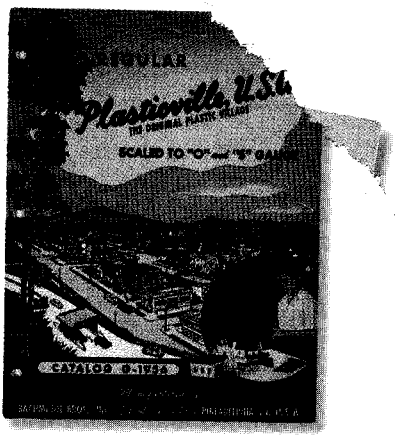
These memorable structures have been enhancing layouts for 50 years

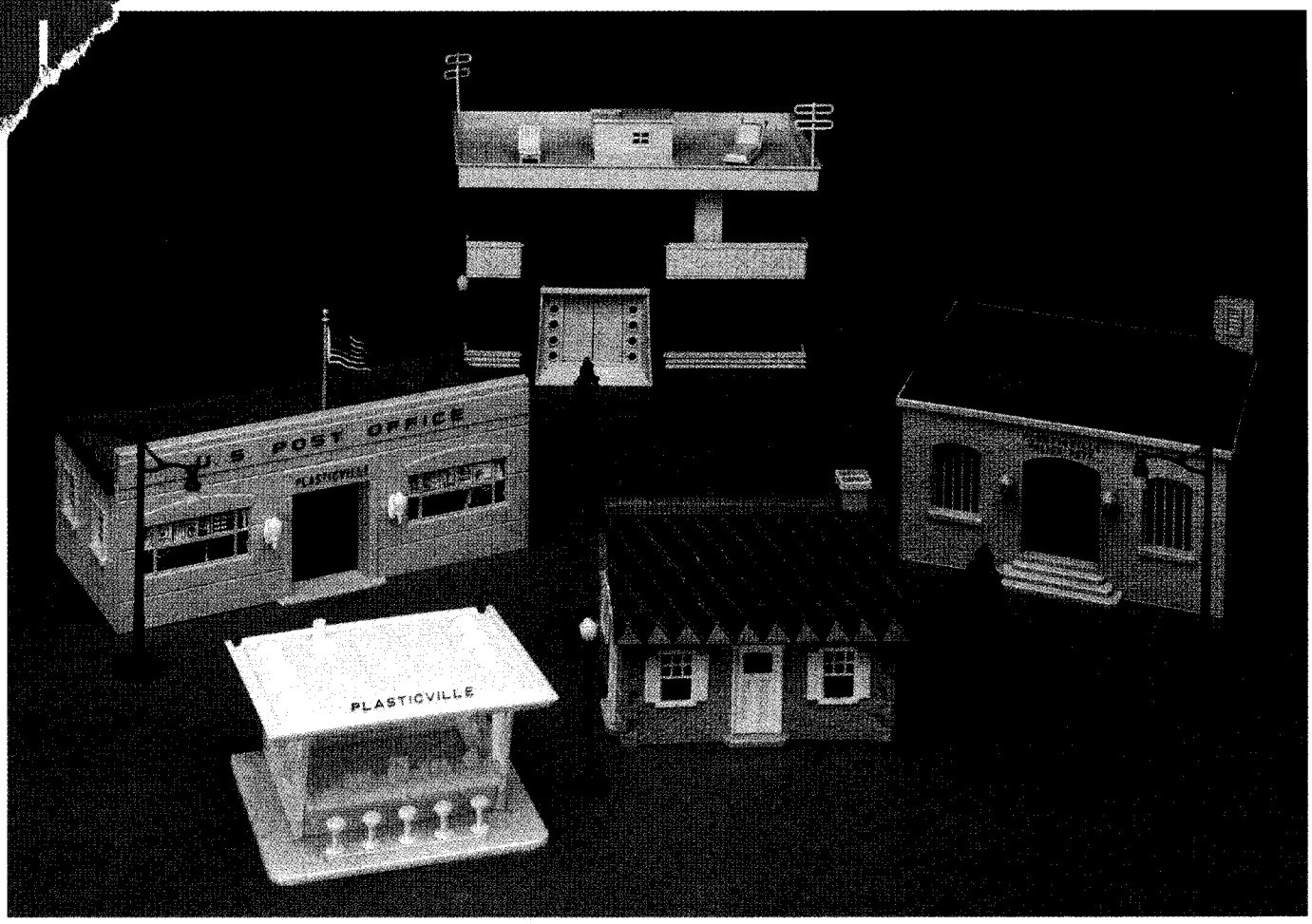


By Roger Carp
Photos by Rebecca Saliture

WHAT BABY BOOMER doesn't remember that classic scene in *The Graduate*? It takes place right after Benjamin Braddock, played in the movie by Dustin Hoffman, has returned home from college to sort out his life. Ben learns, to his dismay, that his parents have invited some of their old friends to join them in celebrating his entrance into the "real world." As Ben greet the guests, struggling all the while to be polite, one of his father's buddies pulls him aside to offer advice for the future: "Just one word – plastics."

