

My Model Railroad Journey

By Bruce Petrarca, MMR #574
Photos by Bruce or his mother, Adela.

What a journey.

In the span of less than two decades, I've gone from a non-modeler, to Mr. DCC, to Master Model Railroader #574. Preparing my short biography for the *NMRA Magazine* put me in a pensive mood. Here I'll share the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say. I kinda stumbled into and over lots of things along the way. Now that I'm a model railroader, I wish I could go back and redo some things that I glossed over along the way.

Stories like this tend to revolve around things and events. People are the serendipity of my journey. This is about people.

Some would say that the story began with the PebbleCreek Model Railroad Club in 1998. But it really started on my first Christmas.

The early years

Home movies show I got a train squeeze-toy for my first Christmas. At the time, I was more fascinated by the wrapping paper than the train. For most of my life, I have lived amongst trains, not for them. Now I'd love to go back and re-live and photograph and document some of the places and times that I mostly ignored along the way.

There are O-27 Lionel and Marx trains in all of our Christmas movies, including the year that I was six and Santa brought me a new red Santa Fe Lionel NW2 [1]. But the trains didn't move to California with the family when I was in high school.

My early story is about electronics and Boy Scouts. Because I had toy trains, I got the Model Railroading merit badge. I got the Radio merit badge after I passed my novice class amateur radio license.

To earn Eagle Scout, I needed 21 merit badges, with certain ones from certain categories. I chose what I liked, but needed some that didn't necessarily interest me as a 12-year-old: for example, Book Binding. But each merit badge was an adventure. In later life, I've actually used some skills I learned for the Book Binding merit badge.

As a kid, I built plastic models, but my patience wouldn't last through a paint job. Squadron putty and sandpaper were not in my toolbox. I looked for models where the parts were molded in the correct colors for the final object. I usually succeeded in getting a fingerprint or two in glue on a prominent exterior surface.



1. SANTA BROUGHT ME A NEW LIONEL NW2 WHEN I WAS SIX. REMEMBER WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT LIONEL TRAINS AND DADS. CAPTURED FROM AN 8MM CHRISTMAS MOVIE.

My Model Railroad Journey

Summer of 1963 found my family camping near Durango. As we headed home to Denver, Mom drove to Silverton, allowing Dad and me to take the D&RG. This was in one of the last years of their operation with cattle-car like open gondolas [3]. I was busy watching the scenery, not studying the ballast color and tie plates.

I'm an only child, my parents were my friends. My Dad, Fred, was not a modeler or an electronics guy, but he has always supported my crazy hobbies.

Later, I dodged the street-running trains of the Santa Maria Valley (California) Railroad (smvrr.com) as I was trying to get to classes at junior college. For about 10 years, I worked on an HO model [11] of that railroad as it was in the early '60s, and I wish I had taken lots of notes and photos back then.



2. MY AMATEUR RADIO ANTENNA FARM (AS KX0E), CIRCA 1986, IN COLORADO SPRINGS, CO.



3. DAD AND ME IN AN OPEN GONDOLA ON THE D&RG LEAVING DURANGO FOR SILVERTON IN AUGUST 1963.

In the late '60s, I was a student at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo (CA). The Southern Pacific wound through the sprawling campus and climbed about 1000 feet from the depot in San Luis Obispo to the high point on the coast route at Cuesta. The Coast Daylight still ran the horseshoe curve on campus, albeit with newer equipment than that shown in this vintage postcard [4]. There was a nuisance grade crossing on the way to campus. I was busy working on a degree in electronic engineering. I didn't look to see what was in the consists that occasionally made me late for class.

After graduation, I lived in Santa Barbara. There, I overlooked (literally and figuratively) the SP coast route. I lived within 1000 feet of the tracks in three different apartments for a total of three years. Yup, I ignored the freight and (pre-Amtrak) passenger trains. I was too busy working and getting an MS in engineering at UCSB and my private pilot's license.

