

Modeling the Western Pacific Railroad (NMRA Branch Line Newsletter)

I have mentioned the NMRA (National Model Railroad Association) in one of my articles on modeling. While I was reading the last issue of the Pacific Coast Region's newsletter, "Branch Line" (Jan-Feb-Mar 2021) I came across a part of the newsletter entitled "The Answers Are Out There" by Robert Pethoud.

This article caught my eye, as it had to do with the Western Pacific's San Jose Branch.

It came out of a design challenge for a model layout that would fit in a small bedroom.

I bring this up, as an example of modeling the WP. This small layout can bring hours of enjoyment in the modeling hobby by giving you something that is small and can be a challenge to test your skills on so many levels. (Wood working, Building, Model making, Track laying, Scenery, and I could go on....)

This article is a reprint (with permission of Robert) and I hope it gives our members more insight to modeling the WP.

- Kerry Cochran

The Answers Are Out There WP's San Jose Branch

By Robert Pethoud

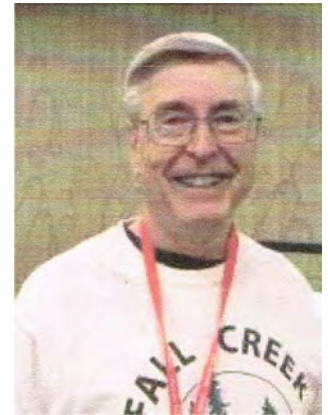
We model railroaders are a creative lot. Given the track arrangement of a prototype railroad's branch line, we can come up with as many different ways of representing it in miniature as there are wheels on a mile-long train of loaded triple-deck auto racks. For the 2021 Bay Area SIG Meet, the Daylight Division's own Bruce Morden posed a challenge to attendees of designing a model of Western Pacific's San Jose branch to fit in a square bedroom measuring 11.5 feet on a side. He provided track diagrams from WP's Training Manual Maps, ca. 1958, and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for the relevant areas. The Training Manual Maps even gave the names of the industries served by the branch's many spurs.

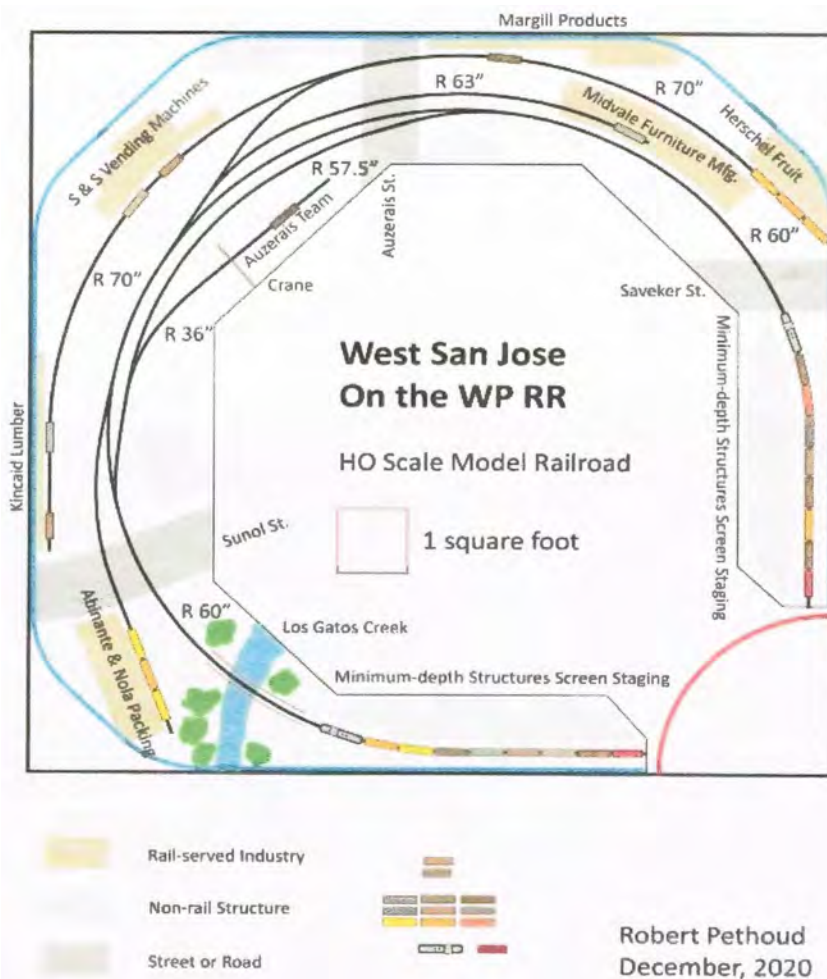
Half a dozen layout designers-Dean Deis, Cal Sexsmith, Doug Smith, Steve Marquess, Mike O'Dorney, and myself-took up the challenge and created a very diverse group of plans. From a three-level layout with a double helix to an ingenious arrangement of modules, they displayed an embarrassment of riches in creative ideas. I'm proud to say that my design finished among the top six entries. You'll find the track plan I created on the next page and I'll try to describe my approach to Bruce's challenge.

