

LEAVE IT TO LIONEL

A toy train brings together a popular TV series and the Association of American Railroads

By Joe Mania 87-26445

WHILE going through some of my railroad-related films, I recognized a familiar face. The film is entitled "225,000 Mile Proving Ground, The Headline Story of Railroad Research." This public service short produced by the Association of American Railroads was released in 1953.

The story is based on a fictional character named E. D. Gillespie. Gillespie is a Feature Editor and is given an assignment to get the "story behind the story of modern railroading." It turns out the familiar face belongs to Hugh Beaumont, who plays Gillespie.

Hugh Beaumont had a career in films starting in 1940. Although mainly a character actor, he took the lead role in "Railroaded," a 1947 film that, despite the name, had absolutely nothing to do with trains. Beaumont played hard-boiled detective Mickey Ferguson in this crime classic, tracking down a sadistic killer who dispatched his victims with perfume-drenched bullets. He also appeared in the first Superman TV series in 1953. But much of his early work was in uncredited supporting parts or in industrial films. In 1957 he landed his most famous role, Ward Cleaver on "Leave It To Beaver." This smash hit show ran till 1963, and he starred in all 234 episodes, and even wrote and directed some of them. Could it be that sharing just one scene with a Lionel train in 1953 rocketed him into stardom? Ummmmmmmm, probably not, now that I think about it.

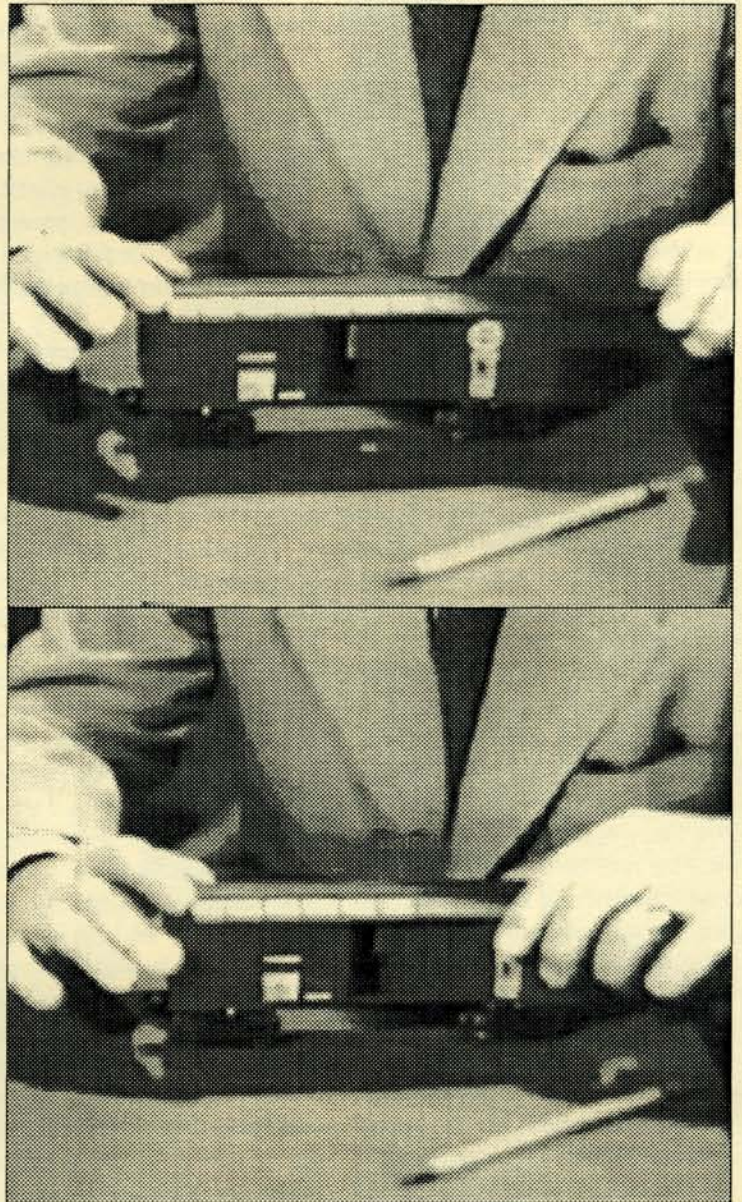
IN the 1953 AAR movie, it is quite apparent that the boxcar in the scene is a Lionel 6454 Southern Pacific 9 1/4" boxcar. Interestingly enough, the letters "SP" are obliterated on the left side of the car. The herald on the right is plainly visible for a second or two, until being covered by Beaumont's left index finger in what appears



to be a deliberate manner.

It might seem odd that some effort was made in order to omit the Southern Pacific markings on this single car, but it was done because of an AAR policy to avoid promoting any individual rail line at the expense of others, a courtesy expected of a national trade organization. Photos in AAR publications such as the *Teacher's Kit on Railroad Transportation* and the *Quiz* books were retouched to remove specific road names, sometimes substituting "East & West Railroad" or "North & South Railroad." Where names and heralds of real railroads appeared, they were usually presented in large groups so no line took precedence.

THE AAR produced several earlier rail films, including "Life-Line of the Nation," "Easy Does It," and "On the Track," and also published guides to other rail-related films. Since "225,000 Mile Proving Ground" is a film about research on all American railroads, prototype footage abounds and most major roads are represented. The use of a Lionel car as a prop makes a lot of sense. Not only was it realistic in appearance and a convenient size, but in addition, toy trains saturated the popular culture of the day. Sales were at a high-water mark in 1953, and Lionel estimated that at the time more than 7,000,000 model train sets from all makers were in use in the United States. For the real railroads, and especially for the companies that made toy railways, times were good. ■



Opposite: Hugh Beaumont, later famous as Ward Cleaver on "Leave It To Beaver," appeared in the 1953 Association of American Railroads film "225,000 Mile Proving Ground, The Headline Story of Railroad Research." **Right, top:** A Lionel 6454 Southern Pacific served as a prop. The SP identification was obscured, in compliance with AAR policy not to promote specific railroads. **Right:** AAR publications *Motion Pictures Owned by or Relating to the American Railroads*, Railway Information Series No. 3, August 1944, and *Railroad Film Directory*, June, 1951 contain listings and summaries of scores of rail-related films available for educational and promotional use a half-century ago. The 1944 booklet contains the statement "This list is . . . not for the purpose of promoting railway travel while this country is at war."

