

# RIVAROSSO

In 40 years  
this Italian firm has  
manufactured 2 million  
model locomotives

**BY HENRY CUMMINGS**

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**R**IVAROSSO, one of the foremost manufacturers of model railroad equipment in the world, was founded in 1945 by two Italians: Mr. Riva, a highly skilled engineer; and Mr. Rossi, a businessman with great enthusiasm for model trains. Mr. Riva soon left the business and Franco Brunner became and remained Alessandro Rossi's partner for many years.

At first the firm was located at a village called Cassano di Albese in the Como region, but after about two years it moved to Monteolimpino, an industrial estate close to the city of Como itself.

From the beginning plastic was used in making the models, a considerable novelty in the 1940s. The very first model, produced in 1945, was an HO version of the electric motor coach of the North Milan Ry. which served Como.



Kittle Hobby

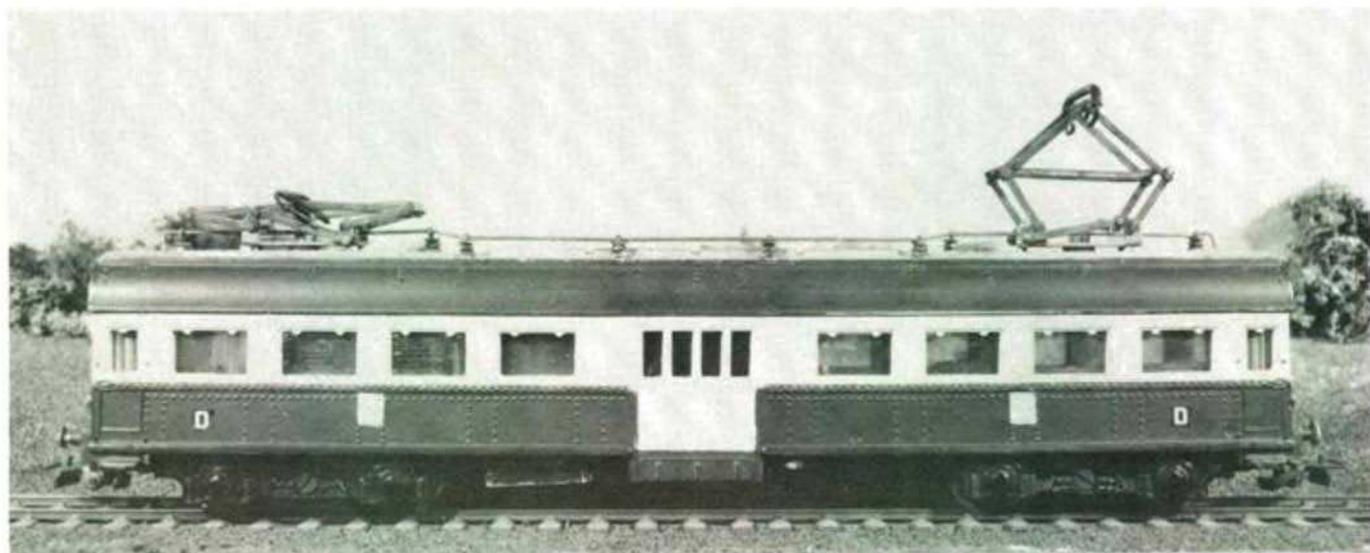
The body was molded from Bakelite, as were all of Rivarossi's early plastic-bodied models. [Bakelite was a very early plastic used in electrical equipment for its insulating properties. Compared to today's polystyrenes it was brittle, did not take detail well, and tended to decompose in the presence of lubricants. — Ed.] The model featured working pantographs. This model remained in production for about 14 years, going through various color schemes and also being available in kit form for awhile.

Some of the early Rivarossi items were really toys, and when the first American prototype models appeared in 1948, they were rather basic compared with the home-produced models in the U. S. of those days. The first models for

the U. S. market were the Baltimore & Ohio 0-4-0T Dockside and the Milwaukee Road's *Hiawatha*.

The Dockside is still available in a much improved form and has never been out of the catalog since its first introduction. It must be a remarkably popular model. [Dockside was frequently included in AHM's train sets, so probably more of them made their way to the U. S. than any other Rivarossi locomotive. — Ed.] The *Hiawatha* had a long run continuing until 1958-59. Early models had a die-cast metal body; later models were of plastic.

The famous Rivarossi motor was still under development, and many early models had motors with brush holders projecting through the side of the locomotive.