Then came a career in the aerospace and computer industries. As that wound down, I became a business owner.

In the early '90s, I wanted a cheap train to run around the Christmas tree, so I went to a couple of local train stores. Nothing tripped my trigger. A toy store sold me an HO Bachmann steam set for about \$25. It made about a dozen loops of the Christmas tree before it broke.

My Model Railroad Journey

Getting into model railroading

We moved to the PebbleCreek Resort Community (robson.com/communities/pebblecreek/overview) in 1997. Once again, I lived near a formerly SP main and branch line. In January 1998, our community newspaper advertised that a group of residents were interested in starting a model railroad club. At that inaugural meeting we created the PebbleCreek Model Railroad Club and I was the club's founding secretary.

PCMRC's first layout was a sectional HO affair [5]. I was learning and asking questions, like "What is DCC?", and "What does '#6 code 100 turnout' mean?" I read a magazine I didn't remember seeing before, *Model Railroader*, at the club meetings.



5. PCMRC'S SECTIONAL HO LAYOUT IN 2001

mine. One of them said, "Let's go ask Mr. DCC" and pointed to me. The name stuck.

In 1999, without really knowing what it was, I attended the NMRA Pacific Southwest Region (PSR) convention in Flagstaff. I joined the NMRA and the Flagstaff Model Railroad Club (flagmrrc.org) shortly thereafter.

The NMRA Arizona division meets became important on my calendar. I used them and the NMRA conventions to promote Litchfield Station. At these meets, I saw Achievement Program (AP) certificates passed out, but had no interest in seeing what was behind them.

In 2000, Gary Gelzer moved to PebbleCreek and joined PCMRC. An NMRA & OpSig member, Gary introduced me to operations. I worked with Gary converting his Great Northwestern Coastline (GNC) railroad to DCC. He got me invitations to operate on some of the local railroads and even to the Prairie Rail weekend in Kansas City.



4. VINTAGE POSTCARD OF THE NORTHBOUND SP COAST DAYLIGHT WITH A HELPER ON THE HORSESHOE CURVE ON THE CAL POLY CAMPUS.

The HO layout was set up to run with DC and DCC. This DCC stuff interested me. It fit with my technical background.

In 2000, I realized that most hobby shops didn't "get it" about DCC, so I started a part-time decoder installation business. I named it for the closest waypoint on the old SP mainline: Litchfield Station. A decade later, when I sold Litchfield Station, it was arguably the second largest DCC dealer in the world.

Early on, I was showing Litchfield Station's wares at a local meet. I overheard a couple of folks discussing what it was going to take to put a decoder into a loco that was being offered for sale at the table next to

My Model Railroad Journey

In 2001, the Home Owners Association (HOA) asked PCMRC if we would like to build a garden layout. That became PCMRC's first permanent layout [6] and introduced me to outdoor model railroading. One of the members had a huge 1:20.3 (Fn3) layout in Minnesota. As I became interested in Fn3 later, I wished I had learned more from him back then.

With a technical background and virtually no modeling experience, my approach to modeling has been unconventional, to be polite. I found things that worked and things that didn't work. I was like a 50+ year old kid. Folks would say that it should be done this way or that way and I'd ask, "Why?" For example, one of my favorite adhesives is clear caulk. I use it for attaching light pipes and scenery, and to temporarily attach things, and to seal speakers, and for numerous other uses.

I built my very first model railroad, about 2003. It is a shelf layout [7] based on the venerable Time Saver with an extra track added. It wound up 8-1/2 feet long and a bit over a foot wide. It has appeared in several of my columns. Gary Gelzer later did the scenery on it for me.

I got started giving sound and DCC clinics for clubs and NMRA events. In 2005 I went big time with two different clinics at the NMRA national convention. Many of my clinics were given to standing-room only crowds. After one clinic, an attendee came up to me and said, "I've done sound for Bob Seger on the road for years and I know the theory behind what you are doing, but I never thought of applying it to my model trains. Thank you."