For Ben and his peers, "plastics" conjures up images of everything that is artificial and shallow, everything that he wants to avoid. No, plastics assuredly won't define the future for this archetypal baby boomer.

Ironically, though, for many members of Ben Braddock's generation, a slightly different word has the most positive of connotations. Hearing this other word is enough to warm their hearts and lighten their thoughts. It can inspire them to look back at their childhood and remember with fondness the make-believe world they created for their O or S gauge electric trains. That word, of course, is "Plasticville."



Houses, commercial and municipal structures, trees, and lights – these are just some of the accessories that have made Plasticville U.S.A. so essential to O and S gauge modelers for half a century. Jim Forbes photo

Roots deep into the past

The full name was "Plasticville U.S.A." Bachmann Bros., a venerable business in Philadelphia, selected that name for the line of injection-molded plastic buildings, signals, figures, trees, and vehicles it began manufacturing in late 1946. Prior to that time, toys had no bearing on the firm's financial welfare. Unlike such other structure makers as Skyline and Yank Model Research – new ventures established to tap the burgeoning toy train market – Bachmann introduced Plasticville after it had been in business for more than a century.

The story began in 1833, when an entrepreneur named Henry Carlisle started fabricating an array of items from horn, ivory, and tortoise shell, with expensive hair combs for women being his top sellers. Economic setbacks occurred during and after the Civil War, but Carlisle's firm recovered by the end of the 19th century. Credit for this reversal belonged in large part to Henry Bachmann, whose father and brother manufactured similar household wares in a separate business. Competition seemed pointless, so the two firms merged in 1899 to form Bachmann Bros.

Three years later, the new firm experimented with making women's side combs from celluloid, the first synthetic plastic material (developed in 1868).

Success was immediate, and times were flush until changes in hair styles undermined the appeal of Bachmann's products. Management reacted by moving into the manufacture of celluloid optical frames known as "tortoise shell." Growth continued into the 1920s under the guidance of J. C. and B. H. Crowther, relatives of the Bachmanns.

Before long, the Crowthers were supervising work at a new factory on Erie Avenue in Philadelphia that still serves as the firm's headquarters. As important, they shifted production to lenses as well as frames, and their Solarex brand soon dominated the sunglasses market. The need for eye protective equipment by the military helped keep production lines operating and profits multiplying during World War II.

A pioneer in the use of injection-molded thermoplastics, Bachmann Bros. looked for new areas in which to expand after the war. Executives selected one that had little to do with anything else they were making. They knew how popular displays at the base of Christmas trees had become and hoped to capitalize on that current interest.

Eager to discover what items consumers needed to create miniature rural or biblical scenes, they focused on fencing. Before long, however, consumers had discovered another use for Bachmann's new item. They realized that these white fences looked great on toy train layouts. Following the public's lead, Bachmann didn't hesitate to promote its fencing as perfect for the model railroading hobby.

By 1950, a hodgepodge of small accessories had joined Bachmann's fences. Plastic trees and bushes, a footbridge, a wishing well, and a trellis were advertised. A brown rustic fence had been added, along with a more delicate type of picket fence. These pieces could be used with toy trains or placed beneath a Christmas tree. In fact, Bachmann marketed two assortments of its accessories as "Christmas Platform Units." It wouldn't take long before

executives and engineers understood that toy trains had much more to offer for year-round sales, and Christmas trees were left behind.

Setting the limits of Plasticville in 1950

In reality, Bachmann had already begun to redirect its sights by 1950. Previously, the firm sold its fencing in nondescript packaging. Now that its line of accessories had expanded, linking the components was imperative. The key, executives knew, was a name; they settled on Plasticville U.S.A.

