

## First Digit

The first digit describes the series to which a car belongs:

- 1: Scout cars (and also *General* cars, which use a 18XX scheme, probably based on the dates of the Civil War era)
- 2: electromagnetic (coil) coupler cars, most passenger cars
- 3: operating cars
- 4: electronic set cars
- 5: electronic set operating cars
- 6: magnetic coupler cars and cars with non-operating couplers. These cars formed the heart of the postwar Lionel line. Many of the early postwar cars changed only their first digit, from 2 to 6, when magnetic couplers appeared in 1948.
- 7, 8, 9: not used for postwar rolling stock by the Lionel Corp.

## Suffix

Lionel used suffixes of one, two, or three digits on some cars.

These suffixes often denoted different road names or paint schemes, as on the 6464- and 3494-series boxcars. A suffix could also indicate the car's year of introduction, and suffixes sometimes denote a different coupler type, more than one coupler (in the case of cabooses), or the type of load. A letter suffix ("X") was also used on occasion, usually to denote a color change. For some models the car each suffix designated is readily apparent, but the meaning of many other suffixes remains obscure.

Some models also carry a prefix of one or two digits before their four-digit number. These prefixes, which most often represent the model's year of introduction, appear on the car itself, but in most cases are not part of the model number. For example, Lionel stamped the sky blue Girl's Set caboose of 1957-58, model number 6427-500, with the number 576427.

## Second Digit

The second digit gives a kind of quality rating:

**0:** Scout cars and their descendants, "stripper" cars. Later in the postwar era this number apparently denoted cars without operating couplers.

**1:** basic cars, generally used in the O-27 line. Later in the postwar era this number apparently denoted cars with only one operating coupler.

**2:** same as 1, plus some cars that accompanied accessories.

**3:** same as 2, plus many operating cars, both those that accompanied accessories and those that did not, and a few variants of cars in the 64XX series.

**4:** the main series for postwar freight rolling stock. Pieces in the standard line of O and O-27 cars carry a second digit of 4. Most of these cars had 2 operating couplers until late in the era, when some exceptions appeared. Many operating cars are also in this group.

**5:** premium cars, plus some operating cars. Also, some cars were bumped into this series because they are modified versions of other cars, for example the 3509/3510/3519 satellite cars, which were modified 3419-type helicopter cars. Another such "spillover" group was the four-bay hoppers: 6436, 6536, 6636, etc.

**6:** some operating cars, spillover cars, some non-operating versions of 36XX series operating cars,

**7:** prewar carryovers, spillover hoppers

**8:** prewar carryovers. Lionel also used this series for a group of flatcars and flatcar-based cars with loads, namely the 68XX series flats and cabooses. Did all the loads used on these cars (other than the 6801 boat) come from outside vendors?

**9:** prewar carryovers and oddities.

## Third Digit

The third digit, in most cases, is the model's unique style identifier.

Why? Imagine that Lionel had two cars with the same coupler type, outfitted at a similar "quality" level, of the same basic type (tank car, flatcar, boxcar, etc.), but with two different body moldings. That means that the first, second, and fourth digits would be the same. How did it tell them apart? By assigning a different third digit. It's uncertain whether there was a system for which number Lionel actually assigned in this spot, but most likely the firm simply used the next number that was open (with two exceptions – 8 and 9 were rarely used as third digits).

Still confused? Take gondola cars, for example. A gondola with a number in the series XX5X would be one of the first postwar cars, XX6X would be a large gondola, and XX4X would be one of the later small gondolas.

In other words, if the third digit of a gondola's number is a 5, it's a short Pennsy car with a metal frame, if it's 6 it's a long NYC car, and if it's a 1 or a 4 it's a short Lionel Lines car. Short gondolas came with two body types, one based on the XX5X gondola and one based on the XX6X gondola. Cars in the first group have a second digit of 0, the others have a second digit of 1. The culvert pipe gondola is a special case; it takes its number from the accessory it accompanied.

Tank cars are similar: XX1X or XX2X is a large three-dome or chemical tank car (since they share a frame, it's logical that they share a number), XX6X is a two-dome car, and XX5X is a single-dome metal car.

The third digit is a very valuable, though not infallible, marker for recognizing different models, or at least different body styles. In some cases, the second digit takes its place as designator of a different model (see below).

Different paint schemes usually, but not always, meant that Lionel assigned the car a new number. For hoppers and tank cars, a new road name often meant a new model number, but boxcars and cabooses often received only a different suffix (and some boxcars and tank cars apparently did not change numbers at all). This pattern suggests that Lionel planned all along to produce 6464-type boxcars in many road names, because a different four-digit number for each would have increased the number of model numbers considerably.

## Fourth Digit

The fourth digit designates the type of freight car.

**0:** Searchlight cars, cranes, work cabooses with lights (and some without). Most rocket launcher flats also have a last digit of 0. In other words, XXX0 denotes a flat with a special load, which may be a light, a caboose body, or something else.

**1:** Flatcars, especially with pipes, logs, transformers, or boats

**2:** gondolas, cars with cans/barrels/canisters (including milk cars and other reefers). The icing reefer is also here (6352, which accompanied the 352 accessory), though it uses a boxcar body. This series (especially the presence of the milk cars) provides strong evidence that Lionel assigned numbers based on function, not form.

**3:** catch-all series for a few odd cars in the later postwar era, such as the 6463 rocket fuel car, 6473 horse transport car, 3413/6413 Mercury capsule cars (the latter may also fall in the 64XX flatcar series), and 6343 barrel ramp car.

**4:** boxcars, operating boxcars, poultry cars (a boxcar). The auto loaders are also here (see below).

**5:** tank cars, aquarium cars, vat cars, plus a few operating cars and the mint car (which used an aquarium car body)

**6:** hoppers, stock cars, zoo cars

**7:** cabooses

**8:** specialty boxcars, such as double-door auto cars

**9:** flatcars, including dump cars, more work cabooses, LPG car, and operating flats.