In 2005, we learned that PCMRC would have a permanent (41 x 19 feet) room in about a year. A layout design committee was formed with Gary and another ops-oriented member, Dick Vogler, and me. There is no better tutorial than working beside folks who have built many layouts. Discussing the "givens and 'druthers" and starting with a blank sheet of paper opens a neophyte's eyes. We had to balance the desires of ops folks to spot cars



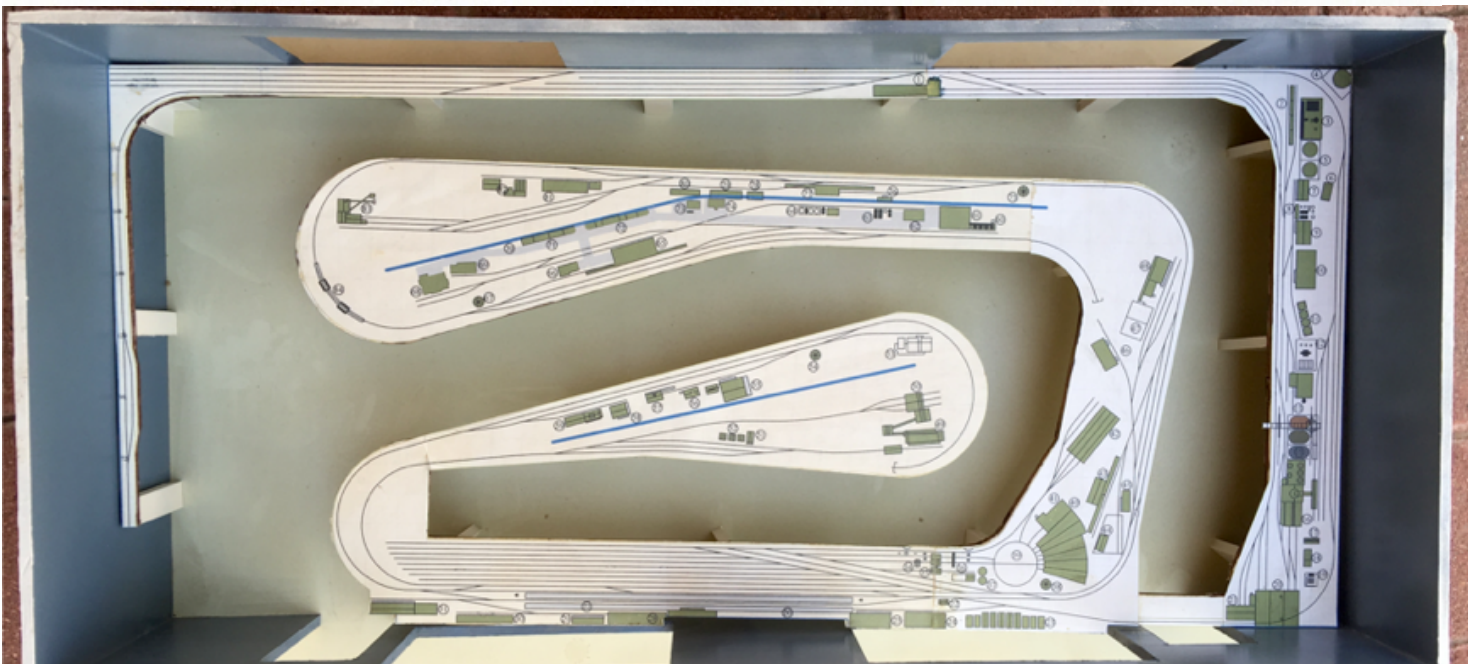
