Reviews of Operation Sessions at the Grand Rapids 2012 National NMRA Covention

Below are reviews along with photos of the op sessions at the Grand Rapids convention that were not covered in the October 2012 issue of The Dispatcher's Office. Unless otherwise noted, all photos were taken by the author of the review.

Scott Dunlap has an album of convention photos and they can be viewed at https://picasaweb.google.com/lh/sredir?uname=111305438755746945332&target=ALBUM&id=5773322056223382817&authkey=Gv1sRgCLzqu9GLy_Wr3QE&feat=email

Steve Benezra, Editor, The Dispatcher's Office

Frank Zajac's HO Scale St. Louis Southwestern RR

Review by Paul De Luca

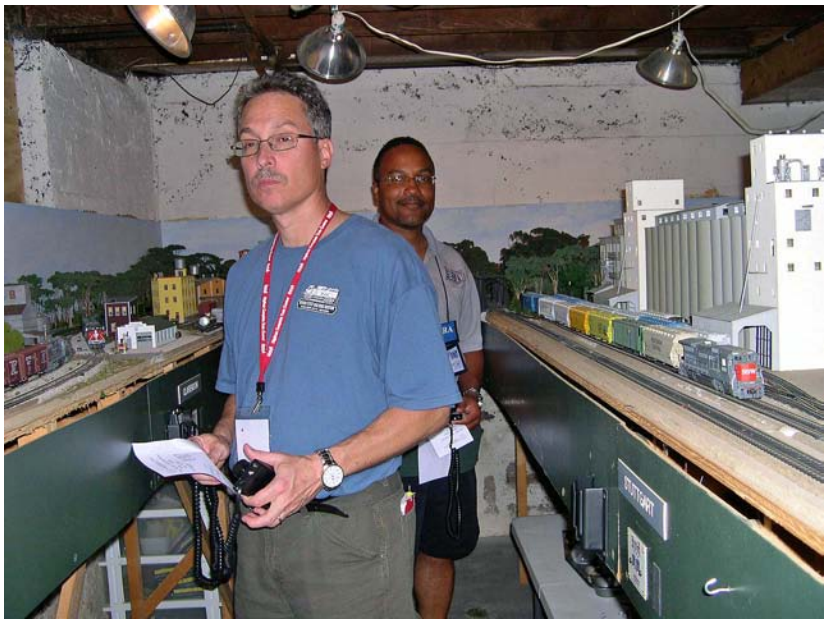
The "Cotton Belt" railroad is Frank's recreation of about a 65 mile stretch of the SSW man line covering the territory between Brinkley and Pine Bluff, AR. Frank's railroad is located in the basement of a beautiful century old home in Kalamazoo, where he welcomed 6 operators on Tuesday evening. Frank, who lived in Arkansas for some time, has done a lot of on the ground research for his RR, which fills an area roughly 12' x 32', and is about 75% sceniced.

The railroad is set roughly in the 1980-1995 era, where symbol freights such as the MBSMF and 107W move thru traffic headed up by a variety of power, including Dash9's and B40's. Signature scenes on the railroad include the very large Riceland Rice elevator in Stuttgart, as well as the river crossings of both the White River at Clarendon and the Rob Roy Bridge over the Arkansas River outside of Pine Bluff. Active staging on the north end of the railroad represents the yard in East St. Louis, and Memphis trains run to/from the Brinkley Yard, which also is the base for some interesting industry switching nearby.

I ran a couple of thru freights, and found myself very envious of Barb Geiger, who worked the local that switched the Riceland facility at Stuttgart. Hopefully I will return someday and get marked up on that job. Frank, thank you for a wonderful evening.

Rob Roy Bridge: An eastbound freight crosses the Rob Roy bridge on Frank Zajac's St. Louis and Southwestern layout.

Stuttgart: Cotton Belt 8076 works the large Riceland Rice elevator in Stuttgart, AR.. Riceland Rice is the largest shipper on the railroad.



Paul De Luca on an eastbound thru freight passes Boras Rosser, who's working on a local at Clarendon, AR.

E. St Louis yard: A view of the E. St. Louis staging yard on Frank Zajac's railroad.

SSW host: Frank Zajac stands behind the Rob Roy bridge which crosses the Arkansas River on the north side of Pine Bluff.

Rob Roy Bridge: A unidentified westbound train crosses the Rob Roy bridge.

SSW crew: From left to right are Paul De Luca, John Brennan, Paul Boening, Barbara Geiger, Boras Rasser, host Frank Zajac, and John Wagner.

