

# Kansas in my



# backyard



1. The original Seneca Elevator was the tallest building in town. The model is made of marine plywood covered with corrugated plastic sheets.

## *The St. Joseph & Grand Island and the Kansas Central*

by John Vorhes | Bethesda, Maryland | PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR—ILLUSTRATION BY MARC HOROVITZ



2. Main Street Seneca on a slow weekday. The cobblestone roadway is dyed concrete cast from a wooden model the author pieced together. The Seneca theater is at the beginning of the street and the turreted First National Bank marks mid town. Other buildings are modeled after existing structures.

**M**y Dad was born and raised in northeast Kansas in a small farming town called Seneca. When I was a boy in the 1950s, we would drive from New York to Kansas every summer to visit the family. The Union Pacific Railroad ran through town—three trains a day. The only trains I knew were subways and commuters into the city, so a lumbering steam locomotive hauling cattle and hogs and scores of rocking boxcars was a spectacular show and I never forgot it.

Many years later, in 2001, my wife gave me a large-scale Santa Fe diesel for Christmas and a small circle of track. It was the wrong railroad and not enough

track to build what I remembered so fondly in Seneca—the St. Joe & Grand Island line of the Union Pacific—so I exchanged the diesel for a toy-like LGB 2-4-0 marked “Union Pacific,” bought more track and switches, and began what has become a great hobby full of nostalgia for 1950s Kansas.

I sought more authenticity, so my roster of vintage UP locomotives and rolling stock grew and, today, includes an Aristocraft Consolidation and a USA Trains Alco S4—both models of prototypes that ran on the old STJ&GI.

### **My vision**

I didn't have a backyard big enough to



recreate the entire rolling prairie of Kansas, but I tried. I built a retaining wall at the bottom of my yard to help with water runoff and allow me to sculpt a more level rolling prairie. I wanted the Nemaha River that flowed by Seneca, a cobblestone Main Street, my grandmother's house, and the movie theater where I first saw Betty Grable. Most important, though, was the Harriman-era depot where I collected timetables while waiting for the doodlebug "motor" from St. Joe to rumble in. All this nostalgia had to fit into an 25' x 25' space.

This allowed only a partial town but I wanted it looking as real as possible, with sidewalks, curbs, and street lights. My miniature farmers would shop for shoes at J.C. Penney's on Saturday, get a haircut, and maybe go to the picture show. I needed parking spaces for their pick-ups.

Because of my tight curves, I opted for a shorter, green Hartland interurban with open vestibule ends. By adding gold UP lettering, my doodlebug looks fine and nobody has noticed any discrepancy.

## Research

In 2003, while I was still laying track in Bethesda, I made a trip to Seneca, which

## The railway at a glance

**Names:** The St. Joe & Grand Island; The Kansas Central  
**Size:** 4,000 square feet  
**Scales:** 1:29 (ST&GI); 1:20.3 (KC)  
**Gauge:** N° 1 (45mm)  
**Eras:** 1950s and 1870s  
**Themes:** ST&GI: Small farming town in Kansas on a connecting line of the Union Pacific in the 1950s as it converted from steam to diesel; KC: An underfunded, historic narrow-gauge line in northeast Kansas that planned to become part of a transcontinental line connecting with the Rio Grande in Colorado. Neither the KC nor the Rio Grande made it to California or Mexico  
**Age:** ST&GI begun in 2001; KC in 2008  
**Motive power:** All battery powered: Hartland interurban for a UP doodlebug, Aristo-Craft UP 2-8-0, USA Trains UP Alco S4 Diesel, LGB 2-4-0, Bachmann "Kansas Central" 2-6-0 Mogul  
**Length of mainline:** Approximately 80' on the ST&GI (plus a 50' upper level); and 320' on the KC  
**Maximum gradient:** 2.3% on the ST&GI; 2.5% over 60 feet on the KC  
**Type of track:** LGB brass sectional track  
**Minimum radius:** 4'  
**Structures:** 16 scratchbuilt; 15 prebuilt, kits, or kitbashed  
**Control system:** Airwire T5000 radio control

is the Nemaha County seat, to revive my memory. I was disappointed to find that Grandma's 1880s Second Empire house had been torn down. My beloved depot was also gone but the Seneca Theater was

still functioning, as well as the grain elevators, the Starlight Motel on Highway 36, the First National Bank, and the Congregational Church where I was baptized. The Nemaha County Historical Society



**3. A overview of the STJ&GI. The Nemaha River is in the middle and Seneca's Main Street and depot are on the right. The Miltonvale loop of the adjacent Kansas Central is visible at the upper right, where it heads into a stand of bamboo.**

opened their files to me and I found photos of the missing depot. Added to my family photos, which included a 1900 shot of my Grandma's house, I had enough information to build a few good models.

