

A compact backyard



1. An overview of the railroad. Hidden by the maple tree is the gold mine and the farm. To the left of the picture is the covered porch where the authors spend much of their leisure time.

The P&BW Railroad reflects Colorado history

by Bob and Paulette Poncar | Denver, Colorado

Photos by Marc Horovitz except where noted



The seeds of our interest in the garden-railroad hobby were sown when we attended a home-and-garden show in Denver, where one of the garden displays featured outdoor trains. Talking with the train exhibitors “spiked” our interest in joining the Denver Garden Railroad Society (DGRS). Actually, we blame our friend Dennis Guthrie for “recruiting” us, as we are now obsessed with garden railroading, but we know we are on the right track! We joined the DGRS in April of 2004 and were fortunate to attend the National Garden Railway Convention, held in Denver in August of that year. The vendor tables, clinics, and tours inspired us to purchase our first engine and enough track to make a small oval in our existing garden. After hauling tons of rock and dirt and applying a lot of sweat and elbow grease, we are now enjoying the fruits of Bob’s labor and railroad design.

No plans, no paper—just a grand vision

As we began work on our railroad, some of our friends and family seemed a bit apprehensive because we never had a trackplan or design on paper. Bob always told them that he had the design in his mind, based on visits to all the other railways on club tours, the articles he’d read in *Garden Railways*, advice from garden-railroad friends, and the configuration of our backyard.

Bob combined the best of the many features he’d seen in other railroads to create the garden railroad he wanted—a trouble-free line adjacent to our patio, designed around a water feature, with full walking access to all areas of the garden. Economy was also a factor. Bob was forced into early retirement in 1999 and had heart surgery in 2000. To keep costs down, we chose to use as many recycled materials as possible.

Construction

We began with a Bachmann 2-8-0 and a ten-foot oval of track. For the next three years, while we were getting the yard ready to lay track, we had to be at peace with an extension cord connected to a portable power unit to run the train. Those were the days!

During the summers of 2006 and 2007, Bob removed three trees, relocated the clothesline poles (air drying is nice but not in the middle of the garden railroad) and took out the concrete sidewalk that extended from our patio to the back of the yard. Next, he constructed a brick sidewalk on three sides of



2. The grist mill was originally a kit that was in sad shape. The author rebuilt it and added a pump, which sits in a reservoir under the waterwheel. On the right, cranesbill geranium blooms with pink flowers and bugleweed carpets the ground at its feet.



3. The village is a mixture of buildings, many of which were purchased at swap meets and auctions. All of them have been repainted and repaired to fit the needs of the railroad. Others were scratchbuilt and a few were built from kits.

the yard. The dirt and cement from the previous sidewalk was recycled and formed into two, high dirt islands. A pondless waterfall (the only work that was hired out) was built into one of the islands, and a town was built on the top of the other dirt island. A dry riverbed starts from the base of the pondless waterfall. The riverbed is in the low spot of the yard and carries the runoff from heavy rains

into a French drain located behind the garage and train shed.

Our daughter Randa and her husband Jim live on five acres in the mountains above Boulder, about 30 miles from us. Each time we visited them, we brought back a load of granite boulders for the railroad. We also hauled in six tons of crusher fines as ballast for the track. Consistent with our goal to keep the railroad

as trouble-free as possible, we decided to use Aristo-Craft stainless-steel track and Split Jaw fasteners.

The trackplan for the railroad comprises two separate loops. There are approximately 250' of track, with only two turnouts for sidings. These sidings are used to run the trains into the garage and the attached train shed for storage. After over five years of operating the railroad, we've only had one joint come loose. The stainless steel rails are easy to clean and require little maintenance.

The first train ran on the completed bottom loop in June 2008. The upper loop was finished by August and we had trains running on both loops by the end of that summer. With no more than a 2% grade anywhere on the line, we don't have to constantly adjust train speeds. We can run the trains for hours while sitting on the patio, enjoying a fine Colorado micro-brew.

