

Rail fanning the Great Lakes Western

by Bruce Petrarca, MMR

Photos by Bruce Petrarca, unless noted otherwise.

A look at the PebbleCreek Model Railroad Club in Goodyear, AZ.

It is early morning on a day in the 1960s and a freight is headed to the BRC (Belt Railway of Chicago) Clearing Yard west of Chicago [1]. Meanwhile [2], a BRC engineer switches cars bound for many of the railroads that co-own the BRC: the Soo, the EJ&E, the IC, the IHB or the Milwaukee.

1. The BRC Clearing yard in west-central Chicago.



2. Switching the The BRC Clearing yard in west-central Chicago.



At the Great Lakes Western's (GLW) main yard in Hammond, IN [3], the yard crew is putting the finishing touches on the turn that will soon run to Rockford, IL [4] and return. It will service the Rockford industries and exchange cars with the CN&W [5]. During the day, freights will come through Hammond Yard, dropping cars from and picking up cars bound to points east (Toledo, OH & Fort Wayne, IN) and west (Kansas City, MO & St. Paul, MN).

3. GLW's Hammond Yard is the central switching point and includes a passenger terminal. The Rockford turn has been built on the Passenger siding and is ready to depart for Rockford. *Mark Pelletier photo*



4. Rockford IL is the westernmost point modeled on the GLW. *Mark Pelletier photo*



5. C&NW interchange with the GLW is a (slightly) hidden track in Rockford, IL. The mainline to the right heads into Westbound hidden staging.



Meanwhile, the morning's coal, byproducts and coke are being loaded in Carbondale, IL [6]. They will be distributed to customers via the Hammond yard and by direct deliveries to Inland Steel on the Furnace siding [7].

6. OVERVIEW OF CARBONDALE, IL



7. MATERIALS FOR THE INLAND STEEL PLANT IN CALUMET CITY COME BY TRAIN (COAL, COKE AND LIMESTONE) TO THE FURNACE SIDING. ORE COMES BY BOAT ON THE CALUMET RIVER (FOREGROUND).



In Aurora, IL, Bjorn Limestone [8] has loaded crushed and block limestone ready for the CB&Q to deliver along with its interchange cars in a run to the GLW yard in Hammond. After the CB&Q leaves Aurora, a grain freight will probably arrive and exchange a dozen or so cars at Commander Elevator [9]. Later in the day, a GLW Aurora turn will arrive from Hammond to service the local industries, including Fox Valley Brewing [10].

8. Bjorn Limestone in Aurora loads out crushed and block limestone.



9. Commander Elevator receives the unit Grain Freight. In the foreground is the arriving CB&Q turn.



10. Fox valley brewery is busy with inbound grain, coal and other commodities and outbound beer.



In Blue Island, IL, reefers are being iced in preparation for transfer to Diamond Meat Packers [11] for loading. This is the start of a busy day which can see the crew servicing the nine local industries and the car-float marine operation [12]. Local industries served include the Pullman Standard car facility, American Can, a machine shop and a scrap yard. This crew is very likely to have cars going to and from the GLW locomotive service facility [13] accessed from the Hammond Yard. These deliveries can include coal, sand, ties, wheels or diesel fuel.

11. Diamond Meat Packers (red building) processes livestock into sides and cut meat, as well as sausage. They also ship rendered oil and consume coal. Behind Diamond Meat is the Pullman Standard car shop.



12. The GLW Marine operation runs 6-car (green) barges on the great lakes from this terminal in Blue Island.



13. A busy railroad has a well stocked service facility, such as the GLW's.



Pick ups from the industries in Calumet City [14] start the day for the crew operating in the shadow of the Inland Steel plant. Later the crew will move ingots and slabs between the Inland Steel basic oxygen furnace (BOF) [15] and the rolling mill [16] a few (scale) miles away. Local industries are serviced include Standard Oil [17], Peterson Plastics, and a power plant.

14. Calumet City overview, looking away from the Inland Steel Basic Oxygen Furnace (BOF). The Furnace unloading crane is in the foreground.



