

Sparta Station Project – Part 1 “Quandaries of Prototype Modeling”

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I model the Milwaukee Road sometime in the early to mid-fifties. But modeling all my key railroad structures in some exact or even approximate time period is problematic for me. Why? Well, first of all it is hard if not impossible to find vintage photos/drawings of hundreds of miles of main line structures from the same time period. Second, structures like people change over time. Believe it or not, I didn't always have gray hair! In the case of Sparta Station, the railroad made many changes over the years, most changes being utilitarian in nature to reduce operating cost and keep profitable.

It is my opinion that originals of things are the way the architects or designers meant that thing to be. While not always the case, modifications over time can ruin the intent of the original. I fully agree that sometimes buildings with numerous modifications can also be gems to model with various brick, stone and other facades, so it really comes down to personal preference on a case by case basis.

As you look at vintage photos in this article, I hope this helps you all to realize the wealth of information that can be gleaned from studying old photos, sometimes with a magnifying glass! I hope this helps to see small details that can bring interest and fun to your projects, whether prototype or free-lance.

Now I will march you thru the changes of Sparta Station over time starting from a pretty small town structure built with pride and attention to detail so common in railroading's heyday and ending with ... well you can decide.

Sparta Station from the HRM Laser Kit is delivered exactly as it was designed from original blueprints. Here is my finished model which is built to the original floor plan from 1916:



Figure 1.

The earliest photo I have of the station is not dated but I assume just a few years after it was built:



Figure 2.

Even in this very old photo, the station changed! If you study both Figures 1 and 2, you will notice the prototype did not keep the “pavilion” or that open section from the station platform to the rear. That section is filled in with a wall, new door, and window, and has a Railway Express Agency sign on it. Here is a close-up of my model’s pavilion:



Figure 3.

Also, notice I painted my model the standard Milwaukee Road two-tone gray paint scheme used in the fifties until the end of the line. I actually don’t know what color the station was in 1916 or in Figure 2, but certainly the bottom portion is not a darker color than the upper clapboard.

The next photo is from ~1970:



Figure 4.

Clearly the two tone gray is evident but also please notice another detail. Painting corner and window trim with a contrasting color is no longer a priority, just all light gray for the upper portion, window frames and all (boring but practical). It also looks like the building could use a coat of paint! Note the formal gold lettering on black background for the station signs made way for black lettering on white background. The semaphore in Figure 2 (hard to see) is long gone and replaced with a three aspect train order signal. That is what I used on my model in Figure 1 (signal by Tomar). Also notice, my station version in Figure 1 still has the center chimney which serves the station office.

In addition to those really cool speeders, Figure 4 shows another interesting change. The station extension to the rear was added sometime during World War II to accommodate a larger waiting room for all the soldiers passing thru from Camp McCoy military base. It served later as an additional freight house when the separate freight house down the tracks was demolished (again, railroads were utilitarian). Finally, note the difference in window arrangements of the station front between Figures 1 and 4. Doors and windows were moved on the left side, and full windows removed, but transom-like windows remain, on the right!

The next photo is also from the 1970s or maybe early 80s but shows more of the baggage and freight portion of the station:



Figure 5:

So now the Sparta prototype Frankenstation is complete! The gutter on the far right shows where the original freight section ended and a new freight section was added. Pretty baggage/REA doors in Figures 1 and 2 are now replaced with ugly garage doors of differing heights and styles. You can also see that addition out the back. *By the way, we can all admit to being that kid with his bike tucked close to the agent's bay window. He's almost as fearful as he is excited as that freight train roars by!* Another detail seen in Figure 5 and way back in Figure 2 is the chimney between the roof of the freight section and the roof of the station is covered in stucco. I simply had to model that detail (see Figure 1). In both Figure 2 and 5 the chimney above the roofline is brick again. But in Figure 5 it was extended compared to Figure 2 (maybe safety regulations?) and with different brick patterns. I choose to keep my model closer to the original chimney height (see Figure 1).

So Figure 5 shows a relatively well maintained station but it has lost much of its original aesthetic. The passenger station portion lacks all symmetry of windows and doors, trim is not accented, the unique pavilion is gone, the freight section is too long with ugly garage doors of differing heights and style, and the addition in the back is out of place. Starting from the HRM kit and modifying that kit to model the structure as it appears in Figure 5 would certainly be more prototypical of the 1950s-1980s era and would probably earn more merit points in a contest. *But I don't like the way it looks!* So I decided to combine the pretty and quant station that was the original with the two-tone gray paint scheme of my era of the 1950s and a more modern train order signal. It is still unmistakably the Sparta Station!

My next installment will talk about my modeling in more detail. Thanks for reading!