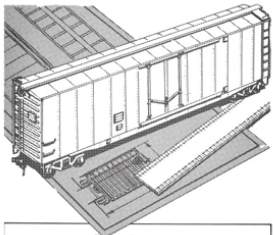
Test Track...



product reviews

Container terminal and bridge crane: HO scale

Mfd. by Heljan and Imported by Wm. K. Walthers, Inc., 5601 W. Florist Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53218.

Experiments with intermodal containerized freight handling began almost concurrently with the inception of steam power on railways. While these experimental ventures were successful, the additional cost of specialized equipment and handling limited their acceptance with the railroads for a century. It was not until the 1950's, when truck competition began to cut into the railroad's revenues, that the concept of intermodal freight began to be considered on a large scale.

Over-the-road trailers mounted on converted flat cars in piggyback service were in the vanguard of this movement that allowed delivery to customers anywhere in the country regardless of their proximity to a railroad. This success, in turn, led rapidly to the development of specialized railroad cars and trailers.

The next major development came from the maritime industry in the 1970's. In order to expedite turnaround times and reduce time in port, shipping companies began developing standardized containers. Not only did containerization of goods speed their handling, it also increased the security from damage and pilfering of the products. What has developed is a totally integrated transportation system that optimizes the use of over-the-road, rail and marine assets to allow timely pick up and delivery to and from any location in the world. In so doing this, intermodal freight has redefined and renewed our nation's rail system to the extent that the lion's share of most consumer products are shipped by rail at some time.

For modelers interested in operations, modern railroading has not had the same allure as older eras, even though the locomotives and other equipment make great modeling subjects. The sheer efficiency of today's railroads changes how we see things. Today's trains seem to shuttle endlessly between point A and point B without any interaction with the outside world.

On a layout, running a container operation usually consists of running a container train from one terminal or staging yard to another where static cranes supposedly on- and off-load the containers. Only occasionally is there even a need to switch the cars.

Heljan's new Container Terminal, distributed exclusively in the United States by Wm. K. Walthers, changes the previously static state of modern intermodal modeling and has in this reviewer's opinion redefined model intermodal operation.

Out-of-the-box, the Container Terminal has a die-cast metal container crane, a molded plastic base plate measuring 13" × 22½", an instruction manual, two 20-foot containers with adaptors pre-installed, and an electronic controller.

Perhaps the most important item packed in the box is the excellent instruction manual. It covers the initial setup of the Terminal, its operation using the electronic controller, and the programming features of the system. Since technology is at the heart of this operating accessory, it cannot be stated too strongly to thoroughly read this manual before beginning set up.

The container crane is in two pieces that are fully assembled: the crane bridge and the traveling hoist assembly that includes the container lift. Both are metal castings with plastic details added. The motors and electronics are also built into each component. This model represents a medium sized apparatus that will easily fit on most model real estate without being overpowering. The crane is neatly painted and lettered, complimenting its scale outline.

The crane arms are mounted asymmetrically with one side of the arms extending beyond the legs. Depending upon how the crane is positioned on the base plate, this arm can extend off the base for use in marine settings in addition to its use in more conventional land-based surroundings.

The base plate is molded in plastic with the crane rails installed. Wires to the rails for operating the crane are pre-installed. Setting up the base plate requires some assembly, which is easily accomplished. The base plate can fit up to five railroad tracks, although track pieces for only one track are included with the Terminal. Additional track pieces are available separately.

After the railroad tracks are installed on the sub-base, road pieces are trimmed per your track arrangement and pressed on. These pieces as well as the two beveled end panels are painted with a flat paint that approximates the color of asphalt. Make sure that the end panels are installed since the crane's travel stops are molded into them.

I found that a standard utility knife with a new blade is the best cutting tool to use for trimming the roadway. Screws are included as well so the base can be mounted to a firm, flat surface. This is strongly recommended since the crane needs a perfectly flat surface for proper operation. Additional base plates are available separately for those wishing to extend the length of the terminal.

The electronic controller provides the brains for this system using digital command control technology. As received, it will control up to three container cranes through their full suite of movements and features. In addition, the controller has ports to add either computer control or a gaming joy stick.

Wiring up the controller is simplicity itself. Two wires from the base are installed into well-marked screw retainers and two wires are installed between a power supply and the controller. The system operates on 14 to 16 volts using either a.c. or d.c. I hooked up the system first to the fixed output d.c., then the a.c. accessory outputs with equal success.

Once the wires were hooked up, the container crane was placed on the rails and put through its paces. As the crane moved back and forth on its rails, the scale speed of the operation became immediately apparent. All of the movements are slow and smooth. One slight problem was encountered. In the rush to install the system, I had not secured the base plate nor pressed the roadway down completely. This caused the crane rollers to ride up and lose contact with the rails, thereby stalling. The base plate was revisited, and this time attached to a piece of plywood with the roadway properly pressed down in correct alignment. This situation was not an issue with the product's design, but operator error at its fullest.

In a matter of minutes, the controller was mastered to the point where well cars could be competently loaded and containers stacked. To simplify picking up containers, an electromagnet is used to grab a container with a ferrous plate installed inside it. Additional 20-foot containers with the adaptor plates pre-installed are available separately, as are five packs of adaptors that can be used with any brand of HO scale container.

The final feature included on the crane is a set of bridge-mounted lights and a spotlight mounted on the control cab. These are operated from the controller with discrete, clearly labeled function buttons.

Having gotten the unit up and running in less than an hour, the fun really began. The container terminal was hooked up to a siding on the test track and a parade of well cars was run into the terminal. Each movement of the crane was prototypically slow and deliberate as each car was in turn loaded and unloaded; the cast-metal unit's weight, precision construction and the superb electronics make this possible.

Recalling a railfan trip to the Port of Los Angeles in years past, one of the interesting aspects of container handling is the three dimensional challenge of properly sorting and placing each container. I was able to replicate the many functions of prototype intermodal operations with this product. Heljan's Container Terminal will prove to be a centerpiece for anyone looking to enhance the operations on a modern era, HO scale railroad. Anyone seeking additional information, as well as a web movie showing the scope of this product, should visit Walthers web site at www.walthers.com search 322-89001.

Prices for the No. 322-89001 container crane is $750.00. Additional add-on items are priced as follows: container with metal adaptor for $19.95; base element extension kit for container crane for $54.98; track extension kit for container crane for $19.98; and metal adaptor for containers for $7.98.—GEORGE RILEY

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