

At the throttle

By Linn H. Westcott

JOHN ALLEN

John Allen died of a heart attack late January 6 this year at age 59. Jim Findley, who lives in Korea, was there on one of his frequent visits to John's home. Jim has built many of the structures on John's layout and has described some of them in this magazine. On this visit, Jim had arrived late in the afternoon and during the evening John complained about a pain, then fell. He died on the way to the hospital.

While it happened quickly, it was not all a surprise. John was overweight, with a heart condition. He told me in 1961 that he thought he might live only about 3 years. But he held on and he probably lengthened his life by watching his diet and losing weight.

John was not married. He lived alone in a cottage-like home high on a hillside facing the morning sun in Monterey, Calif. It was his second Monterey home, and he picked the town for its pleasant setting. He kept the home in reasonably good condition but he took the trouble to put the lawn in ground cover so he needn't waste time mowing it.

It's easy for a person living alone to go overboard, either in excesses or the opposite, but in most things John moderated himself, trying to keep to a sensible course. People who live by themselves also tend to be great talkers when they are with others, and this was surely true of John Allen. I remember one time when he, Ken Barnhart, and I spent all night discussing model railroading at Ken's house in Fresno. We couldn't stop.

With John, conversations might start and end with model railroading, but they were never so limited. John did a lot of reading on many subjects, and he remembered what he read. He loved to argue; it didn't matter which side you took, he could take the other. This was a little game of wits with him. One of his tricks was to bombard his verbal opponent with one question after another until he found a question that the opponent could not answer. It was a psychological victory. But if you were really right, John would quietly admit it another time. I never recall his maneuvering to "save face." After the game was over it was more important to him to be fair; and if you were right, he was not stubborn about it.

Oh, he could get irritated. One thing he didn't like was discourtesy. He was always courteous himself. Also, he did not like to boast nor did he like this in others. This put John in a difficult position. While many model railroaders practically idolized him, some others resented the publicity his model-work received and especially the acclaim these other modelers gave him. Often John and I would discuss the spacing of photo features we published on his layout. Neither of us wanted them to appear too often. I remember one time when we hadn't printed a John Allen feature for more than 2 years. But when one appeared in *Railroad Model Craftsman* we received complaint letters of "too much John Allen in MR."

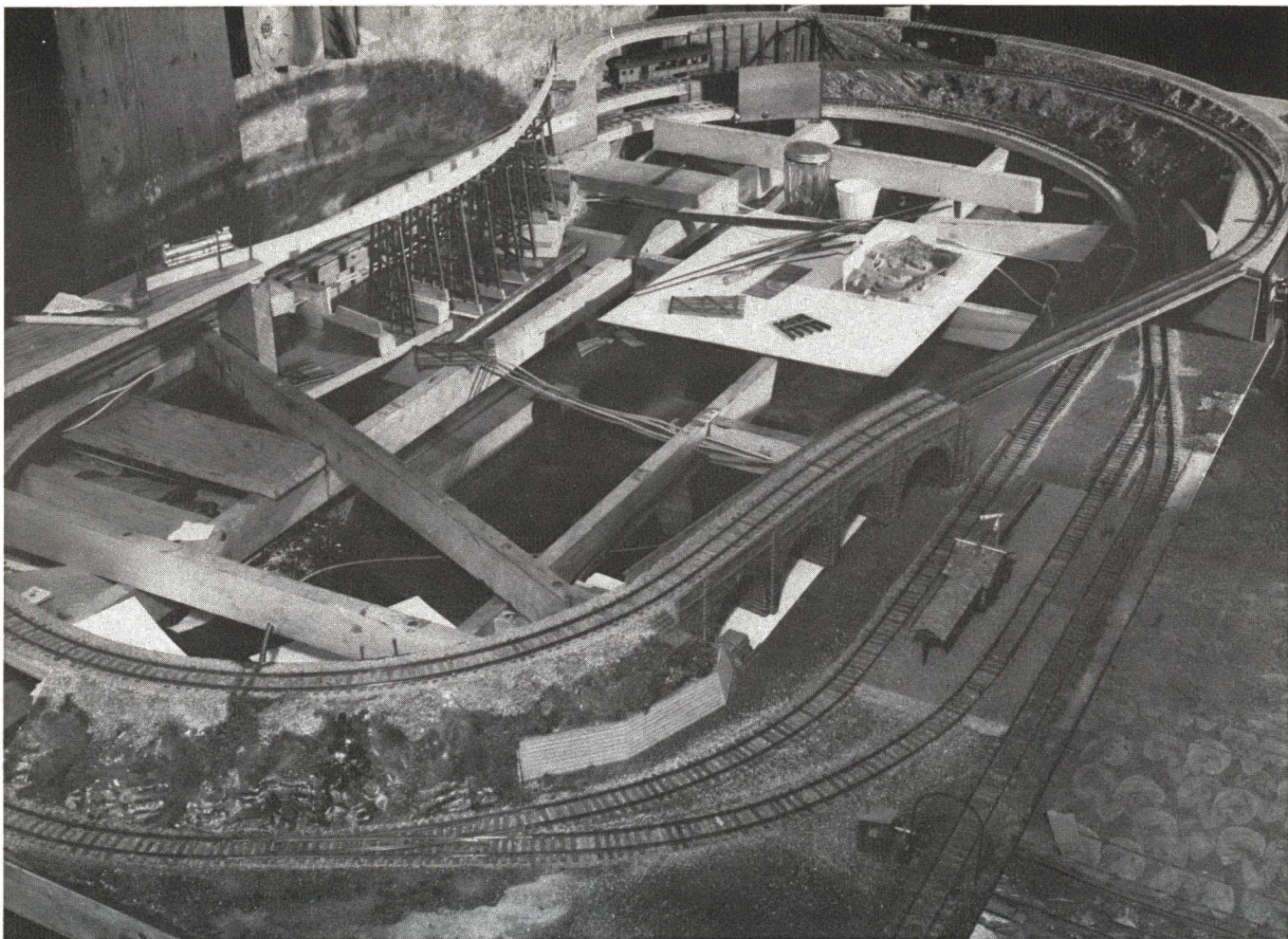
I said John didn't like to boast, but he did have self-confidence in some of his modeling practices—particularly in lighting the layout, photographing it, coloring it, and in the field of operation. He would tell you how he did these things but there was no implication that his was the best way. For some it probably wasn't, and he would be the first to say so. With John, the hobby was an art as well as a craft.

Allen was not a superdetail builder. Many a modeler is more particular about some aspects of the hobby. For John it was more important to get a balance between all things. Most things on his layout were well fitted to their surroundings. The planned exceptions, and there were many of these, were made either for a spectacular scenic effect or for humor. The humor was often subtle, so it wouldn't overpower the layout and become too tiring.

The name of the railroad, Gorre & Daphetid, was of course chosen in jest. This "after the battle" pun seemed cute to John, at first; but he told me long ago that if he were to name it again he would have chosen a more straight-faced railroad name, something that would connote the country the railroad was supposed to pass through.

John Allen and his brother were brought up by an aunt. John had a happy childhood and went to good schools. After University of California at Los Angeles he attended art schools and also studied photography. He became fascinated with photography and decided to make it his profession. Perfectionist that he was for the visual effects of things, he was soon taking color photos for billboards for an oil company; and this was no snapshot matter. For example, when he had an order for a color photo at Point Lobos,

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Photos by John Allen except as indicated.

The Gorre & Daphetid started as a two-lap main line plus a short branch, over the trestle. This became a part of both of the later GD layouts.

Continued from preceding page
near Monterey, he spent 2 days getting ready for the picture and checking the sun, the clouds, and the scene. Nothing in the photo could be allowed to distract the viewer from the main effect. So it was with most of John's model railroad photos. The idea of building a model railroad diorama so he could photograph it hit John like lightning in the mid-1940's. One of his diorama photos became well known to model railroaders because model railroad manufacturer Gordon Varney used it on his catalog cover.