Chugging along

We wanted our railroad to depict a Colorado scene. We run both narrow gauge and modern diesels but we don't couple narrow-gauge cars to the diesels! Rather than restricting ourselves to a single scale, we run a variety of trains, including Thomas for the younger folks. We like to run the narrow-gauge trains on the upper

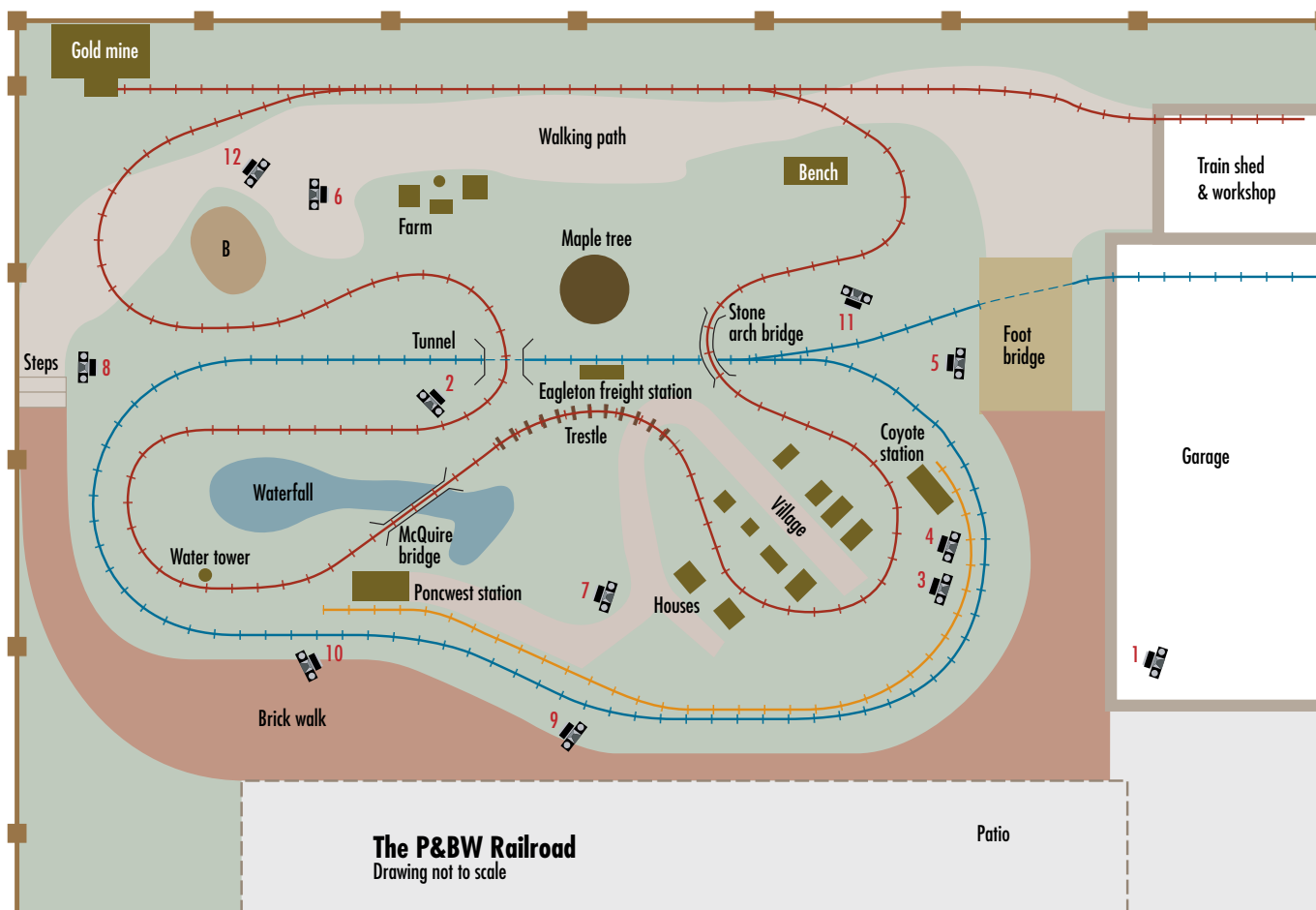


ILLUSTRATION BY MARC HOROVITZ

Railway at a glance

Name: P&BW RR

Size of railroad: 30' x 40'

Scale: 1:29 and 1:20.3

Gauge: N° 1 (45mm)

Era: Late 1800s to present

Theme: Colorado railroading then and now

Age: 4 years

Motive power: USA Trains diesels, LGB and Bachmann steam locomotives

Length of mainline: Lower loop, 106'; upper loop, 146'

Maximum gradient: 2%

Type of track: Aristo-Craft stainless with Split Jaw connectors

Minimum radius: 4'

Structures: Mostly rebuilt/kit-bashed; some Lionel kits, and Aristo-Craft

Control system: Aristo-Craft Train Engineer with Bridgeworks 15-amp power supply



4. N° 10 and its train have just passed over the stone arch bridge while a freight train passes under it. Color abounds with hardy yellow ice plant above patches of pink and red dianthus.



5. A USA Trains GP-38 pulling a freight load exits the tunnel, then passes under the stone arch bridge. The grist mill overlooks the whole operation. Three dwarf Alberta spruce trees line the track.

