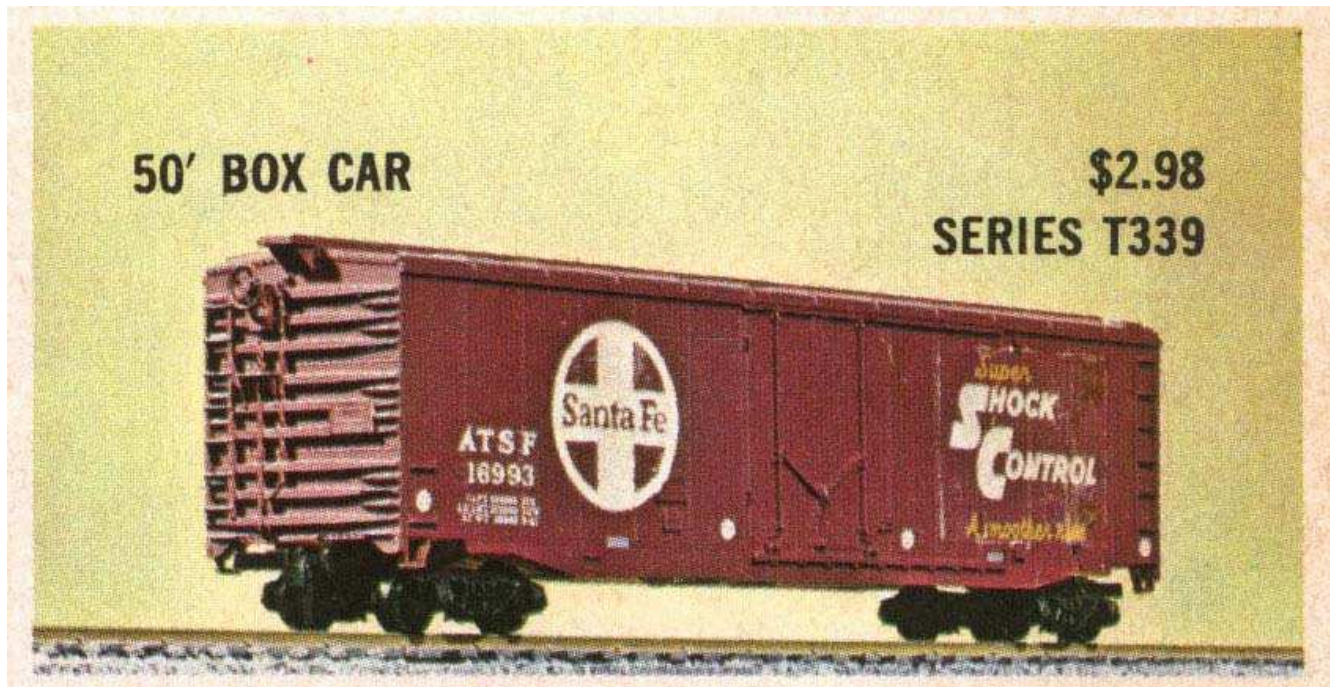


GOING IN CIRCLEZ GUIDE No. 3

BOXCAR BONANZA: TYCO 50-foot boxcars in Prototypical RR paint schemes

Introduction

From their earliest days in the blue-box era, Tyco kept a 40-foot sliding door boxcar in its line – tooling that survived with few modifications right up to the “new Mantua” split in 1978, and beyond.



1968 Catalog Image

In 1968, Tyco previewed a dubious new addition to their boxcar line – one that, despite the non-existence of the particular model pictured, would still become the very definition of the word “ubiquity”: the 50-foot plug-door boxcar. Finding duty in virtually every freight train set they would ever sell, this plucky car survived - also virtually unchanged - right through the very end of Tyco Trains a quarter-century later. While changes were indeed made, the car still survives today, now approaching its fortieth birthday!

Like the 40-foot car before it, the 50-foot plugdoor boxcar was the seeming price of entry for any model vendor to be taken seriously. Athearn, AHM, Bachmann, Cox, MDC/Roundhouse, and a host of other vendors both serious, fly-by-night, and inheritive have served up their own versions of this car, each one a little different (if only sometimes slightly) than the others.

In those 25 years as a Tyco item, the 50-foot plugger was dressed in different catalog names and stock numbers, and even served as the basis of a short-lived premium accessory. It donned over 40 different paint schemes by stock number; the total count goes well higher than 60 once you add in variations of several of them. By virtue of its prototype, it shared a number of features similar to its contemporary competitors, but retained some unique features all to itself.

Currently I do not have anything close to “all” of the 50-foot boxcars. Probably not even half of them. But I bet I DO have a few that you haven’t seen or thought about. Even the “most common of the common” have certain specimens that are well worth the collectors’ hunt.

The purpose and contents of this post will unfold over time. Eventually (maybe) (big maybe), I will someday be able to photograph and present the “entire” catalog of boxcars here – my own personal collection will have to grow over time to fill this purpose.

Initially, I will be presenting variations of some of the more well-known (and often overlooked) examples. As well as going into some sometimes-surprising variations in the tooling itself. Eventually I'll delve into the other stock numbers and catalog versions as money, availability and personal whim permits. Given the sheer amount of potential content, it may take quite some time.

And of course I will hit up the other types of boxcars as well - conditions above pertaining.

So welcome aboard this journey into the depths of plastic hell – haystacks and haystacks of boxcars – in search of dreck and gems alike.

(You know – if I were a commissioned artist, I would try to build a real boxcar out of enough Tyco cars.)