Gradually model railroad also became a hobby, then almost a vocation for John. His first venture in describing his activities was an article in the July 1946 issue of MR titled "How to make realistic model photos." He advised, "We have one sun; therefore we should have one light" on a model railroad scene. He also explained how to avoid harsh contrasts with one-bulb lighting: "If there are a lot of light-colored buildings or ground around, you will get interesting shadows; if not, your picture will be very contrasty as in nature. Place your light so as to get the details you want." Because one bulb can light only a small area satisfactorily, he suggested photographing only small areas at a time. Later, when his own layout was larger, one-bulb lighting was difficult to use except in local areas. Then he tended more toward soft lighting so that larger scenes could

be photographed. This prevented him from attaining as much sparkle in his overall layout shots as his diorama photos contained.

In later years, many of John's model photos were made with a 35-mm. reflex camera—which is the easiest to use for closeups. But, time permitting, he always preferred to work with larger film. Almost always a small diaphragm opening was used. Most of the diorama photos were taken nearly broadside to the models using 4" x 5" film at f. 45. This would be a diaphragm opening of .1" or so. (It gives the same depth of field as f. 22 on the usual 35-mm. camera.) If objects will be closer to the lens in the foreground, or if the scene is shot diagonally, a much smaller opening was and is needed.

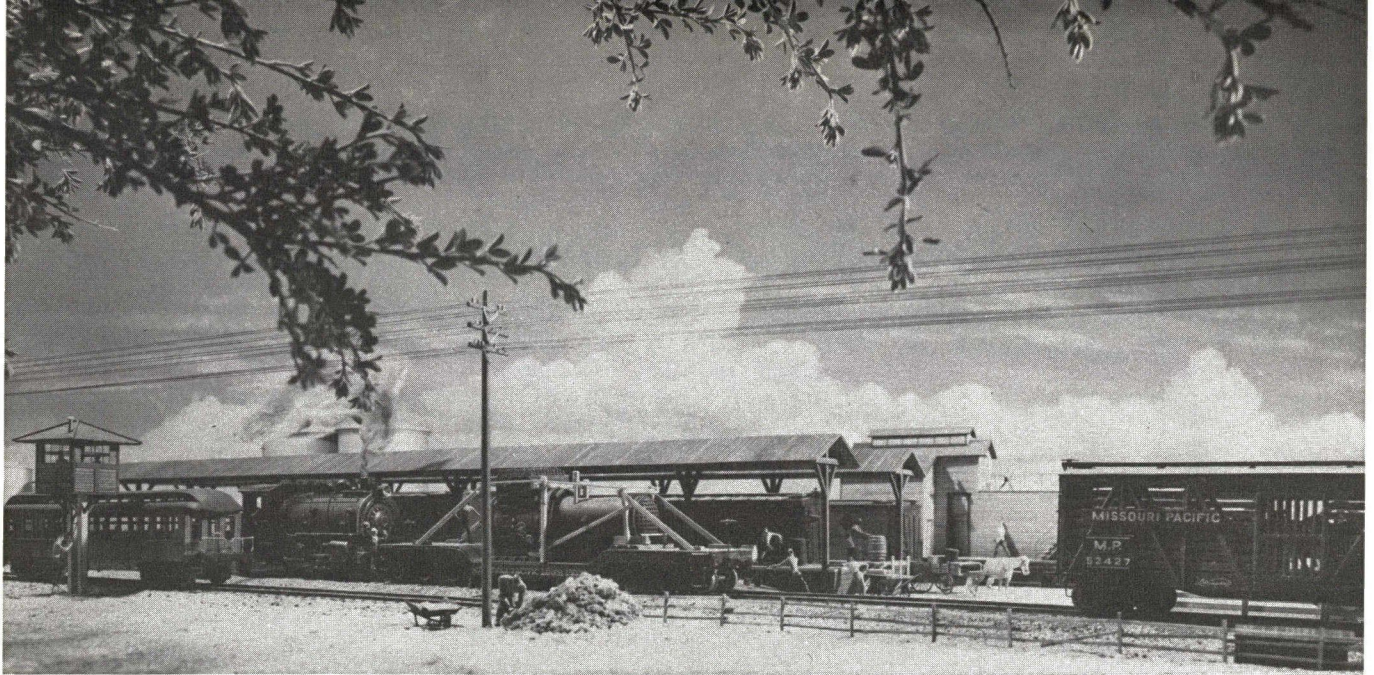
The nature of commercial photo assignments gave John some time to work on a model railroad; and the first Gorre & Daphetid was born in 1947 in a tiny house near Cannery Row in Monterey. This first GD Line was built in HO scale on a 45" x 80" open-grid frame. Looking back at a photo of that framework I notice that John had already anticipated one of the features of the girder framework now commonly used, in that some of his joists were laid above the longitudinal pieces.

In those days the national model contest was held annually by MODEL RAILROADER instead of the NMRA; and, in

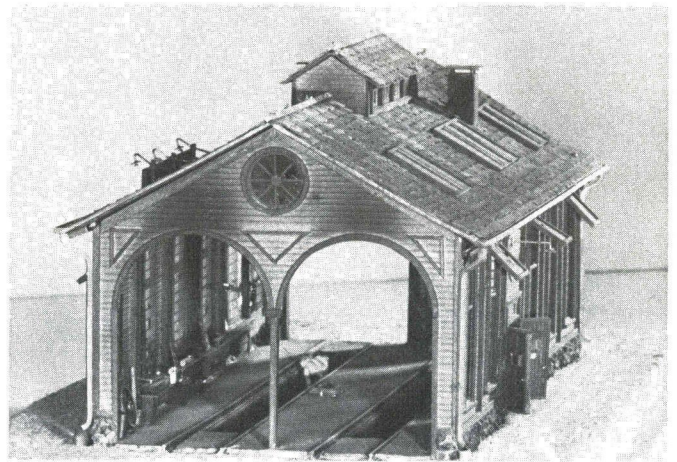
1948, John Allen's two-stall enginehouse took first award in structures. It aroused comment because John had modeled pigeons and their evidences along the ridge of the roof. Pigeons and other animate detail, once considered unacceptable in this hobby, were given another look; and many a modeler began to humanize his railroad. While "weathering" was not entirely new, the work of Allen and a few others in this period showed how effective it could be in adding atmosphere to otherwise very stiff-looking modelwork. This also created a trend.

Along this same line of adding atmosphere to the railroad came improvements in miniature figures. Weston made some good ones, but the variety offered was very limited; and we had none of the fine examples that came later from Preiser and Merten in Germany. John decided to make some figures of his own. He started with armatures of wire bent to resemble human and animal bodies, heads, and limbs. Candle or beeswax was then dipped on and dabbed on and then carved. Since most paints don't stick well to wax, a coat of white shoe polish, such as "Shu-Milk," was given next. Then came the watercolor or oil paints. The important point to me was that John didn't carve just "a man." He made a fat man or a thin man or an old man or a cripple, each with its own personality.

