed, one at the "correct" setting, and two overexposed. Bracketing increases the odds of a good picture with the best exposure, though it does use more film.

Keep at it

If your first rolls of film don't come out as well as you'd like, keep working on the basics. No one is a great photographer after just one role of film.

Remember to set up the scene, use the smallest aperture, match the photography lights to the film, and bracket your exposures. Send your best work to Reader Showcase. Before long, you may see your trains in CTT. Good luck! CTT

You'll find more hints for taking great pictures at our website classictoytrains.com.