I give you: *The Boxcar Bonanza!*

Part 1: CAPTAIN'S SHOCK

339A: Santa Fe (1968 – 1988)*

First shown as part of a 1968 train set, the car was decorated in what was very obviously a hastily-applied decal job:



1968 Catalog image

Adding further insult to injury: not only was the catalog car an ugly duckling, but it in no way reflected the graphics that were actually produced! While the Santa Fe's famous "Shock Control" livery was new in 1968 and would have made a fine, popular model... Tyco would take over 10 years to offer the car they so crudely displayed in their own catalog! Instead, what hobbyists got in 1968 was this:



339A v1.0 - Capitan White

1968

One can certainly question the logic of introducing a boxcar that promoted passenger service, when passenger trains themselves were on the brink of extinction. Perhaps it could be argued that Tyco was attempting to help the cause? Nonetheless, while the El Capitan boxcar is somewhat common, the all-white version is not, as it was only made the very first year. Being the first release, it does have some unique tooling characteristics that were immediately revised:



50' boxcar chassis 1

Most significantly, the chassis and weigh mounting are unique to this one specific car. The weight is not fastened to or retained by the chassis; rather, it is placed onto two pegs in the body shell that fit into the small holes. This was quickly revised to the chassis version below:



50' boxcar chassis 2

...which is, by far, the most common one across the entire production run of 50' boxcars in all flavors. This chassis would be introduced with the most common variation of the El Capitan car:

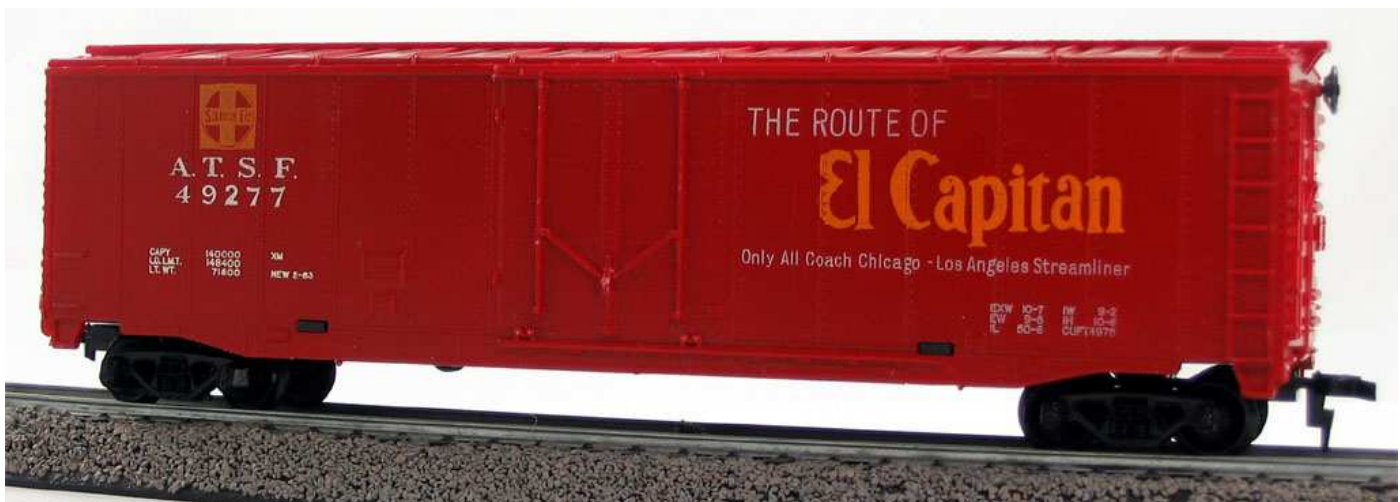


339A v1.5a - Capitan Yellow

1969-1979

Not only is a splash of color added in the form of yellow heralds, the base color is changed from the salmon-pink of 1968, to a deeper maroonish color.

This red, yellow, and white Santa Fe car was included in thousands of train sets, and separately available as well. And as usual, in numbers such as those, subtle variations abound:



339A v1.5b



339A v1.5c

Comparing the cars above, one sees that it gradually sheds data over the years.

In 1975, Tyco revised the tooling on the 50' plugdoor body, by filling in the stirrup steps and shortening the roofwalk overhangs. Previously available roadnames are available in both versions for a short time, but new roadnames and production runs from 1976/77 on are only available with filled steps. The El Capitan cars were becoming long in the tooth by then (not to mention outdated, per their passenger train promotion), and had also been replaced by other roads in train sets, so they are somewhat scarcer in this revised tooling. Curiously, the filled-step car shown above has more data than the open-step car below it.

And there may yet be more variations than those above! Incredibly, I received most of my examples as lot fillers, and then rounded up the examples at the haunt – and out of 6 total, 4 were different.

While Tyco had been offering the Shock Control paint scheme on their 40-foot boxcar for some time, in 1981 they FINALLY produced the car they showed in the 1968 catalog!



339A v2.0a - Shock Left

1980-1988*

While this example leaves MUCH to be desired in terms of paint quality, it represents a major and long-overdue change in graphics, reflecting what was on thousands of real boxcars all over the country.

Note the terrible coverage and registration of the paint, and the distortion of graphics on the logos. Unfortunately, this is a dubious Tyco trademark where cars that were included in train sets are concerned. This makes the search for worthy examples fun and frustrating at the same time. And when they do turn up:



339A v2.0b - Shock Right

1982-1988*

The results are often surprising, and worth the effort. Compare the two "Shock Control" cars above, and you'll first

notice the swapping of the graphics from end to end. If you have an eye for detail, you'll notice something even better: the road numbers are different! But most importantly, the second car has bright, bold, beautiful paint and a nice even gloss sheen, worthy of keeping.



Was ATSF 40' boxcar 12079 hauling steroids?

Strangely, these two 50' Shock Control cars share unique traits with their smaller cousin, the 40-foot sliding-door boxcar mentioned earlier. That car has the roadnumber "12079", like version 2.0a above, but the graphic arrangement matches version 2.0b. In fact, if you look closely at version 2.0b – they have it stenciled as a 40-foot car!

