



## The Christmas Putz, Then and Now

The Christmas putz we know today developed slowly. Its origins are back in the middle ages when it was used to teach the story of Christ's birth to people who couldn't read. Those early creche scenes evolved in two directions: into elaborate scenes made of gilded marble for the rich (and for wealthy churches); and into humble scenes carved by local woodworkers for people to have in their own homes. The Moravian putz blended both aspects!

The Moravian Church has roots dating back to the 1450's and was formalized with the establishment of Herrnhut village by Count Zinzendorf in 1727 in present day Saxony, Germany. The Count was an aristocrat and appreciated fine art. He brought this value with him as he established tenets of belief that led to the spread of the Moravian church through Europe and into colonial North America. Two of the earliest Moravian colonies were established in Bethlehem and Nazareth in the Lehigh Valley, in Northampton County, Pennsylvania.

Zinzendorf knew people would understand the Christmas miracle better if they could *see* the story and he used works of art for this purpose. In the large Moravian community of Bethlehem, people worked together to produce scenes that represented the story of the nativity. They set up a putz every year and invited the surrounding communities to come and look and learn.

We know that in the 1750s German settlers in Northampton County, Pennsylvania were invited into the nearby Moravian communities at Christmas time to see miniature nativity scenes. These Moravian Christmas nativity scenes were backlit with candles, decorated with moss and had small hand carved buildings and miniature people. Such a nativity scene was called a "Putz" [pronounced put(s)] from the German word meaning "to place", as in 'to place small objects that told the nativity story'.

Think of those early settlers who lived in widely separated log cabins, visiting large, beautiful stone buildings in Moravian towns. When the settlers went inside they saw rooms where the walls were plastered and painted and where each room had many glass windows. And there, in the best place in the room, was the nativity scene, the putz. We can imagine the delight of the German speaking children seeing the putz with its small people and tiny animals, angels suspended by threads above a baby Jesus

in a manger. It would not take long before their parents made little nativity scenes for display in their own houses.

And so it was that both the concept and the name spread to the houses of the Pennsylvania German speaking people who lived in the Lehigh Valley. In the middle 1800's larger putzes were erected by towns and churches, outside. Inside, people were now able to buy small figures of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus along with the three wise men in robes and shepherds with sheep. In some families, only the mother or father could touch and arrange the nativity scene. In other families the children were allowed to play with the figures with the hope this would reinforce the Nativity story.

By the early 1900's, parents, grandparents or uncles, who were handy with a carving knife, were making replicas of their houses and farms and giving them as presents to children – who promptly added them to the nativity scene under the Christmas tree. It wasn't long before wind-up toys, which were very popular in the late 1800's, were added to the mix. Some people created whole little towns under their tree. The Moravian putz had always had moss and other natural decorations, and these, too were found on the putz that was created in non-Moravian homes. Mirrors made lakes, cotton made hills of snow. And wind-up toy trains had circular tracks that nicely fit around the base of the tree. Although having a Christmas putz was fairly common in the Lehigh Valley, the custom had not traveled farther but this was about to change.

The Lionel Company was formed in 1900 to make electrical novelties. Between 1900 and 1915 the company built and sold a number of electric trolleys and trains. In 1915 Lionel introduced inexpensive trains that ran on O gauge, three-rail tracks and were powered by a 110 volt transformer. WWI captured everyone's attention but after the war ended, two important events coincided. One was the electrification of most middle class homes. The second was a shrewd marketing campaign. Lionel convinced toy stores and department stores to put toy trains in their Christmas display windows, often placing them under the Christmas tree. This immediately turned electric toy trains into popular Christmas presents. Lionel painted their trains in bright and unrealistic colors because it was mothers who purchased trains as presents for their children and the bright colors appealed. What better Christmas morning surprise than to copy the set up in the store window! It was Lionel, with its inexpensive toy trains, which was responsible for moving the putz out of the Lehigh Valley and into mainstream USA.



Beginning in the 1930's, but especially after WW II, Japanese firms manufactured tiny houses and churches out of thin cardboard. They were painted white or pastel colors and had a dusting of mica glued on to represent snow – hence their nickname of “glitter houses”. They had a round hole in the back (or in the bottom) through which you could put a Christmas tree light. Lights at this time got very hot, and the houses were of paper, so lights could be a fire hazard. However they had the virtue of being cute and cheap and were sold in 5 & 10 cent stores. Soon every putz boasted a large collection of glitter houses.<sup>1</sup>

The Christmas putz that had originated with Moravians then broadened out to include the Pennsylvania “Dutch” of the Lehigh Valley, had now made the leap to most middle class families in the US. The putz had three parts: a creche with at least Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, a Christmas tree with electric lights and decorations, and a toy train village. This remains true today for the “Christmas putz” but the concept of trains and little villages would soon take on three new and different faces.



