

A History of the NMRA Achievement Program (1961 - 2024)

CJ Riley MMR #97

With additional material provided by:

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The Achievement Program (AP) is one of the more popular activities of the NMRA, with voluntary participation running in the thousands. Since the program's beginning in 1961, 769 Master Model Railroader (MMR) certificates have been awarded (#769 was awarded in May, 2024) and countless others have earned a Golden Spike Award or at least one of the achievement certificates.

While the program was instituted to recognize both modeling achievements and service to the hobby and NMRA, there have been additional benefits. One of the requirements of an AP MMR is a commitment to helping others, a requirement I am proud to say is taken very seriously by the recipients.

The AP is designed to be accessible to all members. Skilled modelers can earn awards for model building, volunteers and “organization leader” types are recognized for their service, authors and photographers can earn a certificate for their published contributions to the betterment of the hobby, and model railroad builders can earn certificates for completion of operating model railroads and/or model railroads finished with scenery. NMRA members who do not feel their efforts warrant AP certificates quite yet can work toward the Golden Spike Award, created to recognize those who have built a model railroad without exhibiting the more advanced techniques or skills required for AP recognition, but who have been willing to try some of the basic modeling techniques, producing well-rounded work that requires more skill than simply opening the boxes.

The history of the Achievement Program reflects the inputs from many people, many of them pioneers of the hobby and legends familiar to all of us. The basis of this history is the work done by Willis “Bill” Ehlert that was published in the NMRA Bulletin of August, 1985 and additional research was done by Kalmbach Library former Research Associate Thomas Mossbeck.

It was the late Hal Carstens, then editor of Railroad Model Craftsman, who first proposed an awards program for model railroaders. The published proposal generated a great deal of mail that was forwarded to NMRA President Leighton Keeling and two committees were formed, chaired by Watson House and David Stearns, to deliver a joint report to the Board of Trustees (BOT) meeting in February, 1961.

The Chicago BOT meeting in February of 1961 was presented a basic proposal for an “Achievement Awards Program”. This proposal was generated by a group of North East Region members led by the “first” program chair and Master Model Railroader #1, Doug Smith. The BOT formally adopted the program as an NMRA activity at the Cleveland convention of 1961. Carol Homuth became the first official AP Chair after the program was established. At that time, there were nine categories with six awards required for MMR. The Scenery category was added in 1963, Prototype Modeler was added in 1985, and the number of certificates required for MMR was increased to seven, with at least one certificate in each of the four categories

Jack Kirby Taylor, MMR #3, from the Midwest Region, became the second chair in the autumn of 1962. Under his leadership, the rules and regulations were refined, providing most of the specific requirements we work with today. The Scenery category was proposed in December, 1962, along with the requirement of an award in each of the four areas as a prerequisite for earning MMR. The BOT approved this package of improvements at the St. Louis midyear meeting in 1963. To avoid possible confusion with the NMRA's Honors Awards program, recognition for service to the organization and the hobby, the term "Award" was dropped, and the program became officially known as the Achievement Program (AP) in 1964.

August, 1964 saw John A. Nalls, of the Lone Star Region, become the third National Chairman, serving until Phillip H. Kohl, of the Pacific Northwest Region, succeeded him in 1966. The growing workload was alleviated when the AP Vice-Chair, Jack Weir began processing the SOQs ("Statement of Qualifications", the application form) at that time. Rick Shoup, MMR #234, took over this part of the job in 1973. Frank Hamilton was named Dispatcher for the program in 1967 and served until 1980. Floyd James assumed that responsibility and served until 1995. Dispatcher was always a very hard job to fill especially after Rick Shoup and Pat Harriman, MMR #168, invented the "First Timer" patches and the Golden Spike Award (proposed by C.J. Riley, MMR #97). Deane Mellander, MMR #68, created the Golden Spike logo. The Dispatcher had to send the patches and the personal confirmations for each certificate.

In January of 1970, Phil Kohl was succeeded by Paul Moon, MMR #30, of the Mid-Continent Region. At that time, thirty members had earned the MMR award and 1311 certificates had been awarded. By the tenth anniversary of the program in 1971, there were thirty-six MMRs and more than 1500 certificates had been awarded.

