

Author Frazier Thomas claims that this is a "finished" model railroad—after his fifth attempt. This is the view from the mainline control panel.

Excuses! Excuses!

I was determined to finish this, my fifth, layout

BY FRAZIER THOMAS
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

A FEW months ago I reached that plateau in model railroading which hard-line modelers say is virtually unattainable. They say it just can't happen to a fellow who's a devoted model railroader. That's why most of my friends in the hobby to whom I've announced the good (?) news have pooh-poohed the whole thing.

What did I do to arouse such a furor? I finished my layout!

It's not like I started last January and then drove the golden spike the first of March. Far from it. The fact of the matter is that this is really my fifth attempt at a basement layout. The first one was a 4 x 8-foot tinplate project for my 7-year-old son. When he got old enough to appreciate HO scale, we traded in the tinplate and started our second project in the basement of an old house we'd just moved into and

remodeled. I made a lot of mistakes, but I wasn't smart enough to stop and correct them. I knew they were there; things didn't work the way they should. But I kept adding on until I was the discouraged owner of a monstrosity. Finally my frustration reached an explosive climax, and I ripped the whole mess apart and started all over again.

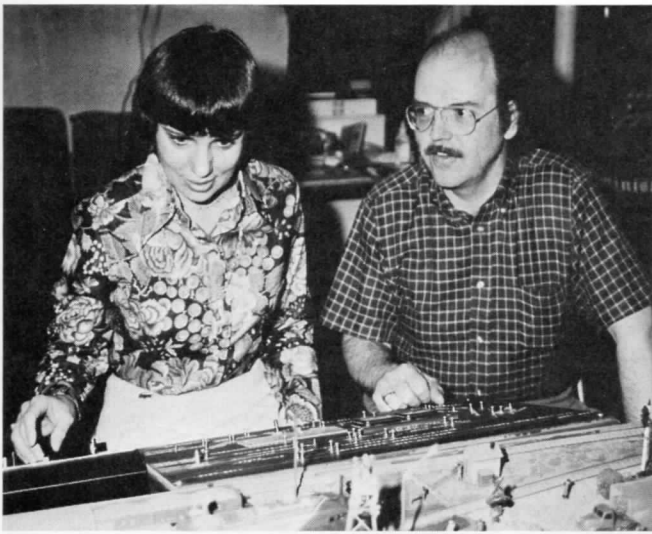
You can bet that I didn't make the same mistakes twice; I made new ones this time. Without any definite planning, I threw myself into another building spree which was doomed from the very start.

The fourth attempt was more of the same; but this time, when my patience gave out I put everything worth salvaging away on shelves, tore out all of the benchwork, cleaned the basement, and made a solemn resolution never to drive another spike or wire another turnout until I had some kind of a master plan.

For 6 months I bent over a drawing board covered with graph paper; I saw those little squares in my sleep. But at the

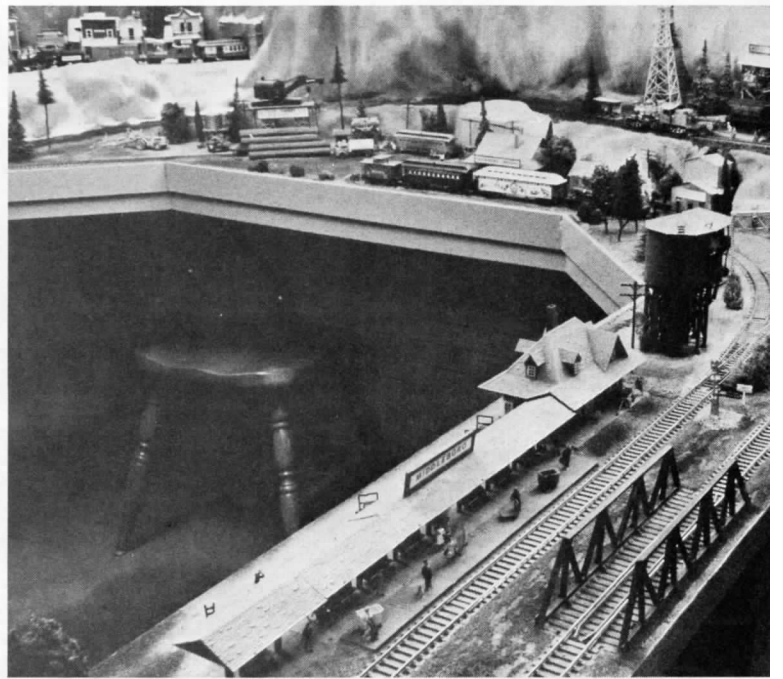
end of half a year I had before me a workable switching layout plan which incorporated everything I had learned from my other false starts—not one of which had even approached a point of completion.

