



50 years of highballing



The Milwaukee Lionel Railroad Club

BY BOB KELLER
PHOTOS BY REBECCA SALITURE
AND JIM FORBES

MY FIRST QUEST after moving to Milwaukee from Seattle was finding a good cup of coffee. Second on the list was a toy train club. I found myself wondering if there would be an outfit like the one back home, a great group of people with a neat layout. What I discovered was even better than I had dare to imagine.

I found an active, vibrant toy train club with more than 100 members, a huge permanent layout, and smaller, portable layouts for shows, school visits, and other public events. A club that is celebrating its 50th anniversary, and claims to be the oldest Lionel club in the country. Sound good to you? Then come to Milwaukee, the home of the Milwaukee Lionel Railroad Club.

Club activities include a monthly business meeting and a weekly "bring your trains" operating session. Outreach programs include regular family activities and two annual open houses. The club also sponsors a monthly train meet, and it regularly provides entertainment at mall shows as well as a layout for Trainfest, Milwaukee's premier model railroading event, which draws 20,000 attendees for a two-day show. The main function of the club, however, is the same as it was 50 years ago: to provide members with a place to meet and run their trains any time of year.

LET THE LONG TRAINS ROLL

Jerry Brettschneider founded the club in 1947 (see sidebar). For nearly 30 years it was headquartered in his family's basement

in Milwaukee's southside. In 1976 the club moved to rented space in northwestern Milwaukee, and a larger layout was erected. Tight space forced the club to move again in 1984. The current location on Fond Du Lac Avenue has ample space for a large layout, a video and book library, a meeting room and even a tool room and kitchenette. Club memorabilia and display cases containing trains donated by members fill the walls.

The massive 26 x 31-foot layout's concept of operation is simple: to allow members a chance to run their largest engines and longest trains with a minimum of interruption. You could call the layout hi-rail, although several Lionel operating accessories are in use. Members can switch rolling stock from track to track, but the focus of attention is on long trains with tree-stump-pulling motive power.

The layout has lower, middle, and upper levels that normally allow five trains to be in motion at once. It's possible to run a train from the top to bottom levels, but it is a circuitous route. The lower level has two main lines, two passing sidings, a small yard that services several industries, and a branch line to an intermodal facility. Main lines on all three levels run through a partitioned area on the north side that provides a hidden staging area.

Though the lower level's focus is mainline running, two interesting areas allow folks to exercise their switchers. The first is the mainline yard that contains most of the layout's operating accessories, including the no. 12847 Icing Station, no. 12875 Operating Saw Mill, and a postwar no. 497 Coaling Station. Just down from the no. 497 is a unique coal dealership, custom-built by club member Art Oseland. Side-dump cars on the middle level unload cargo that slides down a chute to the first level. The coal can be scooped up and reloaded by the layout's only prewar accessory, a no. 97 Coal Loader. Since a lot of

Daylights roar past Hidden Valley. Dave Rohr's Lionel no. 8307 Southern Pacific GS-4 (left) meets Sergio Daharo's no. 18007 GS-2 on the club's mid-level trestle.



In this view of the entire layout you can see the heliport reflected in a mirror above the center access way. High above, in the distance, fighters are returning from an air strike on a nearby HO layout. Train guys just wanna have fun: left to right Sergio Daharo, Gil Bruck, Dan Olech, club president Roman Berdes, Ken Pabst, and Rick Jegl.



hard work goes on in this industrial area, a no. 12802 Roadside Diner serving food to hungry laborers anchors the south end of the yard.

A Sunoco oil depot fills a corner on the north end of the yard. Two tracks service the facility, which features a custom-built oil depot with a great-looking oil transfer stand, custom-decorated tanks made from auto oil filters, and a no. 12848 Oil Derrick to ensure a fresh supply of black gold.

The lower level's other switching area is a branch off the main to an area called Hidden Valley. A small stream, the Rainbow River, crosses through this area, which is dominated by the upper level's heights to the west and by the middle level to the east.

The branch features an intermodal terminal and a no. 12781 Intermodal Crane.

Sergio Daharo's Lionel no. 18018 Southern Ry. 2-8-2 takes a spin on the club's custom-built turntable, then it's off to the coaling tower and the water tower for routine locomotive servicing.

There is also a small railroad shop plus a power station, and a Lionel no. 12931 Electrical Substation kit with a difference. Peer through the transparent plastic roof, and you can see an electrical generator diorama. Hidden Valley also has a farm and a well detailed recreation area.