In the late 1940's and early 1950's, the introduction of Plasticville buildings was significant. At Christmas, their buildings with 1950's designs, were sold in many stores, but they were available year round in train hobby shops that catered to growing numbers of toy train enthusiasts. Made by the Bachman Company, these houses came packaged flat and had to be snapped together but they also could be disassembled, a selling feature for mothers who had to find a place to store all the putz equipment after Christmas.<sup>2</sup> Plasticville's school buildings, fire stations, post offices, streetlamps, and more made the putz resemble the buildings in a child's life. At this

point there we find the first significant divide in the evolution of the putz.

From the start, Lionel tracks were "O" gauge, meaning that the width of the three-rail track was 1 ¼ " and tracks and trains were scaled to 1:87 (i.e. 1 foot of the putz track/train = 87 feet of real track/train).<sup>3</sup> There are larger and smaller scales. In 1957 Lionel offered HO (half of O gauge) tracks and trains for sale. These appealed to hobby enthusiasts who wanted to keep their train set up all year. For them, it was no longer a Christmas putz, but an all consuming hobby where everything had to be perfectly to scale. No small glitter houses or leftover Plasticville police stations, everything on the platform was to be strictly O or HO size.



And things went in the other direction as well. Whereas HO scale is half the size of the original O gauge, G scale is essentially double the size of O gauge. Larger, more robust trains and tracks lend themselves to outdoor use (see the article by Frank and Cheryl Mummy in this issue). And like HO the train setup was no longer a Christmas putz. All of these, O gauge, HO gauge and G gauge trains appealed mostly to men. With this in mind, in 1976 one company found a brilliant way to entice female customers.



This company with the odd name of "Dept.56" brought out "Snow Village", a group of four ceramic houses and two churches.<sup>4</sup> The buildings were decorative and not meant to be in scale with HO or O gauge trains. They appealed to people who didn't have toy trains and who wanted to set up a Christmas village on the fireplace mantle. These villages were ceramic, porcelain, or resin and no longer strictly bound to Christmas but displayed year round..

Similar houses, churches and other structures now are manufactured by many companies and sold in high end gift stores as well as in dollar stores.

I have no doubt there are little Christmas villages almost everywhere Christmas is celebrated. I have a French-Canadian friend who lives in Ottawa and as been collecting the smallest size of these ceramic houses for over 20 years. Each Christmas she takes over the shower and bathtub in her guest bathroom to create a display that goes from the floor to the ceiling and is lit by colored lights.<sup>5</sup> She also has a lighted display of the larger, more elegant ceramic houses displayed on her fireplace mantle.



G gauge trains have a devoted following of people who want to have outdoor toy trainyards. They are sturdy and waterproof. As expected, manufacturers of G gauge houses and other buildings soon emerged to create a new and larger putz, but without the attachment to Christmas or the creche.

When I was drafting this article I realized that I could provide personal examples of the evolution of the Christmas putz. There is my French-Canadian friend with her ceramic village displays. I have a cousin who lives in Michigan who has a huge Lionel O gauge train setup in his basement man cave. And I have a good friend who lives at the very edge of the Lehigh Valley and who has a huge G gauge train layout in his garden! But what about my personal connection to the putz?

I grew up with the traditional Christmas putz triad. There was a paper mache stable housing the creche scene with Mary in a pale blue robe, Joseph in a long purple robe, and baby Jesus with both hands raised, laying in a little wood manger. Three elegantly dressed wise men bearing gifts, assorted kneeling shepherds wearing short white tunics, a few sheep, a cow and a horse completed the scene. Oh yes, and an angel, who was always placed on the roof of the stable. The Christmas tree stood at one end of the large platform and if the tree didn't reach to the ceiling, the purchase (done by my father) was considered a failure. Encircling the tree and running around the whole platform were O gauge tracks was a steam engine and a sleek Sante Fe express. Glitter houses made up a village along with a Plasticville church, streetlights and a bench. There were some purchased and some homemade figures of people. One year we sprinkled a glitter all over the putz to make it look like snow. It was lovely, all sparkly in the lights of the Christmas tree – and it went everywhere in the house. We found sparkles for months. Needless to say this was not repeated. That putz has now been broken up, distributed to younger cousins, a few special pieces carefully wrapped and brought out each year to display on a table at Christmas.

I'm wondering, what kind of Christmas putz do you have?

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<sup>1</sup> Photo from eBay

<sup>2</sup> Photo from eBay

<sup>3</sup> Used with permission of clickamerican.com

<sup>4</sup> Used with permission of Dept.56

<sup>5</sup> Used with permission of Andree McClennan