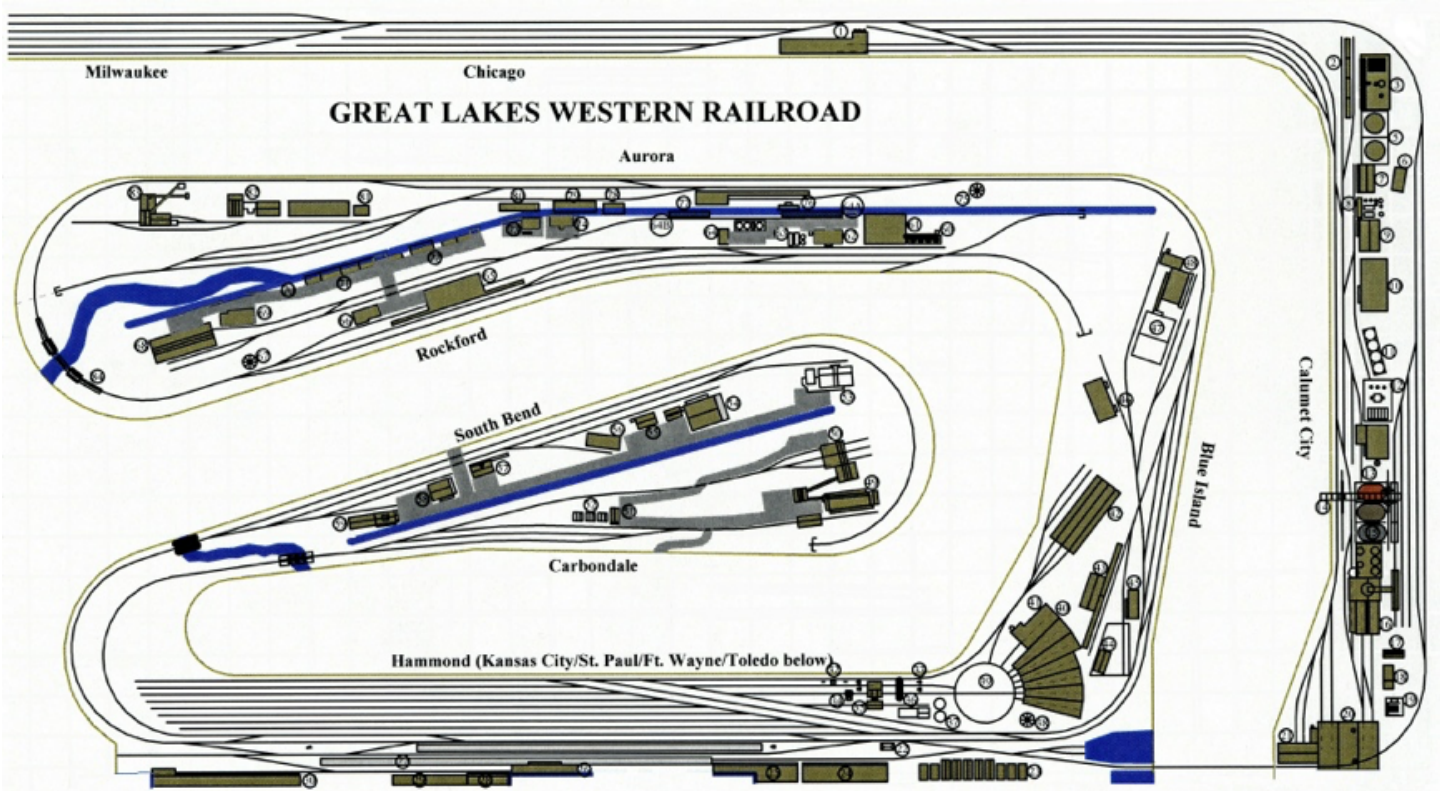
6. GARY GELZER DURING THE TEST OF PCMRC'S FIRST PERMANENT LAYOUT, A GARDEN ONE, IN OCTOBER 2001



7. MY FIRST MODEL RAILROAD A MODIFICATION OF THE TIME SAVER DESIGN

My Model Railroad Journey

with the need to run in circles for neighborhood open houses and other members. The year's planning culminated in a design [8] that survived fourteen years until the HOA decided they wanted the room for storage.