UP THE GRADE

The middle level has two main lines, a major passenger depot, a roundhouse and engine service facility, and branches to serve industries and other railroad shops. An access way divides the second level, with the passenger station on the west and the roundhouse area to the northeast.

The roundhouse and backshop area dominate this level. The engine service area was custom built for the club's previous layout by Cal Schmahl and incorporated into the new railroad. In addition to the mammoth roundhouse and turntable, two Lionel no. 12897 Engine House kits are used as service shops. A Lionel no. 12767 Steam Clean and Wheel Grind accessory is behind the roundhouse, and a smaller simulated wash rack stands by the sanding tower. Helping complete the backshop area are a wood coaling tower and water tower, also made by Cal.

Part of what makes this layout stand out is the level of detail present in nearly every location, and clutter is an important aspect of this. Just as any railroad has its piles of forgotten or broken parts, you'll find the Milwaukee line just as messy. Truck and wheel sets stand ready for use, cases of lube oil dot the landscape, old ties and broken rails lay along the right of way. Old Illinois Central switchers await repair while a nearby crew hoists up a replacement freight car truck with mobile crane home-made using an old freight car chassis and the boom and control cab of an old Lionel crane kit.

"Train guys just wanna have fun"

A Rico station is another highlight of the middle level, where passengers wait to board an express train while a few tracks away rests a string of maintenance and work cars. Behind the station a line proceeds northward upgrade and curves south on an elevated level. This track serves a rolling stock repair facility and connects to the Lucky Coal Co. mine complex.

This industry features an abandoned tipple (complete with a wrecked gondola) and two "in service" structures, a Lionel no. 12904 Coaling Station and a home-made three-track tipple. Regardless of ongoing train operation, these tracks and sidings provide an excellent place to store and display rolling stock. The mine can also be reached by trains serving the upper level. The mine complex helps to cement the illusion that this is a line with a purpose, not just three rail track running in circles.

On the east side of the access area, you'll find a handsome Lionel no. 12905



A Lionel no. 1700E prewar articulated streamliner owned by the club's founder, Jerry Brettschneider, blazes past the railroad's backshop area. You'd better stop, look, and listen before crossing this railroad.

Roman Berdes' postwar nos. 400, 404, 2550, and 2559 B&O Budd RDCs haul another happy load of commuters home after a hard day's work in Milwaukee. The all-wood structure was custom-made for another owner and transplanted to the club's layout.



The kids in the gully must not be railfans since they're ignoring Ken Pabst's no. 602 Seaboard diesel switcher lumbering upgrade with a heavy load.

50 fun years



Jerry Brettschneider and his parents Adolph and Lydia during Christmas, 1949. No, Jerry's mom wouldn't let the layout stay up all year!

Gain Elevator painted in Ralston-Purina colors, a small factory building, and a switch leading past the shop area. This track ultimately connects with another line running from the east end of the lower-level yard to the engine service facility.

RIDGE RUNNER

Upper level running caters to the rapid transit crowd. It has a single long loop that provides Budd car commuter service for a large town, Valley View. The loop is about 38 feet long and includes an impressive trestle crossing high above Hidden Valley. The trestle was acquired when a local attorney's layout was disassembled after the sale of his house. The club got quite a deal: Help break up the layout and the trestle was theirs!

The buildings in Valley View are a mixture of off-the-shelf kits and kitbashed structures assembled by Dwight Safter. Most of the downtown structures are from Walthers or Design Preservation Models, and the homes in the suburbs are from Buildings Unlimited. Interiors are currently being added to the downtown buildings since these are easiest for visitors to see. Additions include curtains, furniture, more people, and in some locations, photographic backdrop interiors. Beneath the town, buried deep inside the benchwork is another little gem – the subway station.

The subway level is tucked away in the northwest corner of the line. This is something of a novelty. The subway, (actually an underground trolley) operates on an independent loop of track. The line was built by one of the club's junior members, Andy Nunemaker, when he was 15. Andy, now an electrical engineer working on a master's degree at Harvard, designed it to fill a nook between the upper and middle levels. Visitors view it by peering through a small window in the side of the layout. Though the underground facility looks more like a coal mine than a subway station, residents of Valley View, Milwaukee's finest suburb, can catch an underground train to work.

BUILDING THAT MILWAUKEE LIONEL LINE

The benchwork design and assembly techniques are conventional, as are those used for scenery. The basic platform and wiring took about a year to complete. Members donated all the construction material and adopted sections to individually complete the basic scenery of the railroad. Scenicking included plaster-on-wire hill-sides as well as cut foam. Detail work continues to this day.