Plants on the P&BW RR

Denver, Colorado
USDA Hardiness Zone 5

ANNUALS

Geranium
Pelagonium peltatum
Miniature petunia
Petunia 'Supertunia Vista
Bubblegum'
Miniature petunia
Petunia 'Supertunia Raspberry
Blast'
Marigold
Tagetes sp.

FLOWERING PERENNIALS

Snapdragon
Antirrhinum majus
Garden mum
Chrysanthemum 'Nicole'
Tickseed, butter daisy
Coreopsis grandiflora 'Early
Sunrise'
Red Mountain ice plant
Delosperma dyeri 'Red Mountain'
Starburst ice plant
Delosperma floribundum 'Starburst'
Hardy yellow ice plant
Delosperma nubigenum
Raspberry Surprise pink
Dianthus 'Raspberry Surprise'
Fleabane
Erigeron compositus 'Alpine Snow'
Cranesbill
Geranium cantabrigiense
'Cambridge'
Daylily
Hemerocallis 'Stella de Oro'
Coral bells
Heuchera micrantha 'Palace Purple'

GROUNDCOVERS

Bugleweed
Ajuga reptans 'Chocolate Chip'
Bugleweed
Ajuga reptans 'Bronze Beauty'
Bugleweed
Ajuga reptans 'Burgundy Glow'
Creeping wormwood
Artemisia viridis 'Tiny Green'
Snow in summer
Cerastium tomentosum
Cheddar pink
Dianthus gratianopolitanus 'Tiny
Rubies'
Golden creeping Jenny
Lysimachia nummularia 'Aurea'
Nailwort
Paronychia kapela serpyllifolia
Irish moss
Sagina subulata
Angelina stonecrop
Sedum rupestre 'Angelina'
Stonecrop
Sedum spurium 'Dragon's Blood'
Stonecrop
Sedum spurium 'Voodoo'
Mother-of-thyme
Thymus praecox
Woolly thyme
Thymus pseudolanuginosus
Creeping thyme
Thymus serpyllum 'Elfyn'
Turkish veronica
Veronica liwanensis

CONIFERS

Dwarf Alberta spruce
Picea glauca 'Conica'



6. The farm reposes in the upper part of the garden under the maple tree. Stonecrop models the farm crops and Raspberry Surprise pinks add color on shrubby plants.

loop, through the mountainous regions of the railroad, where the train crosses the waterfall. The diesels run on the lower loop, around the two dirt islands, passing directly in front of our covered patio. Additionally, a streetcar line runs for 20' along the lower loop.

Creating, recycling, and recreating

There are four bridges on the P&BW: a metal one (built by our friend, Kirk McGuire) spans the river over the waterfall, a girder bridge on the lower loop crosses the dry creek bed, a wooden bridge passes over the siding to the garage, and, the highlight of the railroad—a scratch-built stone-arch bridge. Bob built the stone-arch bridge using recycled Lexan plastic from a discarded supermarket sign and fine-grained Berea, Ohio, sandstone that we purchased from Stoneworks. We glued each piece of sandstone (with the help of friends Dennis Guthrie and Michael Bird) onto the plastic, which Bob



7. Bachmann 2-8-0 N° 10 and its varnish cross the waterfall. The farm can be seen in the top part of the picture.

had cut and shaped into a double-arched bridge. The bridge is 7' long and 17" high, and is composed of approximately 40 pounds of stone. In addition to the four bridges, a wooden trestle, 17' long and 18" high, carries the track between the two dirt islands.

Bob enjoys "recycling" buildings and structures from other railroads, some of which have been damaged by the weather or just tossed aside. Rebuilding gives them a new life and has become a rewarding pastime for him. The creation, or sometimes re-creation, of these structures is a fun part of the hobby. The gold mine in the upper corner of the railroad belonged to Ron Poinsett's railroad (April 2005 *GR*) and the grist mill is from a past president of DGRS, Doug Mayes' line (August 2008 *GR*).

Plants on the railroad

Our heavy clay soil needed to be improved before the planting could begin.

We incorporated organic soil amendments into most of the garden areas to improve the soil's texture and to give the plants a healthier start. Our first goal was just to get something green growing. Our focus was on groundcovers and a variety of perennials. Anytime we heard that club members were cutting back or removing overgrown plants and groundcovers from their gardens, we had our recycled containers and shovels ready.

We have an array of plants, groundcovers, and perennials, mixed with annuals that we purchase each spring. We have become more aware of the flowering seasons for different plants so that color is achieved from spring to late autumn. Plant guides didn't help us very much; plants that supposedly grew best in shade died when placed under trees but thrived in the sunshine, and vice versa. Online plant information was helpful but trial-and-error seemed to work best.