It is only speculation on my part, but the nice paint on my particular example of 2.0b might be explained by some other very unique characteristics, that I have not seen on ANY of the other dozens of 50-footers I have, which I will address in the future...



Comparison of 50' plugdoor body revisions, all from Santa Fe cars. Details to be forthcoming...

PART 2: ORANGE MGGINNIS**339B: New Haven (1969-1979)***

Going to the next color in the spectrum and sporting the famous stacked letters of the McGinnis railroad conglomerate, is Tyco's next offering, Decorated for new haven. Previously, Tyco had offered a New Haven boxcar in an attractive inverted color scheme of black car with orange and white letters. Simple but distinctive, the New Haven car is eye-catching in any consist... and unlike the Santa Fe car preceding it, did not seem to change much over the years.



339B v1.0a



339B v1.0b

In comparing the first two cars above, we can see the New Haven car survived into the filled-step era. The graphics are also shifted slightly to the left, where they seem to remain for most production of this car.



339B v2.0a - CP Rail 56767

There was one more notable variation in graphics however. Looking at this car above and comparing to the first two, we see that the font for the roadnumber has changed, the data is larger, and the black printing has been moved; the "H" is closer to the "N" as it should be.

Of course, print quality on all three of the examples shown is somewhat lacking. The third one is nothing short of terrible, but even though the first two are better, the block serifs on the NH logo have an improper curvature to them. Did Tyco ever get it right...?

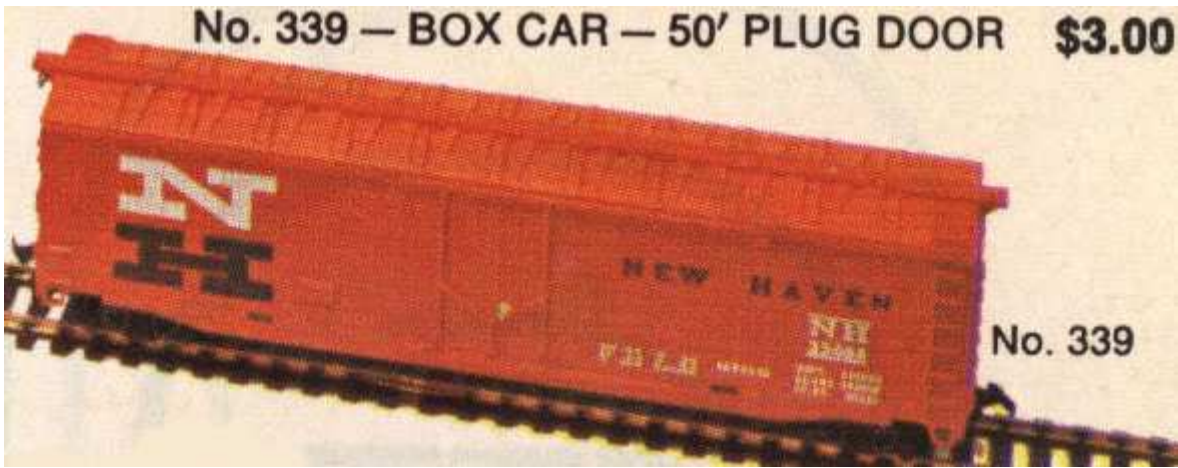


339B v2.0b

1977-1979*

Boy, did they ever! This example, which must be one of the last produced, has a deeper orange base decorated with perfectly aligned lettering, solid print, squared serifs on the NH logo, and even modified data and herald fonts, all under a coat of factory gloss. It's a night-and-day difference compared to its sister above! The filled steps make this a 1976-ish car. Tyco did seem to find religion from 1976-1978, as a plethora of new paint schemes and a general improvement in quality control across the line can be found in this era.

Stepping back for a moment, there is something else that deserves mention. The 1972 catalog shows a version of the New Haven boxcar with more data than any of the examples I have found. This was after the New Haven car was first cataloged, so it is not a reproduction sample, and may in fact exist:



No. 339 — BOX CAR — 50' PLUG DOOR \$3.00

1972 Catalog Image

Part 3: WUKKA WUKKA WUKKA...**339D: CP Rail (cat 1973-1978...)**

Tyco's CP Rail 50-footer is one of the more interesting and varied examples in the line. It first appears in train sets in the 1973 catalog, is shown as a separate item only in 1975, and is available for at a least a few years after that. It is easily found in mass quantities, but has a number of interesting graphic variations. Between road numbers, colors, and data spacing, let's get to work:



339D v1.0a - CP 9208

While rail fans and the general public alike nowadays refer to Canadian Pacific's famous logo as "The PacMan logo", the technical term for it was Multimark, which is not to say that makes anymore sense. In any case, it predated PacMan by a full decade, having been unveiled in 1968.

Once again proving that they should not be taken seriously, Tyco commits a few serious errors on this car. First off, while Canadian Pacific became famous for applying the Multimark in a kaleidoscopic array of color combinations on all types of cars, one of the few they did NOT use, was blue! CP rail boxcars were red and green; there was a blue Multimark logo, but it was reserved for maritime equipment. Another distressing "feature" of Tyco's CP Rail car, is the location of the Multimark itself – its effectiveness as a bold, dynamic symbol is lessened by having it so inset from the end of the car. In real life, the vertical edge of the triangle was formed by the very end of the car (hoppers and tank cars excepted due to their shape).

Tyco's first version of the CP rail car seems to be the one above. Wearing road number 9208, this car also wears a large Multimark that spans from the bottom edge of the roof panel, nearly all the way down to the sill. Compare it to the next example:



339D v1.0b – condensed text and small logo

Still wearing #9208, notice that the Multimark is smaller and no longer touches the roof panel, nor extends so close to the sill. Not only that, but the lettering itself is highly condensed on this version, and moved to the right.



