



Thoughts on Hosting a Layout Open House

by Kurt Thompson

As part of our last Annual Group Meeting, three of our division members opened their homes and layouts for us to view. Don Marvel, Jack Keene, and Fred Scheer all kindly agreed to allow division members to view their layouts. All three layouts are under construction or reconstruction at the time of the open houses. On the Monday after the AGM, we were all back at Jack's house for a work session. With a little prodding from me, we talked about their experiences in hosting a layout open house. Below are some of their responses to my questions.

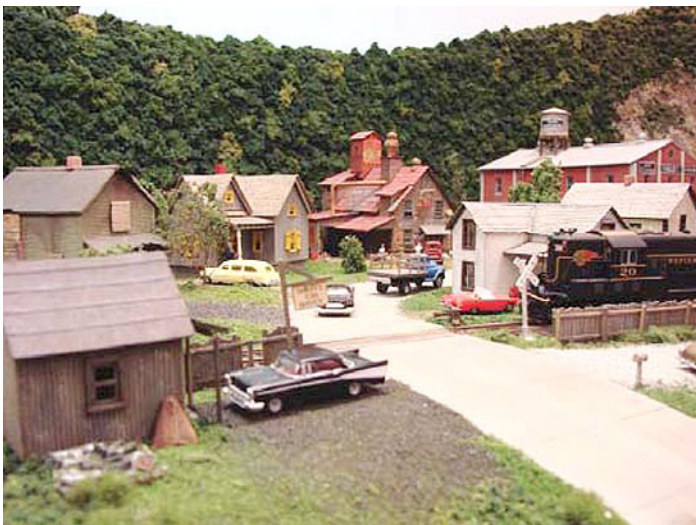


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First here are the layout descriptions from the layout hosts themselves:

Don Marvel's Layout

The Wilson Creek Division is a free-lanced model railroad located in the mountains of Pennsylvania during the summer of 1955. It is a point



to point track plan with a loop around the walls and a center peninsula that allows for continuous running when not being operated. The size of the layout is 15' X 22' with one staging yard located in an adjacent room.

The B&O interchanges with the Western Maryland and C&O in the town of Norton. Coal from nearby mines as well as mixed merchandise is classified and sent on for processing or its final destination from here. A small engine service terminal allows fueling and minor repairs to be carried out and includes a turntable for turning motive power. Several industries along the B&O and Western Maryland generate revenue for



the railroads and a lone passenger train helps transport people to distant cities. Construction of a branch line on a second level of two sides of the room has recently begun that will include a breaker, power plant, small industry, interchange and staging tracks.

The layout is currently being updated for future operations and is controlled by NCE wireless radio.

Jack Keene's Layout

My layout is an O scale point-to-loop track plan representing portions of the Second Subdivision (Susquehanna Division) of the Delaware and Hudson Railway in 1974. The railroad will extend from Albany, NY north to Mechanicville, NY where it meets its major interchange partner, the Boston and Maine.

From Mechanicville, the line runs south through Oneonta, NY to Nineveh Junction, where the First Subdivision (Pennsylvania Division) route to Wilkes Barre and Scranton, PA diverges from the



Second Sub line to Binghamton, NY. Wilkes Barre/Scranton and Binghamton are both represented by staging loops.

Much of the D&H's traffic uses the line as a bridge route between the B&M at Mechanicville or the CN/CP at the Canadian border and the Lehigh Valley and Penn Central in Wilkes Barre/Scranton or the Erie Lackawanna and Lehigh Valley in Binghamton.

Major on-line industries will include a Ford Motor Company radiator plant near Albany, General Electric's turbine and generator division in Schenectady and the Penn Dixie Cement plant near Cobleskill.

Operations, based on prototype schedules of the period, include seven through trains in each direction per day, local freights, yard operations and pusher service at two locations, as well as cameo appearances by inbound and outbound B&M freights at Mechanicville and the Alco PA-powered Amtrak/D&H Adirondack on its Albany - Montreal route. D&H power is all Alco or GE, with the exception of a pair of Baldwin sharks. Run through power from the Lehigh Valley and Erie Lackawanna will also frequently be seen. The plan is predominantly a shelf layout extending around the perimeter of the basement on three levels. Work is currently underway on the uppermost level between the yard in Oneonta and the staging loops representing Wilkes Barre Scranton and Binghamton.

Control will be provided by an NCE DCC system.

Fred Scheer's Layout

Prototype-Based: York, Pennsylvania circa 1953.

Small South-Central-Pennsylvania industrial town, 50 miles north of Baltimore. Strategic location with superb rail connections, home to an outsize list of manufacturing concerns. Halcyon years were post-industrial-



revolution through early 20th century; however, industrial footprint remained significant through WW II, into the 1950's, 1960's, even the 1970's.

Railroads in Town:

- (1) Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR);
- (2) Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad (M&P); and (3) Western Maryland

Railway (WM).