In these early days of the program, models winning 1st, 2nd, 3rd, Honorable Mention or Best in Show at national or region NMRA contests automatically qualified for AP credit. No credit was offered for division contests or for superior models that did not place in the contests. In the mid-1970s, the current system of any model scoring at least 87-1/2 points in any NMRA contest (national, region, or division) or in evaluation by an AP appointed member, would qualify for a Merit Award and therefore, automatic AP credit.

Don McKinnon, of the Thousand Lakes Region, managed the program from August, 1972 until June, 1974, when Dr. George Mellinger, MMR #42, Mid-Continent Region, took over. Several refinements and changes were made during his tenure and he was succeeded in January 1979 by Bill Ehlert, MMR #59, Mid-West Region.

In 1983, the 100th MMR was awarded and many felt the symbolism was perfect. With a program designed so that every member can participate, John M. Smith (appropriately) became MMR #100 and the ranks of MMRs were growing quickly. The first ten years saw 36 MMRs, but in the next 14 years there were an additional 76 MMR certificates awarded for a total of 112 as of June, 1985.

Rick Shoup, HLM, MMR #234, assumed the AP chair in 1987 and served until 1995, when he was succeeded by Pete Moffett, HLM, MMR #143. It was Rick who conceived the "Hat and Gloves" logo in the early 1980's that is still in use today. When Pete became AP chair, he started to use the logos for each category that had been created by Charlie Hansen, MMR #160, and Don Buckley, MMR #199. Rick had commissioned Charlie and Don to develop the logos a few years earlier.

During the 1980's there was a rapid increase in serious prototype modeling efforts. The informal group known Railroad Prototype Modelers (RPM) was formed. There was a sharp increase in both the number of railroad historical societies and the size of their memberships. There was a growing and renewed interest in modeling a specific portion of a real railroad and its equipment.

This interest was noted by both the Contest and AP Departments, and several changes were made. First, following more than a year of parallel testing and judging in the Mid-Central and Pacific Coast Regions, the contest and AP point allotment was modified, increasing the total possible points in the "Conformity" category while decreasing the total number of points in scratch building. This change recognized research to establish conformity to the prototype, and, more importantly, allowed the modeler to develop relevant documentation that could lead to a "freelanced" model based on several similar prototypical structures. It also recognized those who did additional research to establish the prototype practices that were in effect during the era they were modeling.

The onus was placed on the modeler to provide the drawings, photos or other data that was used as the "prototype" basis for the model. The prototype equipment rosters had grown considerably since the early days of NMRA. The multitude of diesel locomotives and vast variety of modern freight cars made it impossible for a judge to be knowledgeable in all facets of the prototype. It was determined that visual back up material would avoid the guesswork that had been creeping into the judging process, and that the points awarded would be limited for undocumented models.

In a parallel move, a new AP category was created: Master Builder—Prototype Models. This category was added by the BOT at the July 1985 meeting in Milwaukee. This was a unique category that required a complete and documented prototype scene, with scenery, structures, rolling stock and a locomotive, all appropriate to the scene.

Following several informal bull sessions, a group of MCR members, led by CJ Riley MMR #97, debated the need for recognition of "pretty good beginning modelers" in addition to the "Master Modelers" of the AP. These discussions led to the Golden Spike Award, added by the BOT at the January, 1987 meeting in Burlingame, CA. The Golden Spike Award was intended to be achievable by anyone building a home model railroad, module, or portions of a club railroad. Earning a Golden Spike Award required a bit more than "shaking the boxes" when building a railroad.

Like Prototype Modeler, the requirements call for demonstrating basic skills with some rolling stock, structures, track work, and scenery, all of which involve some simple detailing of kits. Scratch building and kit bashing are encouraged, but not required, and existing MMRs are exempted from participation. (Hint: Earn your Golden Spike before you apply for MMR if you want the Certificate.) It was anticipated that many members might be inspired by the earning of this award to further participate in the AP and work toward additional certificates. The intent was to provide an entry point for the AP program and to provide a **starting** point that could be achieved by almost everybody.

As is probably typical in many organizations, a very minute number of members are tempted to exaggerate their accomplishments, and the AP suffered such an episode in the early 1990's. Accusations were raised that an MMR certificate had been awarded to someone who had used a personal relationship with a program administrator to obtain credit for models that were built by others. This situation was new to the program and there were no provisions in place for dealing with it. It was decided to hold a formal hearing at the Valley Forge Convention in 1993, with testimony presented before a panel of MMRs, with a member who acted as "judge", and an MMR acting as "prosecutor". The result of the inquiry was to remove the name of the offending party from the MMR listing, thus explaining the missing name for MMR #156. The removal decision was confirmed at the following EC/BOT midyear meeting. As a participant in the inquiry, this author fervently hopes we do not have to deal with this kind of very unpleasant issue again.

