Old enough to play

He had to wait, but Dr. Fox finally gets to run his trains

by Paul J. Dolkos

Here's a classic tale of a kid who badly wanted to play with his trains, but couldn't – at least not right away. It's a tale that Jack Fox would live not once but twice in his life.

As a young boy in 1947, young Jack Fox saw the wonderful toy train display layout at Macy's Department Store in New York City. Sure enough, that Christmas he was given his first train, an O-27 no. 1439WS Lionel Freight Outfit, consisting of a no. 2025 2-6-2 locomotive, coal dump car, tank, reefer, and caboose with smoke and whistle.

On Christmas morning Jack's father and his uncles carefully unpacked the set, laid out the track and ran the trains, and were all on hand to take part in the grand unveiling. But Jack, age 9, was told to stay on the couch because he was too young to play with the trains. At the end of the day, the set was packed up and put away.

It wasn't until the following Christmas that Jack really got to play with his trains.

Fast forward through a life that included more childhood trains, full-course medical schooling, and plenty of other distractions that kept Jack away from his trains for some years. When the trains came back (original set and all) from a cousin who served as their caretaker until 1970, Jack again began to set them up each holiday season, with increasingly larger annual setups.

Dr. Fox soon reached the point where he was ready to play with his trains in earnest yearround. What he had in mind was a layout that would make use of his original Lionel accessories and trains in a scenic setting that depicted Maryland's Potomac River Valley, railroad tunnels and all.

To build such a layout, he was happy to enlist the help of an experienced professional layout builder, Michael Hart and his SMARTT (Scale Models, Arts & Technologies) co-workers. Hart and company custom-designed what started out as an L-shaped layout for Jack's home and began the six-month process of construction.

There was only one problem. During the construction phase, Jack decided to move – and his

◄1. A Seaboard passenger train runs along a mountain stream on Jack Fox's layout.

▲ **2.** The accommodations on the Seaboard train look warm and cozy as the passenger consist passes through a truss bridge and heads for the mountains. Scratchbuilt and kitbashed bridges are an important part of the layout.

custom-designed layout was far from being an exact fit. Hart's firm essentially had to straighten out the L-shaped configuration to fit into a larger rectangular room and then store the finished layout as Fox's new house was being completed.

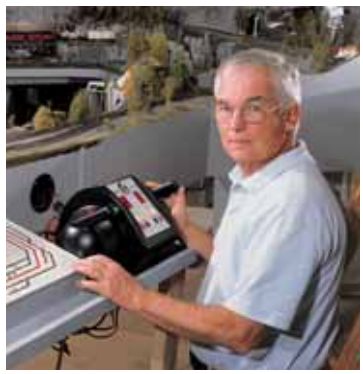
Just as he had in 1947, Jack had to wait a year or so to play with his trains.

If good things come to those who wait, then you could say that Jack was twice blessed. His 14 by 19-foot layout, climbing from 40 to 55 inches high on maximum 3 percent grades, provides him with exactly what he had specified in working with Hart.

The scenic layout consists of a triple main line – three long loops with minimum O-72 curves running through industrial areas and towns at one end and then climbing into the mountain scenery at the other end. Parallel mainline tracks are minimized, an approach that helps to make operation more interesting and balances the scenery-to-track ratio.

Stand-out elements include several kitbashed and scratchbuilt bridges, especially one long curved trestle custom designed for the layout. In addition, the bridges have realistic approaches and abutments, and the tunnels have an often overlooked but important feature – tunnel liners behind the portals so the trains look like they really are in an actual tunnel.

Crossovers between the loops



▶ **3.** Jack Fox at his railroad's controls.

permit trains to run on any track. Working signals change their aspect upon detecting the presence of a train. Illuminated switch targets rotate when their respective turnout is thrown.

