

Starting in railroad modeling

A special edition of *The Missing Conversation*.



Welcome to a special edition of *The Missing Conversation*.

Traditionally, the holidays are when lots of folks are introduced to the hobby of model railroading for the first time. Maybe a new train set found its way under the Christmas tree, or you decided to see if that toy train had anything to offer for the rest of the year.

Regardless of how you got to this point, I want to welcome you to the beginning of a journey, one that can provide a lifetime of enjoyment, learning and deep pleasure in the discovery of new skills and interests.

As you'll soon see, there is much more to this hobby than meets the eye. In scale model railroading, you can pursue things as far as you

want to go over time and, while there is some very advanced work being done by many skilled craftsmen and women, don't be intimidated by the skill level they've achieved. These folks have spent years developing their skills. If there is one piece of sage advice to remember for now it is this: **You don't have to learn everything at once.**

Enjoy.

Mike Cougill

Creative Director, OST Publications.



I have the train set, now what?





People who wonder if that new train set has anything to offer them for the rest of the year ask this question annually. My answer is, yes, it does.

For many veteran modelers, that simple train set became the gateway to the lifelong hobby of model trains. Model trains? While this phrase brings to mind images of toy trains racing

around Old West buildings and through pressed board tunnels on a sheet of plywood, there is much more to the hobby than that.

Railroad modeling covers a wide array of interests from understanding the operations of full-size railroads to learning skills that can provide a lifetime of personal growth and

enjoyment. There are numerous pathways to explore and you can pursue the option of your choice at your own pace. This is a craft that grows infinitely more enjoyable the more you invest of yourself into it.

Is this you?

People have individual reasons for their interest in model trains. For some it will be memories of childhood or Christmas nostalgia. Maybe you've always been fascinated by full-size trains. You've probably seen magazines at the bookstore, or perhaps you have a friend who is "seriously into this model train stuff and, yeah, it's kind of cool."

People have individual reasons for their interest in model trains

It's at this point that the popular hobby literature has outlined a path for you based on certain assumptions they make, which often include the following:

You're a complete novice who doesn't know anything about the hobby.

You may have some knowledge but at this stage you're not ready for anything more complicated than running trains in a circle.

A 4x8 foot sheet of plywood is the best option for a first layout.

Does any of that fit your situation? Maybe yes, maybe no. These criteria aren't as important as the answer to an obvious question: **What would you like to do now that you're here?**



Specific advice by proxy is hard.

In an essay like this, it's hard to give specific advice because there's no way to know who you are as a reader, what your level of knowledge and experience is, or what your interests are. This is why I offer questions to consider rather than "do this" instructions to follow. So let's consider a few.

Where to begin?

Everyone started somewhere and learned as they went along. Learning new things is a big part of enjoying what this craft offers.

Veteran modelers will tell you there is a ton of stuff to learn. Yes, there is and it can be overwhelming. For now, though, all you need is your own curiosity, which is a good guide to follow and brings us back to the question

of what would you like to do? Whatever looks interesting to you now is a good place to begin your journey and, a journey is a good metaphor to keep in mind because that's what it really is.

I don't know what I don't know.

If you are a beginner you'll have a ton of questions and that's perfectly normal. No matter how skilled you become, you'll never run out of questions and there are lots of resources for information both online and off. There are books and magazines oriented toward beginners and the advanced alike. Online there is no end of

Questions are how you learn.

blogs, forums, and other sites bursting with information. Here's something important to understand about all of them.

The important thing to remember is that there really is no right or wrong way to pursue this craft. It's truly a matter of individual choice.

Railroad modeling consists of people with a wide range of opinions about everything. Attitudes range from those who view it as a purely recreational activity, where the focus is on the amount of play value and fun one can have. Folks in this category generally don't take things too seriously. As some say, "I just want to play with and enjoy my trains." This is just one approach among many others.

Other modelers do approach it with a more serious intent. They've determined that it adds a great deal of value to their lives and over the years have made a substantial commitment to pursuing it on a much deeper level. They've invested themselves in learning about full-size trains, developed their model building skills beyond the basics and have accumulated a vast understanding of railroading, perhaps even using the craft as a learning tool to enrich other aspects of their lives.

While the vast majority of people who frequent online forums will be very helpful, others, a tiny minority actually, can be quite opinionated and insistent in their views as to the best way to do something. If you join an online community or follow someone's blog, take any such dogmatic advice with a grain of salt and don't let yourself

There's a wide range of opinion about how to pursue the hobby. Take any strong, dogmatic statements lightly.

be overwhelmed or even bullied into following someone else's path. Learn to understand and choose your own. You'll enjoy your time in the craft much more.

What is it about a train that attracts you?