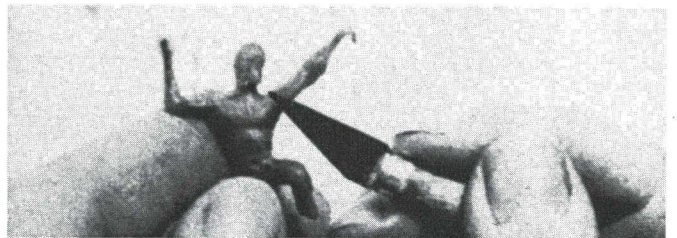
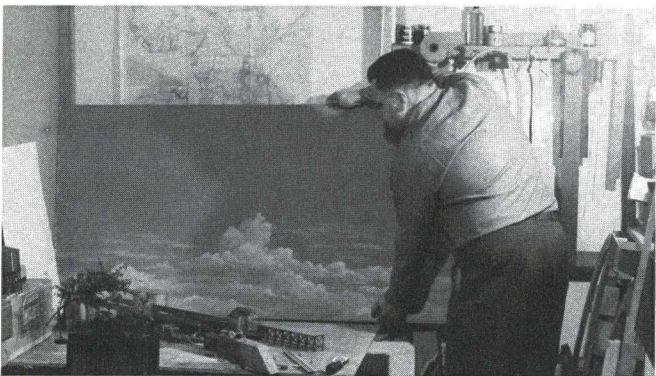
He also made a miniature dinosaur



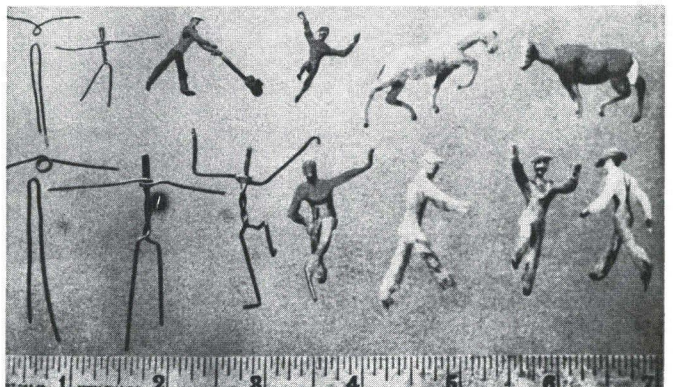
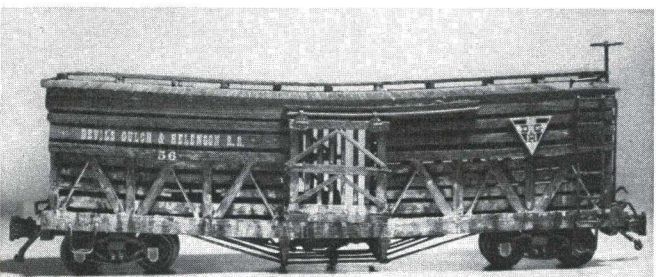
Allen's hobby started with the building of this model railroad diorama as a photograph prop. By using light-colored ballast, a sky backdrop, and one bright lamp at the side, he achieved the effect of sunlight.



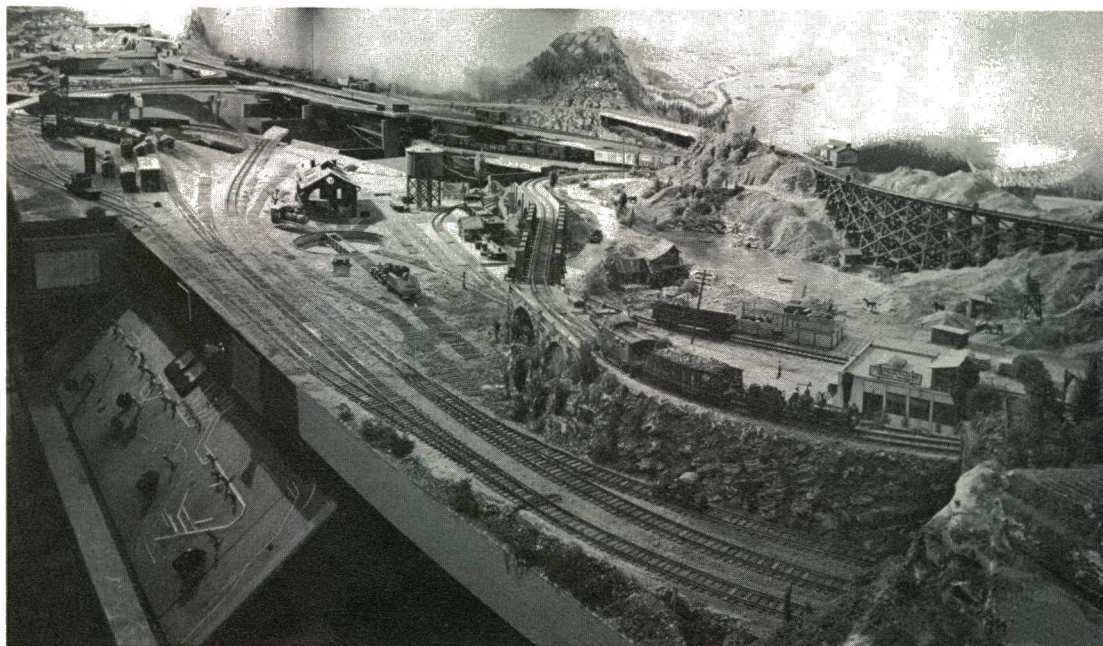
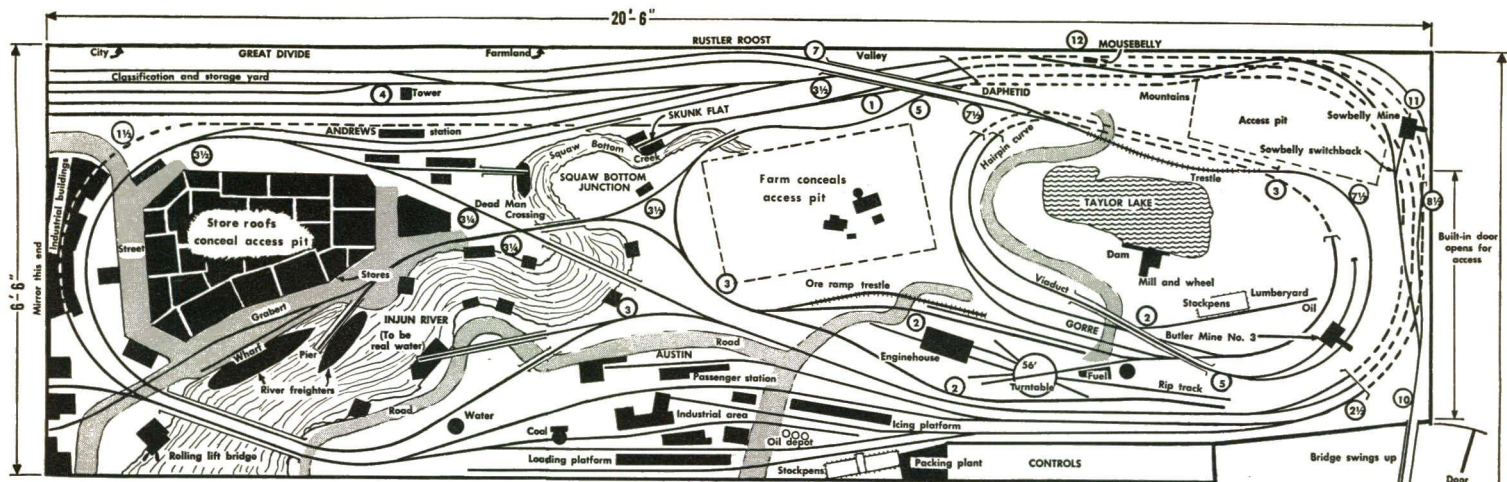
A structure often began as a sketch with notes about its detailing. This one won Best of Show in the MR national model contest in 1948.



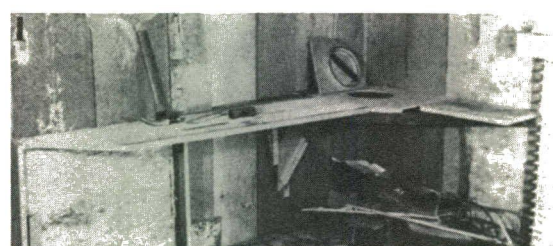
Figures began with armatures of wire: were soldered, bent into lively shapes, and coated with carved wax to look like individual persons.



By using figures, weathered effects, sagging cars and structures, and light colors for the scenery and structures, John attained an effect of realism rarely seen before in models. He humanized the machine.



The second Gorrie & Daphetid, still in the little house at Cannery Row, occupied the dining area, and it extended and surrounded the original railroad. The switchback through Helengon was the last built here.