That was 4 years ago. The first 3 of those years were occupied with tracklaying, careful placement of structures, and interminable under-the-layout wiring, from which my back has never really recovered. It took those 3 years to get all of the big bugs worked out, often with the help of some of my model railroading friends. But when I was done with that phase of my project, which turned out to be the easy part, I had what I wanted: a model railroad empire which was a practical operating entity, with four independent but interconnected control panels (all simple to operate), which could keep an enthusiastic group of model railroaders busy for a whole evening working out switching problems and moving passengers and freight.

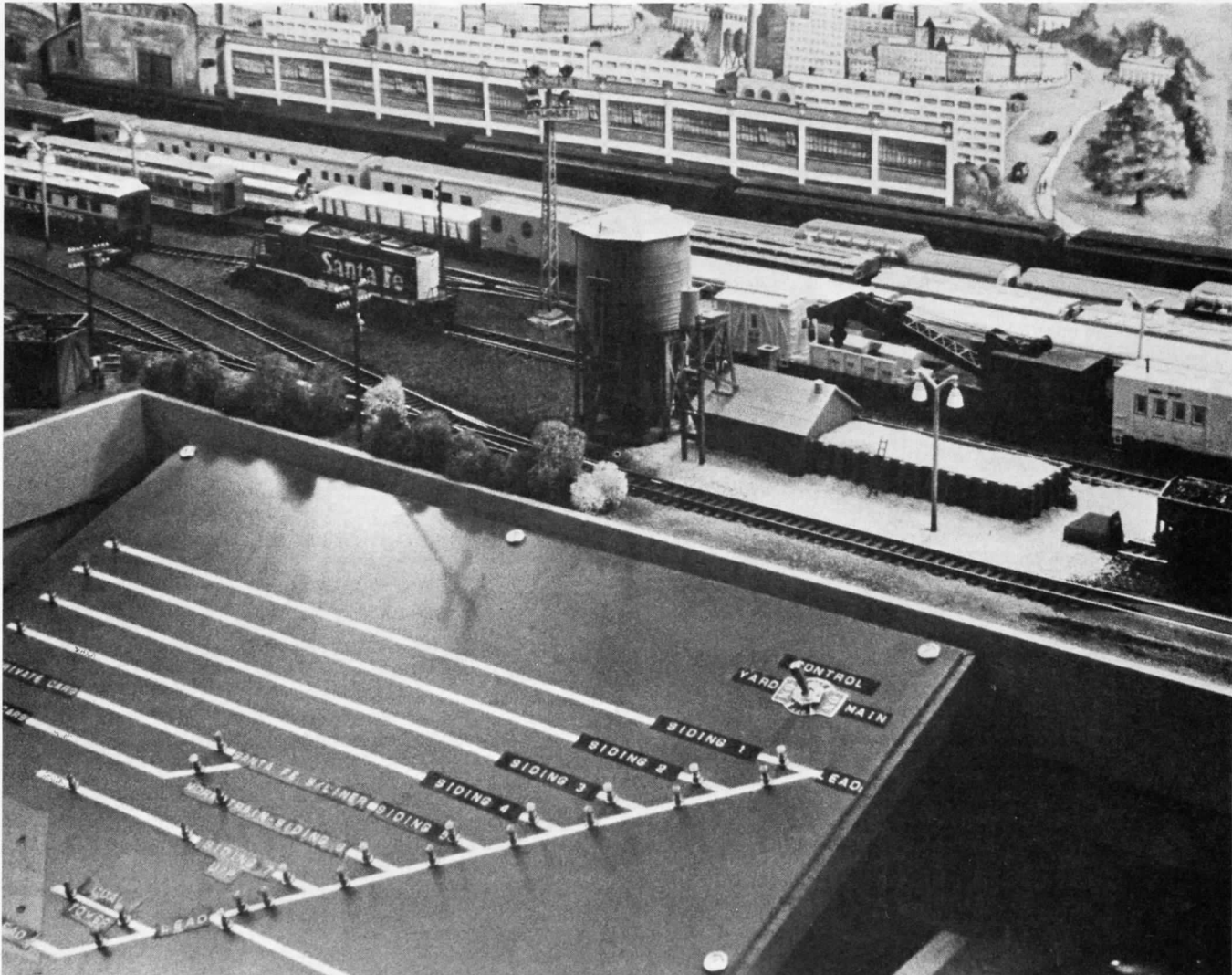


Mrs. Lynne OHep, a Delta Airlines stewardess and a model railroad fan, joins David Campbell — who teaches French and Italian at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. — during an operating session. They're pondering the simplicity of the mainline control panel. Dr. Campbell is a traction enthusiast with his own layout under construction; he enjoys an evening with the steam and diesel gang, solving switching problems.

This is the storage yard, from which the operator of this panel makes up all trains to be sent out to the main line. He has control of the trains until they are ready to enter the main line; then a flip of the switch at upper right gives control of the trains to the mainline cab.