Club member Norm Nunemaker, Andy's dad, assembled most of the benchwork, and the late Ernie Glasser did the bulk of the painting. Others working on the layout include Ken Greifenhagen, Art Oseland, Frank Pratt, and Pete Repka.

Track is by GarGraves, with main line

IN JANUARY 1947 five young boys rode out a snowstorm by doing what came naturally – they ran their Lionel trains. In the best Our Gang tradition, the youngsters formed a club with officers and regular meetings. Their goal was to run their electric trains year round.

Led by Jerry Brettschneider, the Milwaukee Lionel Railroad Club held weekly round-robin meetings and charged dues. By 1951, the club had a permanent layout in the Brettschneider home, using Jerry's trains, trains from a neighbor, and equipment purchased by the club. Various fund raisers, including open houses, helped meet expenses. The first two-day event was held the first weekend after Thanksgiving, 1951 and the club earned \$50 in a single day. Subsequent open houses were covered by local newspapers and TV stations and were well received.

Jerry recalls people waiting in line outdoors, some for up to an hour, to see the club's handiwork. His mother, Lydia, would pass out cookies and hot chocolate to waiting train watchers. As Jerry said, "It was the magic of Lionel that brought people out."

In the 1950s the club held a regular outdoor event dubbed Trainarama, where members operated a 4x16-foot railroad outdoors under a parachute, and club members set up displays and

"The theme of this club is family."

gave toy train lectures. Activities in the late 1950s and early '60s included picnics and an annual train trip or railroad activity. As Milwaukee's trolley lines were being phased out, club members made many "last rides." By 1965 the club had 30 regular members and more than \$1,000 in the treasury, quite a sum for a small hobby club at the time.

Although activity ebbed when members were in college or during military service, the club held together. In 1974 the club finally outgrew its space and rented a basement in a commercial building at 80th and Burleigh Street, where it built a new layout. At about the

same time the club built a portable layout for Milwaukee's Southgate Mall and ran it as a mall attraction. This event may have been the first regular mall train show in Milwaukee.

Today the club performs at mall shows in Kenosha, Wis. and at Milwaukee's Trainfest. The Lionel club's sectional layout is always one of the more popular displays, with crowds three and four deep surrounding it.

But the spirit of Lionel enthusiasts isn't confined to the upper Midwest. Jerry's career as a full-time technician in the Army Reserve took him to new areas every few years. His interest in Lionel trains led him to establish Lionel clubs in St. Louis, San Francisco, Chicago, and more recently, Kenosha. Each club is independent and incorporated in the state of its founding. Jerry says "I'm the bond linking them together." The clubs swap information and ideas about toy train operation, club management, and recruiting.

Jerry formed the St. Louis club in 1983. Club organization and activities were patterned after the Milwaukee group; today the club has 130 members. Jerry next formed a group in San Francisco, in 1986, when stationed at the Presidio of Monterey, Calif. That club has about 60 members. Back in the Midwest, Jerry and Roman Berdes established the Chicago Lionel Railroad Club in 1993 with support from Berwyn Toy Trains in Berwyn, Ill. The Windy City outfit rosters more than 300 members and has successfully marketed several custom-decorated Lionel cars. In January 1997 the organizational meeting of a Lionel club in Kenosha was held. Any guess on whether or not, it too, will grow?

Why has Jerry been so successful in setting up so many new toy train clubs? Simple. He summed it up this way: "The theme of this club is family. It's everyone coming together to enjoy a great hobby." – *Bob Keller*

curves varying from 40" to 56" radius on the lower level. Cal Schmahel assembled and installed more than 50 switches throughout the railroad, using GarGraves switches on the lower and middle levels and Curtis products on the upper Valley View line. Curtis products were used due to the higher-profile rail, which more readily accommodates older equipment.

As with any large layout, the great mystery is wiring. Club member David Rohr wired most of the layout with the ultimate goal of computer-controlled operation. The club's objective is to have the switches, signals, and controls feed into an interface panel for the system to be controlled via computer. Computer hardware problems have prevented the system from being fully installed. In the interim, the layout is controlled by two ZWs on the lower level and single ZWs on the middle and upper levels.

DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS

The layout successfully captures the mood of a real railroad and makes toy trains look quite realistic. Industries suggest a reason for the line's existence, and detailed scenes throughout this miniature world illustrate the interaction between a railroad and the surrounding community.