Do you find the rush of a passing train exhilarating or does the process of sorting out cars at an industry make you wonder what they're really doing? Do you like modern equipment or something historical like steam

locomotives? These are some of the many aspects of full-size railroads people find interesting and each can provide the foundation for a layout.

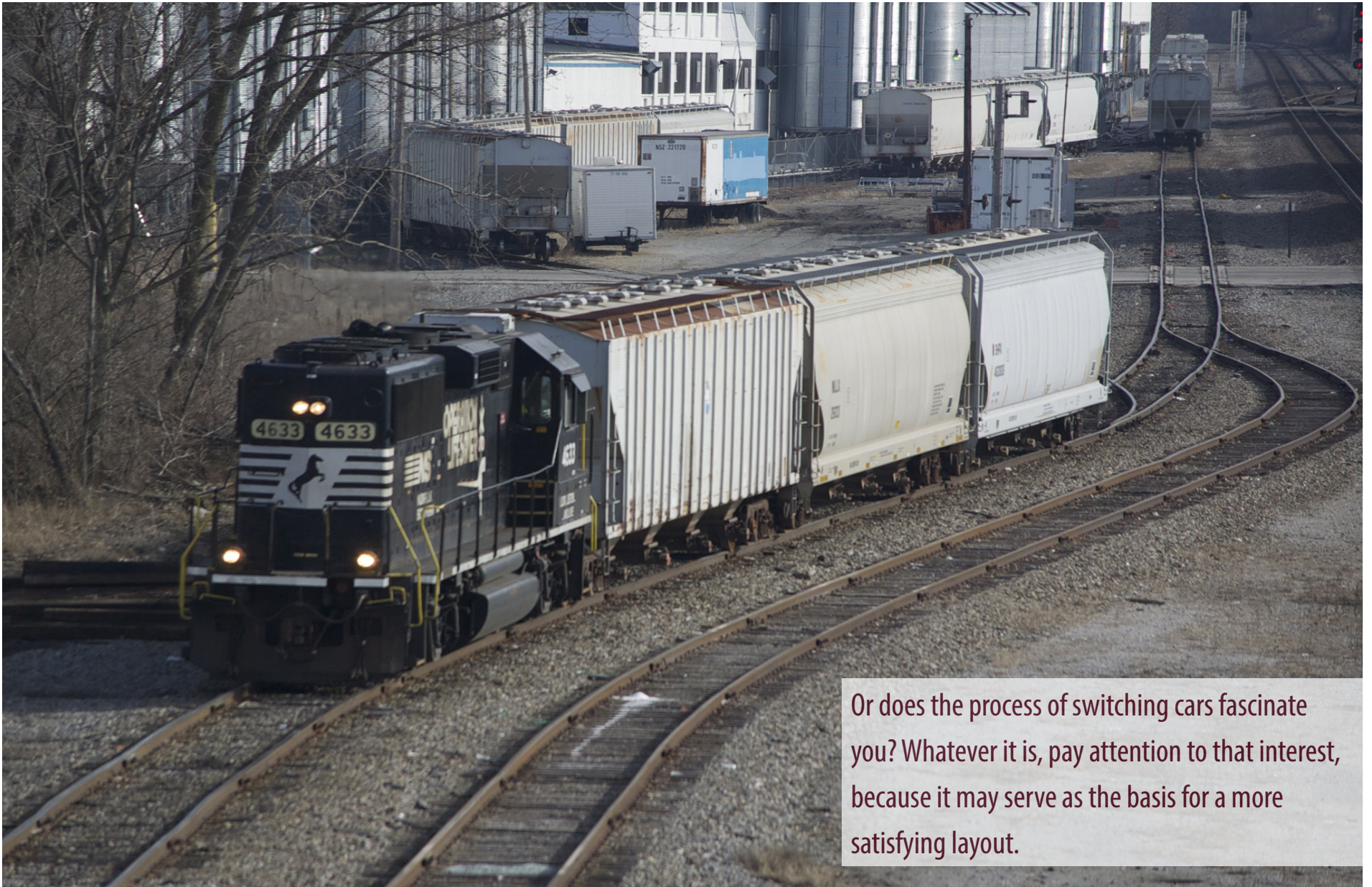
What types of operations do you enjoy?

"Operations" is the catchall term used by hobbyists for what a train does. Full-size trains don't operate randomly. They provide purposeful transportation services for moving freight and passengers from place to place. An extremely

What about trains interests you?

Is it the sight of mainline action?





Or does the process of switching cars fascinate you? Whatever it is, pay attention to that interest, because it may serve as the basis for a more satisfying layout.

satisfying aspect of the craft is that we can duplicate these purposeful movements in a very realistic manner on our layouts. Many modelers find duplicating such operations the most enjoyable part.

