



“Tools & Tips” Toothpicks and Trees!

by Bill Jacobs



I want to make a small disclaimer, right off the bat this will probably be more about tips than tools, at least for this particular issue, and will weigh heavily on found things that I have learned from others or discovered myself, that you can use for modeling on your layout.

So, let us start with toothpicks. Weird, huh? Many years ago, I attended the last Narrow Gauge Convention held in Durango and sat in on a number of clinics. One was presented by a real expert on the Rio Grand Southern who was demonstrating just how bad you could make track work (RGS was known for badly maintained track, at least in its latter years) and still have reliable operation in HOn3. During the presentation he mentioned that he had a ready source of ties that were the exact dimensions that the RGS used. Seems that he was trying to quit smoking and started chewing toothpicks to fulfill his oral needs. By happenstance he bought a box of Diamond round toothpicks with square centers and viola, lop off the round ends, cut the square part to length and you've got a HOn3 RGS tie. Use your favorite stain (I prefer black leather dye and rubbing alcohol) and you're ready to go. I'm pretty sure that this would also work for HO standard too, especially for older track because the square part is just a little short for two ties in HOn3, but enough for a single longer tie. The toothpicks have varying hardness so they come out of the stain in a number of hues, which is also more prototypical. Warning, when driving spikes it is better to drill a pilot hole because, due their hardness, the ties can split. I found that Forster brand also makes these picks and they are the exact same size. Enough about ties- but not about

toothpicks. Suppose you want to make a four-poster bed for an interior or ornate posts for a front porch? Look at the party toothpicks in your supermarket and let your imagination run wild. I actually made a four poster for one of my models and in displaying it to some non-rail friends (actually my

dentist and her hygienist- more about this later) got rave reviews- now, I only told them I built it and did not imply that I had made the actual fancy post parts until later.

Let's talk trees. This will involve both the expert above and the dentist. Another clinic I attended at the Durango convention, presented by the same fellow, was about building conifers out of fake Christmas trees.

A little side bar here- my wife attended this with me and I volunteered to do a hands-on as part of the demonstration, so I asked good old Janie, who is a NMRA member, to take notes. She was doing a good job until the clinician mentioned 2,000 trees out of a couple of fakes and the notes quit there.

Warning, again- until about 10 or 15 years ago, fake Christmas trees looked like they were made of pine needles. Since that time they look like flat pieces of green paper and do not make good looking conifers, so, yard sales or thrift stores are your best bet.

Pretty simple from there, just cut them up to the size you want, trim to a conical shape, spray with cheap, non scented hair spray, apply some ground foam of the right color, and spray again. Now to the dentist. I do not like to floss my teeth, not because it hurts my gums, but because it hurts my fingers. So the dentist tells me that if I use these things called go-betweens, she'll let me



off the hook. They are the GUM brand and are actually called proxabrushes, conical in shape, and they come in four different sizes- I take the wide and Janie takes the tight. It took about two nanoseconds to realize that these would make great 5 - 6 foot tall conifers to go under the big trees, which are plentiful in a forest setting (along with the aspens). They are wound on a small wire imbedded in a plastic handle with a cover that comes on and off. They are good for about two days of use after every meal and by then are pretty tattered looking, just what you want. So clean them up and when you get a pile, nip off the brush part just above where the handle widens. Sometimes the plastic remains fall off, other

times you'll need to take an old x-acto #11 and carefully cut the plastic off. Stick them in a block of foam with some spacing and when the block is full, hit them with some conifer colored paint and while still wet, sprinkle with ground foam of the right color. After they are dry you can plant them or use another block of foam for storage.

That's it for now, in later issues, assuming that you liked this, we will discuss tarpaper, shingles, found plastic parts, concrete footings, wine bottle tops, pencils, and pens, and incense. This is kind of a lead-in to a clinic I will be giving in Temecula, so if you'd like to see some of this stuff up close and personal be there. -