Tim Verberg's Chessie System

Review by Don Winn

It's 1978 in western Michigan, with the Chessie System running freight between Grand Rapids and Holland. In this "modern" era, the trains are getting very long. One of the things that makes Tim's layout special is his ability to capture the feel of operating these very long trains.

The scenery creation is still in the early stages, but that doesn't take anything away from the operations. Car forwarding is accomplished with written instructions and switch lists. It takes three guys to keep the main yard operating, with the rest of us running really long trains.

The layout is set up on three levels, with the mainline working in a continuous spiral around the basement. Using a technique Bob Reid explained in his clinic on layout design, Tim uses lap tracks behind the scenery around the perimeter of the room to move trains from the lowest level back up to the highest level without the need for a helix. This is a great aid in re-staging trains between sessions. During a session, trains enter this hidden staging and tie up for the night.

Another special feature of the Chessie System is the virtual CTC control panel. Tim uses the C/MRI software to graphically simulate a classic CTC machine. The display is presented on 5 large CRT monitors that Tim's wife picked up at a thrift store. (Tim notes that it killed his request to buy flat screen monitors!) Mouse clicks move the switches and the signals in a prototypical manner. The signals on the layout's mainline follow the actions of the CTC machine. Switches can also be aligned remotely on-location, and the switching display panels are very nicely done.

Owner Tim Verberg (at right) goes over the operations plan

Owner Tim Verberg with Andrew Winn

Tim Verberg reviews the CTC machine

Hank TenWolde's Monson Railroad

Review by Don Winn

Hank TenWolde faithfully models The Monson Railroad, a prototype 6-mile short line that existed in Maine until the 1930's. The line supported slate quarrying and slate finishing processes, interchanging with the outside world with the Bangor & Aroostook. It's a small HO layout, but had plenty of work to keep 2 crews busy for an evening. The layout was featured in the June 2012 Railroad Model Craftsman magazine.

Hank has incorporated a number of very creative features in his operating process to make things interesting and enjoyable for the operators. Car forwarding is controlled with a switch list, but there are "no @$% numbers" (Hank's term) or reporting marks for our old eyes to try to find. Cars to be picked up or set out are identified by type, such "loaded quarry flat" and by their siding location. This takes away some of the less enjoyable clerical parts of running the trains. It also greatly simplifies the task for the layout owner in setting up for the next operating session.

What is really unique are the two timers attached to the conductor's clipboard that count down the water and coal usage for the steam power. This adds some great realism to the challenge of running a steam engine! When you're out of coal or water, you have to stop! (actually, when you're out of water, you'd better run!) For the engineer, Hank has created cards that overlay on the Digitrax UTD throttles to identify the actions for each button, and to provide additional instructions for running that specific train.

You want more variety? On some operating nights, the crews arrive to find that snow drifts (foam blocks) are blocking the tracks! The regular crews have to adjust their plans to work around the MOW crew that is clearing the snow.

Hank presented these features in two clinics during the convention. This author is taking a number of Hank's innovations back home to use on his pike.

Rick Stern Switch on the Monson


Andrew Winn (R) also doing some switching on the Monso

Review by Reinhard Mueller

At first I was a bit curious about operation without using car numbers to identify the cars to be moved, however with such a shortline using their own cars it doesn't matter which empty flat you use. And this system really proved to work very well and still there was enough to do. Some special restrictions add more prototype feeling. There are restriction of cars on the (small) grades. And if you ignore this, the wheels will slip! So you may have to go a second or even third time to move all cars or another crew may help you up the grade. The other special experience is that you have keep an eye on the water and coal supply, simulated by two timers. While coal is relatively simple, as you need get coal just once per session, the water may run out faster than your time to finish your switching and you may have to call for help from another crew as it happened to one crew almost at the end of the session. While the scenery is not completed, there are already enough structures to get a feeling of the environment. And the sceniced areas are very detailed. As a result the operating this layout was a real highlight and I

didn't mind to see this layout a second time on the LDSIG layout tour on Wednesday.

Figure 3: Raw Slate shed at Milbrook

Figure 6: Dave and Danny at Portland slate branch

Figure 12: Dave and Peter at Monson car shed, Mike at Monson

Brian Preston's N Scale BNSF

Review by Frank Alan Schneider

On the Tuesday night of the Grand Rapids National Convention five of us went out to operate Brian Preston's N Scale BNSF layout. Set in the present, Brian models Tacoma Washington on the BNSF. The layout is beautiful and highly detailed. Brian has used Bing maps to locate specific scenes. The layout has a staging loop at each end, representing Seattle at one end and Portland at the other. Trains, including Sounder service, come out of one yard, run through the layout, sometimes stopping at the main yard in the center of the layout to drop or pick up cars, or at the station behind the yard (for the Sounder service). Trains then travel to and terminate in the other staging loop, ready to reappear the next time they are needed.