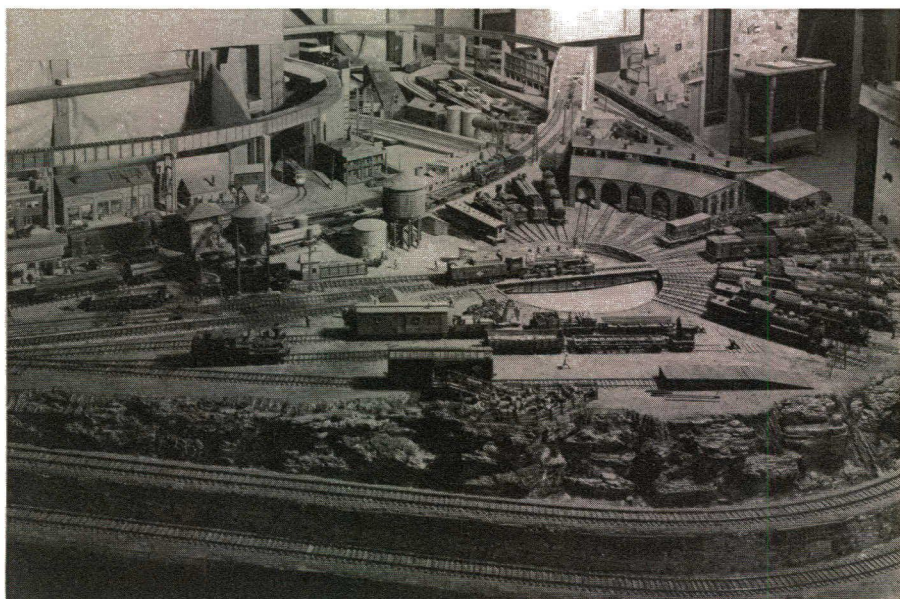
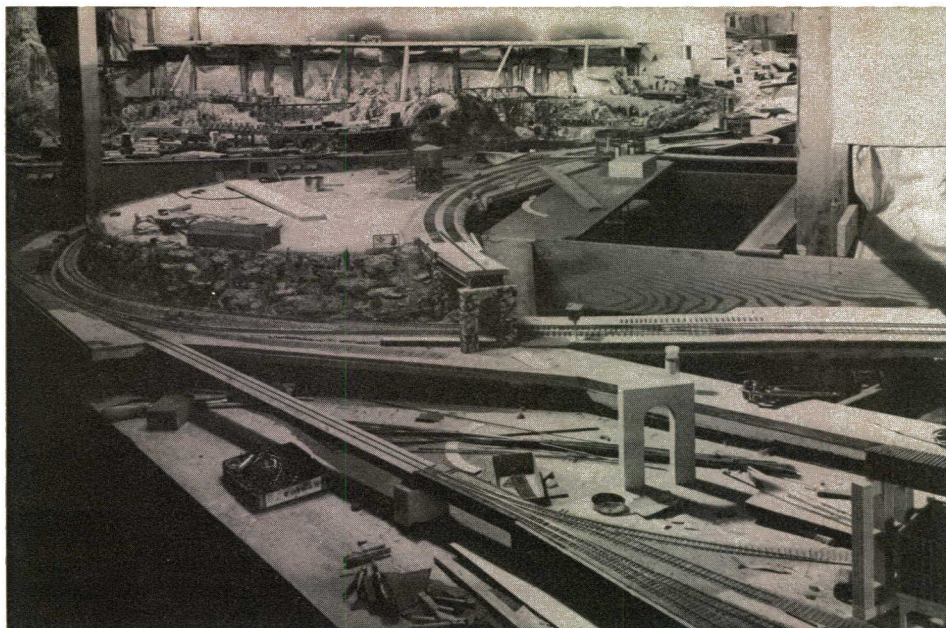


At Helengon, John built Mount Alexander. First he roughed it out with a grid of bent cardboard profile strips. These were then covered with a layer of paper and plaster, forming an early version of hard-shell terrain. The three-way switch at the base of Mount Alexander was laid by hand.

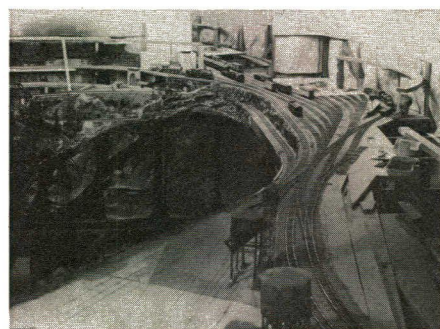
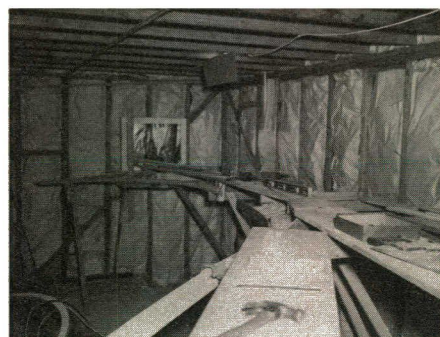




The enginehouse inspired many modelers to try weathering. Parts of GD 1 and 2 were nested into GD 3 in John's newer house, just to the right of the distant column.



Framework for the third GD was mostly bracketed from the walls. Great Divide (upper view) soon had track installed (lower), but for years trains had to switch back to get out of the terminal. The larger views show Port's site and the engine terminal from opposite directions across room.



which was occasionally seen in early Allen photos, helping the track crews by pulling the supply cars.

Cliff Grandt tells a story about how John helped him improve his modelwork. The year following John's building of the enginehouse for the MR contest, Cliff built a 1:48 scale model of a Heisler geared locomotive. He showed the finished model to John and John did him a favor. He made a sharp photograph of the model, then made a clear 8" x 10" enlargement from the negative. "Take this," said John, "and look it over with a magnifying glass. Wherever you can tell from the photo that the locomotive is a model rather than a prototype, you may be able to improve the modelwork."

Grandt was amazed at how many little things were giveaways. A tiny screwhead he thought was well hidden showed noticeably. A compressor that had been

carefully made with 12 parts looked crude. Cliff rebuilt the model, this time hiding the screw, making many other changes, and making a new compressor with 69 parts. It won "best in show" award in the contest that year.

I first visited John in 1949, when he was in the little house. Already the GD had been extended onto another framework to about quadruple the original size. John developed a way of making scenery that was a real step forward: this was by erecting an irregular trellis of cardboard strips into approximately the desired finished shape, then covering the form with layers of paper dipped in plaster. Part of the genius of this fellow was that he would study what had been done before, then try new ideas, whether his own or those offered by others. He didn't care where the ideas came from as long as they worked; and,

so far as I can recall, he never claimed a "first" for himself. He was probably too aware that each "first" was usually a mere improvement upon an earlier "first" of someone else. Claims were not his satisfactions anyway. He enjoyed the railroad for what it was and for the many friendships it developed for him.

At its greatest (see track plan) the first GD Line became 6'-6" x 20'-6" plus a 3'-0" x 7'-6" dogleg from one corner. A mirror at one end helped to make it look still larger.

As time progressed, John's work allowed him more and more time to spend in building the GD and photographing it. It outgrew the little house, so early in 1953 a move was made to the present home. This is a little more than a mile to the south. The hillside is very steep, so that what is the ground floor along the street in front is far above the rear

yard. The house has a good-sized living room in the center, a kitchen plus dining area to the south, and bedrooms to the north. John fitted his own room with high-fidelity classical music equipment. The cellar was unexcavated but it had full headroom along the rear wall. John excavated the rest to make a basement. The layout room was 24 x 32 feet over all but with two corners restricted. Next to it a workshop was built.