Design:

Single-deck walk-around shelf layout with open-staging,

aisles ranging from 42" to 46" wide; benchwork designed to the space, followed by the layout designed to the benchwork. Custom designed to my specifications by the Shelf Layouts Company of Silver Spring (Lance Mindheim). Plan includes all three railroads;

primary focus urban industrial switching within and

among the railroads; minor representation of through freight and passenger traffic.

Size: Layout — 14'6" x 22'10" / Backshop (frontshop, actually) — 10' x 18' / Paint shop — 10' x 7'

Gauge and Track: HO standard. Atlas Code 83 & 100 flex, Shinohara Code 70





flex; manufactured turnouts & crossings from Atlas, Micro- Engineering, Peco, and Walthers, ranging from #5's through #8's. DCC: EasyDCC (CVP Products, Inc.) Progress: Bench-work, sub roadbed, and backdrop 100 %; roadbed 65 %; track 40 %; wiring 30 %; DCC 95 % purchased, temporary installation; scenery 0 %.

Amenities: Completely finished and furnished Crew Room & Crew's Head. No disability access.

Commentaries

Kurt: What went through your mind first when I asked you to open your house and layout for the division ?

Don: As few people outside of our Round Robin group have seen the layout, I thought it was a great idea to show Division members the work in progress. It became a good

opportunity to set some goals and prioritize what could be realistically accomplished in the relatively short time before the open house.

Jack: Honestly, I was open to the suggestion of an open house, particularly on a rather low-key division level. I think for all three layouts, these visits were billed as works-in-progress, so there was not the pressure of reaching a certain degree of completion. That said, I think the first things I considered were "what do I need to do in the basement to make it presentable" and "what additional projects can I reasonably undertake before the open house, and in what priority."

Fred: "Why in God's name would anyone want to see my layout?" Then, fight-or-flight response. Sued for time, I checked with Diane (Fred's wife). She thought an open house was a splendid idea



and immediately went to work on a menu.

Kurt: Did the open house cause you to change things you were thinking about for your layout?

Don: I don't believe the open house changed anything...there is a desire to get as much as possible accomplished before the open house and it's great to have a deadline looming because it motivates you to put the extra time in to complete things that may not have been a priority.

Jack: My priorities became: upgrade the room lighting; get enough brackets installed to suggest where the railroad is headed next; lay out the track plans and supporting materials so I can

explain the concept of the railroad; and the ever popular "put the tools away and clean up the railroad room!"

Fred: Funny you should ask. Yes, but not for the open house. Major pre-open house changes were underway before the open house request materialized and I went into overdrive to get them advanced to a reasonable stop-

ping point before the open house. Inspired by the open house, afterward, I went through all my locomotives, made major decisions on keepers for ops., keepers for display, and engines that are now up for sale. (Call for a list.)

Kurt: Did the deadline scare you or inspire you to complete another project for your layout?

Don: The deadline at first inspires you to come up with a plan to get certain projects accomplished. As the dead line inches closer, you suddenly realize that you might have bit off more than you can chew.

Jack: The deadline in this case - approximately 3 weeks - did not leave much time for any major new initiatives. Ideally, I think 2-3 months notice for an open house request would be desirable for



a host.

Fred: In a sense, yes. The deadline certainly inspired me to hustle: to finish what I was working on, do a major clean-up/straighten-up of the train suite, and then, since I didn't have much railroad to show guests, to create exhibits and print photographs to show what I was doing and where certain prototype structures were slated to go. I also created labels to identify industry locations and sidings, and to show which tracks belonged to which railroads. Finally, I put together a guest handout. Crossed the finish line about 15 minutes before the first guest arrived.

Kurt: Were you able to share with your guests your ideas about your layout and what you are trying to represent or accomplish?

Don: Most of the guests were spread out so I was able to speak to everyone that came over. As only 10 or 11 people visited, I had adequate time to explain what I was trying to accomplish.

Jack: With the pace of visitation for this open house, I was able to give all guests a good overview of the layout concept and time period, as well as discuss areas of particular interest, both currently under construction and proposed.

Fred: I suppose it would be best to ask the guests that question! I was satisfied with guest interaction. My hall monitor, who knows the railroad, real and model, as well as I do, was terrific. We had ten or 12 or 13 guests and many seemed to linger. I figure they were either confused and frustrated because they couldn't figure out what I was trying to say or show, or they were interested in one thing or another, be it my shell of a layout, or the photos, maps, track schematics, and exhibits, or perhaps the railroad art in the crew room and crew's head.

Kurt: Were your guests reasonable individuals or were they the "horror story" guests we hear about in model railroading folklore?

Don: As would be expected with Division members, everyone was on their best behavior. Gene Nash even struck up a conversation with my wife about his recent trip to Ireland and now it looks like there's a vacation in my future!

Jack: All of my guests were reasonable and

polite, and spent considerable amounts of time examining the layout and the plans for future construction. Many had constructive thoughts and comments. None were game changers, of the "you really need to rethink this and start over" variety.