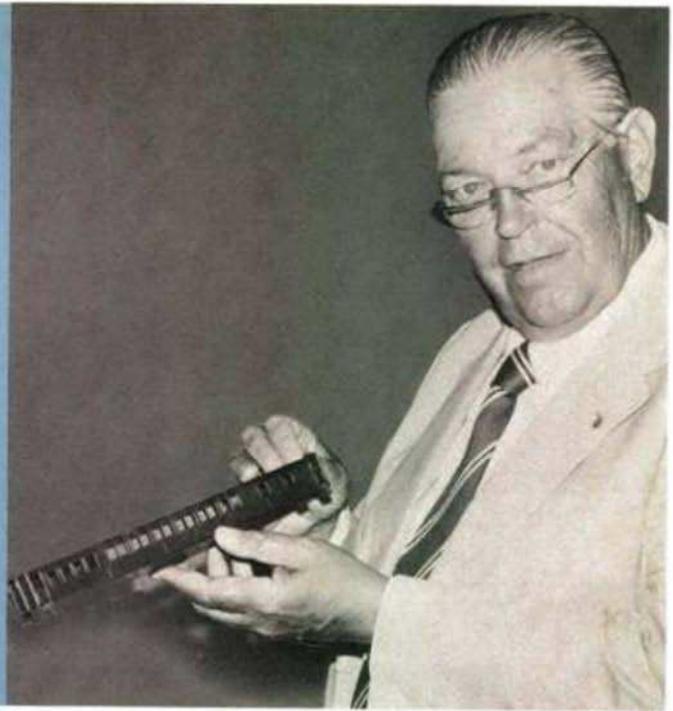


Len Weal

Rivarossi turned to a local prototype for their first model. Produced in 1945, it was an HO Italian motor coach. It had working pantographs and was among the earliest production models to feature a plastic body.



Left. Rivarossi's modern factory is located in the beautiful Como region of northern Italy, literally within a stone's throw of the Swiss border. Right. Signor Alessandro Rossi founded the company and is the "Rossi" in Rivarossi's name.

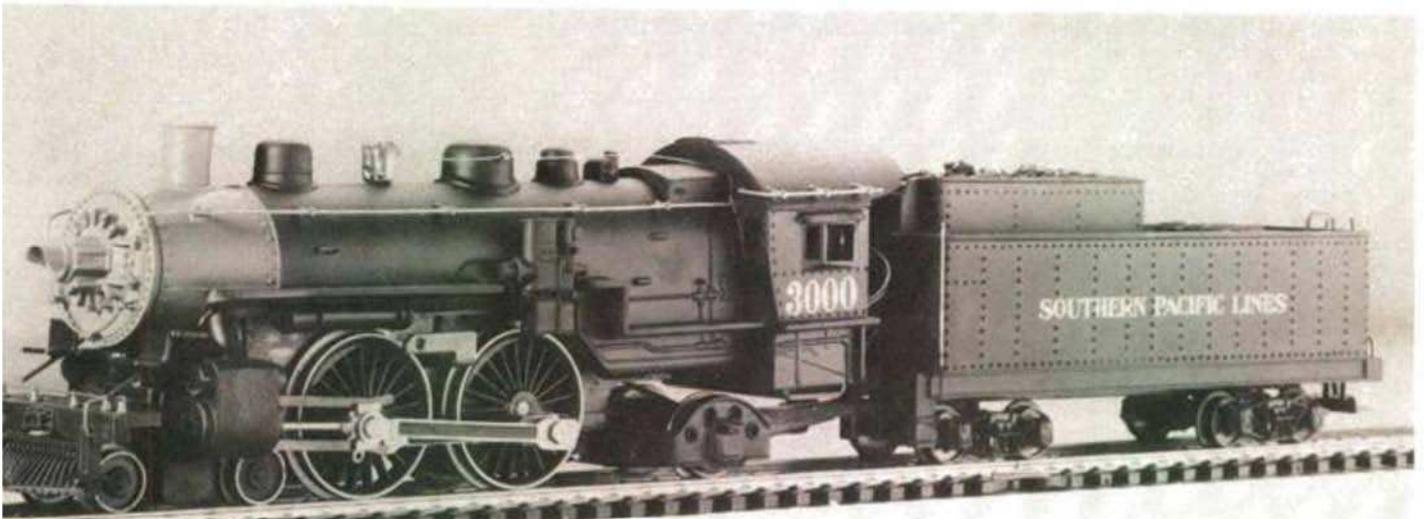


Bankstudios



In 1948 Rivarossi entered the American marketplace with an HO scale Milwaukee Road streamlined 4-4-2 Hiawatha. Note the RR emblem (for Rivarossi) on the nose where prototype units carried the engine number.

Bankstudios



The Southern Pacific Atlantic, introduced in the early Fifties, brought a new and higher level of detail to inexpensive HO plastic steam locomotives.

Bankstudios



The HO scale UP Big Boy was introduced in the Sixties. Highly detailed, big, modern steam was generally unavailable and unaffordable before AHM began offering this and the other large-size Rivarossi models.

Rivarossi

At the beginning of the 1950s the classic Southern Pacific 4-4-2 appeared. This Atlantic had a European counterpart dressed up to look like an Italian engine, but it was in fact a free-lance model. Rivarossi had used common tooling to achieve two different models for two different markets virtually for the price of one.