339D v1.5a - CP 56767

The next variation in the series, shown above, keeps the small Multimark and letter spacing. The actual variation concerns the road number: it is now #56767, a number shared with Tyco's 40' Yellow CP Rail boxcar.



339D v1.5b – deeper blue

The next variation (shown above) primarily concerns the shade of blue – which is now a little bit darker. But the Multimark is seriously inset now, almost a full two panels inward. And the data is inset further as well! Interesting...

But woe: even if the color is nicer, it's still *blue*! Has anyone EVER seen a blue CP Rail car? It begs the question: What was Tyco thinking?



339D v2.0 - CP Green

1975/1976*

Perhaps they thought "We'll just sneak out a few green ones to see if people are paying attention, and to shut up pseudo-riveters like GIC". The overall presentation is similar to the blue car preceding it: the data is the same. Tyco even went as far as to correctly invert their Multimark colors for use on the green car – and curiously, they went back to the full-height version as well. Note the filled steps, which makes this a 1975/76 or later car.

One thing that ALL these 5 cars have in common, unfortunately, is that trademark, lousy Tyco paint! I've reviewed at least a dozen more of these cars, and they all (but one) shared the same blurring and sponginess of graphics as the five shown above. Notice also, that several of the Multimarks are not quite as true as they should be – the round element bows outward from the corners.

So, like the Santa Fe and New Haven cars – is there a true "prize" version out there?



339B v1.5c – premium finish

1977*

You betcha! Bearing the trademarks of late-70's Tyco production, this car has a richer, deeper base color; bright, crisp, square graphics; and a smooth, even factory-gloss sheen. And just like the New Haven example above, it also has new fonts for the road number and data. (And ironically, I knocked the brake wheel out before I took the picture... sigh).

Part 4: Ubiquity to the moon**339E: Burlington Northern (1972-1993)**

Look up the word "ubiquitous" sometime, and if I have edited that dictionary, you will find the following picture:



339E v1.0a – BN Green

1972-1990

This of course is the (in)famous Tyco Burlington Northern 50' boxcar. Introduced in 1972, this car existed, in some form or fashion, until the very end of production in 1993.

The question regarding this car is not "When was it available?", or "what sets was it included in?"; rather, the question should be: "When was this car NOT available?"

Just for fun – do an ebay search in Tyco for "Burlington Northern" and see how many of these turn up. Then expand that to general HO and see how many more you find. Ooops – don't forget your nondescript ebay listings like "lot of old cars" "miscellaneous HO stuff" and "HO trains". Do that every few days, and I guarantee you'll have accounted for at least a metric decabuttload of these by the end of the year. Lined up end to end, there aren't enough PowerTorques in the world to pull the train these would make. But they could probably be used to build a lunar staircase.

What I'm trying to say is: if you don't have like 10 of these, *you aren't trying hard enough!!* And collecting Tyco without getting more of them is like trying to get out of the Mafia – just when you think you're out, more come falling from the sky.

But as always with Tyco, things are not always as they seem. For every standard buttload of plain BN boxcars out there, there's bound to be a gem or two.

The picture above illustrates an earlier car, with open steps. The markings are reasonably close but a little bit off: for instance, the BN's very clever "alligator jaws" logo should be up higher on the carbody, and possibly larger as befits the era when these were made. But the scaling is also off... the silhouetted "N" inside the white "B" looks a little compressed. And the curved part of the top half of the logo is distorted a bit too large. These nitpicks may seem like splitting hairs, but they are very distinct, especially when compared to almost any other BN car by any other manufacturer, not to mention Tyco's other BN cars! The herald text is better... but a little tall and narrow, and not the bolded Arial-style font more typical of the real BN.

But the example above might just be considered one of the better ones you'll find, because as usual, Tyco didn't know the meaning of "quality control" with train set filler, most of the time. The following example is ample proof:



339E v1.0b

Note the sponginess and the downright horrible distortion of the logo, culminating in the two halves actually touching. Ugh. The logo is also much lower than it should be. The herald text usually fares better, as it does in this case.

Unfortunately, bad logos like that shown here, even if not as extreme, were very much more the rule than the exception on Tyco's BN Boxcars.



339E v1.0c – BN Green, revised font

At first glance there might not seem to be anything special about the car above. Just another green BN boxcar. You might notice the glossy paint, but that's not too special. The logo is still lame. But the herald text has changed. It's bolder, and a completely if only subtly different font. Compare the G's, O's, and R's on this car, to those above it!

Anybody who has collected HO trains for any length of time has undoubtedly seen dozens if not hundreds of BN cars identical to those above. But there are actually a few notables, some of which are relatively new to me:



339E v2.0 – BN Yellow

1976/1977*

Now THIS BN car will get your attention... if you realize it's a Tyco! Bachmann is noted to have produced this scheme in mass quantity, but careful attention to the telltale elements such as the awkward logo, the herald lettering, and the standard "BN 100024" reporting marks reveal this to be a Tyco. This version was no doubt inspired by the BNs fleet of Western Fruit Express reefers; while some of the real cars sported the "WFE" lettering, many were left with the simplified graphics like those above.

These cars are not very common, especially when contrasted to the number of green ones out there. I would not feel uncomfortable guesstimating the ratio at something like 500:1. So if they're that "rare", then when were they produced?

Surprisingly, a Bachmann catalog may have the answer! In the late 1970's, Bachmann was apparently readying their own offering of this yellow BN car. But close inspection of the 1978 and 1979 Bachmann catalogs reveals that they used Tyco's version as a stand-in for photos. Bachmann's versions, in addition to sporting better graphics, also used different molds, including a true mechanical reefer with a separate roofwalk.