I'm a retired industrial designer, with most of my career in exhibition and architectural design, so it was natural that I take my research to the drawing board. I drew scale drawings based on the photos, compressing certain dimensions but maintaining the massing and detailing of the buildings. The size of each is roughly 12" square, with some overhang where necessary. Compressing them this way meant they would be easier to move and store each winter or in case of sudden storms. I purchased a shed to house all my equipment, which allows a small storage yard. A single track comes out of the shed on a steel trestle with a removable bridge to the railroad.

### **Buildings and landscaping**

A few of Piko's "Main Street" buildings follow American Victorian detailing well. With a little tweaking, I could use them without apology. Where I needed to build from scratch, I used marine ply for frames and Precision Products plastic siding,



**4. The store-bought 6'x8' train shed, with a steel trestle bringing trains onto the STJ&GI.**

roofing, and windows, gluing them down with Marine Goop, which is just tacky enough to stick but will not melt the plastic. I set the buildings on fieldstone squares to keep moisture in check—an ongoing problem.

My yard gets dappled sun under a canopy of beech and poplars—a shade garden. I got permission to take moss

from my neighbors' yards, with which I surrounded the models and framed the track. It thrives with little maintenance and looks as though it has always been there. Miniature euonymus and boxwoods serve as cottonwood and elm trees. Corn and wheat fields are sisal and green-plastic door mats, which don't require much upkeep. Mid-summer dry spells are



5. This isn't much like Kansas but all the landscaping was already 20 years old when the author built the Central over his garden waterfall.

my only gardening problem, the same as in Kansas.

### Track power vs. battery power

I began the hobby with little advice from others and a “Lionel attitude,” remembering the snap-together track sections and simple power connection to the rails, so I used LGB brass sectional track to create the plan I envisioned. I couldn't do a larger-radius curve than four feet (#1600 series) so I didn't have the realism I wanted, but it had to be okay.

Of course, track power required that

every piece of track fit together perfectly. At that point, I didn't focus on the realities of outdoor railroads in the mid-Atlantic part of the US. The ground in suburban DC heaves in winter frost, and spring rains wash dirt and debris into every little nook, regardless of how solid a track foundation you put down. Each year, after cleaning the winter mess, trains operated in fits and starts and I spent weeks crawling around the track looking for the bad joints. I switched to battery power in 2008 and have had few regrets since then.

### The STJ&GI construction

I began building right after I was fairly certain the fill dirt behind the railroad-tie retaining wall had settled. The trackplan called for a level place for the town of Seneca and an interior loop with a grade up and down, providing the need for a bridge or two. The actual STJ&GI was built on a rolling prairie, with bridges over the feeder streams that flow into the Missouri River. I made curving concrete retaining walls to hold back some of my “prairie.”

I poured a concrete riverbed that



flowed to the lowest part of the railroad, into a basin I dubbed Lake Nemaha. After a few experiments, I opted for an exposed submersible pump strong enough to lift the water 12" and 25' from the pump. The actual Nemaha River is a slow, undulating stream but, if I went for that small flow, most people would not notice the movement. I now have a roaring torrent.

I lined the river with stones to help limit erosion, but these don't stop some soil from washing into the river during a big summer rain. This natural erosion makes the water a realistic mud color and also hides my pump.



6. The sun is low as a freight arrives at the Seneca Depot to begin shuffling a few cars onto the Seneca Elevator siding.

### Narrow and standard gauge

In my Kansas research, I found that, in the 1870s, the Kansas Central narrow-gauge line ran a few miles south of Seneca. It was never profitable and was bought by the UP as a feeder line, converted to standard gauge, and finally stopped running in 1935. One of its first locomotives was a beautiful Baldwin Mogul, N° 102. An old photograph I found showed the diamond stack, and fancy brass fittings that I identified with the engines of the western frontier.

I was surprised when I saw that Bachmann sold the exact N° 102 with "Kansas Central" on the cab. Of course, this revelation meant I had to build a narrow-gauge line in addition to my UP 50s recreation. Considering my "authenticity" mindset, the two different eras (and gauges), could not share the same rails.

A narrow-gauge trackplan would also have to go through well established landscaping in my garden: a bamboo grove and fern garden, a cluster of 50-year-old azaleas, a stone waterfall, and a small pond I had built 10 years earlier. There was a 24" elevation change from my backyard up to the front yard. This steep grade change was hardly like Kansas, so

## Plants used on the railroads

**Bethesda, Maryland, USDA  
Hardiness Zone 7-8**

### GROUNDCOVERS

**Chocolate chip ajuga, bugleweed**  
*Ajuga reptans* 'Valfreda'

**Miniature mondo grass,  
dwarf lilyturf**  
*Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nana'

### CONIFERS

**Cypress**  
*Cupressus* sp.

**Dwarf Alberta spruce**  
*Picea glauca* 'Conica'

**Arborvitae**  
*Thuja occidentalis*

### TREES AND SHRUBS

**Boxwood**  
*Buxus* sp.

**Cotoneaster**  
*Cotoneaster* sp.

**Miniature leaf euonymus**  
*Euonymus japonicus*



7. A slow-moving tractor holds up traffic on rolling US 36, headed to Denver. The highway is ceramic tile set on concrete, with black sealer for tar. Along the tracks, moss creeps as slowly as the traffic.