In that decade there also appeared another locomotive destined to have a long production run, the Fairbanks-Morse diesel. This model was among the first of the

product line to be fitted with the famous Rivarossi motor featuring a large three-pole armature, the shaft of which ran on microscopic ball bearings. There was some size variation with this motor according to the type of locomotive to which it was fitted.

Rivarossi engineered its models so the armature shaft would be exactly vertical or exactly horizontal. This meant that the motor nearly always filled the cab of steam locomotives, but as it performed

so well, nobody seemed to mind much. Today's models are fitted with a slightly smaller cylindrical motor equipped with plain bearings.

During the Fifties Rivarossi also produced a wide range of excellent American freight cars.

The period 1960-70 saw considerable expansion. The American series began to include some really good passenger stock, and fans of U. S. practice were rewarded with outstanding locomotive models: the Nickel Plate Berkshire, the Norfolk & Western Y6b Mallet, the Southern Pacific Cab Forward, and the Union Pacific Big Boy.

In the 1970s Rivarossi added both O and N scale models to the line, although HO output remains by far the largest.

Rivarossi has in recent years introduced some extra special models in O scale, a notable example being the ex-PLM (Paris-Lyons-Mediterranean Co.) Pacific. [This model retailed in the U. S. for \$2500 in 1983. — *Ed.*] Such absolutely magnificent models must surely be regarded more as investments than workaday engines.

In the past long runs were the general rule — 10,000 Big Boys at a time — but it is now the policy to make smaller runs of more models. Most models stay in the line and the catalog for many years, once introduced.

In their 40 years Rivarossi has made several million locomotives. The Indiana Harbor Belt 0-8-0 has been the best seller. [It's been offered in O, HO, and N. — *Ed.*] Still, the firm is most proud of the Big Boy, which had sold about 50,000 as of 1983.

Rivarossi has become a name synonymous with quality and ingenuity in the model railroading world. Today they produce models of British, American, French, Italian, German, and Dutch locomotives, as well as freight and passenger cars representative of practically every western European country. The slogan on the card placed in many locomotive boxes saying "When you remove this protective covering you will be displaying one of the world's finest locomotives" is no idle boast. ◊

## Rivarossi in America

**T**HOUSANDS OF MODEL trains have been sold in the United States under the Rivarossi name, but far more have been manufactured by Rivarossi and sold under other labels. Here's a brief look at a rather complicated history:

In the early 1950s Polk's Model Craft Hobbies in New York City became Rivarossi's American agent. Polk's was offering the Rivarossi B&O Dockside for \$9.95 and the Milwaukee Road *Hiawatha* Atlantic for \$19.95. Also in the Fifties Rivarossi made models for Lionel's ill-fated venture into HO.

Later in the Fifties AHM (Associated Hobby Manufacturers) signed an exclusive agreement to market HO models made by Rivarossi. Classic models such as the UP Big Boy and other large steamers, as well as the exquisite passenger cars, were developed during this partnership. Rivarossi also manufactured track and accessories for AHM. Eventually O scale models and track were added to the line.

In 1967 Atlas made an exclusive arrangement with Rivarossi to bring in N scale equipment. When Atlas lost interest in 1975, Con-Cor picked up the line, most noted for beautifully detailed steamers such as the USRA Pacific and Mikado, the IHB 0-8-0, and the 0-4-0 with slope-back tender. With time, Con-Cor added to the line, most notably with the UP Big Boy. (Atlas is back in N scale today, but not with models made by Rivarossi.)

When MRC dropped out of N scale in 1973 Con-Cor bought the tooling. (In

most cases, the company importing the models pays for and owns the tooling, even though it is made by the model manufacturer.) MRC's exceptional Y6b Mallet and Nickel Plate Berkshire had been made by Röwa, a West German firm. Röwa went bankrupt, so Con-Cor had the tooling shipped to Italy where Rivarossi continued the production of these engines.

Meanwhile AHM went bankrupt in 1981 and its assets were bought by Regal Way. Regal Way's chief interest lay in less expensive items made in Hong Kong, so it leased to newly formed IHC (International Hobby Corp.) the rights to most of the HO steam locomotives formerly offered by AHM. Once again these were manufactured by Rivarossi, by this time recovering from a bankruptcy of its own.

Last year Regal Way took a turn in bankruptcy court and its HO tooling was bought by Con-Cor. The leasing arrangements between Regal Way and IHC remain in effect, so today both Con-Cor and IHC offer HO models made by Rivarossi.

Rivarossi has made steady progress in recovering from its financial difficulties. Alessandro Rossi is retired, although he still works as a consultant for the company. His cousin, Alessandro Rossi Jr., is a member of the new management team.

My thanks to Nat Polk, Bernie Paul, and Jim Conway for their assistance in compiling this sketch of Rivarossi's participation in the American model railroading scene. — *Jim Kelly*