

I became interested in trains when I was about 10 years old and was able to view steam engines as they traveled around Chicago. My grandmother lived within a block of overhead tracks that contained a big yard. The sounds of steam engines starting to move large trains would keep me up at night when I visited.

My father gave me an American Flyer train set in my early years and it lasted into my teen years. As I began caddying, I also started visiting model train stores and became interested in HO trains because of the size and detail of the locomotives. I purchased a couple of kits, and then got



BILL ZAWACKI EARNS MMR #468

interested in the usual distractions — cars and girls.

I started working, and some of the guys were interested in HO trains and equipment. That renewed my interest in the hobby, and I began looking in hobby shops again.

After completing Army service, I got married and started a family. We bought a house. I built a garage and finished the basement, leaving some room for a train layout. The trains were not on my radar for a while, although I did start building some Campbell kit houses that currently reside on my railroad. We ended up moving to a bigger house with a basement that was more suited to a train layout.

One of the neighbors was with a group of guys in what we know now as an operating group. He invited me along to a couple of meetings. It was interesting learning about all the construction techniques and to see their vast collections of engines and rolling stock. I started planning a railroad and was ready to build it when I got transferred.

The house we bought after the transfer was above a basement that was well suited for a railroad. The lot line at the back of the property was Ontario & Western's right-of-way. The tracks were already gone, but bridge supports for a creek crossing were there as well as a mile marker. It got me interested in the O&W, and I contacted the O&W Historical Society to learn a little more about the railroad. As I started planning and building a railroad, I was transferred again. Alas, I did get some more

Campbell kits built and was developing a pretty good idea of what I wanted for a layout.

After this transfer, we ended up with a smaller house that didn't have the room for a large railroad. I did build some kits and tried some scratchbuilding. I was still a lone wolf modeler, keeping interested in model railroading. We stayed in the new house for seven years before the next transfer.

The next house needed to have the basement finished and was well suited for a model railroad. I finished the basement with enough power and lights to build a new railroad. I joined the NMRA and got some information on scratchbuilding turnouts and crossings. I enjoyed the magazine, but didn't find that I was getting enough out of it to keep my membership. I started to build fine scale models to relax in the evening after a stressful day at the office. I built some dioramas and started and stopped a couple of railroads. The plans didn't quite come together. I then built and scenicked a complete railroad in an 8x9-foot area just to be able to display my many buildings, fine scale models, and try out various scenery techniques. It wasn't an operating layout. Even though it looked pretty good to me, I still didn't know any model railroad buffs.

One day, while my wife was away on a visit to her aunt and I didn't have anything to do on a Saturday afternoon, I went to a train show sponsored by the Piedmont Division. While there, I met Walt Lilies. He suggested that I buy a raffle ticket for the model railroad layout that the Division uses to raise money. I did and I won! Walt

delivered it to my home and helped me set it up. He also commented on my layout and complimented me on my fine modeling skills. Walt also suggested that I visit the monthly Division meeting.

The Piedmont Division warmly welcomed me to the group. I started to visit the Board of Directors meeting at a local barbeque place and got to know some of the board members and other interested members. This started to give me a real feeling of what the NMRA stood for and how it could help my modeling. It also provided me with fellowship of model railroad enthusiasts.

I was invited to share my railroads (the one I won and the one I built) through the Piedmont Division's Pilgrimage — the Division's organized model railroad show with more than 80 railroads on display to the public during the months of October and November every year to celebrate national model railroading month. I had my railroads on the tour that year and they were well received. My model railroading skills were acknowledged, and I felt a lot better about the fellowship in the NMRA.

In March 2007, an open house of my layout had to be moved to another member's layout since I had heart problems. The next year, I was invited to join the North Atlantic Rail Barons (NARB), an all-NMRA member operating group.

Before I really became an active member, we moved to another house with less yard work and a smaller room for my railroad. The NARB has rotating work sessions, and once a month we operate on a member's railroad. The work sessions really helped me build my railroad because of the combined knowledge of the group and their willingness to give advice to someone.

My railroad was planned at a work session. After the plan was approved, we together built the railroad. I did a lot of the work since I was now retired. When we had a work session at my house, we built some of the benchwork and laid track. Track wiring was done with standards that made the connections disappear (another assist from a NARB member).

Earning a merit award during a Division modeling contest for a Fine Scale Miniatures kit of a branch coaling station stirred my interest in the Achievement Program as a way to demonstrate my skills as a modeler. That was the start of my quest for my MMR. My railroad was being completed and displayed on the Division tour. After the scenery, track work, and electri-

cal was completed enough to be judged, I achieved a Golden Spike Award. I also earned the Volunteer Achievement award. Later, participating and keeping track of the time in NARB operating sessions helped me to earn the Chief Dispatcher certificate. By then, my railroad was coming along well. Encouragement from the group led me to earn Civil, Electrical, Scenery, and Structures.

Finally, I had only one more certificate to go. Members of the NARB fine-tune their clinics for Division, Region and National presentations with local presentations. After Charlie Crawford's clinic on how to scratchbuild styrene boxcars, I went on to scratchbuild boxcars from styrene and wood, a stock car, drovers caboose, a sway-backed boxcar reminiscent of John Allen's, and two styrene reefers. Division contest judges gave me valuable feedback, and my progress led me to the Cars Achievement Award and thus the MMR.

I really enjoy the fellowship and modeling opportunities that the NMRA provides and urge any modeler to attend division meetings and try to get into an operating group. Or, form your own operating group. It really is what the NMRA is about.