

John Sipple

Sipple on Trains

Aristo RoadRailers are Modern Garden Hits

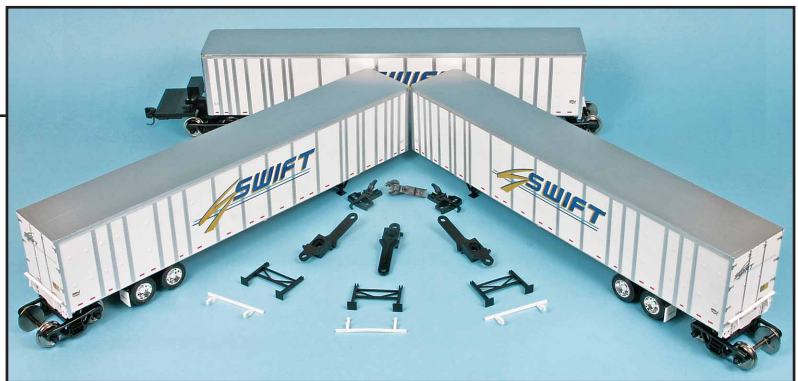
Introduction

Aristo-Craft's 1/29 A-scale line has furthered their push into the modern era of railroading with the addition of their RoadRailer packs. For road and company names, they are currently offering Triple Crown, Canadian National, Clipper, BNSF Ice Cold, Santa Fe and Swift Trucking, as well as an undecorated version. Each version is sold as either a single or a three-pack. Both versions start with a Coupler Mate, which is the front railroad bogie with their famous AAR-type knuckle coupler and a user-installable hook & loop. Depending upon the pack you buy, you get either one or three of the trailer units, complete with rail bogies.

Wabash National Has an Idea

Wabash National, known for its highway trailers, rolled up its sleeves and designed a highway trailer that would also run on railroad tracks. No, it is not that simple, and the criteria were severe. First, the trailer could end up being part of the draw bar for a hundred or more. They would have to be able to stand the pull without being torn in half, and resist the compression in braking that could crunch them like a tin can. Each freight bogey would hold the back of the trailer in front and the front of the trailer behind as a form of articulation (to avoid confusion with highway freight trucks, the railroad trucks will be referred to as "bogies").

The various highway regulation agencies had a defined list of things a truck trailer must be, and this new invention would have to jump through every one of those hoops. I would also need to pass for an ordinary truck trailer. It could be a little more expensive, but not a lot more; this trailer was entering a very competitive marketplace. Of course, if possible, it would be nice if it



The 3-pack with three RoadRailer trailers, Coupler Mate on one trailer with Aristo's AAR coupler, a pair of hook-n-loop couplers, a long drawbar for each, retracted and extended landing gear for each, and up plus down highway bumper for each trailer. The Kadee 830 coupler is sold separately.

addressed security and actually streamlined the flow of freight. The RoadRailer has successfully done all of that. It does look like just about any modern truck trailer. It has dual axles with standard dual wheels, a spare tire and landing gear, and it can be pulled behind any standard road tractor. In fact, one could be beside you on the freeway and you'd probably never know it was any different — but it is.

The air ride system on the axles works like off-road air shocks that can be pumped up or let down into one of three positions. In its road position, the rear axle assembly is approximately halfway up. At the railyard, it is backed up to a RoadRailer bogie and its axles are raised to full height where the end of the trailer can now go over the mounting site on the bogie. Once in position, the air ride system is let down and the axles actually retract upward. Air lines are connected.

Meanwhile, the tractor on the front is pulled off and the landing gear is raised so that the next bogie can be pushed into position. Then, the landing gear is retracted and the trailer is now an official part of the railroad car. The rear bumper of the truck has actually been folded up so that the rear doors cannot be opened. There is no slack in the mounting system and the trailers are so



The RoadRailer is coupled to a regular train via a Coupler Mate, shown on the front of this car. This is also how the single pack cars are delivered.

close there is hardly any space between them. The front-most bogey finishes the trainbuilding. It is called the Coupler Mate bogey because it has a standard railroad coupler on the front and can be mated to the end of any train. However, while a Coupler Mate can be added to the rear, it is only used for rear-end switching.

Aristo's RoadRailers

Polk's sent me a three trailer set, complete with all four bogeys, one being a Coupler Mate. As I examined the set, I made a number of fascinating discoveries. Since the trailer isn't going to really haul freight, some of the cargo space can be used to make a system that will work on a scale model. They start with a "bogey box" and connect the wheeled bogey to it. A drawbar tongue sticks out from the front of the trailer behind and has a large connecting hole in it.

If you lift the rear of the trailer while holding down on the bogey, the trailer will slide up on the bogey box and open a slot on the back of the trailer into which the drawbar tongue is inserted. Then, when the trailer body is set back down, a pin built into the bogey box slides up into the tongue hole and holds it in place. As delivered, the system is flexible down to eight foot diameter curves.

Based on photos and other information, our 53-foot Swift trailers scale out closely. The 53 foot length comes right at 22 inches, which scales to 53.166 feet. Overall width should be 102 inches and measures on the model at 3.5 inches or 101.5 scale inches. I will say that the height above the railhead when on bogies is 13 feet 7.125 inches, very close to specifications and well within the Plate B tolerances claimed by Wabash National.

The paint and decoration is excellent while the door and rivet detail is accurate. The doors don't actually open, one less thing to cause trouble. Swift Transportation Co. is a familiar motor freight provider that actually has a RoadRailer collection, which is part of their fleet of 48,000 trailers. Their inclusion among the motor freight and railroad names is appropriate. The logo on the sides of our dry vans may be positioned a bit low, but is otherwise right on.

Aristo designed the trailers to be converted to a highway trailer appearance. First, the bogey box is removed following the instructions. As it goes, so goes the railroad-related stuff. Next, the highway wheels on one end of each axle are removed and the axle is repositioned through the alternate holes, setting it at highway height. Third, the rear bumper is swapped out between the included folded up and down models, then the drawbar tongue is removed. All of this involves removing three screws from the trailer bottom and separating it from the van shell. You will be installing the support brackets of the landing gear by simply snapping them into place, and you have your choice of extended or retracted landing gear. Extended gear is for a parked trailer; retracted is for rail or tractor service.



A trio of RoadRailers arrives on the end of a string of Aristo 53-foot Evans box cars. They may be as long, but they aren't as wide, nor do they have the height inside. Neither do they have the weight rating. As a result, they're less costly to haul.

Operation Issues

The trucks employed on this release are the latest issue from Aristo. They feature steel axles and brass bearings for very smooth operation. The result is free, smooth rolling at all speeds, and bearing endcaps that rotate. One

of the issues resolved by the prototype is coupler slack action. In a train of 100 53-foot dry vans and not counting the the railroad coupler on the Coupler Mate, the rest of the train won't show more than a few inches, front to back. This saves cargo from being banged around and reduces damage to the equipment from buffeting.

I had zero derailment problems anywhere on the Pine Belt. Thanks to installing the Kadee 830 body mount coupler on the CouplerMate's prepared mounting site, I was able to back the RoadRailers without trouble. Due to the problems of buffeting from regular freight car slack action, Wabash National recommends keeping RoadRailers at the end of your trains.

Summary

Aristo-Craft has also introduced a very nice truck tractor in this same scale, so the RoadRailers can play to both your railroad and highway crowds. I'm sure a displayed three-unit set would draw considerable attention and comment; that's certainly what happens on my layout. **HM**