



Model Railroad Hobbyist |

DCC IMPULSES

column

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A novice's view of the Narrow Gauge Convention

This year I attended my very first National Narrow Gauge Convention. It was the 37th annual version. About 10 folks who were there had been to all 37.

I am moving more and more in the direction of narrow gauge for my modeling interests, so it was time to get my feet wet. Also, it was held in Denver, close to where I now live in Arizona. I was born in Denver and spent many years living along the Front Range from Cheyenne to Colorado Springs. That said, things have changed a bit in the 31 years since I've been in this part of Colorado.

Here is an armchair tour of the convention as I experienced it.

The trip

We had hoped to spend several days driving to and from the convention and to see some of our beloved Colorado in the process. Linda, my wife, was born in Denver, too. However, personal issues kept us to a very tight time frame for the trip, driving about 800 miles in two days each way. Albuquerque was just about the middle of the trip time-wise, so we booked a room there. We jumped in the car and headed out on Monday, August 28.

We got to Albuquerque just about sundown, checked into our room, and went for some Mexican food at Garcia's Kitchen. After a comfortable night's sleep, we headed north on I-25 toward the convention.

It's been about 50 years since I've been in Raton, NM. I suggested we have a bite of lunch there. Wow, what a surprise. The town is shrinking at an alarming rate. We found a mediocre restaurant and drove around where

Amtrak has taken over the former Santa Fe depot. I do love the art-deco fire department [1], even if it seems deserted.

1. Raton, New Mexico, may be a shadow of its former self, but I love the art-deco fire department. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



After lunch, we continued on I-25 over Raton Pass and along the Front Range to the convention hotel, the Marriott Denver Tech Center. The population explosion along I-25 blew our minds as we drove in. When we moved from Colorado Springs in the mid '80s, the population was about 90,000. Now it approaches a half-million.

We would have loved to spend some time in the mountains after the convention, but we retraced our steps, almost, coming back. We left I-25 at Walsenberg and came over La Veta Pass and through Taos and Santa Fe. We batted 1000 on lunches this trip, stopping this direction at Fort Garland. Our meal was memorable only in its slothfulness. This route was a few minutes longer but more scenic than the I-25 route.

A bit about narrow gauge

In the US, there are a few popular scales and gauges for narrow gauge modeling. While there are lots of offshoots and variants, the major ones are shown here.

Understanding narrow gauge modeling terms

Identifier	Scale 1:	Model gauge	Prototype gauge
Nn3	160	6.5 mm	3 ft
HOn3	87.1	10.5 mm	3 ft
Sn3	64	14.3 mm	3 ft
On3	48	0.75 in	3 ft
On30	48	16.5 mm	2 ft 6 in
Fn3	20.3	45 mm	3 ft

The first letter or two in the identifier (capitalized) refers to an implied scale (HO, for example). The lower case n says that it is narrow gauge and the numbers on the end refer to the gauge being modeled. These numbers can be a bit confusing, as some refer to feet and some to inches. On3 refers to three-foot gauge, while On30 refers to 30-inch gauge.

Why the attend convention?

There are two major reasons for attending a convention: meeting the people and learning modeling concepts to inspire your creative juices.

But the people are the conduit for all the information. Coming to a convention and sitting in your hotel room is a waste of resources.

However, it takes energy and enthusiasm to rub elbows with folks all the time. I'll admit to sitting in the room for a few hours a couple of times, just because I was too tired. The organizers pack a lot into four days.

Some folks who I have talked with over the years came to this convention. Had I not come, I may never have had face-to-face time with them.

For example, a fellow who was a member of the Flagstaff AZ club over a decade ago turned up as part of the HOn3 New Mexico NG Model Club.

Their modular layout took first place in the contest room, by the way. Anyway, I hadn't seen Ryan for years. It was good to get back together.

2. I've seen Laurie McLean's animations in his YouTube videos. Seeing them in person was as big a treat as getting to spend time with the man, himself. Bruce Petrarca photo



One of the attendees that I wanted to spend some time with was Laurie McLean [3], a Master Model Railroader (MMR) from Australia. I have gotten to know Laurie through emails and his YouTube channel, [youtube.com/channel/UCLNf_r5kmK6WiDLaKPbajKg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLNf_r5kmK6WiDLaKPbajKg), where he has posted literally hundreds of how-to videos relating to DCC and animation

and LED lighting. About a year ago, when I learned that Laurie was planning to attend this convention, I started making my own plans to attend.