There is yet one standout BN car that supersedes all I have ever seen - even the yellow one. Tired of my crabbing about the logo? Well, here I need to give credit, because they DID get it right:



339E v3.0 – BN "Fixed"

I only found this car because I was trolling through hundreds of "BN Boxcar" auctions in search of the yellow one. But this stopped me in my tracks as soon as I saw that logo, and font. IT'S CORRECT! And even the data lettering has changed to something much crisper.

Who What When Where Why and How? I don't know. This car came to me in a late-production brown box, with yellow end flap and UPC sticker affixed to the back. I was skeptical that it wasn't a decal/repaint job when I saw the original auction, but took a chance anyway. It is most definitely a factory-produced item! There is some faint fading in the logo, and a Tampo application pattern within that is repeated on both sides of the car.

Rarer than the yellow version, it surely is. I don't know the genesis of it, or why they finally decided to do it right, or even if the box is correct. But, based on the decoration quality, I DO suspect it was one of the last releases of the original tooling, as you may soon judge for yourself...



339E v4.0 – BN "Modernized"

1990-1993*

In the late 1980's, Tyco began outsourcing much of its product from Yugoslavia. It's unknown how much of the old Hong Kong tooling (if any) was sent there, but what IS known, is that the boxcars were finally updated to new tooling!

This "new" boxcar is a nicely-rendered modernized 50-foot boxcar, with a modern, wide plug door, angled roof, and short end ladders. It's truly leaps and bounds beyond the old car. Strangely, there is a nicely-detailed refrigeration unit cast into the "A" (non-brake) end, but no indication of ventilation grilles on the car ends. Pemco released a similar series of cars in the early 1980's, complete with the same refrigeration unit; Pemco shared a number of similarities with Tyco even then and there are indications that this may be the exact same tooling as Pemco's earlier "50-foot Reefer".

Perhaps the best feature of these cars, are their modern Roller Bearing trucks, which are true replacements that can swap into any Tyco freight car. Indeed, the chassis for this new 50' boxcar body tooling, is much the same as it had always been on the earlier cars.

Curiously, the stirrups are half-filled on many examples (as they were in Pemco service)... although others have been found that are completely filled.

The Modernized BN Boxcar was found in train sets from the late 1980's through 1993. I do not recall if it was available separately, but it is fairly easy to obtain today. All examples feature the same improved painting as the one shown above: crisp, correctly-scaled logos, and nicely done herald lettering. But that trademark roadnumber and data still made the trip to Yugoslavia.

So what can you do with those other hundreds of forlorn green BN boxcars like the first three shown above?

Well, consider the vagaries of Tyco's production history. Within the lowly BN Boxcar genus, you can have the following species:

- Open steps, Flat paint
- Open steps, Gloss paint
- Filled steps, Flat paint
- Filled steps, Gloss paint

Oh yes... I almost forgot: in 21 years, do you think the shades of green ever changed? Why yes they did, but surprisingly just slightly, best seen compared next to each other. In each of the above four flavors no less. So, that's no less than EIGHT distinct specimens, if one were so inclined to hunt them all.

Then you could try to find examples of each with graphics that are actually *presentable*. And you'd probably find all of the others multiple dozens of times before a presentable, Yellow, or "Fixed" example turns up. But hey, I'm not THAT crazy... I'm just sayin' - they're out there... 🤖



(339E vSTC – “St Canard Midland M.O.W.”)

...Alternatively, the really bad ones still make excellent, durable, and cheap (even free!) test beds for weathering and other detailing ideas, as the car above - a true survivor in every sense of the word - illustrates. And for that, we all owe Tyco a bit of muddled thanks, otherwise we'd be forced to sacrifice other more worthy cars to our deviant causes... 🤖

Part 5: The Worldwide Coloring Pool

#365F (1977-1981) and #339F: RailBox (1979 – 1993)

While Tyco's BN Boxcar might be a fixture in train sets, collections, yard sales, junk shops and landfills all over the country, there's another Tyco car that better reflects a prototype that was seen virtually anywhere a pair of steel rods crossed a set of wooden beams.

In the 1970's, demurrage rates were causing a shortage of boxcars and excessive runarounds, as railroads were then required to return a boxcar to its home road's rails – or else pay excessive demurrage rates (a late return fee, basically) for each day. It didn't matter if the car was loaded or not.

To solve the problem, massive fleets of boxcars were built and rehabbed, giving even 30-year-old 40-footers a new lease on life. Short Lines got in on the act too – sometimes owning more boxcars than they had rails of their own to store them on; the gamble was that demurrage fees collected would subsidize other operations, as long as the boxcars never came home all at once.

To help solve these issues, the TrailerTrain Corp (now TTX) created the concept of RailBox – cars that were essentially pooled for use by any railroad that needed them, any time, anywhere – without incurring demurrage charges. In this manner, it wasn't even necessary to ship a car empty back to its owner; it could be reloaded and sent on to its next caretaker, where it would be emptied, reloaded, and sent on its way again. Sort of like a child's game of "Telephone" with a big metal box.

TrailerTrain introduced RailBox in 1974, to such a resounding success that the trademark yellow boxcar with black doors, bold lettering, and "Arrows-X" became a fixture in trains all over the Us, plus Canada and Mexico. This act was followed up with RailGon, and an ever-expanding fleet of TrailerTrain flatcars and autoracks.

Today, the general-purpose boxcar business is nowhere near as lucrative as it once was – shipping containers and trucks have dented the need, and many loads are pampered with specialized cars. But RailBox cars still remain a beloved fixture, so much so that you'll see a train with one – sometimes even with the original large logos – more often than not, over 30 years later!