Full-size railroads employ a number of rules and practices to ensure the safety of both people and equipment and many modelers base their layout operations on those operating rules and practices. The important thing to remember for now is this:

You don't have to learn everything at once.

Understanding the numerous aspects involved in building and operating a layout can seem intimidating. In the beginning, there is a learning curve to negotiate, but time is on your side. The

fact that there is wealth of material to learn is what keeps the hobby fresh over the course of a lifetime.

How do I get started on a layout?

It's always tempting to just dive in and start building something right away. It's very

Learning what your interests are first and starting simply from that point will prove very satisfying and save you from frustrating dead ends.

enjoyable to see the train run for the first time and completely understandable why you'd want to get to that point quickly. However, by taking some time to learn what your interests are and starting simply from that point can prove very satisfying and save you the frustration of going down dead-end paths. Let me emphasize again that you have complete freedom of choice in pursuing this craft as you see fit.

What skills do you already have?

Railroad modeling covers many skill sets: from basic carpentry for building benchwork to artistic skills for drawing track plans and scenery construction. There are hand skills involved with laying track, assembling models and so on.

These are just a few of many skills you'll acquire over the years. It's easy to feel overwhelmed but

take things a step at a time and you'll grow.

The odds are you already have skills you can bring from your professional life, education and so on. Skills like being organized, detail oriented and the ability to see a project through to completion will serve you well. Craft and other hand skills is also an asset, but don't worry if you don't have these or feel you have nothing to bring. You do; and your interest in modeling will serve as excellent motivation for learning what you need to know. The best and deepest learning is always motivated by a strong desire. Finding a mentor who can help will also make life much easier.

How much time, financial and other resources do you want to dedicate to the hobby?

Notice I didn't say how much **can** you dedicate,

but rather how much do you **want** to do. This is an important decision to consider.

It's always good to start with something simple that you can learn the different stages of layout construction from and complete in a reasonable amount of time. **Simple doesn't have to mean simplistic though.** Your individual interests and level of enthusiasm will be the best guide to follow with regard to how deeply to dive in initially. Keep both of those in mind as you plan.

Designing your first layout

So let's look at that notion of using a 4x8 foot sheet of plywood as the foundation for a first layout. The 4x8 tabletop approach has been promoted to beginners by the popular magazines for decades. This format is actually a holdover from the toy train heritage and is

fueled by the major assumption that as a novice you're only interested in running a train in endless circles.

If that's truly the extent of your interests, then you're good to go. However, if you're interested enough in railroad modeling to have made a commitment of time and resources to reach this point, a question to consider is: How long do you think going in circles will keep your interest level engaged? That's a question you'll have to face sooner rather than later.

How long will running in
endless circles keep your
mind engaged?

Another part of the rationale behind the plywood sheet approach is that it's simple to set up with regard to the carpentry aspects of adding a framework and legs to support it at a good height off the floor. That big flat tabletop also makes it simple to lay the track and/or rearrange it at will. While those criteria are all well and good, there are several significant drawbacks to using a 4x8 foot sheet of material for the design of a layout. Let's look at them.

How 32 sq. ft. quickly becomes 140 sq. ft.

It's important to understand that the major shortcoming to a full sheet of plywood is the amount of space it takes up. You're looking at 32 square feet of floor space just for the sheet itself. This doesn't account for the extra space required for moving around the edges to work on and enjoy the layout. For that, add three feet

minimum on each side of that sheet. Now, at minimum, you'll need a space of 10'x14' with a big slab of wood in the middle of it, and with only a three foot wide space on all sides to move around in.

Does that still sound appealing? Most people don't have an empty spare room of this size to dedicate solely for a tabletop layout like this. Even worse is placing one or more of the edges up against a wall or in a corner. While that

There is more to a 4x8 than meets the eye. You need lots of extra room to move around it

might free up more space in the room, doing this leaves those sides completely inaccessible, which will almost certainly leave you frustrated and disappointed with the design.

This arrangement also dictates the room will not be usable for other activities, which could create tension with your spouse or other family members as a result. If you live in a condo or apartment setting, you not only don't have the extra space but you'll likely encounter major problems with moving such a big piece of material in and out.

Furthermore, that plywood sheet severely limits your design options.

For one, it will dictate the use of very tight curves and your trains will look pretty unrealistic

as a result. The space in the middle of the sheet tends to become a wasteland because reaching it will be an uncomfortable stretch. Reaching over the edges like that will pose the risk of damaging track, buildings and other details.

Is there a better way? Yes,

Something important to consider is that a layout is much more satisfying when it is designed for easy access. For this purpose experienced modelers find that a narrow shelf along the walls of a room is far superior to that sheet of plywood.