Lionel working accessories include three coal loaders, a coal trestle, a barrel loader, and

◀ **4.** A Western Maryland GP9, on a mine run, crosses a wood trestle through an area based on the Potomac River valley and surrounding mountains. A pair of Lionel FAs hauls freight on the second of three main lines.

▼ **5.** Lionel accessories, including a barrel loader and a coal loader, have been weathered to blend in with the scenery.

a log loader. Structures, many of them kitbashed and equipped with interior lighting, include a number of business enterprises named after family members.

The scenery techniques employed are not uncommon. However, Hart fine-tuned some commercial products to increase their effectiveness and scenic impact. Made with foam board, Hydrocal plaster, Sculptamold, paints, and ground foams, all scenic areas have realistic colors and texture. Roads consist of textured plaster, colored as needed. Commercial trees, basically right out of the box, are highlighted for added realism. Water areas are colored with gloss paints, coated with resin for depth, and then textured with clear gloss to form wave patterns. Prefabricated and scratchbuilt molds, combined with hand-carved plaster, helped Hart create individual rock formations and cliffs.

Since SMARTT began constructing the layout at its North Miami headquarters, it naturally needed to be built so that the nine sections could be transported over long distances. The modules, with benchwork framing consisting of 1 by 4s, are bolted together to form a complete one-piece, semi-permanent layout. The result is a super strong framework that can be disassembled and transported.

But the conveniences for its proud owner don't end there.

All internal benchwork supports are designed to allow easy access from below to trains and trackwork hidden by scenery, if necessary. Legs are finished 2 by 4s, cross-braced, and fitted with leg levelers.

Individual joists and risers secure separate sub-roadbeds for different tracks at varying elevations. SMARTT workers cut the sub-roadbed, fabricated from ¾-inch plywood, using a CNC router conforming precisely to the track plan.

All track is secured to cork roadbed mounted to the sub-roadbed. The cork roadbed is fastened to the sub-roadbed with professional grade contact cement, while the track itself is glued to the cork roadbed with

Layout at a glance

Name of layout owner: Jack Fox
Gauge: O
Size of layout: 14 by 19 feet
Major era of trains: Postwar and modern
Track: GarGraves flextrack and electric uncouplers
Switches: Ross Custom Switches with Tortoise machines
Control: Two MTH Z-4000s
Accessories: Lionel postwar and modern
Structures: Scratchbuilt and kitbashed
Figures: various
Vehicles: various

▲ This swing bridge permits easy access to the center of the layout. It is securely braced, and a wiring harness underneath provides power to the track sections.

Illustration by Kellie Jaeger

carpenter's glue. SMARTT used jigs and fixtures to hold the track in place while the glue set. With this approach, the track will never move.

As added insurance, countersunk screws secure some of the ties of hidden tracks.

Whereas the original design ran along the walls, the finished layout has access along the outside, plus an aisle in the center. Fox easily and routinely gains access to the center aisle through a convenient swing-bridge "Dutch door" gate, which eliminates the need for a duck-under and allows the broad radius mainline curves.

Numerous track power feeds maintain constant voltage settings throughout the layout. All wiring is routed in harnesses, neatly secured within the benchwork. Terminal strips and barrier blocks connect power between the benchwork modules. All wiring is color coded for easy identification.

A full control panel features the complete track plan laid out as a simple schematic. Different mainlines and yards are printed in different colors for easy identification. All switch controls and uncouplers are mounted on the panel, complete with indicator lights.

Jack's original 1947 train set is still running on the railroad along with a few newer locomotive and cars that show no regional bias.

Jack is not a collector of locomotives and rolling stock. Instead, he takes great joy, especially during the winter months, in letting his adult children and grandchildren run the trains. He's revised the family tradition; you're never too young to play with granddaddy's trains. CTT

Mike Hart contributed technical information to this article. Other photos of Jack's layout are on SMARTT Inc.'s website at www.smarttinc.com. The e-mail address is smartt@netrox.net and the phone number is 305-949-1706.