The original 4 x 7-foot Gorre & Daphetid was saved and mounted diagonally near the middle of the room. It was to become the Gorre area of the new system. A larger terminal yard, but still modest considering the size of the entire layout, was built across the aisleway to the east and called Great Divide. Near this was Port: actually a midpoint on the planned-for main line, but used as a terminal up to now because not all of the main line has been put into operation.

John worked out a main line 6.7 scale miles long to connect these three major points. Most of it was wrapped along the outer walls of the room, looping back where space permitted. His plan was never altered except for minor details.

Gradually the new GD took shape. Work was begun at both Gorre and Great Divide. Some framework was installed for scenery in the mountainous area, and also some roadbed so that track could be laid for early operations. Friends helped with the enormous project so that it progressed at a reasonable speed. In some places the scenery was built directly on unexcavated parts of the earth under the house. In another area, part of the scenery extended to floor level. The walkway here represented a river surface.

Layout building, of course, wasn't the only project. There were cars under construction, and a modest stable of locomotives was gradually developed. Several of them were remodeled for GD characteristics by John's friend Cliff Grandt.

The GD represented a railroad of the early twenties in mountainous country. Many of its structures had obviously been built many years before and were now in all states of repair, from excellent to deserted.

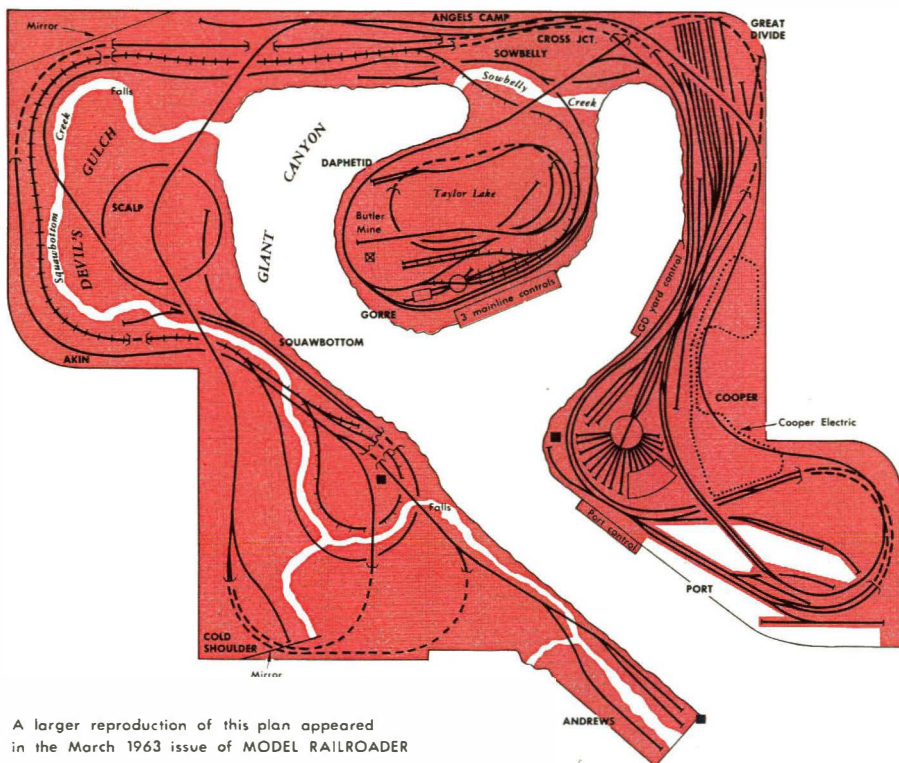
For engine performance a momentum throttle was developed. Transistors were not available yet in power types, but John rigged a generator and flywheel arrangement that worked well. Actually he had two such machines. One was simply hooked across the line so it drew most of the current and thus kept voltage low until its flywheel had gained speed.

Another Allen contraption was a box-car containing a large steel ball on sagging internal rails with electric contacts at the ends. Anyone who operated a train too jerkily caused the ball to roll to the car end, completing a circuit to signal a hotbox. A lamp under the car would stay lit until the device was reset.

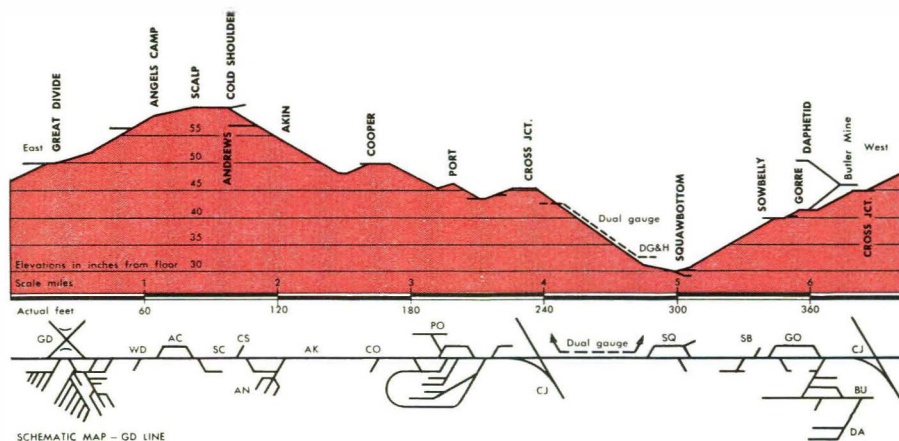
To keep the rails in good-contact condition, John mounted pieces of pressed wood rough side down under several box-cars. These pads slid along the rails, wiping the tops clean. The cars were used in general service, simply depending on