This is the west end of the layout. Middleboro station is attached to the drop-down passageway into the center walkway portion. Callaham's Crossing siding can be seen at upper center; to the left of that is the Elliott Timber siding. Meyer's Mine is on a second level at the upper right, and on another level in the distance (upper left) is Dodge City.





You are looking across the panel that controls the west industrial area into the area itself. Beyond this area, on the upper level, is the

SW1500 cow which serves this yard, waiting patiently for orders on a siding at Canyon City. In all, the railroad has four control panels.

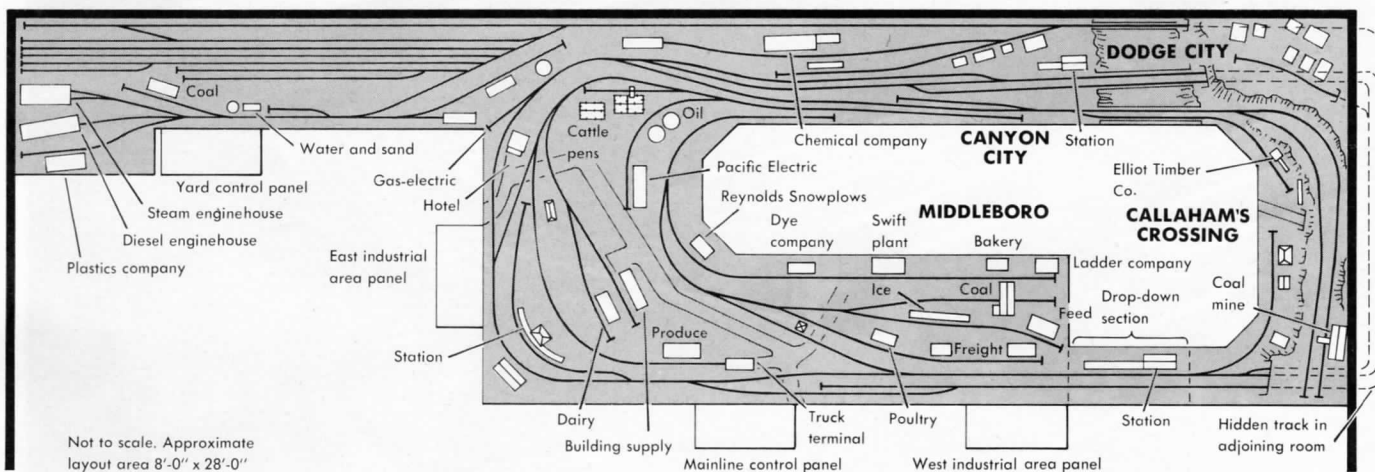
But by March of 1973, while everything was in its proper place and worked reasonably well, I still didn't have a square inch of scenery. There was no ballast, no grass, no ground of any kind; no trees nor bushes, no little people going about their daily tasks to help bring the whole thing to life — and above all, no fine detailing (which I was soon to find out was the most difficult and time-consuming job I'd yet tackled). I'd never gotten this far before, never this close to completion. So little did I realize at the March 1973 meeting of the

club, which was convened in my basement so the other members could appraise my progress, that my idle boast to have a "finished layout" for our March 1974 meeting would come back to haunt me many times over.