For example, the roundhouse and back-shop areas have that grimy, cluttered feel, you can almost smell 30 years' worth of spilled diesel fuel and lubricants. (Hey, is that an O scale Environmental Protection Agency SWAT team over there?) Over in the valley, on the west side of the layout, is a maze of sidings, switches, and shops. Sure, there is a container yard, power plant, and yet another railway shop building, but fishermen, farmers, and power walkers also share the landscape.

Many members contribute to the high level of detail of the layout, but Gil Bruck (whose layout was featured in the July 1996 CTT) is the artist who creates most of the diorama scenes. He is a master at creating small settings that bring a smile to anyone looking at the layout. Many of his scenes such as the amusement park and hobo camp are classic.

Gil enjoys bringing the layout to life and seeing the smiles on the faces of visitors. He also knows it's a great recruiting tool. "Most members we get make the decision to join after they see the railroad. People get hooked when they see this layout."

Gil's dioramas are terrific. He created a Green Bay Packers' camp with four green and gold houses, O scale cheerleaders with pompons, and a scrimmage between the offensive and defensive lines. He even has a player going out for the long bomb. The player was originally an O scale bike rider. Gil meticulously trimmed away the bicycle, leaving a figure that appears to be running.

Always trying to find creative ways to fill

In a shop area, clutter equals realism, and the Milwaukee Lionel layout is very realistic!

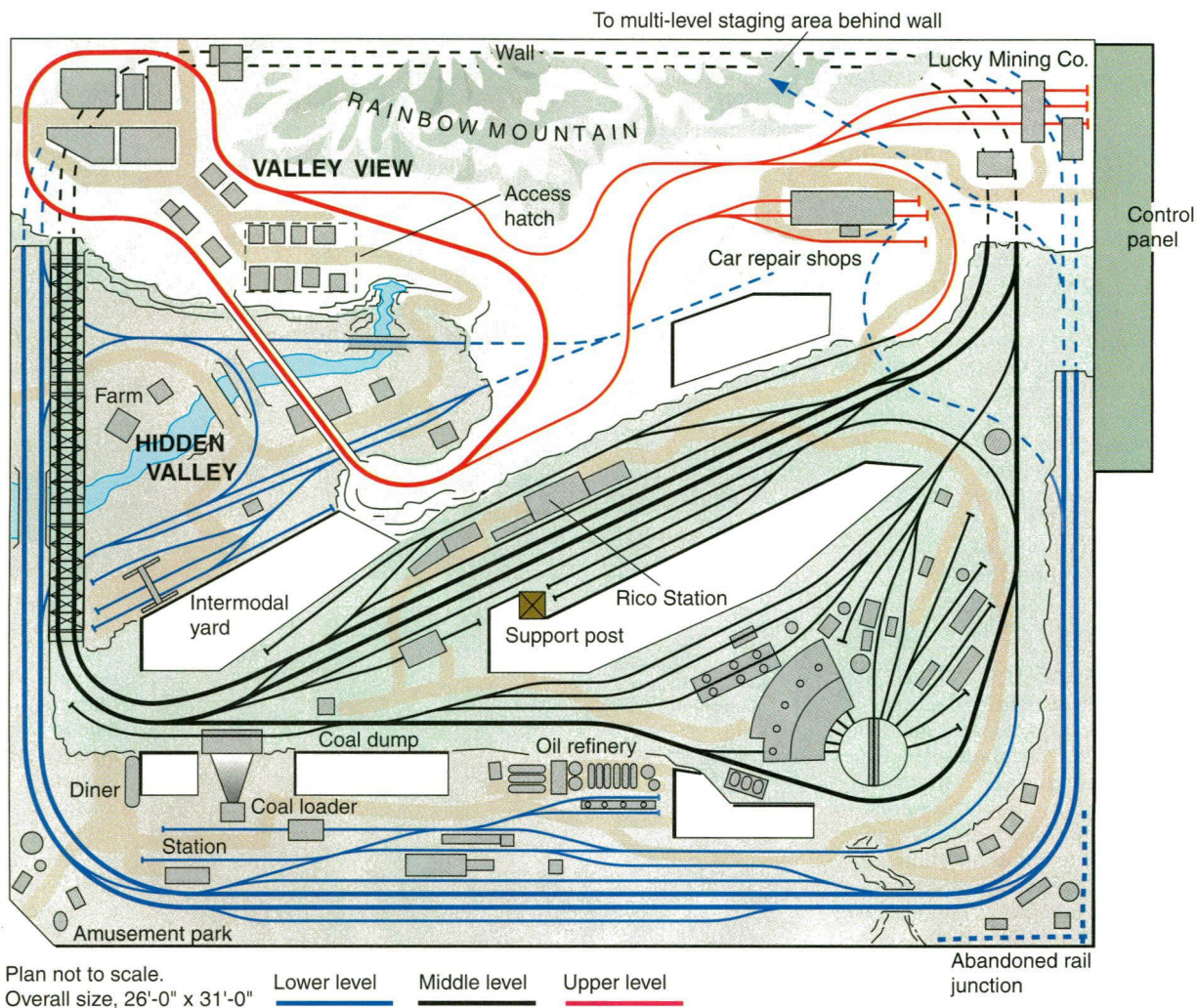
"People get hooked when they see this layout."