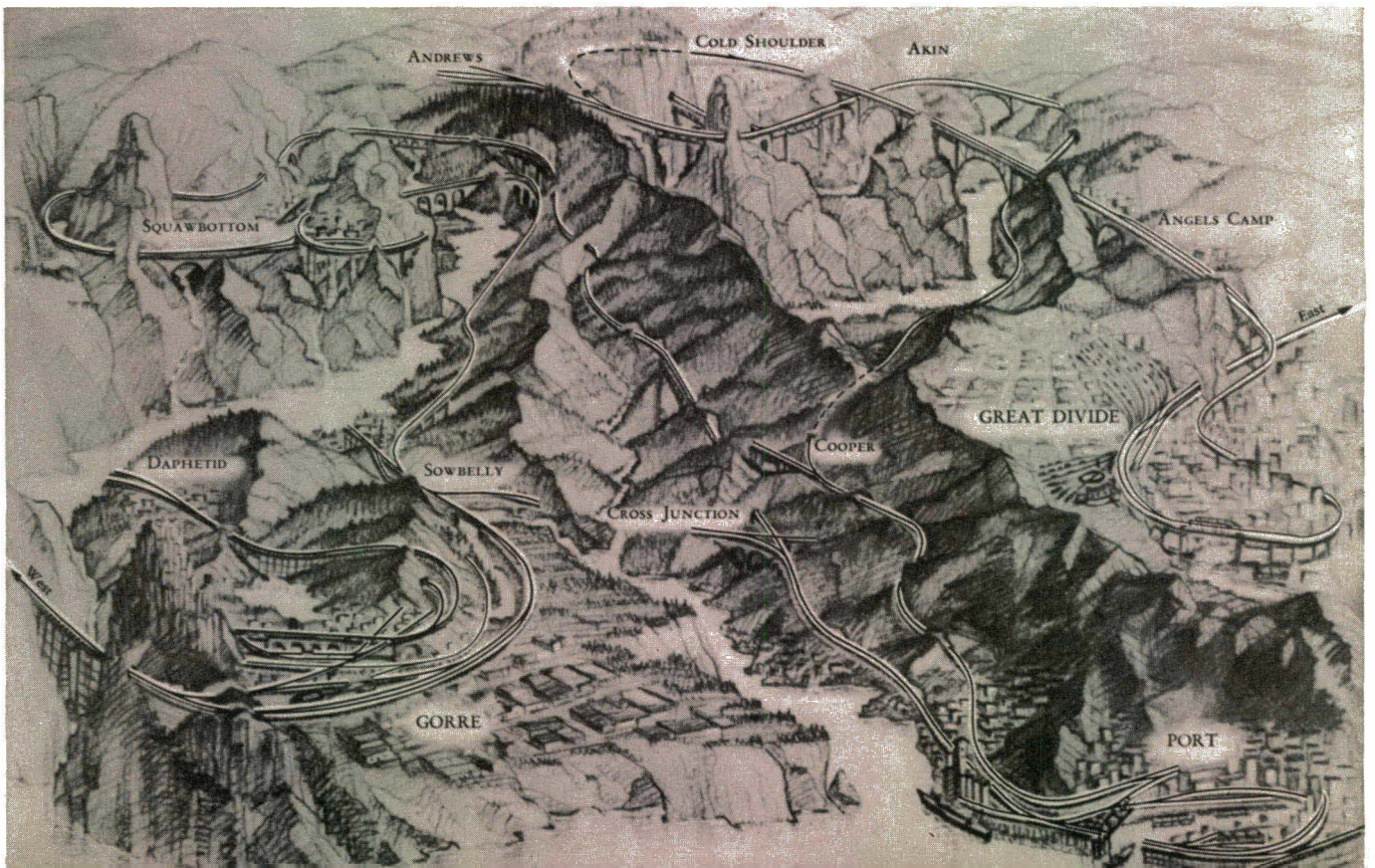
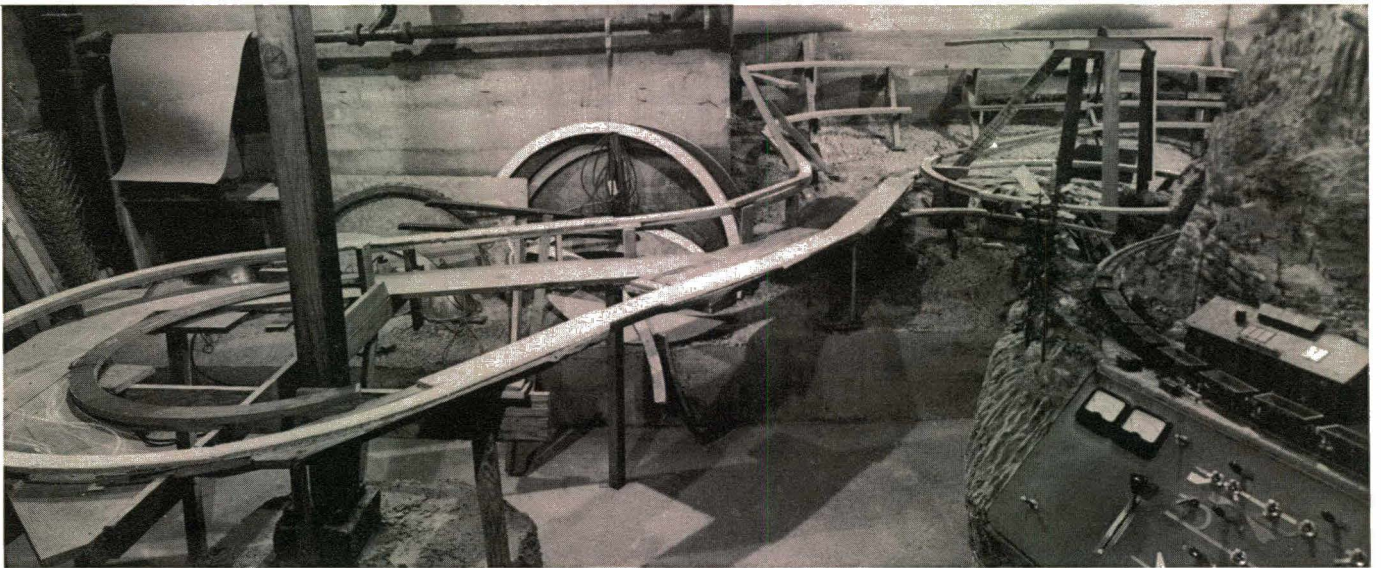
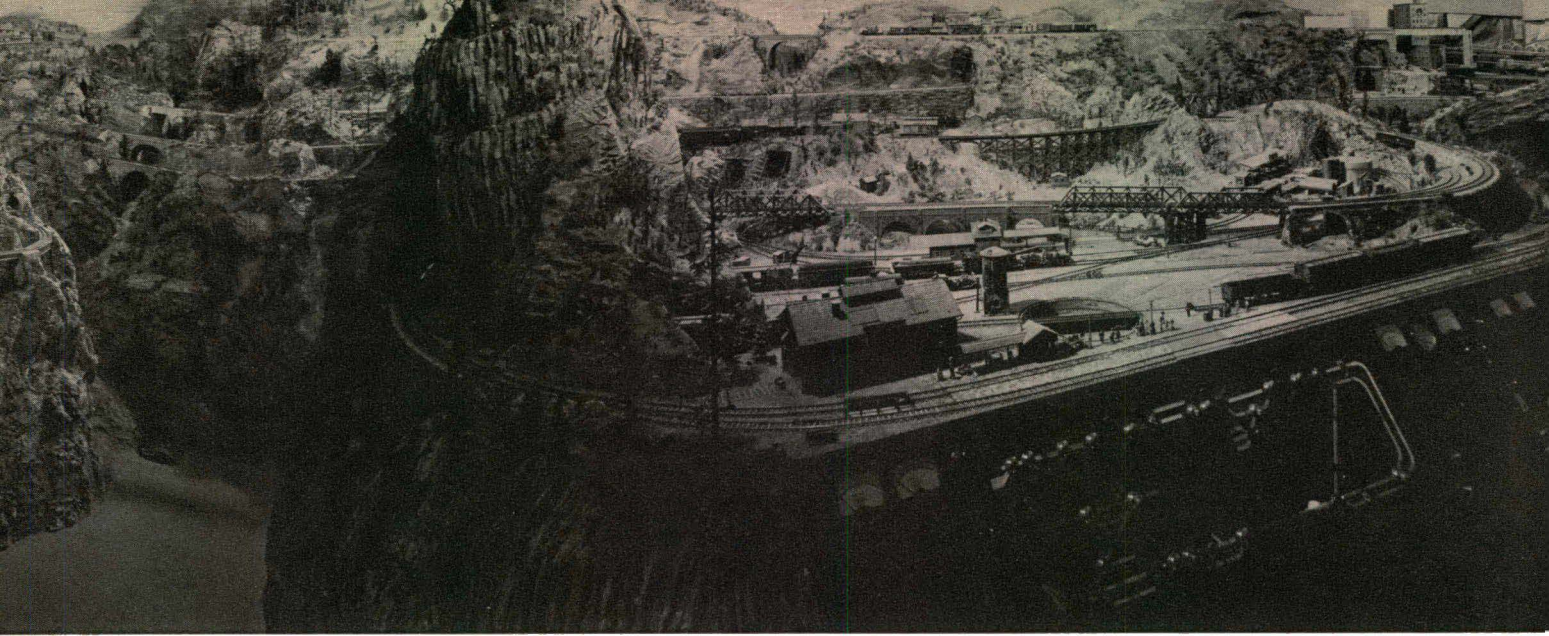