No one ever "finishes" a layout, they told me. But I was bound and determined — the Good Lord willing — to finish this one. The sly glances which were exchanged that night should have tipped me off that the boys were all sure that I was about to learn another lesson.

Well, they were partly right. "Finishing" a layout is really only a matter of semantics. I like to "play trains," and I like to do it on a layout which looks as much like a miniature of the real thing as my limited skill can manage. So, semantically speaking, I could "finish" one to that extent, though I was sure there'd always be something to do to keep things updated and running satisfactorily.

So, with my friends' derisive laughter ringing in my ears, I went to work — and I worked and I worked and I worked.





Bob Hoskins handles the east industrial area switcher as it delivers a Shell tank car to the main line to await the arrival of the peddler.

Hal Reynolds handles the control panel for the west industrial area during an operating session. This is one of the two highly industrialized areas with independent control, from which switchers accept incoming and bring out outgoing cars to the mainline peddler consist.

Months went by and I was still working — laying ballast, ground cover, grass and gravel; putting in detailing like fences and walks and streets and roads; and building mountains. I used white glue by the gallon and plaster by the bag, and I thought it would never end. I even confided to my friend Hal Reynolds* (who is also my helpful neighborhood hobby store owner, and who has led me by the hand through all my years of model railroading), that had I even suspected the endless, backbreaking work which was ahead of me on this last lap, I never would have gotten into this hobby in the first place! I didn't mean it, of course. But there were times, when I couldn't get something to look the way I wanted it to, that I questioned both my previous enthusiasm and my sanity. I had to be nuts to spend those long hours in that basement like a mole.

But at long last things began to take form. My wife and family began to stop by and compliment me on some particular scene which struck their fancies. Neighbors came over to admire my work. (It was the only way they could visit me because I was always in the basement.)

The days and weeks and months slipped away. It was getting closer and closer to March 1974 and my club meeting when my layout had to be finished to make good my boast. Lest the raw suspense drive you completely mad, let me tell you right now that I made it — but it was close!

The truth of the matter is that I put the last finishing touch on my scenery just exactly 2 days before my meeting. I was

*Reynolds is also the R of Holgate & Reynolds, makers of embossed structure materials, double-deck suburban cars, and other model railroad accessories. The hobby shop, in Evanston, Ill., is called Northshore Hobbymodels. Author Frazier Thomas is very well known in the Chicago area for a television feature he masters. Besides all that, both of them are fellow members in our model railroad club, so a plug is more than appropriate. — Ed.



Part of the east industrial area, viewed from the east yard's control panel. The top of the layout is 35" from the floor; the control panels are 28½" from the floor, to allow them to be pushed under the layout. The control panels fold down when not in use, and then form flattop roller-legged tables which can roll under the layout. All this allows for seated operating sessions.

about to sigh that sigh of relief when it suddenly dawned on me that for 1 solid year I hadn't run a single train on that layout. There were places where the track was splashed with dry glue; locomotives needed wheel cleaning and oiling; rolling stock needed to be road-tested to see if a tree here or a piece of lichen there would interfere with operation — and that crowd of my peers, all of them perfectionists, were due to descend upon me within 48 hours.

Again, Hal Reynolds and another railroader friend, Bob Hoskins, came to my rescue as they had done before. We all spent a couple of long evenings cleaning track and testing equipment. Hal, an expert at locomotive repair, sat at the workbench and cleaned and oiled my motive power while Bob and I cleaned track and tested equipment as it came out of the repair shop.

On Friday night, March 8, 1974, when we clubmembers and our guests filed down

the backstairs to the basement, the golden spikes were there, waiting to be driven. A few weeks later a very impressive-looking certificate was delivered to each spike driver to commemorate the occasion.