Fred: To quote Will Rogers, "I never met a man I didn't like..." Our guests were gracious and none of the silver went missing. Diane complained that people didn't eat enough. All that said, I have indeed seen incidents from which the folklore has been established. It could happen. But it didn't happen at this place on November 22, 2014. (See item (6) under the next question below.)

Kurt: Anything you'd like to say to others who might be considering hosting a layout open house?

Don: Set reasonable goals and prioritize what you want to complete before visitors walk through the door. Don't stress if everything you wanted to complete isn't 100%. It's a great opportunity to clean the layout room. Just remember where you put everything when you cleaned up.

Jack: I think there are a lot of positives and few negatives for hosting an open house. It does give you a laser-like focus on what your most pressing priorities are, and it's a great spur to action, often resulting in noticeable progress on the layout in a relatively short time span. Cleaning up the layout room periodically is always a good idea, but sometimes needs an external push to make it happen. In addition, discussions with visitors can lead to new viewpoints or creative solutions to problems which may have sprung up. You get to know folks who you might otherwise not have a chance to talk with at length, and you may possibly recruit some new workers or operators for your layout! Likewise the visitors acquire ideas and techniques from seeing how other layout builders are approaching challenges. Whether it's a "Wow, I never thought of doing it that way" or a "I don't think that's the best way to solve that problem," it's still a learning experience. Let's face it, without hosts for open houses, this facet of the hobby would simply be unavailable.

Fred: (1) Might seem counter intuitive, but "NEAT



AND CLEAN” covers over a lot of sins. “BRIGHT AND CHEERFUL” also helps. Clean up the railroad room and its approaches, put stuff away, and if necessary, throw stuff out. Dust off the layout, the scenery, the rolling stock, etc. Household dust doesn’t present a pleasant aesthetic, any more than do dead spiders and rodent feces. If storage space for surplus junk is limited, look at that as a challenge to be creative. If no -can-do, you’re probably not ready for an open house just yet.

(2) Be honest when you write up a description of your layout. First and foremost, this requires you to be honest with yourself. NOT self-deprecating. Just honesty. Frankly, in my layout’s current state of construction, I’m not interested in explaining to people why I’m not further along. I want guests to know ahead of time my layout is mostly infrastructure. In turn, I’m prepared to respond to questions about what they see and what I intend to do going forward. I don’t want guests who will waste my time by complaining the trip here wasn’t worth their time because I don’t have any scenery or structures. In return, I will be clear about the status and condition of my modeling efforts for their consideration before heading over. These are the same courtesies I would like extended to me as a potential guest.

(3) Relate the railroad to some place and time in real life, no matter whether you do prototype or freelance. Have maps or diagrams of some sort on display and perhaps, some photographs or drawings as well.

(4) Label stuff on the layout. If the layout has scenery and your structures have identifying names on them, that’s good. If they don’t, please label them. Or in the absence of “stuff,” label locations where stuff will go. Label factories, “spots,” yards, mainlines, etc. Augment with photographs if it is reasonable to do so. This would all be nice for operating sessions on “going” layouts, and it’s particularly nice for interested folks who visit an unfamiliar layout on tour.

(5) Give people an escape route. Some folks turn out to not be interested in what you’re showing. While I know people who would just say, “I think this sucks,” turn around, and walk away, I

think most people would prefer to be gracious and might feel awkward excusing themselves if your place isn’t crowded. In our case, although Diane wanted to put munchies in the train room, I implored her to set up out in the crew room, from which people could just slip out the doors onto the terrace or upstairs to the front door.

(6) Hosting an open house is a lot like retailing. You need to be “ON” and “UP.” You need to have prepared your layout and its environs so they support you in being “on” and “up.” Do your best to make people feel welcome. Always overlook personal insults — you need to allow as to how often folks are just socially awkward in some of these situations and the best thing is just to be gracious. If guests are insulting other guests, that’s another issue which requires discreet policing.

To that end, adopt another practice from retailing and be sure to have floor walkers. While security is something of a concern, there’s a practical sociability issue here. You can’t be everywhere and talk to everyone at once if more than, say, three or four people are visiting at once. A hall monitor who can help with conversation about the layout and point people to the restroom, the munchies, and the exit, is priceless.

(7) Please think twice before setting up your own private white elephant table at your open house, unless it’s free stuff you’d like people to just take. Speaking as someone who has about 20 locomotives for sale, I think having a sales table at your private open house is tacky. However, there are more practical issues: its a detraction from the main event, which is your layout; and, unless you have another full time helper to man the sales table, your guests are likely to be interrupted when white elephant customers are suing for your attention and trying to wheel and deal for your surplus stuff. A more gracious alternative would be a list of sale items either attached to your handouts or sitting next to them on a table. Another alternative is the way Chesapeake Division handled the issue — by having a sales table at the annual meeting that preceded our recent open house tour.