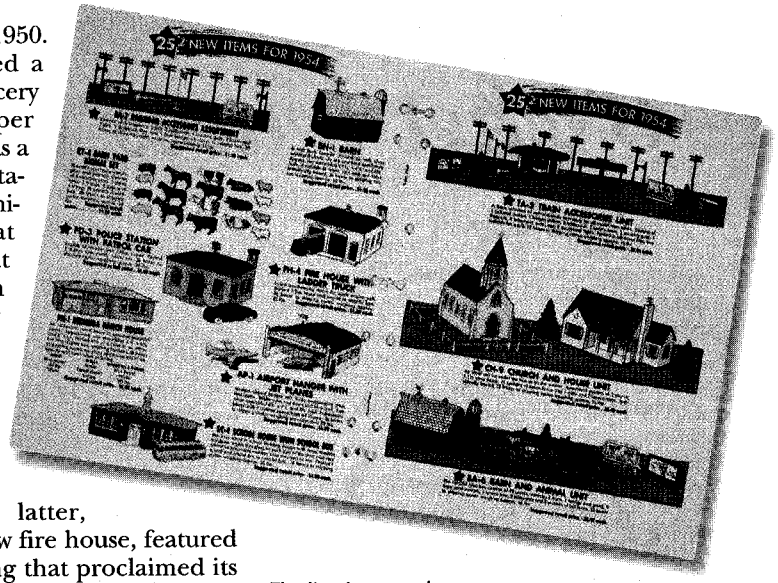
The choice was brilliant. It captured the optimism of the early postwar years and conjured up the modern as well as the traditional. Plastic was associated with countless new items that were convenient, inexpensive, and readily disposable. The word connoted a revolutionary new material with unlimited potential. Later, as *The Graduate* showed, plastic brought to mind things that were cheap and shoddy. Right after World War II, however, it symbolized progress and prosperity.

Ironically, many of the Americans who were embracing plastic and the economic and technological growth it suggested occasionally yearned for a simpler, almost rural past, when change was slower and community reigned. Marketers at Bachmann, sensitive to the undercurrent of nostalgia, appended "ville" to the name of their new line in order to tap into the lingering sentimentality. They recognized that no matter how up-to-date new entries might look, those models needed to be associated with gradual growth and small town values. Plasticville U.S.A., like the actual bedroom communities rising across the East Coast and Midwest, had to promise the best of both worlds: It must be modern yet still touch America's past.

Convinced they were on the right track, executives built up the new line. In addition to bucolic elements like the birdbath, yard pump, and trellis, they offered a model of a Cape Cod house. This boxy cottage, perfect for "you and me and baby makes three," featured a door, two windows, and a pert chimney.

Also available was a model of the kind of barn kids pictured when pretending they lived on farms. Attached to the main structure was a silo; on top of the barn's roof were ventilators and a weathervane. Bachmann then released two versions of a country church. Thanks to these colorful, low-priced additions, consumers could create elaborate rural scenes for their O or S gauge trains or holiday panoramas.

City dwellers discovered a few models aimed at them in 1950. Bachmann offered a white and red grocery store labeled "Super Market." There was a gasoline filling station molded in similar colors that looked right at home in an urban setting. Especially striking were the window inserts depicting details that enhanced the look of the market and the gas station. The latter, along with the new fire house, featured embossed lettering that proclaimed its locale as Plasticville. No matter what kind of community kids wanted to model, they could use these buildings.



The line increased every year in the 1950s with colorful structures, vehicles, and the other details that kids needed for their miniature rural villages and urban centers.

Bustin' through the city limits

Solid sales, bolstered by promotion in the F. W. Woolworth's variety stores, propelled Bachmann to expand the line further. The executives and engineers overseeing the development of Plasticville adopted an approach that reflected contemporary and not historical concerns. To be sure, in 1951 they introduced a schoolhouse whose design appeared better suited for the country than the city. But more typical of Bachmann's direction was a new police station, whose spartan gray and green exterior suggested a gritty precinct house in downtown Philadelphia. The police station joined a white fire house with a red roof introduced the previous year, probably at the insistence of Al Redles, the company's national sales manager, who was crazy about fire-fighting equipment.

Over the next few years, Plasticville U.S.A. gained more of every type of building. Starting in 1952, residents could satisfy their admittedly small appetites at a new diner. Its gray walls and red or yellow trim beautifully captured the look of restaurants throughout the Northeast. Accommodating folks in a hurry was hardly a problem after 1954. That's when the Frosty Bar first set out its five stools and offered refreshments to those on the go.

Once their stomachs were full, residents could dash over to the Plasticville Hardware and Pharmacy or the Plasticville 5 and 10 (both new in 1953). A larger supermarket with an updated design also opened its doors in 1953.