During the considerable elbow-bending and train-running that evening, I guess the main topic of conversation never once got around to the rather commendable (I thought) job I'd done on the layout. Instead, with a recognizable tone of sadness in their voices, they all wondered out loud what I was going to do now?

Do? Why, I'm going to run trains, that's what I'm going to do. I'm also going to do all those little things which I've never had the time to do up until now because I was "finishing" my railroad. I'm going to weight cars so they track better; I'm going to level all my couplers so they mate in the switching yards and hold tight; I'm going to devise a half-dozen ways to disguise my tabletop switch machines so all the purists who view my layout won't be able to see them at first glance, lest they faint dead away. I'm going to update my structures when a new one comes along which titillates my fancy, and I'm going to take a lot of photos of my "empire" so I can show friends, acquaintances, and some perfect strangers, that I finally did it — I finished my layout.

And I'll tell you something else: Hal Reynolds and I got to talking one night and came to an obvious, yet little discussed, conclusion. It's been Hal's observation through the years, and I agree, that most (not all, but most) model railroaders spend 90 percent of their time just trying to make their equipment work. They don't spend it meeting schedules and solving switching problems; they spend it trying to make *this* engine work or *that* car stay on the track. And invariably, when a crowd gathers for an operating session or just to "watch the trains run," the road president spends the greater part of his time making excuses about jerky operation, or derailments, or faulty couplers on his favorite car.

Excuses! Excuses! We all have to make them at one time or another, but a lot of it isn't really necessary. I studied the situation very carefully on my own layout, and my first job since "finishing" my pike has been to make a few corrections.

Assuming that your trackwork is reasonably well done, and that you've tried installing new trucks when the old ones may have been the cause of your trouble, and that you're willing to admit that the X2F couplers just weren't made for backing long trains, and that the perfect turnout just hasn't hit the market at this writing, there's still something you can do to reduce the necessity of those excuses to a bare minimum: *Eliminate from the layout the locomotives and cars which resist all attempts at corrective repair.*

That sounds pretty dang simple, I know, but it works like a charm. The first hurdle you have to get over is your love for some offending locomotive or piece of rolling stock. I know because I had some old favorites which I've owned from the very beginning. (Who ever throws anything away?) Several of the locomotives just didn't run right no matter how much time I spent working on them. Some with



A snowfall in the mountain village of Dodge City indicates the beginning of a tough winter: the white stuff has even drifted through the open door of the blacksmith shop. Goldie's Place has rooms for rent. A dentist has an office above the Panhandle Gazette; a barber and an undertaker complete the business district. ↓ Callaham's Crossing appears to be enjoying much warmer weather.



the deep European flanges didn't operate smoothly on my pike. Maybe they do on yours. So, I gritted my teeth and pulled them out of service. I traded them in or put them on the shelf, and replaced them with locomotives and rolling stock which did work, every time. I made it a rule to test each new acquisition before I bought it — not in the hobby store, but right on my own layout where it was going to be used — and this system paid beautifully.

Like most everyone else, I guess, I had twice as much rolling stock as I needed at any one time. It actually only served to choke my yards. So, when I'd come across a car that didn't operate smoothly after reasonable corrective maintenance, out it went — to be replaced by one that would work well under all conditions.

The results have been spectacular. What I've done is use equipment which suits my railroad and my style of railroading, instead of laboring endlessly to make my railroad suit some very unsuit-

able equipment. It's by far the easiest and most practical route to better operation; and come to think of it, it's precisely the way the prototype railroads do it. They have locomotives and cars built to suit their needs; they don't waste time and money trying to adapt their railroads to the requirements of available equipment.

Today, during an operating session, I'm not obliged to put any restrictions on what rolling stock can be used, or what locomotives will be better left in the yards because they hesitate every time they cross a rerailer. All my equipment will take my sharp curves without uncoupling, and I've cut my excuses down to nothing. My friends and I can now "play trains" to our hearts' content, and devote our attention to switching problems and not to operational hazards. And it was all so simple that I'm ashamed that I didn't think of it before. But this is the first time I've had to give it any thought — and that's because I've finally "finished" my railroad.