Due to Denver's dry climate, watering



8. A diesel-hauled freight train passes through the tunnel, then under the stone arch bridge. Angelina stonecrop lights the way along the wall.



9. The Ski Train running in the summer! USA Trains diesels pull a string of Aristo-Craft heavyweights, creating a scene from a bygone era. The station and the water tower on the upper level are from Lionel large-scale kits. Woolly thyme and Turkish veronica fill the cracks between flagstones near the depot.



10. A Bachmann streetcar runs between Coyote and Poncwest station. Hardy golden ice plant covers the top of the rocks and mother of thyme fills the backyard of the station.

is essential. Before we laid track, we installed a drip watering system. The basic concept was great, but the watering needs for each individual groundcover or plant were different. Additional research would have helped. Plants with similar watering needs should have been grouped together. Another lesson learned was that, as our plants became more established, we needed to adjust the system.

We also learned that placing stepping stones strategically throughout the gardens made access to the growing areas

easier. We found we needed additional stepping stones as the plants covered more of the walking space. Although plants are now filling in spaces throughout the rock walls, we wished we had put plants between the rocks earlier, as they were being installed.

Where do crusher fines go, and other lessons learned

As we read about garden railroads and talked with members of the DGRS, we heard that people had to replace their



About the authors

Bob and Paulette Poncar have lived in the same house in north Denver for more than 40 years. They have two daughters and two granddaughters. Paulette retired from a local school district, where she worked for 25 years. Bob retired from a grocery chain after 27 years, then worked as an ATM technician for another seven years. Today, Bob serves as the visitor trainer in Denver-area hospitals for Mended Hearts, a support group for heart patients, while Paulette's volunteer work with Mended Hearts involves membership responsibilities. Involvement with family, friends, church, and other volunteer work keeps them active and fills their lives with enjoyment.

crusher fines each year. That led Bob to wonder what happened to all that rock. Did it go to crusher-fines heaven? Determined to keep as much of our crusher fines on Earth and around our track as possible, Bob installed steel lawn edging as he laid the track, to hold the ballast in place and keep it from eroding into the soil and groundcover. He placed the edging level with the ground; small plants have grown over it so that the metal edge is no longer visible. This has eliminated the need to add ballast to the track year after year. Even after the freezing and thawing of winter months, we only have to lift the track and use a small hand-held garden rake to loosen the crusher fines and re-level the track.

P&BW Railroad

Our fondness for trains began at an early age. Paulette's Dad retired from the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad in



11. Controlling switching operations is this switch tower, a large-scale kit from Lionel, assembled by the author.

1973, after serving for 24 years. He worked many jobs for the railroad, including fireman and brakeman, and retiring as a locomotive engineer—the exact wording on the certificate that hangs on our office wall today. Both of us regret that Dad isn't able to enjoy our garden railroad with us today, but we are grateful to share this wonderful hobby with Paulette's Mom. When Mom comes to our house for dinner, she doesn't ask, "What are we having for dinner?" Instead she asks, "Will the trains be running?"

Bob's journey with trains began when he received his first train set for Christmas in 1948. That Marx train set is still a holiday tradition for our family, running every year under the Christmas tree. Bob has had many different scales of trains and has built various layouts since those early years, but he is no longer limited by a piece of plywood or by the size of a room. The entire backyard is his railroad!

Both of us enjoy the outdoors and have found so much pleasure, not only in transforming our backyard (who enjoys mowing the lawn?) into our garden railroad, but also many other aspects of the hobby: the history of the trains, the challenge of the gardening, modeling with buildings and people, scratchbuilding bridges and structures, and attending meetings and clinics. What we value the most, however, are the friendships we have



12. The author rebuilt this mine structure, which was originally built for another railroad. It was removed from that one and modified to fit the needs of the P&BW.

made through the DGRS. These friends have enriched our lives. Sharing our garden railroad with seniors, church groups, young families, and other organizations is always a treat. Everyone has a fascinating train story to share.

The future

Are we finished? Of course not! We always work to improve buildings, structures, and select new plants. We love the challenges and fulfillment this hobby has brought to our lives.

Do you wonder what P&BW stands for? A sign on our back patio wall reads "Paulette and Bob's World." Look for the sign when you visit our railroad. We have created a sanctuary, a paradise, in our own backyard, rewarding us and our guests with relaxation, fun and entertainment. Our backyard garden railroad is our "staycation" destination. We were on the tour for the national convention in 2009 and we look forward to being on tour again in 2015, when the convention comes back to Colorado. Please stop by and see us! 🚂