8. TRACK PLAN OF PCMRC LAYOUT AS DESIGNED IN 2005 - COMPUTER PLAN AND ROOM MOCKUP

My Model Railroad Journey



9. PCMRC FIRST RUN (LEFT) ON TRACK THAT WAS USED FOR THE LIFE OF THE LAYOUT

Our planning paid off. Within six weeks of getting the room in early 2006, we were running our first train on permanent track [9].

This is a good place to introduce my wife and best friend, Linda. She not only supports my hobby, she encourages it. She uses her artistic leanings and experience to enhance the layouts I work on. She also shares her ideas with other hobbyists by giving clinics and demos. Her first NMRA clinics were at a national convention. The business we built at Litchfield Station was due in no small part to her customer service expertise.

When Litchfield Station moved into a “brick and mortar” store in 2007, I wanted it to have a layout to demonstrate DCC. Since we were going to sell the HO_{N3} Blackstone products, it needed to be HO dual-gauge.

This would be my second layout and was based on the Denver skyline that Linda and I knew from having grown up there.

Dick Vogler gave a track laying clinic for Litchfield Station in December 2008. In the course of a Saturday, the clinic attendees laid some of the track for the layout [10] as a way to hone their skills. I finished off the track and wired the layout - my second. Any of three DCC systems (Digitrax, Lenz or NCE) could operate it.

Late in 2009, Gary Gelzer suggested that I get my NMRA Chief Dispatcher AP certificate. My response was something like “Huh? What’s that?” It turned out I had done most of the operating that was required and just needed the signatures. There is a requirement for setting up a time table and creating string diagrams to show that the trains can actually run as scheduled. Not too difficult after I reduced it to a spreadsheet.

While looking up the requirements for Chief Dispatcher on the NMRA web site (nmra.org/education/achievement-program), I realized that I was also qualified for Model Railroad Author. I had given the clinics and had the certificates and files, dating back as much as five years. I hadn’t collected any signatures along the way. With some detective work, I got the signatures necessary and the paperwork submitted. The knowledge base from that Litchfield Station web site is now on my own site (mr-dcc.com). This was all before I began my “magazine career” with *MRH*.



10. LITCHFIELD STATION LAYOUT: HO AND HO_{N3} USING ONE OF THREE DCC SYSTEMS.

My Model Railroad Journey

Contest models are eye candy. Since the hobby isn't a competitive sport to me, I volunteered as a judge partially to get a close look at nice models. I got to bounce ideas off the other judges and observe what entrants did.

Bringing it home

In 2010, we sold Litchfield Station. The layout that I had started there [10] had had the possibility of qualifying for the Civil and Electrical Engineering certificates, as well as the Scenery certificate. I said a tearful goodbye to it.

I began work on a narrow gauge garden layout [16] ([CLICK HERE](#)) and a bedroom-sized HO layout [11]. I registered the garden layout with the NMRA with pike name Rocky Mountain Pacific (reporting mark RMP); that could also be Real Money Pit.



11. IN 2010, I STARTED ON AN HO MODEL OF THE SANTA MARIA VALLEY RAILROAD IN A SMALL BEDROOM. HERE IS ITS STATUS IN OCTOBER 2015.

In 2011, three events steered my journey.

The NMRA national convention in Sacramento had a Modeling with the Masters session building laser cut structures that included Fran and Miles Hale. Linda and I had met them at a prior convention. This was the first time I got to spend several hours with them on strictly technical issues. Discussions started then for them to come to Arizona to do a three-day structures clinic.

Remembering the heavy handed modeling of my youth, I was not certain that I would have the patience to develop the skills to earn the “artistic” AP certificates. So, it was a major leap of faith when I publicly committed to working on my MMR at the NMRA PSR convention in Flagstaff that summer.