The layout is an around the wall layout that takes three sides of a room in the basement of the house. There is a peninsula in the middle that represents the dock area of Tacoma, with a large US customs service warehouse dominating the scene, as well as an intermodal yard and other industries.

There is no schedule; trains run in sequence. Through trains are mixed with local turns that switch the industries. The layout is broken into 6 zones. Each zone got a turn that was put together by the yardmaster and originated in the yard. Cars are switched using the car order system. In this system the conductor is simply concerned with car types, not specific cars. It worked quite well on the layout. Some of us had used the system before, but even those who had not, quickly caught on.

Brian and his father acted as de facto dispatchers, assigning crews to the next train when we finished the run we were on. Everyone got a chance to run both through trains and turns. There were two yardmasters who switched positions midway through the session. Crews consisted of an engineer and a conductor, and we switched off roles so both crewmembers got to experience both positions.

The five of us thoroughly enjoyed our time running this railroad. The trains ran smoothly, and operations instructions were clear and easy to follow. I especially enjoyed running the turns, as the switching is complex, but not so complex that it made my brain ache. It was also great to have the mainline runs so I could sightsee the layout. Special kudos for the great cookies!

Brian Preston's BNSF

Brian Preston’s BNSF

Duane Henry’s Sister Lakes Southern

Review by Dan Hadley

Thirteen guest operators traveled the eighty miles from Grand Rapids south to Duane Henry's layout located out in the country near Benton Harbor, Michigan. Duane also had four of his regular crew members on hand to help with the session. This large, double-decked layout kept everyone busy with more than enough jobs. The session started an hour early but we still went until 11 pm. A unique feature on Duane's layout are the two "swing" bridges connecting the main portion of the layout to an isolated section.

Members of the Op Sig crew look on as Robert Lamfers rerails an errant locomotive.

Brian Ford - Yardmaster extraordinaire.

Will Jordan flips through his car cards while working the car float on the Detroit River.

Robert Lamfers and George Jarvis thread a passenger train through a maze of switches while Ron Christiansen and Bruce Notman work the Detroit passenger terminal.


A wide view of the Sister Lakes Southern with Op Sig members hard at work.

Skip Luyk's Arcadia and Betsey River

Review by John Wagner

At the NMRA national convention in Grand Rapids, MI, I was able to operate on four layouts through OpSig. One of these was the Arcadia and Betsey River, a logging line owned by Skip Luyk. In addition to hosting the op session and being open for viewing on three days Skip was also the Chairman of the convention.

As you can see from the pictures the layout is built on two levels. The lower level has the town of Arcadia at one end and a lake with a car float at the other. Above the lake is a second yard called. From there a line winds its way to two logging camps ending above Arcadia. Between the two yards the line twists and curves through tunnels and over trestles

using the peninsula to gain the needed height. The end of the peninsula has rock scenery from the floor to near the ceiling. The structures are mostly scratch built by Skip and have incredible detail especially the car shop. Skip said he decided to add the interior detail after he had it built.

Arcadia is the main town on the railroad and is the connection to a class one railroad. There is an interchange track , a small yard, a two stall engine shed, a sawmill and several industries. This certainly kept the yardmaster busy. Once a train of ten empty log cars was ready, it was sent up the line into the mountains, winding through tunnels and over trestles until it reached the second yard . Here it left its empties and picked up ten loaded cars to take back to the mill at Arcadia. The loads are three logs glued together sitting loose on each log car. Skip has built a mechanism to pop each load off its car and send it down the chute into the pond. Very realistic unloading.

Following the first train out of Arcadia were two more; one was a second empty log train to switch the logging camps between Arcadia and the second yard while the other train took general freight on the lower route to the car ferry at the lake . Here it switched the barge before returning to Arcadia.

Meanwhile, once the first train of empties arrived at the second yard a logging locomotive took them further up into the mountains to two more camps and returned with ten loads for the next day's train to Arcadia. The final train to leave Arcadia took up two cars of freight and supplies to a couple of the camps.

It was a real pleasure to run a train in such a scenic setting. The track plan and operating schedule are very realistic. Skip was a very gracious host who explained things to us and then let us work things out on our own . I know everyone enjoyed themselves very much.

End of peninsula Reid Kahis on right

Rick Stern switches the car float with Reid Kahis in background

Yardmaster Dave Johnson switching at Arcadia

Bill Moore watches his log train while Sudro Brown moves an engine past the car repair shop in Arcadia


Car repair shop

Logs rolling off a car at the log dump