Our time together was not a disappointment. What fun we had. Seems as if we had spent time together weekly for years, as opposed to setting eyes on each other for the first time when we happened into the same elevator on the first day of the convention.

While Laurie's animations [2] have whetted my imagination over the years, holding one in my hands and being able to look into its mechanism was amazing.

3. Laurie McLean's clinic on DCC and animation was well attended and received. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



There were folks in attendance that I knew previously, and a lot that I hadn't met before the convention. I came away with a lot more friends. Time spent together enhanced old bonds and established new ones.

The clinics

Early in the convention, I wasn't really prepared for what was to come. The clinics and layout tours were about to start. Inspiration material breaks down into discussing techniques and seeing what others have done on their layouts or modules.

The clinics began on Wednesday evening. Having been to many NMRA national and regional conventions and, having given many clinics along the way, I thought I knew what to expect. Every clinic exceeded my expectations. They were thorough, detailed, specific, and well presented.

For example, there were a pair of clinics about Gilpin County, CO, covering Central City and Blackhawk. This three-mile square bit of geology is the location of over 500 mining claims and had 200 active mines about 1900. Some of the ore was over 20% gold by weight, with another 10% silver, and 10% copper.

Monte Pearson (a Ph.D. in geology) discussed the geologic forces that concentrated ore in such a small area. Keith Pashina, a long-time modeler of the district, discussed "Mines and Mining along the Gilpin Tram" in another clinic. The Gilpin Tram was a 2-foot gauge railroad that serviced the mines using as many as five Shay locos. These two clinics complemented each other nicely.

These clinics worked hand-in-glove with another clinic: "Prototypically Modeling a Mine Site," by Ed Freeman. A long-time student of mining technology, Ed explained what needs to be in a mine diorama, and what sort of equipment is era-appropriate.

The Thursday afternoon meeting of the On30 folks was amazing. Having about 60 enthusiastic On30 modelers together was good. Add in a representative from Bachmann Trains, Ray Buteux, and Chris Lane, the founder and editor of the *On30 Annual* as host and cheerleader. Presentations by Kevin Spady (On30 modules) and Pete Steinmetz (Dead Rail Installations), rounded out the two hours spent.

“Making Photorealistic Buildings Out of Cardstock Using a Computer” was a clinic by Joe Crea that excelled. I was expecting to see some quick buildings that would make-do until real buildings could be built. What Joe shared, along with some witty humor, are buildings built out of paper and cereal boxes [4] that are almost indistinguishable from craftsman kits.

4. “Model Builder” software can be used to build credible structures using printed paper glued to cardboard, with weathering and signs included. I believe there was one piece of wood for the cornice above the false front. Bruce Petrarca photo



If the clinics were interesting, the layouts were over the top.

The layouts

You didn't even have to leave the hotel to see some amazing modular layouts. The atrium [5] of the hotel was turned into a mini-train show with several groups showing their handiwork. There were layouts in the hallways around the meeting and vendor rooms.

In the spirit of ecology and sharing, I started off on the first round of layout visits riding along with a collection of friends from San Diego (Pete Steinmetz, Bob Treat, and Steve Seidensticker).

5. The atrium of the hotel was home to several modular layouts. Here they are in the process of being set up. *Bruce Petrarca panoramic photo*



Our first venture was to Colorado Springs to visit Rick Huntrod and his scenery spectacle, the HOn3 San Juan Silverton [6]. A picture is worth a thousand words. Check it out.

6. Home layouts provide lots of “eye candy,” Perhaps none better than Rick Huntrods’ HOn3 San Juan Silverton, featuring a photo backdrop and hand-built trees in fall colors. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



Rick’s layout proves that good things can come in small packages. He has shoehorned what looks like miles of scenery into a 12 x 15 foot area. This is a DCC column, so I will say that the layout was DCC controlled with some fine sound-equipped locomotives.