That fall, I started writing the ***DCC Impulses*** column for ***Model Railroad Hobbyist (MRH)***. The first one was in the October 2011 edition. I worked from there as a form of a DCC handbook. I wrote 74 columns for them, ending with August 2018. I also wrote three articles for them, including this one.

In March of 2012, Fran and Miles Hale did a three-day structures clinic in Arizona. We had a dozen folks from two states participate. Hales brought kits and materials for twelve structures per person. Most folks finished three to six.

The Hales introduced us to the difference in mindset between contest judging and AP evaluation. Judging is finding the best model amongst those submitted to a contest. Evaluation concerns how well the modeler achieved their AP goal with one particular model.

What I took away was the realization that simple items could earn (even if barely) a merit award in AP evaluation [13]. That weekend earned me merit awards for five structures [12]. I was almost finished with a sixth [15].

I finally started to believe that I could make good on my statement of the prior summer and earn my MMR without ever entering a contest.

My Model Railroad Journey



12. KELLY'S CORNERS KIT FROM THE STRUCTURES WEEKEND. I'LL EVER HAVE PLACE FOR IT, BUT I LIKE IT.

Bob Libbey (one of the participants in the Structures weekend) and I began spending every Wednesday night working on the hand-laid track necessary for the Civil Engineering certificate. Changes in Bob's life resulted in his moving out of state before either of us could complete our MMR. After that move, he died suddenly due to an aortic rupture. I miss Bob and those Wednesday nights.

I started work on scenery for the South Bend portion of the PCMRC HO layout. I had never done serious scenery before. Dick Vogler showed me how to do layered rock outcroppings with wet plaster, then I added seeping water [14].

Arizona created its own OpSig weekend. Desert Ops (desertops.org) was coordinated amongst ten local layouts and scheduled to debut in October 2012. Three of the ten scheduled layouts were in our PebbleCreek community: PCMRC's, Gary Gelzer's and Dick Vogler's.

Gary, who was three weeks older than I, died less than two weeks before Desert Ops. He had appeared healthy when he left on a 5-week cruise in July. Cancer took him two months after he returned. His departure was a shock and a loss to many, including PebbleCreek, local operators and OpSig folks.

At Gary's request, I hosted his four Desert Ops sessions. I also hosted a couple of memorial sessions for regulars on his GNC in the few weeks after Desert Ops.

Gary's death and lack of preparation contributed to the desire by Linda and me to write the article for **MRH: Slow Orders, Dangerous Track Ahead**. We have given a clinic based on this article (with updates) at many venues over the years. It is being added to the NMRA's EduTRAIN library.

Focus on the target

My pursuit of MMR recognition needed to be more scientific. I created a spreadsheet to track my progress. Many MMRs that I've talked with say that their path was vague and scattered until they reduced it to a quan-



13. A CABIN FROM THE STRUCTURES WEEKEND, USED ON THE PCMRC LAYOUT. ENHANCING THE SIMPLE LASER KIT GOT IT A MERIT AWARD WITH ADDED DETAILS INCLUDING THE PAPER ROOF AND A FOUNDATION, WITH SCRATCH BUILT ITEMS LIKE THE PORCH DECK, SUPPORTS AND RAILING; AND INTERIOR FLOORING WITH INDIVIDUAL JOISTS AND FLOOR BOARDS.

My Model Railroad Journey

tifiable goal. There is the satisfaction of coloring in boxes or watching percentages change. The sooner you start to plan the quicker your plan will come together.