Even the most diminutive people

Bachmann's board of directors admires the latest additions to the Plasticville product line. Left to right: A. H. Crowther, W. F. Newby, B. H. Crowther, A. H. Redles, and C. W. Crowther.

need spiritual sustenance, which may explain why two more houses of worship broke ground. The white and gray parish church introduced in 1953 (using tooling purchased from Skyline after it went out of business) came with attractive paper inserts that simulated stained glass windows.

Grander still was the cathedral. Added in 1955, it has become one of the most desirable pieces in the line. Its bell, gold cross, and colorful window inserts delight collectors.

What else does a bustling town require? Housing. In the late 1940s and early '50s, suburbs around New York City and Philadelphia introduced the world to tract housing – planned neighborhoods in which all residences looked about the same. Plasticville seemed destined to a similar fate until designers came up with a ranch house in 1951 to go with the Cape Cod they had previously finished. Even two styles didn't offer enough variety to the forward-minded citizens. Consequently, two-story colonials and a New England ranch began crowding local streets in 1954. As with all Plasticville houses, an array of color variations exists, with a few bringing premiums.

Vital for any expanding burg was a spanking new post office. The good folks at Bachmann brought out one in 1953 that featured a gray front, tan sides, and a gray roof, along with two paper window inserts and an American flag. Also new that year was an enormous white and blue hospital. Junior doctors and nurses noted with pleasure in 1954 that operating and examination tables, beds, and other appropriate furnishings were included to make this impressive model even better.

Residents eager to explore the rest of the world (or layout) had only to head over to the Plasticville airport and buy tickets at its neat white and blue administration building (new in 1954). There, they would wait while aircraft were prepared for takeoff at the multicolored hangar (new in 1952).

Less adventurous souls might take to the road. They could climb aboard a bus or select one of the cars introduced in 1954 for their excursion. A more modern gas station with washing facilities and two islands with pumps made its debut the next year.

Work and play characterized two additions for 1957: a tan factory with a gray or brown roof, smokestack, and water tower, and a red and white TV station known by its distinctive calling letters, WPLA. No wonder folks were saying that, to paraphrase a lyric from the musical *Oklahoma*, everything was up to date in Plasticville!

Train time in the '50s

Bachmann had nothing to lose by marketing the airport and the hangar. Aircraft fascinated youngsters, and planes were becoming the preferred mode of transportation for wealthier people. But the hub of activity in Plasticville was still the rail yard.

Railroad-oriented items made their debut in 1950. First came a station platform molded in light gray or brown plastic and featuring, respectively, a brown or green roof and a small sign identifying the locale as Plasticville. A manually operated crossing gate with a white arm and a black or red base came next.

The most impressive newcomer was a suburban station. Its platform tended to be brown while the roof and trim might be light gray, brown, or green. Two signs and a chimney gave it personality, as did the benches added later.

Four years passed before Bachmann expanded this part of the line. A switch tower and a signal bridge debuted in 1954. Engineers specified that the tower be molded in colors that matched those of the platform and the suburban station. On its roof they placed plastic signs identifying its location as Plasticville Junction. In 1955 and 1956, the same structure was cataloged by The A. C. Gilbert Co. as the 590 Control Tower, although it had a light and metal signs labeled for Cedar Hill Junction.

Bachmann brought out only one railroad accessory in 1955, a black trestle bridge. Modelers had more to enjoy the next year with the Union Station. This handsome passenger terminal featured gray platforms on both sides of the green and white central facility. Two more additions appeared in 1957: a water tank and a loading platform. A watchman's shanty entered the line the following year, thereby giving modelers an amazing assortment of accessories.

In homage to Philadelphia's past, Bachmann thought a model of Independence Hall would fit perfectly in Plasticville.

Sales of Plasticville buildings, figures, and accessories grew steadily, especially after Woolworth's began promoting them in the early 1950s. Courtesy Raymond Fetzner

All but complete

By the late 1950s, the basic Plasticville line was in place. Bachmann, which now dominated the marketplace for O and S gauge structures, elected to expand it only gradually over the next half-dozen years. Those additions, Plasticville's competition, and the decline and revival of the line in the past 25 years will the focus of a future article. CTT

This overview of the development of Plasticville U.S.A. benefited greatly from the assistance of George Haggerty, Jack Lienhauser, Frank Lippincott, and Lee Riley at Bachmann Industries; the research of Jean Bickerton, Charles Donovan and Bob Nussey; and the comments of Bill Nole and Don Simonini.