

Imperial Hobby Productions

When you think of model railroading, you usually don't envision layouts made up of commuter trains or subways. They aren't as nationally ubiquitous as freight trains or iconic as steam trains. Still, their limited appeal is stoked by a small but dedicated group of enthusiasts and modelers, and catered to by an equally dedicated small group of 'cottage' suppliers and manufacturers. One such manufacturer is Imperial Hobby Productions, a small model railroad manufacturer based in the suburban area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Imperial Hobby Production's (IHP) owner and operator, Mike Bartel, was born and raised in Philadelphia and its suburbs. He rode the local transit and commuter lines in the 1970s and 1980s and wanted to have some models of equipment he rode for his own (eventual) model railroad layout. After graduating from college in 1993, Mike founded The Imperial Navy, producing 1:700 scale waterline warship models and accessories for one of his other interest areas. He realized that most of the railroad models he wanted to operate on his dream layout weren't likely to ever be produced in either plastic or brass. In 1995, Mike got into the HO scale model railroad market with a cast resin shell of a Kansas City Public Service PCC trolley body shell. The shell did well amongst traction modelers and three years later, Mike was producing a dozen HO products, covering locomotives, trolley cars and electric MU commuter cars. It was also in 1995 that The Imperial Navy became Imperial Hobby Productions, denoting the diversification into different areas of the hobby. IHP became a full-time operation in 2000, and expanded into the O and N scale markets during this time. Even so, HO scale was still the primary focus. The company's product range continued to expand in the ensuing years.

IHP's range is unique in that it is exclusively focused on USA-prototype commuter, transit and traction rolling stock models. IHP produces no freight trains, freight locomotives, steam locomotives or 'non-revenue' equipment of any type. Many subjects produced have been made for the first time by IHP. IHP's range covers eras from before WWII to the present day. IHP's range consists of commuter cars, subway cars, trolley cars and LRV's and commuter locomotives. Very few of these are likely candidates for production by the larger plastic manufacturers because they don't have the mass appeal required for expensive mass production. IHP's chosen medium is resin, and in some cases, cast metal. Resin has become an ideal medium for limited production runs of specific models for a limited market on a limited budget, largely replacing brass for this purpose in recent years. Resin has been around for a long time and many established and well-known smaller hobby manufacturers have been making short-run, limited interest resin products for many years.

IHP has several product ranges intended to satisfy different needs and budgets. The Apprentice Series is made up of body shells and craftsman kits for those with more time than money to pursue their hobby. The Standard Series is made up of kits that are more complete, with extras such as decals and trucks included so the modeler doesn't have to supply much more than their standard modeling tools. Some Standard Series HO models are powered and sold partially assembled as 'ready to finish' kits. Lastly, there is the Motorman Premier Series, which takes some IHP products and offers them built up and finished, with authentic paint and decals, and power drives. These items carry a premium price and are limited production, sometimes based on

licensing of transit agency logos and graphics or availability of components.

IHP's production is done in the USA, bucking the trend of outsourcing production in countries such as China. Mike Bartel does almost all of the patternmaking himself. For most of its existence, IHP subcontracted its resin production to different resin casters around the USA, but in the last couple of years, Mike has taken on the job of doing all of IHP's resin mouldmaking and casting in-house, and has turned himself into a skilled mouldmaker and caster, producing quality parts from his patterns. IHP subcontracts certain machined, photo etched and cast metal parts and custom decal printing to local and regional firms. Other components are obtained from US firms. Mike also does assembly, painting and finishing work. IHP has supplied models and souvenirs to local transit agency SEPTA for sale in their Transit Museum Store, and has also supplied souvenir tanker ship models to the Aker Philadelphia Shipyard. In fact, souvenir models are one future area into which IHP hopes to expand with some success.

Though IHP is a hobby supplier, the company functions more like a prototype car builder. Individual orders are obtained and customer relationships formed on a one-on-one personal basis rather than through dealers and distributors (though IHP does have a handful of longtime dealers through which the company does business). This results in a loyal customer base that continues to grow one customer at a time. The Internet has been key to this business model and Mike maintains the company's website himself. Visit: <http://ihphobby.tripod.com>.

Models are made to order and can be customized to a customer's requirements. IHP can also do contract moulding and casting work, if you supply your own patterns. Unfortunately, Mike has no time to do custom patternwork or extravagant custom jobs. IHP demands long days and long weeks to do all this work. Mike says he hasn't had a vacation in years, and jokes that his wife still doesn't really know him, even though they married in 2006.

IHP is currently developing a range of modern LRV models to tap in to the future market that Mike and others in the hobby expect will be created by the resurgence of light rail in many large American and Canadian cities. Mike currently does most of the patternwork by hand, but is teaching himself CAD/CAM to enable future IHP patterns to be made by computer. IHP still makes 1:700 scale ship models, but this range is becoming secondary to IHP's model railroad production. And, that railroad layout Mike hopes to build? Mike says that will happen someday, but at least for now he has some of the equipment he would like to operate.