My garden layout ([CLICK HERE](#)) [16] slowly started to take shape. What I discovered is that scale becomes elastic in the garden. Everything from 1:20.3 to 1:32 is run on 45 mm (gauge-1) track, with 1:24 and 1:29 being the most popular. Turns out that 1:20.3 is correct for 3-foot gauge and 1:32 corresponds to 4' 8-1/2" gauge. The whys and wherefores



14. SEEPING WATER AND HAND-CARVED ROCK OUTCROPPINGS SET THE PCMRC LAYOUT APART. THE WATER SEEPS OUT OF THE ROCKS IN THE CENTER RIGHT OF THE PHOTO AND RUNS DOWN INTO THE RUBBLE BESIDE THE TRACK. IT FLOWS TO THE LEFT IN THIS PHOTO AND EMPTIES INTO A RIVER.

of all this could make another article.

Finishing the Structures certificate required some scratch built structures and the RMP needed a few bridges. So I scratch built a small trestle (18), a concrete culvert and a wood culvert, as well as a MOW shack (17) in 1:20.3.

As I was building experience in areas of model rail-

roading other than DCC, I felt a bit like Haley Mills or Patty Duke. Once one gets a reputation in one area (whether it's electronics or being a child star), it is hard to change folks' image of you. No matter what, I think I'll only be Mr. DCC to some folks forever.

I got another invitation to Prairie Rails for February 2016. This gave me an opportunity to focus on the Cars AP certificate. I took a couple of completed cars with me. There I used Miles Hale's shop and counsel to build another six cars [19]. The cars were evaluated and the certificate processed before I left. Also the week there let me rub elbows with many talented modelers and expand my ideas.

The Electrical and Civil certificates (the last two for my MMR) were completed at the end of March, 2016. The irony of it all is that the last certificates I earned were the engineering ones.



15. THE GLW FREIGHT HOUSE WAS MY LAST OF THE SIX MERIT AWARD STRUCTURES NEEDED FOR THE AP CERTIFICATE. HERE IT IS IN SITU ON THE PCMRC LAYOUT IN SOUTH BEND.



16. THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN PACIFIC NARROW GAUGE GARDEN LAYOUT IN OCTOBER 2015

My Model Railroad Journey



17. SCRATCH BUILT MOW SHACK IN 1:20.3. THE DOOR KNOB AND HINGES ARE FROM LINDA'S BEAD COLLECTION

[14] [15]. There is still a Scenery certificate I can earn. As I write this, I'm building a Bar Mills kit for the PCMRC O-gauge modular layout.

Becoming a MMR has opened my eyes to some aspects of our hobby that I didn't even know existed before my quest. I know now that I can be a decent modeler. I just need more practice and a generous shot of patience.

I got a fortune cookie that sums it up: "Perceived failure is often times success trying to be born in a bigger way." That hangs over my workbench.

Some parting thoughts

Be a positive influence on someone. There are lots of folks who would love to know something that you know. It will make their journey lighter. Share with them. Today. Learn something from them. They may not be here tomorrow or next week.

Fittingly, my MMR was dated April 1, 2016 - April Fool!

But what does that mean? I am, as another MMR said, "certifiably average." Another calls MMR Mediocre Model Railroader. Yes, I marshaled a lot of items together to make up the whole. But each item by itself wasn't that that big a deal.

Build a structure that gets at least 87-½ out of 125 points in AP Evaluation or a NMRA contest; that's 70%, a C- grade. Repeat as needed to have a total of 12 structures, half scratch built and half merit award winners. Repeat for a total of eight cars. Judge a division contest. Repeat. Judge a regional contest and repeat. Go to an op session. Volunteer for a NMRA event. Do a clinic. Write an article. Get elected to a NMRA office. Wherever you go, get signatures "contemporaneously." That means "when you do it."

Where does my journey go from here? I feel as if I have just started. I have two personal layouts [11] [16] to finish, and I'm working on the scenery in South Bend on PCMRC's GLW HO layout



18. SINGLE BENT SCRATCH BUILT 1:20.3 SCALE TRESTLE

My Model Railroad Journey

Look back on the events in your own life and think about those folks who influenced your thinking, concepts and life direction. Thank them, if you still can.