Our next stop was Kevin Strong's Fn3 Tuscarora Railroad. This is an outdoor railroad running battery power, with AirWire DCC radio control. Designed for continuous running on a point-to-point layout, it features a teardrop turnaround on each end, each accessed through a spring switch. This layout runs around a grassy rear yard about 30 x 65 feet in size.

7. Kevin Strong's Tuscarora RR Fn3 outdoor layout brings modeling to the garden. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



From Kevin's we headed to Ken Schei's home to take in an amazing amount of bridges [8], trestles and tunnels on his Calumet and Hecla RR in On3. At 12 x 33 feet, this layout doesn't win any size contests, but pleases the eyes with fine modeling and innovative use of mirrors. Ken uses DCC, Lenz, as I remember. But don't take that to the bank - I'm not sure what I had for breakfast yesterday.

8. Ken Schei's Calumet and Hecla RR On3 layout is an amazing collection of bridges and rock work. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



The next time we ventured out to look at layouts, we added another southern Californian to the motley crew, Dave Balser. We headed for an indoor Fn3 layout, Bill White's San Juan Southern. This 20 x 30 foot layout was touted as being "well worth seeing."

I realized we were in for something special when we entered the room to see a model Ford Tri-Motor airplane directly in front of the entry door. The attention to detail and small vignettes were mind boggling. I'm including two of the many photos I shot at Bill's house in this column.

The Baby Bee Mine [9] is humorous and full of things to suck you right into the scene: animation, lights, and sound.

9. Bill White's San Juan Southern Fn3 is a study in details. This "Baby Bee Mine" is fully illuminated and automated with sound, to boot. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



One of the other guests pointed out the realism of the auto repair scene [10], where the modeling even includes the part being installed and its shipping carton. Elsewhere on Bill's layout is a functional stamp mill with all the belts and pulleys.

I'd like to say that Bill runs NCE DCC, but there were no trains running when we were there. Seems a guest had turned off a block and, with the rush of folks, there was no way to troubleshoot the situation. I can say that NCE DCC was installed.

10. Amazing detail on Bill White's San Juan Southern Fn3. Note the part in the shipping box being installed on the auto under repair. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



From Fn3, we moved to a startup On3 layout with lovely details and the use of a photo backdrop. Don Vancil's D&RGW layout is starting with the loco service area of Ouray, CO [11]. His plans include filling the rest of the basement with more of the same. The layout is powered by Tam Valley Depot's DRS over-the-air DCC system and batteries.

11. Ouray engine house and photo backdrop on Don Vancil's D&RGW On3 layout. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



The next morning, I spent some time talking with the folks from the Casper, South Fork, and Eastern modular layout. This Nn3 module set features innovative LED lighting [12] to simulate early morning.

The photo backdrop was created by photographing the actual trees on the module and using a photo editing software to create layers of trees with slightly differing tonal values. Very effective.

12. The Nn3 Casper, South Fork and Eastern lumber camp module has innovative lighting duplicating sunrise and a bright blue sky. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



The musketeers were at it again the next afternoon, out to home layouts. We visited Gerald Style's innovative On30 layout [13] featuring fun animation: a flying eagle and ground hogs. Digitrax DCC is the control method. The Termite-N-Tarantula occupies 22 x 25 feet in the basement.

13. Gerald Styles' Termite-N-Tarantula On30 yard. Bruce Petrarca photo



Another layout that our crew visited was Ron Keiser's D&RGW. In the 1:20.3 scale of Fn3, Ron packs a lot into 24 x 36 feet. Since it is designed as a one-man layout, it uses DC control.

Between the dramatic lighting and the details on the layout, a guest could spend a long time looking and still not see it all. I especially enjoyed the body that was working to open the casket before it was interred, while the coroner looked on from the fender of the hearse.

14. Ron Keiser's D&RGW shows the detail that is attainable in an indoor Fn3 layout. Notice the blue light giving depth to the backdrop. Bruce Petrarca photo



On Saturday, Linda and I took off to Castle Rock to visit Don Meeker's Rocky Mountain Line. This amazing layout occupies the entire 2800 square foot basement of his home.