365F – Railbox (Tyco v1.0)

1977-1978*

Tyco's first Railbox appears in one of the 50' boxcar's many moonlighting efforts. Cataloged in the #365 "Billboard Boxcar" series introduced in 1977, the RailBox car shared ranks with a host of other fantasized "household product" cars, despite being an actual prototype. Perhaps this is why Tyco jazzed it up a little with a silver roof and ends? The silver roof could actually be somewhat plausible, as railroads were beginning to experiment with leaving boxcar roofs unpainted to save money, but the ends are a Tyco-only embellishment. Of course, if one were to nitpick the roof color, one surely would have overlooked the fact that RailBox never did roster a "traditional" plug-door boxcar. In real life, they were all-new modern construction, with the vast majority being rib-sided sliding-door cars; a very few were smooth-sided with a different type of plug door.

I have said it elsewhere but will say it here for the record: this car is an ABSOLUTE MUST HAVE in any Tyco collection! Indisputably one of the BEST cars Tyco ever released. No quality control issues here – unlike all the other cars and road names above, the Billboard RailBox is almost universally of impeccable quality in paint and graphics. They are bright, bold, and sharp. Tyco's train line expanded a bit and quality generally improved (even some train set fodder got a little extra TLC) in the days when this car was first offered, and this car is the touchstone.

And, not only is this a standout among Tyco's line, but save for the silver roof oddity, its decoration is easily superior to ANY of the other RailBoxes sold by Athearn, Lionel, Roundhouse, and even Accurail, all the way through the late 1990's! To be fair, those manufacturers did have the proper boxcar tooling to use... but their paint jobs couldn't come close to what Tyco did. Strange but true!

(An interesting note about competitors' models: Tyco gave their RailBox the road number #10000, Athearn's was #10001, and Pemco/AHM did 10101!)

So how exactly, after years and years of middling paint jobs and aggravating quality issues with their boxcars, did Tyco manage to nail such a comparatively complex boxcar paint scheme, even taking 4 colors and adding a fifth with the silver roof? Their next version yields a clue:



365 / 339F – Railbox (Tyco v1.5)

1978-1980*

At some point, Tyco eschews the controversial silver roof in favor of a more prototypical car. The exact timeframe for this change is unclear to me... it seems to happen right around the time the Railbox was moved from the #365 "Billboard Boxcar" series, and into the standard #339 "50' Boxcar" group, with stock# 339F (which previously used on a promotional item – perhaps explaining why the Railbox was cataloged a billboard car for a time).

However, beginning in 1979, catalog pictures show the full-color yellow roof car included in train sets, where it would remain for several years as a standard item, but I have also seen it sold in #365 boxes as well as #339 boxes. But most train set versions actually looked nothing like these above, as you'll soon see. So this version is somewhat of an odd transitional item.

In person, my example above gives away the secret to the great paint jobs: they're not actually paint, but decals! I could look at my silver-roof version all day under a microscope and not discern it... but somehow there is a slight defect on my yellow-roof example. The door is painted, but the glosscoat is not a good so the carsides show evidence of a square of film which completely covers them from door to ladder and roof to sill. It's very faint, and my photography skills can't capture such subtlety. But it actually makes sense.

Another interesting note about decals – the catalog shots of the 365F car, show it with COTS stencils. This would have been a first for Tyco, and a nice touch... but no production examples have been found. There are a good many suitable COTS decal sets on the market however, and it would be easy to add them to this car. So beware if you ever see one, as it was probably added later.

Unfortunately... if there's one thing we know about Tyco, it's that corners were made to be cut, and boxcars were never a high-end item. And the beauty-queen RailBox was not immune:



339F – Railbox (Tyco v2.0)

1981-1989*

In the early 1980's, with the RailBox now firmly entrenched in the standard #339 series and trainset fodder, Tyco stopped using decals and went back to pad-printing. This version first appears in the 1982 catalog. And once again, as if going cheap wasn't bad enough, they went even further and did something that defies explanation! To wit - the graphics are sharp enough. And maybe (just maybe) they could have gotten away with blackening the "X-arrows" logo. But how on earth could they cheapen production by going to an all-black color process, yet manage to omit the very trademark feature that RailBox was famous for – the black DOOR?!

This car is actually cataloged as "New!" in 1983, with the 339F stock number. This is confusing as it was available in "all black" a year prior, and in full color as far back as 1977.



339F – Railbox (Tyco v3.0a)

1990-1993*

The RailBox was the second of two cars to make the transition to the modernized 50-footer with rollerbearing trucks, produced in Yugoslavia. As such it was included in many train sets, although I recently found 6 brown-boxed (unlabeled) examples, MIB, at a train show. Early versions retain the same graphics on a basecoat of yellow paint (note how it thickens in the detail eaves)....



339F – Railbox (Tyco v3.0b)

...While later versions are simply stamped on an unpainted, molded-in-color shell. Also note the differences in stirrups on these two examples: one is half-filled; the other is completely filled.

It's a pity that Tyco didn't revisit the full-color process on this tooling, because it is actually much closer in style to an actual RailBox. It would have made for a nice near-prototypical model. At least the door would be easy enough to paint.

Tyco's RailBoxes might be my personal favorites of the boxcar line. They fully illustrate the highs and lows of Tyco within a span of 10 years. The early ones were beautiful, almost prototypical; later ones feature a bizarre Tyco head-scratcher of a cost-cutting measure; the last ones offer attractive tooling and appropriate trucks. They came from across two oceans, with perhaps even a batch from the last gasp of US production (yes, there is evidence of this even in the late 70's). And with some minor attention, they can look good even on a "serious" modeler's layout... which is a tough task for 95% of Tyco cars.

Part 6: The Last of the Prototypers

As common as the Tyco 50-foot boxcar is, in all its numerous flavors and incarnations, the fact is that only a small percentage were actually fashioned after prototype railroad paint schemes. Most of them would be dressed in a variety of billboard, commemorative, and promotional schemes.