As the number of participants in the program expanded, it stopped being a “boys club” and in July, 1991, the AP proudly awarded MMR #175 to Mary Miller, whose husband Bill preceded her by 10 certificates. As of mid-2023, there are a total of twelve (12) female MMRs: Mary Miller, MMR#175; June Maier, MMR #243; Leslie Eaton, MMR #289; Mary Barstow, MMR #292; Gail Allen Komar, MMR #349; Fran Hale, MMR #349; Georgia Dahlberg, MMR#472; Katherine Millatt, MMR#542, Brook Qualman, MMR #665; Susan Werner MMR #729; Beverly Farnham, MMR #743; and Connie Jones Coy, MMR #763. We encourage all to aspire to join the ranks of the MMR...everyone has an equal playing field.

There have been five (5) husband-wife pairs who have both earned an MMR so far. They are listed below.

W. Miles Hale, MMR #90	Fran Hale, MMR #349
Bill Miller, MMR #165	Mary Miller, MMR #175
Rick Maier, MMR #204	June Maier, MMR #243
Ken Farnham, MMR #658	Beverly Farnham, MMR #743
John Coy, MMR #730	Connie Jones Coy, MMR #763

Additionally, there have been three (3) father-son pairs who have achieved MMR status: Paul Richardson, MMR #345 and Duane Richardson, MMR#391; Dr. Joseph Nichols, Sr., MMR #48 and Joseph Nichols, Jr. MMR #511; and Stephen Priest, MMR #377 and Joel Priest, MMR #503.

Lastly, there has been one pair of brothers who have joined the MMR ranks: Tracy Mitchell, MMR #311 and his brother Terry Mitchell, MMR #312. The AP has certainly proved to be a family event in many combinations.

For many years, there was a difference in evaluation between the NMRA Contest Department and the Achievement program – they used different scoring systems. While contest winners received Merit Awards for AP credits, the judging systems differed in the allotment of points and the total points possible. There seemed to be an implication that contest participation was necessary to earn AP credit. Although that was a false assumption, a cooperative movement began under Pete Moffett, AP Chair, and Dean Windsor, Contest Chair, to make the Contest and AP rules more compatible and the judging more consistent. Since there were many excellent modelers who just did not care for competition, or were unable to attend meets where judging was available, these revisions encouraged more AP evaluations at participants’ homes or other compatible locations.

Additionally, it created a basis for scoring that would be more consistent. To that end, a jointly used judging guide was created in 1999, the point systems were melded, and a scoring matrix created for each certificate that presented a clear method of evaluating the quality of the modeling verses the difficulty of the project. Now, there is much more consistency in the judging, whether at a contest judging or in AP evaluation in a non-competitive situation. Rick Maier, MMR #204, prepared a detailed set of Judging Guidelines that explain the scoring in each area. These guidelines are posted on the NMRA website in the AP area for all to use.

The achievement program has come a long way in more than 60 years. The number of MMRs is 745 as of mid-August, 2023 and the number of certificates awarded totals more than twelve thousand. Clearly, this is a program that attracts a large proportion of our membership. Listings of all MMRs, living and deceased, in numerical order and by Region, are on the NMRA web site in the AP section.

We encourage all members to participate. Even if you are all thumbs with model building, the service awards (Volunteer, Official, and Author) are within reach. The Golden Spike Award was created so that virtually any member can aspire to it, and it can be achieved with a simple module. The requirements have changed over time to reflect changes in the hobby – DCC, electronic publishing, and more. There is a great deal of pride and satisfaction in earning any of the certificates, and you will be helping others in ways you could not imagine.

As a final side benefit, it is the easiest way to have your name published in the NMRA Magazine. Please give some thought as to how you can participate. Just do it.

C. J. Riley's Personal Side Bar (2013)

This author's personal experience may well serve to illustrate how a typical member starts down the path to earning the MMR certificate. I joined the NMRA in 1972 in the Mid-Central Region, but remained a "lone wolf" modeler, until attracted by a local division meeting held at the headquarters of Union Switch & Signal Co., in their display room. I was received enthusiastically as a new member and began regular attendance.