A shelf design that runs along one or more of the walls and in the range of 16-24 inches deep, allows you to easily reach all parts of your layout from front to back. It brings the action of the trains up close where you can enjoy it.

Designing a layout as a narrow shelf opens up many more possibilities over a sheet of plywood. Notice how open and usable the room is. As you see here, you can also raise the layout to a more comfortable viewing height (56" in this case) and tuck storage or work spaces under it, thereby doubling the utility of the same space. Integrating the layout into the room is much simpler, and makes for a much nicer presentation. While many people in the hobby consider this an advanced design concept, there's no reason a first layout couldn't use this form factor. This is my own layout.



Here's a closer view of my layout.

My layout is only 24" wide and uses a modeling scale where a quarter of an inch equals one foot, sometimes called O scale. Here you can see how accessible the track is and how it has a nice flowing quality, which was very important to me.

I chose to focus my layout on switching operations that are based on an actual location. I could have chosen a continuous running arrangement, but in this scale, which is somewhat large, that would have imposed on the space in the room in a way I simply didn't want. You can also see how the scenery was treated and how the work bench and other storage fit underneath.

This is also an example of how understanding your interests about full-size trains influences the design choices you'll make.



For example, you can easily throw switches, couple and uncouple cars and, in general, be where the action is. Using a shelf as a design form let's you create more realistic scenes and track outlines. With a narrow shelf the room space is more accessible for other activities and the layout can be visually integrated into the room, making it seem less obtrusive. As you can tell, I'm a big fan of such designs.

How do I get in and out?

You may wonder what happens at the doorways in the room with a shelf running around the walls? There are many solutions. The obvious one is that the layout does not have to encircle the entire room. A very satisfying layout can be designed using just one or two walls of a room.

Often such designs focus on railroad activities

like switching of industries instead of running continuously. However if you simply enjoy watching trains circle around, doorways can be spanned with removable sections of track that simply lift out of the way when not in use. The construction of these sections doesn't have to be complicated, although modelers have come up with many ways of building such devices.

Remember, it's a journey.

As you can see, there are lots of things to think about but this should give you plenty to consider for now. My only sage advice is to go at your own pace, keep some perspective and enjoy the process as it unfolds.

Resources

As I mentioned earlier, there are tons of resources out there for modelers of all levels. As with all things the quality of these resources varies from excellent to mediocre and it's difficult to know what to recommend in general terms.

All that said, here are a few picks that will give you a different view of the hobby of model railroading from the normal train set approach.

Designing a simple layout

There are alternatives to the 4x8 approach and a good resource is Lance Mindheim. Lance is a professional layout builder and has written a series of books that speak to the issues a newcomer to the hobby needs to know. Lance emphasizes switching of industries in his

designs, which may or may not suite your tastes. However, his layout designs are worth a serious look as they are simple and therefore easy to get started with. Here's a link to his book series.

<http://lancemindheim.com/bookstore.htm>

Another good option to consider is a style of layout popular in Great Britain called the inglenook. The track design of an inglenook layout is very simple and such layouts make an excellent way to get your feet wet with minimal fuss and expense. It may look simplistic at first, but don't be fooled. Simple doesn't always mean simplistic. Again, the emphasis is on switching operations. Check out this link.

<http://ingletonsidings.com>

A couple of blogs to consider

Seeing what another modeler is doing is an excellent way to learn about the hobby. Many people publish blogs about their layouts or interests. While some things may seem hard to understand if you're not familiar with the terminology, you can still learn a great deal.

Trevor Marshall's Port Rowan in 1:64

Trevor models a Canadian branchline and his blog documents the different aspects of the construction and philosophy behind his modeling. It's well written in an approachable, friendly tone.

<http://themodelrailwayshow.com/cn1950s/>

Trevor is also the co-host of a podcast about the hobby called The Model Railway Show. It is an excellent show that comes out twice a month

and features interviews with some of the leading thinkers in the hobby.

<http://www.themodelrailwayshow.com/>

Lance Mindheim's blog

In addition to his professional layout building business, Lance is the go-to person for modern layout designs and operations. Modern-era switching operations may or may not interest you, but there is a wealth of potentially useful information on his blog nonetheless.

<http://lancemindheim.com/blog.htm>

Finally, OST Publications also has a blog where I share more thought provoking questions designed to challenge your thinking and preconceived ideas. You can also check out my books in the OST Store.

<http://www.ostpubs.com/>



A model railroad can be very realistic as this scene on Warner Clark's layout shows. These models are at a scale where one quarter of an inch equals one foot.



OST Publications

P.O. Box 297, Richmond, Indiana 47375

www.ostpubs.com