

Planning an OPSIG Weekend

BY THE THREE RIVERS OPSIG COMMITTEE

As with all great accomplishments clear vision, team work and effective communications are the keys to success. These attributes clearly drive the development of our layouts and the operating session we all enjoy. The Three Rivers OPSIG weekend has become a success due to planning, effective division of labor, willingness to adjust to change, collaborative communication and the focus that visiting operators have a fulfilling operations weekend. To the outside observer coordinating such a weekend would appear monumental; however, understanding the basic building blocks quickly reveals the effort is straightforward.

The Three Rivers OPSIG Weekend began as an offshoot of the successful Michigan OPSIG Weekends held in the springtime annually in Detroit. For multiple years we participated in the weekend op-till you drop event. In a gesture to reciprocate the hospitality we enjoyed yearly, the Three Rivers OPSIG Weekend was proposed to our Detroit hosts. In 2005 the first Three Rivers OPSIG Weekend was held. Our vision was clear and concise; provide an operations weekend to our Detroit hosts similar to what we experienced at their layouts. We achieved our goal in 2005 and established an alternating year rotation event with Detroit.

So how does the Three Rivers OPSIG plan its operation weekend? We begin by establishing a committee to divide and conquer all the tasks that must be completed. The committee reconvenes/forms approximately six (6) months prior the operations weekend. A chairman is selected and the various tasks are distributed to the committee members.

Our first order of business is to obtain formal sponsorship from our local NMRA division. Coordinating under the NMRA umbrella is done for multiple reasons and lessons learned. The NMRA provides an anchor in event recognition. The NMRA membership is an excellent source of contributing event staff and more importantly layouts. Lastly, and most important, is the insurance coverage the NMRA provides which is far superior to a home owners policy. The Three Rivers OPSIG requires all participating layout owners to be NMRA members. For layout owners who are not NMRA members, the Rail Pass program is implemented.

Our second order of business is establishing the participating layouts. The first several months of event planning are spent inventorying potential operating layouts. Operating layouts are



LEFT TO RIGHT: Three of the eight organizers of the Three Rivers OPSIG Meet: Chuck White, Bill Wemhoff, and Alan Bell. PHOTO BY PHIL MONAT

those that hold regular operating sessions or will be doing so by the time our event occurs. The Three Rivers OPSIG covers northeast Indiana and northwest Ohio (60 mile radius from Fort Wayne, Indiana) to maximize our pool of candidate layouts. In addition to identifying candidate layouts the number of operating positions must be identified. Lastly, a determination of which sessions the candidate layout will participate in must be defined. The Three Rivers OPSIG holds four operating sessions during our weekend event; beginning on Friday evening, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon, and Sunday morning.

The logistics of layout selection is admittedly the most demanding tasks and as such the Three Rivers OPSIG has a committee member dedicated to coordinating this effort. As layouts (individual and club) are in a continual state of development (due to personal, family, work obligations) a significant amount of time (months) is required to establish commitments to participate and prepare (establish operations, fix equipment, etc...) for the operations weekend. Our lesson learned is to begin the layout selection processes a minimum of five months in advance of the event. Encouraging first-time participating layout owners to host practice op-session is a must.

The second part of layout selection is determining the number of operating sessions a layout owner will participate in. An op-till-you-drop weekend can also be and op-till-you-drop for the layout owner. Subsequently, great emphasis is placed on ensuring our layout owners have sufficient time to re-stage their lay-

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out and sleep. First time and large layouts will only run two of the four sessions, the seasoned layout owners will host no more than three sessions. To ensure the layout owners have an enjoyable experience we tap our NMRA membership pool to provide layout assistances.

As the majority of our guests are from out of town preparations are made with a local hotel to provide accommodations. A dedicated committee member coordinates the hotel accommodations and arranges a bulk room rate. The Three Rivers OPSIG selects a hotel facility based on central location, cleanliness, local to restaurants, and room rate. Free conference rooms and other amenities are also arranged. Prior to signing the hotel agreement, it is presented before the opsig committee and our sponsoring NMRA division for approval.

As layout selection and hotel accommodations are being established communications with our guest operators is launched. Our formal announcement is placed in the Dispatcher at a minimum of two publications prior to our springtime event. Our lesson learned is to ensure our submission is timely and does not exceed the go-to-press cut off date.

In 2005, communication with guest operators was via e-mail and postal mail. When our guest arrived, each received their layout information package at the central hotel. To prevent guests needing to 'backtrack' to their first session layout, information packages were distributed at some of satellite layouts. For 2007, our goal was to provide guests full information prior to the weekend. Our forum for communications was via a Yahoo group. Once the registration and emergency contact forms (both sent by postal mail) and fee were received an e-mail was sent to the guest granting them access to the Yahoo group. Once admitted, each guest could obtain layout information (posted by each participating layout owner), hotel information, maps to each layout, and the schedule of which layout they would visit prior to the weekend. The forum also allowed guest to network amongst themselves. Lastly, utilizing the Yahoo group yielded a significant cost savings to the event as the need for printings and mailings was minimized. This held the registration fee at \$10 per guest.

Monies gathered through the registration fees paid for our expenses. Namely the gas spent by the layout chair to visit layouts over the course of the many months. Money was

also allocated to a welcoming gift (travel coffee mug with the Three Rivers OPSIG logo) so that each guest could long remember their operations weekend.

With layout preparations well underway, hotel contracts signed, and Yahoo group communications flowing, monthly committee tag-up meetings are held to monitor progress and make adjustments. The location for the monthly committee meetings were rotated so that driving distances were distributed equitable amongst the committee members. Admittedly, the most stressing activity is the last month prior to the operations weekend, driven by the closing of registration and assignment of guest to layouts.

As aforementioned, the Three Rivers OPSIG weekend host four sessions for our guest operators. Nine layouts participated in the weekend. The maximum number of guest operators is a function of the number of operating slots – operating positions per layout and the number of layouts open during a given session. Once the capacity of the weekend is met, registration is closed. Three Rivers OPSIG registration closes no less two weeks prior to the event. Once closed, the committee begins the task of assigning guests to layouts. Several tools are used to coordinate the assignments of operators, ensuring that order of registration, layout preferences, are travelling groups are honored [see Traffic Management article]. After the layout assignments are made and double checked that guests are not driving extreme distances between layouts, our guests are notified by e-mail via the Yahoo group of the layouts they will visit.

After six months of planning and the efforts of many dedicated volunteers the arrival of the operations weekend arrives with few surprises. Layouts are operational. Each layout owner knows who will be attending and is prepared with assistants. Insurance is in place. Emergency contact forms for each guest are held by one of our committee members accessible by cell phone should a health problem arise. Hotel accommodations are set. All that is left to do is enjoy. And we all do! ☺



The Three Rivers OPSIG Weekend success is due to the talents of our committee; Drake Omstead, Joe Berger, Gary Evans, Rich Swihart, Bob Petit, Chuck White, Bill Wemhoff, and Alan Bell.