The bulk of the "real" cars were covered above, in just five road names: Santa Fe, New Haven, CP Rail, Burlington Northern, and RailBox. But there are two more uncommon releases of the boxcar tooling that are reasonably prototypical in paint. Due to their scarcity, I have not found multiples to compare for variations nor do I intend to chase any... so I will present the final two "prototypical" cars together here.

339J: Alaska Railroad (1973 or 1974; uncataloged)



#339J – Alaska Railroad

This would be about as basic as a boxcar gets – vintage “boxcar red” paint, and plain white graphics. But this is actually a very attractive car, thanks to the large logo and simple herald. Plus, who doesn’t think of expansive vistas, unspoiled nature and frontiersman adventure when they think of Alaska?

This is an odd car in the Tyco line. When it came to railroads and freight cars, Tyco generally picked lines they could get a lot of mileage from: large, popular roads with numerous interchange points and large fleets of cars that would get bounced all over the country. What better way to sell trains to kids than to evoke the ones they could see by their house? And yet I’ll venture that very few have seen an Alaska car roaming the “lower 48”.

The open steps make this pre-1976 production; the style of box and print on the end flap would seem to indicate perhaps 1973 or 1974. All examples I have seen have open steps. This car doesn’t turn up too often and can bring a premium over most.

One other unique graphic adorns this car: the copy data is the same generic set that Tyco used on many cars, but the “HYDROFRAME - 60’ “ marking is unique to the Alaska car.

#957: Baltimore & Ohio (Electronic Sound of Steam) (1982-1988)

Tyco had offered a crude-but effective rock tumbler “chug chug” boxcar for several years, before taking a stab at the electronics age and releasing one of their most sophisticated accessories: The Electronic Sound of Steam (in 50’ boxcar). This would also be the final moonlighting effort of the lowly 50’ plugger tooling, but it did receive some modifications to serve this duty. It also received an interesting paint job!



#957 – Baltimore & Ohio (Electronic Sound of Steam)

While not entirely accurate, the B&O “Timesaver” livery is the seventh and final prototype roadname applied to the 50’ plug-door. It’s an interesting choice with more than a few Tyco oddities (Tycoddities?) in play.

In the early-mid 50’s, the B&O re-branded its former “Sentinel” LCL service into “Timesaver”, and created one of the most dynamic and interesting paint schemes ever applied to a 40’ boxcar. Remember, in the 50’s “boxcar brown” was still the rule, so a deep blue car with an orange stripe certainly got attention, and ultimately pioneered the “railroad billboard” craze that would sweep the industry. And yes, you read that right – the real cars were all standard 40-foot sliding door boxcars!

Tyco did have the tooling to make a proper (40-foot) Timesaver available, but instead chose a 50-foot plugdoor. They can be forgiven since the electronics surely wouldn’t fit in the 40’ car... and the paint is certainly attractive, with the Timesaver scheme indeed just fitting into the waning days of the Steam Era they were trying to orate. But then, what on earth happened to that famous period-artwork logo?



A proper Timesaver logo

The white paraboloid shape should be smooth and curvilinear, and the “T-S” lettering within should be standing upright and italicized. Instead, the whole thing looks like it got *run over* by a Timesaver. Nevermind the use of red instead of orange for the surround. This is not nitpicking something subtle like the size or relative scale of a BN logo, and it’s not some one-off defect or batch variation either. Rather, it seems to be a strange, deliberate deformity on the part of Tyco’s art department! Every example of this car that I have seen (at least a half dozen) has had this feature. I hate sound like a hater but I’m just genuinely stumped: How do you lay out artwork for a car - doing a respectable job for the most part - and then decide to blatantly mess that up? Everything else about the logo and paintwork is reasonably fine!

There’s one other unique feature of this car’s decor: the tiny roadnumber matches the catalog stock number; a very Lionel-ish touch that Tyco never (to my knowledge) did before or after on any other car.

The net effect of all this is one of the more bizarre examples of Tycodom: the very things that make Tyco so dismissed by the masses, yet so bafflingly endeared to its collectors.

Part 7: DETAILS AND OTHER BITS

Tooling Changes

In order to securely house the electronics and other parts of the Electronic Sound of Steam in 50' Boxcar, Tyco had to modify the inner workings to fit them:



50-foot boxcar shell tooling insides

The first three shells on the left are all from standard 50-foot boxcar production over the years. The shell on the right has four pegs near the center, to which the sound module (a small circuit board) was attached. It also has two smaller pegs barely seen in the top left: these formed a slot into which a small metal weight was inserted. This weight, located as such, helped the special geared truck to stay on the rails. A small baffle containing an 8-ohm .25W speaker was inserted into the opposite end of the shell, sized to wedge between the pre-existing tooling ribs and the car end.

You may have noticed the picture above shows all-red cars. This is the same picture from the Santa Fe chapter, way at the beginning. So what this means is: yes indeed, there may be other cars out there than can perfectly house the guts of the steam sound boxcar. They may not be too common, but they're out there.

How does it work?