At the NMRA PSR convention in September 2015, Dale Angell gave the keynote address ([youtube.-com/watch?v=2Q4eEk_TQYI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q4eEk_TQYI)). In that address (about 28 minutes into the video), he challenges folks to join the NMRA. Not just to pay dues to the organization but to get involved with the Achievement Program.



19. TOP AND BOTTOM OF TWO SCRATCH BUILT ON30 FLAT CARS. BOTH EARNED MERIT AWARDS.

That fits into something I just read in a book: *More Iditarod Classics* by Lew Freedman (2003). He collected stories from Iditarod (dog sled) race participants in the early 2000s. Bruce Lee (not the actor, Bruce Li), who had, at the time, run seven times and never finished higher than 10th place said, "The people I feel most sorry for are the fans, because they really don't get to be out there and see what we get to see."

You can sit on the sidelines and watch others or you can get your feet wet. Go do it for yourself. If you don't stretch yourself, you won't know what you can really achieve.

I really like that I've been one who has been able to see the things that model railroading has shown me. Linda and I are thankful for the friends we have found along the way, only a few of whom could be mentioned in this article.

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Post Script - March 2026

This article was published in Model Railroad Hobbyist in 2016. Many things have changed in the decade since this was originally written. Some of the text above has been revised to be correct as of early 2026.

In 2016, I took over as the AP manager for the Arizona Division of the NMRA. Since then, I have helped seven members achieve MMR status. Many others are participating in the AP program as their interests dictate.

In 2017, we moved 12 houses down the street into a larger house with more usable room in the back yard. I began work on RMP 2.0 in the back yard. It now runs on the D&RG rail lines between Santa Fe and Silverton and is being prepared for OPs. I got a larger layout room (the intended living room) and decided to work in On30 and do an indoor narrow gauge OPs layout. So far, it hasn't progressed beyond bench work.

In 2019, the HOA decided they needed the room that we were using for our HO layout. We dismantled and sold off all we could of both the indoor and outdoor layouts. I had completed the scenery on about 75% of South Bend, which was what I was planning to have evaluated for the Scenery AP certificate. An example of losing due to procrastination. The members were burned out. The club was abandoned. Over twenty years of my focus gone to the wind.

My Model Railroad Journey

In November 2021, I was elected Superintendent (President) of the Arizona Division of the NMRA. I served for three years, earning another AP certificate: Association Official.

In 2023, Dick Vogler died after about a week in the hospital. Another major mentor of mine gone quickly.

In 2024, Jack Baer died suddenly. He had purchased Litchfield Station from me in 2010. Litchfield Station was abandoned by his heirs. I don't know what happened to the inventory or my layout or any of it. Poof, gone.

This is not meant to be a doom-and-gloom message. But one of hope. Take the time now to recognize your friends and mentors. Learn what you can, when you can. Take photos and keep notes. you never know when you might want that information.

Bruce Petrarca, MMR - stock biography

Bruce was raised in Colorado and Wyoming and moved to California in high school. After high school in Santa Maria, he earned his BS in electronic engineering at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo and his Masters in engineering at University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB).

He tinkered with electronics from age 7 and got his first amateur radio license when he was 12. He has now been licensed for 65 years.

After college, he got his private pilot's license.

As an engineer in the computer and aerospace industries, he moved from coast to coast, but his heart remained in the southwest and the Rocky Mountains.

He and Linda, his wife of almost 50 years, encourage each other's hobbies and share an interest in aquatic creatures. They are both scuba divemasters. Bruce has studied and taught underwater photography (still and video). Some of his work is on his Vimeo site (vimeo.com/user125635561/albums).



In 2016, he earned his Master Model Railroader (MMR) certification with these certificates:

- Master Builder - Cars
- Master Builder - Structures
- Model Railroad Engineer - Electrical
- Model Railroad Engineer - Civil
- Chief Dispatcher
- Association Volunteer
- Model Railroad Author