A few months later, I took a model I was proud of to an informal contest, in which the modeler verbally presented his model to the judges, who could ask questions about particular techniques and make suggestions for improvement, along with offering encouragement to enter it in a regional contest the following month. An article on this style of contest was published in the old *Bulletin* (my first author credit). With that convention experience a rousing success and a lot of fun (I also received an award for the model) I was fully hooked on the advantages of an active NMRA experience.

I built more models that earned Merit Awards, was elected to a division office, had a few published photographs, gave a clinic, and ultimately, had my first published article in RMC. I was suddenly sliding down the ever-steepening slope of the Achievement program, without an actual decision to participate. I examined the AP requirements with increasing interest and began focusing my modeling efforts toward them. Master Builder Cars was the first award, followed by Structures and Volunteer (I continue to volunteer at the divisional and regional levels).

Noting the ever-rising numbers of MMRs, I thought I might as well work a little harder and try to make the first one hundred MMRs. With a flurry of work on my layout followed by evaluation for the needed certificates, I received word that I had been awarded MMR #97 in 1982 (as in the old railroad song, "The Wreck of the Old 97").

Like many others, I quickly realized that earning the award was just the beginning. MMRs pledge to continue to serve the membership and the hobby, a serious obligation. Election to regional office led to ten years on the BOT culminating in a term as Executive Vice-president and a Co-chair of the 1990 Pittsburgh National convention. I continued to earn additional certificates, and hope to eventually earn all eleven even though there is no additional public recognition.

The most important benefit I saw from AP was the encouragement to try new things. I had to try techniques, build models, or volunteer for duties I might not have otherwise. Both my life and my modeling greatly benefited from the expanding horizons related to the AP program. While I am no longer active at the National level, I continue to write, judge contests, give clinics, and am the Fourth Division PNR AP chair, where I am proud to say we have encouraged six new MMRs with another half dozen who are close.

While the experiences of others may differ considerably in the details, the step-by-step progress, followed by a push to finish is typical. The hardest part of all is that first step.

AP Program Managers

1961-1961 Doug Smith, MMR #1 NER
1961-1962 Carol Homuth PCR
1962-1964 Jack Taylor, MMR #3 MWR
1964-1966 John Nalls LSR
1966-1970 Phillip Kohl PNR
1970-1972 Paul Moon, MMR #030 MCoR
1972-1974 Don McKinnon TLR
1974-1979 George Mellinger, MMR#042 MCoR
1979-1987 Bill Ehlert, MMR #59 MWR
1987-1995 Rick Shoup, HLM, MMR #234 SSR
1995-2000 Pete Moffett, MMR #143 NFR
2000-2008 Pat Harriman, HLM, MMR #168 MCoR
2008-2018 Paul Richardson, MMR #345 MCoR
2018-2024 Frank Koch, HLM, MCR
2024- Ray Persing, MCR

AP Assistant Managers

1961-1973 Jack Weir
1973-1988 Rick Shoup, MMR #234 SSR
1988-1988 Ron Williams, MMR #82 MCoR
1988-1995 Mark Stone SER
1995-2003 Rich Coleman RMR
2003-2018 Frank Koch, HLM MCR
2018- Eliminated

AP Dispatcher

1967-1980 Frank Hamilton MCR
1980-1995 Floyd James MCR
1995-2000 Rich Coleman RMR
2000-2008 Roger Quinlan MCoR
2008-2017 Floyd Brittan MCoR
2017 - Eliminated

MMR Milestones

AP Program Approved, Summer, 1961
MMR #001 Doug Smith, March, 1962
MMR #100 John Smith, June, 1983
MMR #200 David Barron, June, 1993
MMR #300 Lex Parker, February, 2001
MMR #400 Lloyd Keyser, August, 2007
MMR #450 Brad Morneau, August 2010
MMR #500 Mark Evans, November, 2012
MMR #550 Howard Garner, December 2014
MMR #600 Sam Swanson, October 2017
MMR #650 Chris Broughton, January 2020
MMR #700 Dan Hinel, February 2022
MMR #750 Martin Pirnat, November, 2023
MMR #800 ??

Compiled by CJ Riley, MMR #97
Revised by Paul Richardson, MMR #345, January 2013; Frank
Koch, January 2018, August 2023, May 2024

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