Western Pacific's San Jose branch has a lot to offer to a potential modeler. It's length of about eight miles (that would be 485 feet if shrunk to HO scale) included a six-track yard, several passing sidings, interchange with SP, and nearly 100 spurs serving scores of industries both large and small.

Unless you have an aircraft hanger to house your model railroad, you'll have to pick and choose what to include and what to leave out. Having been on a minimalist kick for the past few years, I zeroed in on about one-half mile of the branch. Those familiar with my Fall Creek Branch will not be surprised to learn that the ½-mile piece I chose includes Sunol passing siding and a few spurs, including a switchback. The result, in fact, resembles nothing more than Fall Creek Branch-basically a British-style exhibition layout-lengthened from 12 feet to 30 feet and coiled around the walls of that spare bedroom.

Of the plans submitted for the design challenge, mine had the smallest number of turnouts and the largest radius curves. We practitioners of scale model railroading would not arbitrarily shorten the model of a 50-foot auto car or an 85-foot Pullman because the result would not look right. Yet we make do with ridiculously sharp curves never found on the prototype, simply because we must in order to fit the trackage into our available space. And, of course, the result does not look right. By using an around-the-walls design, I knew I could employ larger than usual curve radii, so I decided on this plan to see how far





I could take that enlargement. It turns out that a 5-foot radius can fit inside the given room and results in a prototypically-reasonable 14-degree curve! This makes for a very realistic appearance and I doubt that I can find a model steam locomotive with a rigid wheelbase long enough to have trouble negotiating that curve.

The five spurs serve just seven industries. These small numbers in this bedroom mean that each industry can be impressively large--no shoebox-sized factories here--and they can be spaced well apart, resulting in an uncrowded appearance which can enhance the realism. With these huge curves and uncrowded tracks, you may be tempted to operate with lengthy freight cars. Resist that temptation. Instead, even as we enlarge the curve radius, consider back-dating the layout's era to the late 1940s/early 1950s so as to justify mostly 40-foot freight cars, with a few 36-footers thrown in. The shorter cars mean more spotting locations per industry and more cars fitting on the siding, which

increases the potential for challenging operation. And here's a bonus: modeling the transition era means you must use cabooses, which further complicate your switching operations in ways that rightfully annoyed the actual train crews of the time, but which gladden the hearts of today's rabid model railroad operators.

Working on this layout design challenge for the Bay Area SIG Meet turned out to be an excellent pandemic pastime. It cost essentially nothing and provided many hours of brain stimulation in the quest for a model railroad plan featuring realistic appearance and challenging operation, all based on a historic prototype. The absence of judged competition or prizes was no disincentive, but instead served to encourage me to try new ideas which might not appeal to volunteer judges. If you'd like to experience the thrill of creating your own prototype-based plan, just track down some current or former track arrangements from a favorite railroad, grab a few sheets of paper and a pencil, and go to work.

Until next time, you can reach me with comments and/or questions at pethoud@comcast.net

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