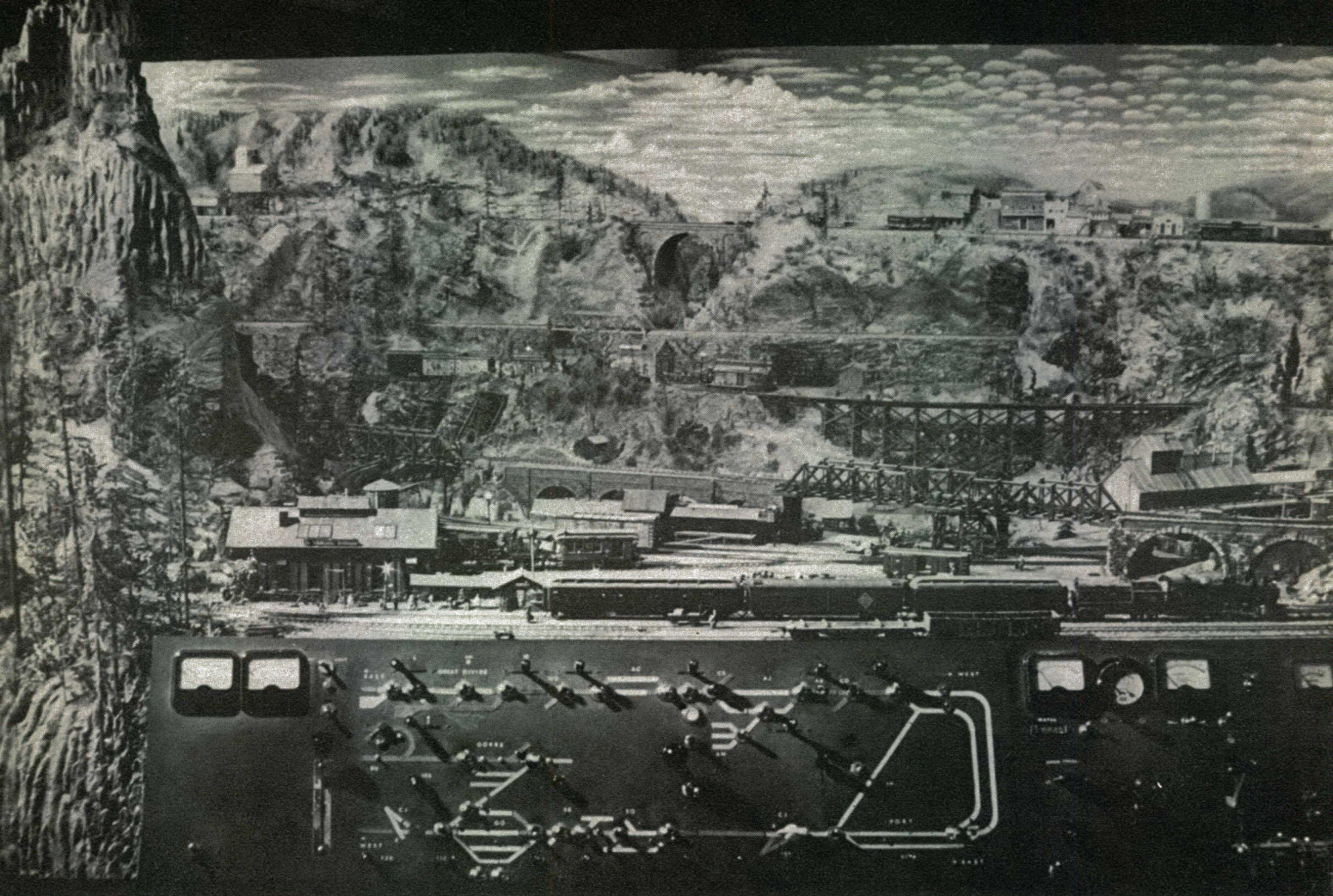
Each year a few more feet of scenic terrain was installed, working mostly in a counterclockwise direction. The view at right is the earlier view here. When completed, the main line was to run from Great Divide (see below) through Port to Gorre, but meanwhile Port was used as a terminal.



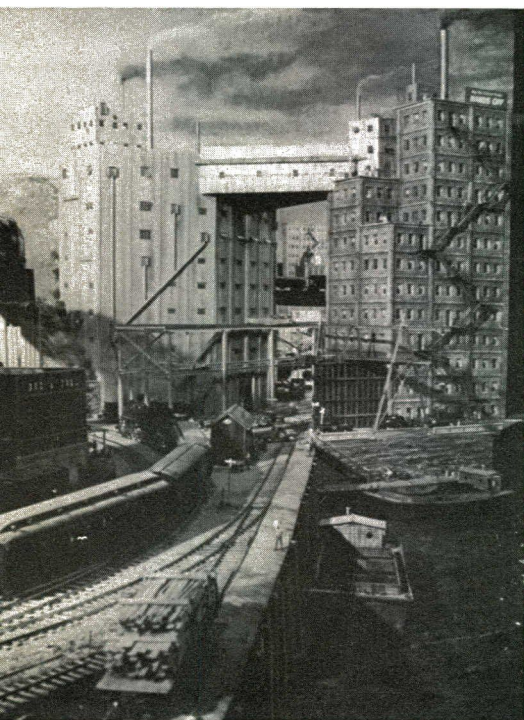
A larger reproduction of this plan appeared in the March 1963 issue of MODEL RAILROADER







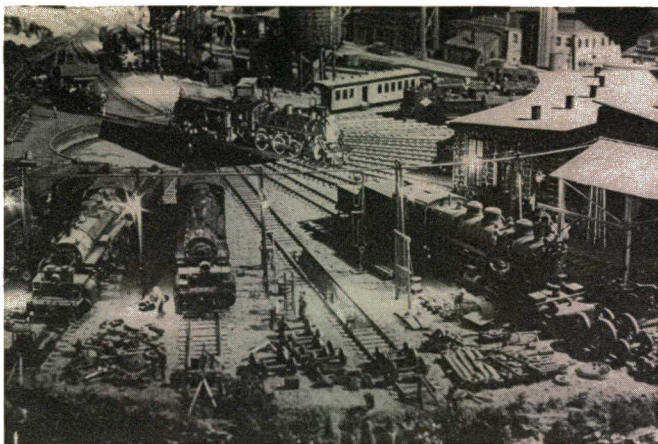
The Gorre panel handled the small yard and much of the mainline trackage. The original Gorre & Daphetid and a small part of GD 2 were built into this layout just beyond the panel. In the distance is a wallside cliff carrying bridges and retaining walls for several tiers of track. The beehivelike mountain at the left was constructed to hide one of the ceiling supporting columns.



Real water was intended at Port, but humidity and other problems eventually ruled against it. The elevator building in the distance is reflected in a mirror to look twice as large as it actually is. The engine at the upper left is on the last portion of main line that was soon to be put into use when calamities struck. The train can be seen through the distant mirror.



Although the photos were published individually, as far as I know this panoramic view was never assembled to show the west end of the room and the trackage built directly on the excavated hillside under the house. Since John took these views, two more high-level bridges were built to take the final leg of the main line across this entire scene, just behind the loop mountain.



By simulating a countryside that has a moderate climate, John was able to keep part of the locomotive repair facilities out in the open so that more of the locomotives could be examined by railfan visitors. Realism was enhanced by piling lots of logical junk near the tracks.



Considering the amount of detail that was packed into each square yard, the speed with which the Gorre & Daphetid developed is amazing, even if it took since 1953 to get this far. In the foreground John has rigged a lumber landing alongside a gently curving spur track in a ravine.



Rockwork was done with considerable use of rubber molds. If the same mold was used repeatedly, care was taken to camouflage the duplications by changing the rock's position, by cropping it, or by modifying the color somewhat. The use of soil and vegetation deposits also helped.



Just to the right of the clock, one of John's famous mirrors makes the Great Divide yard look longer than it is, and doubles the light-colored building at right. The high bridge, here unfinished, is a part of the last series of bridges that were being completed on the GD this winter.

their random movement in trains to get them over the line. If you happened to get two such cars in the same train it became a little hard pulling going over an upgrade route.

Fairly early in the development of the new GD, enough main line had been laid to begin operation even though much of the scenery was incomplete. In recent years the crew included Joe Cain, Allan Fenton, Bill Corsa, Darrel Harbin, and Earle Flaws. Sometimes John would also invite a model railroader from one of the nearby military posts, and at other times friends from distant places were guest operators. Cliff Robinson, Whit Towers, Leighton Keeling, Jim Findley, and many others operated on the GD.