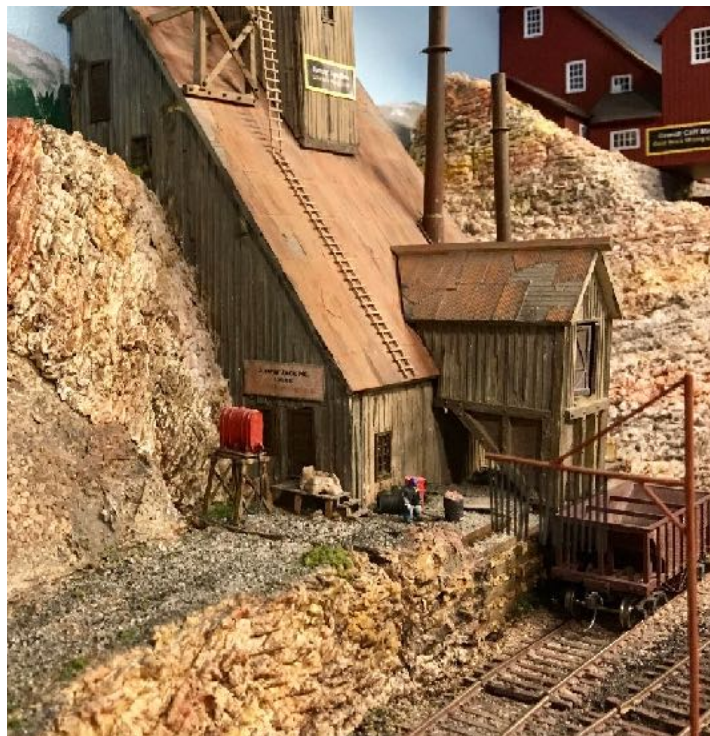
While it was standard gauge (HO), it is Digitrax DCC-equipped and designed for operations. Don's operating sessions require 25 or more participants with CTC track control.

Around every corner there was something new to see and revel in. I found the Gilpin County section interesting, given that I had studied it in the clinics earlier in the week.

This layout models an "alternative universe" version of Colorado in the 1950s (Centennial is the capital city). Some of the highlights are the operational version of the Moffat Tunnel with its approach grades, and Union Station in the capital city.

Lots of small scenes make for great detail enjoyment and photos to be taken.

15. Don Meeker's Rocky Mountain Line in HO is the only standard gauge layout we visited. However, there is a very large representation of the Gilpin County mining district, which was serviced by the 24-inch gauge Gilpin Tram. Don took lots of liberties with his layout. This area was mostly accurate, except for the 4-foot-8-½ inch track gauge. *Bruce Petrarca photo*



Vendor rooms

Competing for time during the four days of the convention were two rooms full of vendors, 114 in total. It was fun to wander and chat. There was even time enough for socializing, not just business. I must admit that Linda made the only purchase for us: a tool -- a pair of cutters for her beadwork.

Contest room

The modeling skills of the attendees are amazing. The contest room took several hours to hurry through. Studying it would've taken days, if they had been available.

The end

I was pleased to see that there was no expensive chicken dinner on Saturday night. Instead, they set up one of the vendor rooms as an auditorium. There was no charge for the awards ceremony, except for what was spent at the cash bar.

The committee was recognized. They deserved all the accolades.

Contest winners were announced.

Future convention cities gave an update on what they would be offering.

The attendance was announced: 1960 folks total.

The evening ended with an auction to benefit the Narrow Gauge Preservation Foundation. We did part with a few bucks here, but it's for a good cause, eh? The convention also contributed \$5000. The NGPF is providing funding for projects around the country, such as the Silverton Northern trackage project and the Carson and Colorado Railway Slim Princess #18 restoration.

It was a successful convention. I scored some decor for my train room, got a lot of ideas for my Fn3 Rocky Mountain Pacific, got a road trip with my wife, checked out some Taos and Santa Fe architecture and enjoyed a bunch of friends. I may be moving closer to an HO vs. On30 decision for my indoor layout. But that's for another column.

Please share your ideas with us all. Just click on the Reader Feedback icon at the beginning or the end of the column. While you are there, I encourage you to rate the column. “Awesome” is always appreciated. Thanks.

Until next month, I wish you green boards in all your endeavors.