

# Picket fences for Christmas?

By Donald Simonini

Bachmann didn't have trains in mind when it launched Plasticville

IT WAS ALWAYS portrayed as the quintessential postwar symbol of peacetime bliss and contentment, what every returning shell-shocked GI and his long-suffering hometown sweetie longed for after years of war anxiety – “a little cottage, a garden . . . maybe with a nice *white picket fence* around it.” Add a few kids, a new car in the driveway, and you had it. The idyllic life, 1946-style.

That symbolism may not have been lost on Bachmann Bros., but when the fence was first brought to the toy market, there seems to have been an almost total lack of awareness as to its most like purpose – a toy train accessory.

The no. 1c 16-piece fence and gate set was unveiled by Bachmann in an advertisement for Monsanto plastics published in the November 23, 1946, issue of *Saturday Evening Post* magazine. Ironically, the fence was shown alongside a Lionel train, among other new toys, all made of Monsanto's new Lustron polystyrene



plastic. The ad belies the commonly held notion that this seminal “Plasticville” product was born in 1947.

Bachmann contends that it did not market the fence until May of 1947. At that time, it touted the product as a “Christmas fence” for use in Yuletide displays known as “Christmas gardens.” Indeed, the lid of the early fold-up display box makes no mistake about the fence's use, showing it surrounding a Christmas tree and some toys, all in red and green.

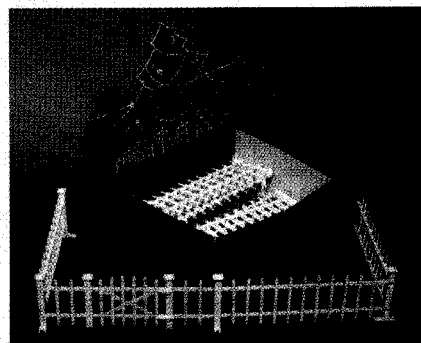
As if to further discourage any toy train use, the picket fence was 9 feet high in O scale! Its only natural companions would be the 3-foot birds, 9-foot birdbath, and 10-foot trellis Bachmann released a few years later, also for Christmas gardens. But at least those items were dropped after 1950. Obviously, Christmas gardeners weren't too fussy about  $\frac{1}{8}$ ” scale. Too bad nobody was making Standard gauge trains anymore.

So much for marketing savvy.

Looking through a 50-year-thick window, another question arises. Why was Bachmann's incursion into the plastic toy village arena so timid? The fence was its only product for a year or maybe longer. The trade name that would become synonymous with toy trains – *Plasticville* – was still a few years away.

The first catalog under the “Plasticville U.S.A.” name, which apparently was copyrighted in 1949, came out in 1950. By then, a respectable product line of more than 40 toy buildings, accessories, and assortments had emerged, all handsomely presented in color. Now it had the

Bachmann's plastic fencing was being advertised in November of 1946, as seen in this Monsanto advertisement printed in *Saturday Evening Post* magazine.



A white picket fence seemed perfect for Christmas gardens in the late 1940s. The marketers at Bachmann didn't realize it would work even better with toy trains until some time had passed.

appropriate copy as well, with emphasis where it rightly belonged in the first place: “*Built to scale for hobbyists and miniature railroad builders.*”

As further testimony to this new line of thinking, the cover illustration of the 1950 catalog provides a glimpse of Plasticville's future. In the background, amid the Cape Cod houses and the country church, are a partially visible railroad track and crossing gate!

With this belated acknowledgment to model railroading, Bachmann began its long companionship with toy trains, which also gave it the advantage of year-round sales. That timorous, misguided baby step was now a full stride. Oddly, as the line grew and improved with “*all structures built to scale,*” the clunky, oversized Christmas fence remained in the catalog throughout the 1950s and '60s. It continues today, probably allowed to live as homage to the line's beginning, and always available as a set with a gate or individual sections.

Rather than discontinue the gigantic fence, Bachmann introduced an additional, more accurately scaled picket fence set (no. 1101) in 1959. At long last, those idyllic little house lots could look more like the love nests they were meant to be . . . instead of like Stalag 17!