Sound of Steam components layout



Closeup of module truck unique to #957 Electronic Sound car

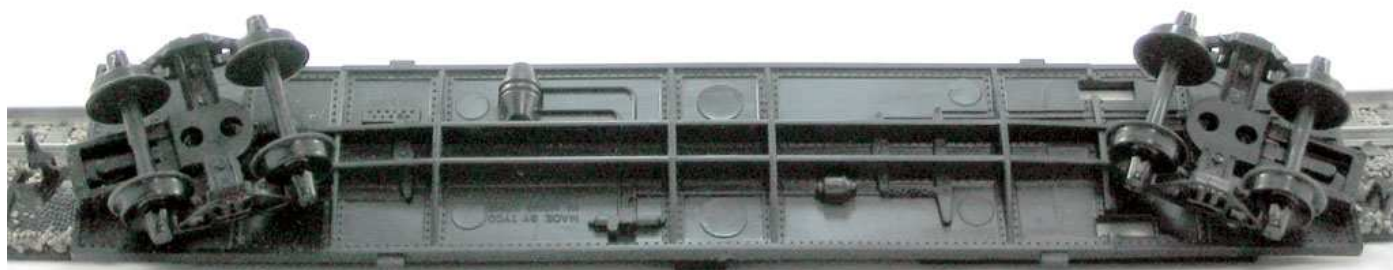


#957 chassis - bottom

The key to the whole works is the special truck. This is basically a standard Tyco freight truck, modified through the addition of a geared axle, and a riveted module with conductive metal prongs. The axle gear turns another gear with a cam molded into it. As the cam turns, it presses the pairs of conductive pins together in a set "on – off" pattern. In this way, the circuit board is activated to generate a sound like a puff of static... and it synchronizes with the speed of the wheels. The effect is crude by today's standards but is surprisingly effective and convincing for a 25-year old item!

You may be wondering why there is so much wiring for the speaker, in the picture above. I have made a pleasant discovery about these cars: sellers at train shows don't know they're actually supposed to make sound! They see it as "another junk Tyco boxcar". I got both of mine loose for a combined price of \$6. One did not have the innards, but I was more interested in the shell anyway. The other was intact, but the cheap paper speaker turned out to be shot. I found that the same type of speaker is commonly found inside many generic PCs, right down to a perfect fit and rating. The extra wire is from the PC harness, left in place because I was lazy.

A final word about those other roadname shells that might be made to house the sound circuitry: The chassis may provide a clue. Looking at the one shown above, you can clearly see the square cutout for the special truck to pass through. Now look at the one below:



#957/339 dual-purpose chassis - bottom

You can see a pair of small slots next to the right truck, which would have been the starting point for cutting the hole. And in fact, if you turn this chassis over...



#957/339 dual-purpose chassis - top

...you can see the tabs for aligning the battery, as well as the extra material on the right to reinforce the chassis where the hole would have been cut. BUT... notice the circular lug in the middle, to retain the large standard weight! This would also have been removed to make room for the battery.

So which car of mine is the potential Sounder? The Santa Fe "Shock Right" (which may also explain that particular example's stunning paint).

I have reviewed all of my other late-production cars, and the only other one to have the modified shell was the "Fixed" BN (another one with great paint!). But that one did not include the odd chassis shown above.

And so... this concludes the review of Tyco's "Prototypical" 50-foot plug doors. I hope you enjoyed it. Eventually, should the demand exist, I will get to reviewing the other 50-footers I have, as well as some of the other boxcars.

Just for Fun

By stock number, Tyco only cataloged 7 roadnames as shown above:

- Santa Fe
- New Haven
- CP Rail
- Burlington Northern
- RailBox
- Alaska
- B&O

But once you take the major color, marking, and tooling variations into account, 7 is an understatement...!

- Santa Fe El Capitan White
- Santa Fe El Capitan Yellow
- Santa Fe Shock 12079
- Santa Fe Shock 10279
- New Haven (font 1)
- New Haven (font 2)
- CP Rail 9208
- CP Rail 56767
- CP Rail Green
- BN Green
- BN Yellow
- BN modern
- RailBox silver
- RailBox normal
- RailBox black
- RailBox modern
- Alaska
- B&O

And you'll notice in that list, I still omitted a lot of those shown above. How many are out there? I probably don't have them all, but I still think I could build a real boxcar out of them...

GIC Scarcity Rank™

As usual, assigning firm values to any one car is an exercise in futility – Specific prices are volatile: subject to local supply, local demand, seller particulars, buyer whimsy, auction hits, and phases of the moon.

That said, it's helpful to know where some cars generally align with each other, as some are definitely scarcer than others.

My listings are in general order and neighbors may "trade places" from time to time, but you can bet the bottom is rarer than the top. In some cases the trend may represent a bell curve – a batch that is consistently easy, and then a sudden batch that is not.

Does that mean one certain car may be worth the price of two or three (or more) others? Possibly – it depends on your budget and level of patience – and good ol' supply and demand. But when budgeting, it helps to know what's out there – and how long you might wait to see another.

NOTE ABOUT 50' Boxcars: There are so many vagaries as to production and data changes, it is impossible to rank every possible combination. With that in mind, I have listed the major color / roadnumber / graphic / tooling variations only. Variations such as filled/open steps, flat/gloss paint, and small changes in data (that do not affect the overall graphic scheme) are not noted here yet, in relation to one another. The exception would be a "premium" version of the most common cars, where the graphics and paint are uniform and clean.

GIC Scarcity Rank™ for "prototypical" 339-tooling 50-foot plugdoor boxcars

Easy Pickings->

- BN Green *
- Santa Fe Capitan Yellow *
- CP Rail 56767 *
- New Haven 1
- New Haven 2 *
- Santa Fe Shock Left
- CP Rail 9208
- RailBox Silver
- Santa Fe Shock Right *
- BN Modern
- RailBox Black
- RailBox Yellow
- RailBox Modern
- Santa Fe Capitan White
- B&O
- Alaska
- BN Yellow
- CP Rail Green
- BN Fixed
- * "premium / presentable" versions of the noted cars

<- "Happy Hunting"!

*Dates shown (if any) following the stock number indicate the year range when an item could be seen in a catalog. In many cases, a car was available before and/or after its catalog appearance, making pinning the exact years of availability difficult. Whenever a catalog appearance is not known or confirmed, approximate years will be given based on quantifiable criteria such as tooling and graphic variations, paint quality, and even box end flap print styles.

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