

The History of Lionel Trains

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The founder of Lionel trains was Joshua Lionel Cowen. Born in 1877, as a boy Joshua was more interested in tinkering with mechanical toys than going to school.

In 1899 he patented a device photographers used to ignite flash powder using dry cell batteries to heat a fuse wire. Cowen later used a variation of this invention to land a contract with the U.S. Navy to detonate mines.

One day while walking through lower Manhattan, Cowen saw a wooden toy train in a store. He envisioned a toy train that would propel itself around a track. This vision became the foundation Lionel trains were built on.

The first Lionel train, the Electric Express, was not intended to be a toy, but a display for toy stores. Cowen and partner Harry Grant opened Lionel Manufacturing Company in 1900. The company first produced small battery powered electric fans.

The Electric Express was built for owner of the toy store where Cowan had seen the wooden train on display. The train was powered by the same motor that was used in the company's electric fans. Soon after the battery was replaced with a 110 volt electric transformer. Eventually twelve models of the Electric Express were sold.

Soon more products were developed, including a "City Hall Park" trolley and a two foot suspension bridge. In 1906 Lionel added a third rail which carried the current and changed the spacing of the outer rails, which were the ground rails, to 2 1/8" inches apart. This new track innovation was soon adopted by other manufacturers.

Lionel continued to gain popularity and soon began building passenger cars, coal cars, train stations and tunnels. In 1909 Cowen began calling his model trains 'the standard of the world". As more and more American homes were wired for electricity, model trains soon became a big business.

The company survived through the Great Depression and World War II, but fell on hard times in the 1950's. By 1959 revenue had dropped by more than 50%. The company was sold to a group of businessmen led by Cowen's great nephew. The company survives today despite several ownership changes since then.

Since Lionel trains inception, the company has sold over 50 million train sets. In 1999 Lionel trains were selected as one of the top 10 toys of the 20th century.

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