15. Inland Steel Basic Oxygen Furnace (BOF) uses materials from the Furnace siding [7] and ore barges. The crane in the foreground unloads both.



16. Inland Steel rolling mill



17. Standard Oil in Calumet City has places to spot up to eight tank cars - there are even two off-spot in this photo. *Mark Pelletier photo*



It is specifically late 1963 or early 1964 in South Bend, IN, as evidenced by the billboard [18] atop the Studebaker receiving building featuring the 1964 Hawk. The South Bend Turn of the GLW will be spotting cars at Bainbridge Cattle [19] to move livestock to Diamond Meat Packers [11] in Blue Island as well as other locations on and off the GLW. In addition to the GLW freight house [20] and Studebaker, local industries served include Bortz Feed, CTS Electronics and AristoKraft Cabinets. An early morning milk run heads into South Bend from the west [21].

18. Studebaker's assembly building in South Bend shows little warning of the impending move to Canada but it does advertise the 1964 Hawk.



19. Bainbridge Cattle ships livestock to Diamond Meat Packers, as well as other consumers.



20. A thriving business in LCL freight is handled by the South Bend GLW freight House. The passenger platform roof is in the foreground.



21. Early morning milk run headed into Hammond From South Bend, IN.



Passenger operations, in the form of a C&NW RDC or full fledged passenger trains are occasionally added for operational variety and added complexity.

This is one variant of the scenario that the club works during twice-monthly member operating sessions. PCMRC also hosts guest operating sessions for local folks and has participated in the OpSig weekends in Arizona, called Desert Ops.

Club History

In 1998, a few of the model railroaders living in the PebbleCreek development decided to start a club. I was not a modeler, but interested in model trains, so I attended the organizational meeting and came away as the founding secretary of the PebbleCreek Model Railroad Club. We worked on an HO sectional layout for a few years, storing it in cabinets in the woodworker's room.

PebbleCreek is a Robson community (robson.com/communities/pebblecreek) in the western suburbs of Phoenix. Conceived as a golf-based "active adult resort community," PC, as we call it, has grown steadily over the years since its inception in 1993. It currently has about 4500 homes and about 7500 residents. Since we are supported by the homeowner's association, PCMRC members must be PebbleCreek residents.

Our first big break came in 2001 when we were asked if we would like to take some of the ground that was part of the Arts and Crafts Center and build a garden railroad. The developer even offered a few dollars toward the cost. This way, the Garden Division [22] was the first permanent layout we had. But this story is about the Great Lakes Western, so let's get back on track.