Operation on the GD meant running by timetable plus freight car forwarding at the same time. The equipment has always been maintained in good condition so that derailments and false uncouplings don't occur often enough to spoil the game. Like Whit Towers, John used Baker couplers, a type that has given good operation and which predated the popular Kadees of today. I have operated on the layout several times, and the thing I always marveled at was how John could handle as much

traffic as he did with those meager terminal facilities at Port. Since part of the planned main line was not operable, operations ran from Port to Great Divide, making one out-and-back transit of the layout room wall space. The other part of the main line was completed from Port as far as Andrews about 4 years ago, and on my last two visits it was treated as a branch line. This added more to the load at Port.

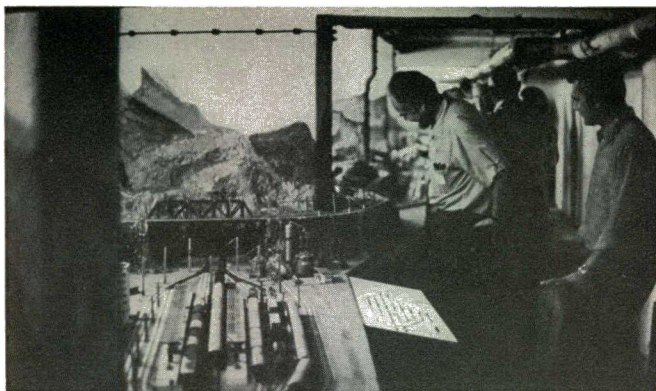
Every operating railroad has a bottleneck that limits the traffic the system can handle; and on the GD it was, of course, at Port. Allan Fenton often operated it, and he says, "When John would decide I was not handling Port in an efficient manner, he would get another operator and put him at West Port, while John would take East Port. They would then try to operate it in a way that John and Cliff Robinson had often discussed. Well, Port got plugged anyway and we'd ask John the next time if he was going to 'play God' again. He wouldn't even acknowledge the question." But sometimes when John operated the branch line he'd play God several times a night by dimming the lighting and making all of the group operate in the dark, with only the structure and train lights showing. "For

a joke," Fenton says, "he sent us Christmas cards this year signed 'The Night Maker.'"

"John was a great teacher by giving us hell when we didn't operate in a prototype manner. And he was always using humor in subtle ways to get ideas across to his fellow railroaders. One joke I didn't appreciate was his attaching a laughing box machine to the uncoupling ramp at Cross Junction. It certainly shocked the visitors. One of his funnier gimmicks was the noisy subway that never arrived." Fenton continues:

"You are right, Linn, that John could always talk. Try being trapped in an airplane with him for 12 hours on our tour to Japan with Paul Shimada. John made the flight go fast with word games, betting on how late the flight would be, or who would be the last person on the bus."

About teaching: "He would set up a tape recorder during an operating session but unknown to us. It recorded the sounds of the trains and all of our unnecessary conversations. Then we had to sit through the tape and learn to watch our railroading very closely and not get into predicaments where we had to talk. With a timetable and established tonnage ratings for the locomotives, the only talk



Linn H. Westcott.

There is a fine HO scale layout in the railroad station at Knittelfeld, Austria. John was fascinated with the way the overhead power distribution system was constructed along the track by the members of the club.



Linn H. Westcott.

No one would ride with John at the Oktoberfest, so he went by himself.

should have concerned train delays, need for helper engines, and peddler freight movements. His most frequent warnings were 'Keep your speed down' and 'Don't push the train; take the block.'

"Some of our Tuesday night meetings would be very short on railroading or no operation at all if John wanted to talk for the evening. A more typical meeting night started with a half- to 1-hour talk on anything; and after operating we talked over coffee for another half hour: for instance, on a switching problem. The last time I dropped John off he was talking about joining a local club so he could go down and find people to hold conversations with."

A lot of the talking was helping others. He was careful not to publish his address in *MODEL RAILROADER* because the amount of mail it would bring would be more than he could handle. But we forwarded all of the mail that was sent to him in care of the magazine, and he always answered that. He helped modelers solve their problems with scenery, wiring, track-work, and almost any other subject they asked. If he didn't know, he said so.

He prepared several slide shows to illustrate his methods on how to light a railroad, night effects, and planning the overall layout. The latest, a tape and slide show, has just been released by the NMRA for use at regional conventions and at model railroad clubs.

Several years ago I asked John if he would like to do a book about his railroad, and he began to take photos especially for the book. Since the area near Andrews

was still empty of scenery until recently, he wanted to wait until this year to complete the book material.

John made many trips around the country visiting other model railroaders. He became quite an authority on the convenience—or lack of it—with various kinds of control panels, but he always caught on quickly as to how a particular railroad should be run.

One of his greatest pleasures was to attend various NMRA national and regional conventions (as long as they were not in summer in the hot states). He went with my wife Harriet and me on our two model and railroad tours of Europe in 1969 and 1971, the latter including the NMRA convention in London and the former including the MOROP convention in Stuttgart. On the tours John was fairly quiet, often at the side of the group, studying something that particularly interested him. He was careful not to walk too fast for his heart but otherwise he participated in everything we did.

At Munich we arrived during the Oktoberfest. This is a sort of temporary amusement-park event with rides located among a number of beer halls. John was just like a youngster when we got to the rides. No one would go with him on one wild sort of roundabout device, so he went alone, as one of these photos shows.

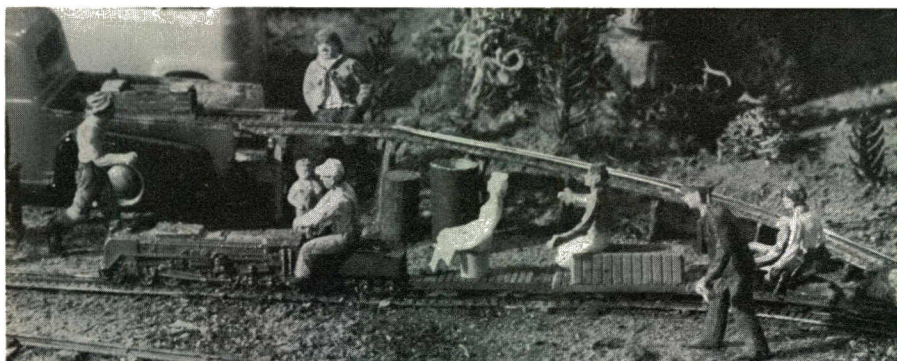
John could, but usually didn't bother to, dress up except for the most formal occasions. He was just himself. Some of our tour group, who had not known him

before, thought he was careless about his clothes. But after they got to know John, his always sparkling and witty personality won them over.

When we visited model layouts, I think, John got as much out of each visit as anyone did. He was careful to study every detail of how track, cars, scenery, wiring, structures, and operations were worked out. He was also quick to show appreciation when someone had contrived a good method.

Track on the GD main line was finally completed this past winter, but there was still one bridge to finish and some wiring to install. John would have driven the Golden Spike sometime this spring—perhaps at the time of the PCR convention in San Mateo this April.

Apparently John left no will telling how to dispose of his railroad. His brother, Andrew Allen, hoped that the railroad could be preserved in one way or another. John himself once said he thought the maintenance would be too much and that the railroad could last only about 6 months. His loyal operating crew thought otherwise: that they could and if allowed by the state and family, would keep it operable. Ten days after John died, the electricity had been turned off and the vacant house was thought safe, but a fire developed near one end of the workshop and the Andrews branch. It burned the layout room timbers, and the living room floor fell in on the railroad. Heat, the crush, and water damage finished the GD before any Golden Spike could be driven in honor of one of the grandest of all guys.



Russ Cain.

One of the last photos taken of the GD, just before the fire, shows John's latest ruse: a live-steam railroad of about .1" gauge. It was located at Gorre, alongside the old stone viaduct.



Russ Cain.

The workbronto met some resistance in its path one day. Note that, as railroad property, the bronto carries an appropriate engine number.