8. The upper loop crosses the flowing Nemaha River. In the background, the wheat and corn fields are sisal and plastic door mats. Cows graze on moss borrowed from neighbors. Boxwoods line the river for a riparian habitat, possibly modeling willows.

## Watch a video

The author's son Dave is a filmmaker who surprised him with a quick video he made of the railroads. Watch it at <http://youtu.be/mZmQJrOVVQk>

I swallowed hard and decided my Kansas Central (KC) line would be a “fantasy” railroad, floating over my fern garden on an elevated roadbed system sold by Split Jaw, hiding in a tunnel under some fieldstone garden stairs, and passing over the waterfall on steel bridges, before climbing the steepest grade up to the front yard.

The added narrow-gauge line would double the track area in my yard but the established landscaping would not be disturbed very much. I figured that the grade up to the front yard would not be a problem since KC's trains were never very long. I crossed my fingers hoping that N° 102 could manage.

My railroad would conclude at Miltonvale, where the actual KC had stopped construction. The top of my front yard became Larkinburg, one of several little towns that the KC served, about 30 miles from Seneca.

## Discovery at Larkinburg

On a return trip to Kansas in 2006, I followed the route of the old Kansas Central, finding remnants of the right-of-way. In a wheat field in what remains of Larkinburg, Kansas, I spotted a grain-elevator shape partially hidden in a grove of cottonwood trees. I crossed a wheat field to explore it. It was still intact—cobwebs and birds' nests in the machinery and a scooping belt lying in a spaghetti pile, like an exhibition of old technology.

The galvanized siding was safely enclosing it almost 75 years after abandonment. I took photos and my model now stands in Larkinburg on my front yard, modeled after the real thing, even if I'm the only one who knows it.



9. The Seneca High Class of '57 carries on the tradition by painting on the STJ&GI bridge. The Congregational Church where the author was baptized is on the right.

## Miltonvale

The only place I could build Miltonvale was on a 30" raised table at the same elevation as, and parallel to, the STJ&GI. I built a skeleton platform eight feet long and covered it with screen and wire mesh so it could retain the ballast gravel while letting rainwater pass through. On this I placed the Miltonvale depot and the windmill that serviced its water tower. The loop of track there simulates the end of the line for the KC.

Friends from Seneca have visited my railroad and are amazed that I devoted so much effort to the town and its railroad story. An article about my trains ran in the town newspaper. Back then, Seneca was just realizing that preservation was worth the effort. I helped city fathers win a Kansas State "Main Street" Prize in 2008, which resulted in grants to help restore and preserve its Main Street. The UP, which took

over the STJ&GI, still roars through town 25 times a day, with mile-long empty coal trains returning to Wyoming.

Meanwhile, I enjoy visiting and reading about the West and discovering more about my Kansas relatives. I found that my great-grandfather arrived in Kansas by train in 1870 at Abilene, a wild cowtown. After a few months of shootouts and bar fights, he moved on to Seneca and became the town Sheriff in the 1880s. His most illustrious act was to chain a UP steam locomotive to the rails since the troubled railroad had not paid its county taxes. The public embarrassment forced the UP to pay up.

## What I've learned

When visitors see my railroad, I become a Kansas tour guide and amateur historian but I now know when my enthusiasm exceeds their interest. I could easily run



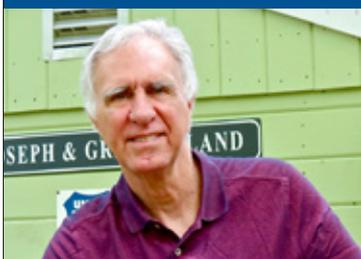
10. This Second Empire-style house is an adaptation of the author's family's Kansas house, built in 1880. The model was built from an old photo and memory. The lawn is moss.

my 1870s N° 102 diamond-stack locomotive on my 1950s railroad and hardly anyone would note a discrepancy—they're "just trains" to most people.

In the summer, my wife Kristen enjoys listening to the trains while reading on our screened porch, saying that the sound transports her far from Bethesda. My children are grown and both living in LA, happy I'm involved in such a great hobby.

To both young and old, I'm a promoter of train travel and railroads. I serve as a docent at the area train club's (WVMGRS) spectacular conservatory display at Wheaton, Maryland's Brookside Gardens during the holidays. Will the families and the toddlers who delight in watching the trains be part of the future of railroading? I hope so. 🚂

## About the author



John Vorhes is a retired industrial designer. He has designed and built cultural-exchange exhibitions in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Far East. He teaches a class in American architectural history at American University's OLLI Program. He and his wife Kristen have two grown children, Dave and Kara, who live in LA.