Hoppers stand ready at the Lucky Mining Co., the layout's largest industry. Soon, loaded hoppers will begin their long journey down to the lower level's commercial fuel dealership.

Norm Nunemaker's Lionel no. 8054 Burlington F3s glide through a gentle curve on the lower level main line. The layout is a great showplace for running those long passenger trains.





Gil Bruck's no. 18816 Chicago & North Western GP38 hooks up to some full tank cars at Sunoco's Milwaukee fuel depot. The transfer station is custom-made and the storage tanks are commercial vehicle oil filters available at most auto parts dealers.

otherwise unused or unusable space, Gil filled a gap southwestern corner with a small amusement park, including a carousel, vendors, more than 50 figures, and even a tiny grill with O scale hamburgers. He also added a hobo camp to a gully under the main line featuring an illuminated campfire.

The club's diorama masterpiece is an abandoned railroad junction created by Roman Berdes. He went beyond placing trackless ties coming out from the curve by installing unused scale signals, a weathered and abandoned switch tower; a stripped concrete building foundation, and a water tower converted partially into a chicken coop.

Does this level of detailing pay off? CTT's art director, Lisa Zehner, echoed the comment most often heard from visitors:

"Every time I look at it, I see something I didn't see before." That is exactly what club members want to hear!

Is everybody happy?

Where else can an apartment dweller find a place to run a scale-length MTH Hudson, double head Lionel Dash-8s on a 40-car freight, or run a Weaver scale-length passenger express gracefully around long curves?

A typical Friday night operating session will find 20 or more people watching trains, swapping yarns, and exchanging ideas on accessory installation and repair. More than one session has run past midnight, and the rhythm of the tinplate wheels seems to make time stop, or at least slow down a little.

"Even if you aren't running a train," one enthusiastic member said, "it makes you feel great to watch the smiles and hear the surprise in the voices of visitors."

Friday night operating sessions see everything run from prewar Lionel to the latest from Lionel LLC, MTH, Weaver, and Williams. You can even find a lone operator who proudly runs his three-rail British trains with the same gusto as any postwar Lionel enthusiast.

Although members are aware of the current product brand debate, you'll find no fighting over manufacturers, or a divide between folks operating high dollar gear versus someone running a little starter set 4-4-2. This is a group that likes trains, enjoys running their trains, and shares these good times with each other.

"Gee, Dad, this is Awesome!"

THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT

A good sign for the future of the hobby in general, and the Milwaukee club in particular, is that every monthly business meeting sees new faces. Though there aren't many members on the south side of the baby boom generation, younger-generation parents and their kids can still be captivated by the sight and sound of toy trains in action.

At last summer's Open House, three young boys said it all when they turned the corner and upon entering the layout room exclaimed, in unison, "Gee, Dad, this is awesome!"

When asked about the future, club president Roman Berdes smiled and with a gleam in his eye, said "This is a great place, but the only better location I can think of would be if we could get hold of someplace larger, like an old elementary school – now there we could build a layout." CTT

Special thanks to Dave Altman, club president Roman Berdes, Jerry Brettschneider, Gil Bruck, Sergio Deharo, Mike Hilbert, Bill Hitchcock, Rick Jegl, Ted Knutowski, Norm Nunemaker, Dan Olech, Ken Pabst, Dave Rohr, Dwight Safter, and Rudy Stemplinger for help in preparing this article.



Dan Olech's no. 8654 Boston & Maine GP9 hauls repaired rolling stock out of the railroad's car shop on the middle level.

This view of the backshop shows Gil Bruck's custom engine wash rack and Cal Schmahl's wooden coal tower.



Rick Jegl's Milwaukee Road Geeps lumber past the abandoned-junction turned-farm. The local chickens love the rumble of tinplate.