22. PCMRC's garden layout in the early years



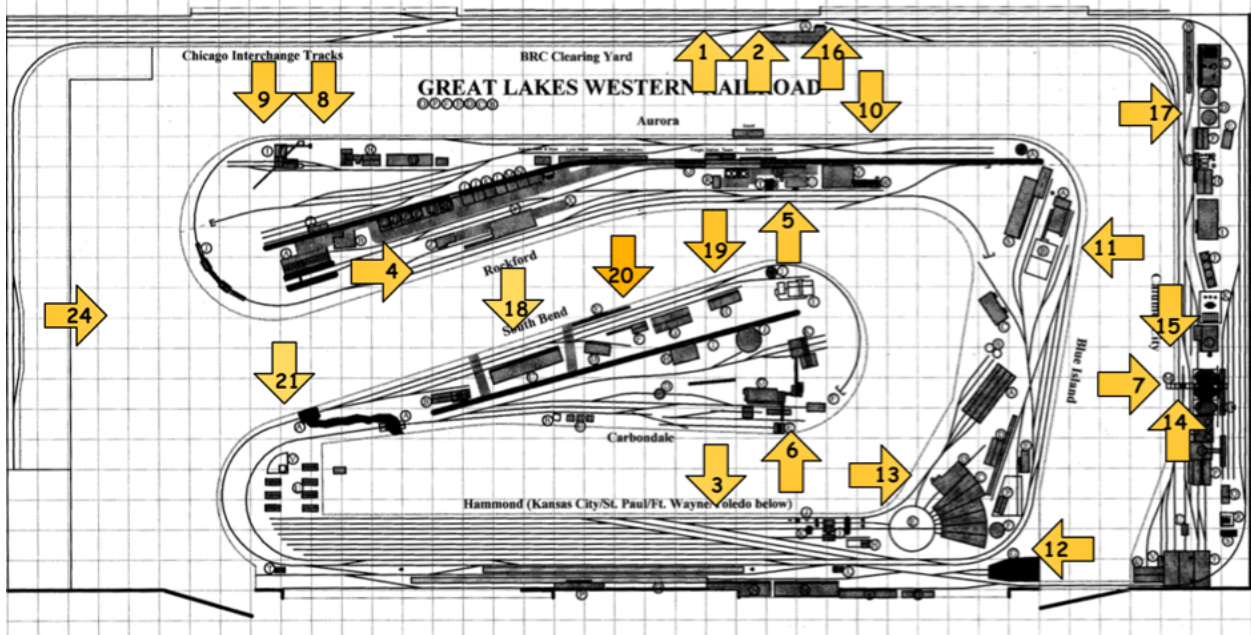
Growth in PC necessitated a larger creative arts center. In the planning for the new building and what to do with the older facility, the PCMRC was offered the 19 x 41 foot former painting club room for a permanent layout. We had almost a full year between when we were offered the room and when we got access to it in January, 2006.

During this year of planning, we discussed the scale, type of railroad, type of operation and all the little nits and bits. What came out of this process was a set of standards and a bench work and track plan [23]. We agreed on HO-scale with the ability to run in circles for those folks who want to watch trains run, as well as for open houses.

We decided to create a fictitious railroad, The Great Lakes Western [24], operating in the Chicago area during the late 1950s to early 1960s. The prototypically shorter freight cars of that era make for more switching action in our limited space.

Chicago was selected for the number of varied lines to interchange with, as well as the fact that almost any livery would not be too far out of place. A member may bring in a Pennsy consist to run.

23. GLW track plan drawn by Dick Vogler



The club layout plus two home layouts belonging to members (Gary Gelzer and Dick Vogler, who were a major part of the GLW planning process) were three of the ten layouts participating in the inaugural Desert Ops weekend in 2012.

24. Aerial view of the Great Lakes Western railroad. Mark Pelletier photo



A group of about a half-dozen operators from the San Francisco Bay area came to Desert Ops 2012. One of their members insisted that they all operate on the GLW.

After the session one of the group, who was not in favor of giving up a good pick for a club layout, told me that operating on the GLW was, perhaps, the most fun he'd ever had on a club layout. We were humbly thankful for his comments.

Things change as time goes by. The scenery is mostly done, but there are always details to add or revise. Recently, we added a new industrial area (East Hammond) [25] to provide more switching opportunities. This area still needs scenic work.

25. East Hammond industrial area is a work in progress on the GLW.



GLW layout details

The benchwork construction is L-girder with Homasote underlayment. Main ground contour is plaster over cardboard.

Digitrax simplex radio DCC is used. Three boosters drive 19 PSx circuit breakers to isolate jobs from one another. The club owns UT4 throttles for operators to use. If a member brings his own simplex radio throttle, it may be used. The club's sole DT400R resides in the drawer, rarely needed.

A LocoBuffer-USB interfaces our computer and the Digitrax system. JMRI DecoderPro to keep track of the roster. There is a WiFi connection for WiThrottle or Engine Driver (cell phone based) control.

Atlas code 83 track is used exclusively on the GLW.

All rolling stock is club owned or on “long term lease” from members.

All locos are DCC decoder equipped. Many have sound.

Technical standards for rolling stock include:

- NMRA car weighting
- Kadee couplers
- Metal wheels
- Glazed windows

Post Script - May 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 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. The members were burned out. The club was abandoned. Over twenty years of our focus gone to the wind.