

# THE SEMAPHORE



January 2018

FOX VALLEY DIVISION • MIDWEST REGION



**Mike Ristchdorff's N&W**  
article and photos by Walt Herrick



We start off the new year by featuring one of Chicagoland's most well known model railroads, **Mike Ritschdorff's** basement size, HO scale, **Pocahontas Division of the Norfolk & Western Railway**. Above we see what you rarely see on a model railroad: the N&W's massive steam turbine locomotive, the Jawn Henry in action. Here Big Jawn is crossing "Railfan's Trestle" deep in the coal fields of West Virginia. *con't on p.2*

## Fun Stuff by Jim Allen

This month's photo shows the lengths to which one rail fan went to bring real railroading into his basement. He built his house over an abandoned railroad right-of-way and then preserved the track structure by building a trench filled with clear resin over it! Concrete slabs were formed on either side of the ties to make walls for the trench. Then many layers of clear resin were poured into the trench over the ballast, ties and rails. Each layer of resin had to dry thoroughly before the next layer was applied. Once the resin reached a level very slightly above the level of the concrete floor, its surfaced was polished to exactly match the same height as the surrounding floor. Pretty wild, huh?! Walt Herrick for Jim Allen.



## Layout of the Month: Mike Ritschdorff's N&W con't

Step down into Mike Ritschdorff's basement and you are transported to Appalachia in the fall of 1958 on the Pocohantas Division of the N&W Railway in HO scale. Mike's layout features big time railroading with big locomotives pulling long trains that serve big industries. Articulated steam locomotives in several classes are seen on main line trains, switching coal marshalling yards and switching coal tipples as mine "shifters". Tree covered mountain scenery reaches to the basement's ceiling and huge industries are located along the "Pokey" Division's right-of-way. Most of these industries are closely tied to the region's primary industry: coal mining. The biggest of Mike's industries is the Sieben's Brewery complex which takes up a huge chunk of the real estate on the railroad and has its own six track, 16 foot long yard. Trains are dispatched by tower operators using telephones in key locations throughout the basement. Car cards forward rolling stock to on and off layout locations.

Mike designed and built most of his railroad but had help with scenery and structures. He credits John Kaspar and Paul Hellerman with creating almost all of the scenery and many of the larger structures on the layout. The pair made extensive use of "puff ball" trees and Mountains in Minutes "Flex Rock" flexible rock castings (no longer available) to create the mountains of West Virginia in the Ritschdorff basement. Mike is a big fan of the late Don Cook MMR's work, and was happy to be able to purchase many of his layout's structures after his passing in 2016. They are seen in several locations on the layout.

One of Mike's passions in the hobby *con't on p.3*



An N&W Y3a articulated holds for an N&W color position signal at the town of Oceana (top photo). The town features several Don Cook, MMR structures. A little further east, a Y6 articulated switches hoppers at the Oceana loader (center photo). A set of Virginian ELB electrics sit next to the coal marshalling yard at Kopperstown. (bottom photo). Note the lighted caboose markers.



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is large industries. Besides the Sieben's Brewery, there are several others on the layout including Hellerman's Tractors which stretches 12 feet along one wall, the large Ironton pig iron plant, and a large coal slurry breakdown plant. Something the Ritschdorff layout is known for is its coal mining operations using "real" (plastic particle) coal loaded into hoppers from two locations and dumped into dumpers at Norfolk, VA. Mike is also known for running 80 loaded hopper car trains during his op sessions!

Mike says his goal was to "capture the essence of the N&W's Pokey Division in West Virginia and its big coal and coal related industries." I'd say he's succeeded admirably in his quest.



Above right is the Kopperstown #1 Mine which loads actual "coal" into empty hoppers. Above Mike Ritschdorff stands next to a small part of the huge Sieben's Brewery complex. Directly above is a large coal slurry break down plant.

### Basic Layout Information

Layout Name:	N&W Ry., Pocahontas Div.
Layout Builder:	Mike Ritschdorff
Layout Location:	Mike's basement
Layout Scale:	HO
Layout Size:	25 x 41 feet
Layout Style:	Double deck, around the walls with peninsulas
Layout Theme:	West Virginia coal & heavy industry operations
Layout Era:	Late 1950s
Construction Started:	1985
Bench work:	1x4 open grid
Sub road bed/roadbed:	3/4 inch plywood (track laid directly on the plywood)
Track:	Atlas code 100 flex track with Peco turnouts
Minimum Radius:	36" radius throughout
Scenery:	Puff balls over chicken wire; flex rock outcroppings, ground foam
Structures:	Kits, kit-bashed, scratch built with many Don Cook blgs.
Locomotives:	BLI, Atlas, Life Like, etc. representing N&W locos
Rolling Stock:	Commercial, RTR and kits
Control:	Lenz DCC with CVP radio throttles
Operations:	Car cards; dispatched by tower using telephones
Hobby Heroes:	Alan McClelland, Bruce Chubb
Favorites Aspects of Hobby:	Operations; developing operating systems for model railroads; coal railroading & heavy West Virginian industrial operations

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Above left is a part of the Ironton pig iron plant. The Baldwin S12 is the primary plant switcher with the yellow 45 tonner assisting as needed. Appalachian scenery on the Pokey Division (above right) is accomplished using tried and true "puff balls" to model the tree canopy and lots of "Flex Rock" painted shades of grey and tan for rock outcroppings.