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>> A lesson in teamwork

Dedicated builders and operators keep the HO scale Muscoot Valley rolling

By John Stamatov • Photos by Lou Sassi

Some modelers like being lone wolves, working on their layouts by themselves. Others, myself included, enjoy working with an operating crew. But my crew doesn't come to the layout just to socialize and run trains – they helped build my HO scale Muscoot Valley.

The MVRR is unusual in that it's a combination of two layouts, my original 9 x 15-

foot Muscoot Valley and the 4 x 14-foot Sugg Bay peninsula. However, the MVRR isn't just about the trains. It's a testament to years of hard work by a group of model railroaders with diverse talents.

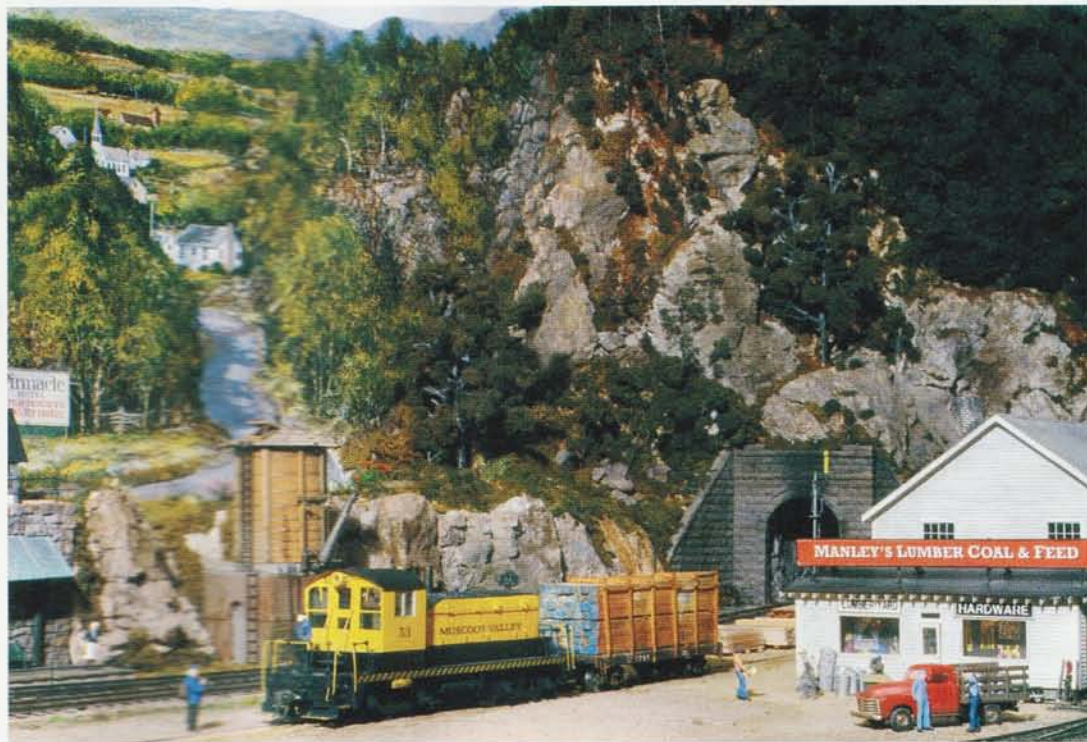
A team effort

In 1970 I began working and operating on Bob Arnold's HO scale U Line. It was

here that I met many of the members of my current operating crew and developed my model railroading skills. Since my primary interests are scenery and structures, that's what I contributed to the U Line. Over the months and years I worked on Bob's layout, I got in the habit of thinking of ways to enhance structures and scenery to improve the model rail-

1 Left: John Stamatov and several friends built the Muscoot Valley RR, an HO scale layout set in mid 20th century New England. Since the MVRR is a small connecting railroad, it held onto steam longer than most Class 1 railroads. Here, MVRR 2-10-0 Decapod no. 11 spots three empty open-top hoppers at Madyda Stone Works. Rich Cobb built the Sheepscoot Models kit.

2 Right: Structures and scenery are key parts of John's layout. He scratchbuilt Manley's Lumber, Coal & Feed, a trackside industry being switched by MVRR SW1 no. 53. Jack Wemp painted the backdrop on canvas and affixed it to the wall with wallpaper paste.



>>The layout at a glance

Name: Muscote Valley RR
Scale: HO (1:87.1)
Size: 9 x 15 feet and 11 x 28 feet
Prototype: free-lance
Locale: New York, New England
Era: 1950s-1960s
Layout style: walkaround
Length of mainline run: 235 feet
Layout height: 48"
Benchwork: 1 x 4 frame
Roadbed: Homabed
Track: code 83 (main line) and code 70 (yards and sidings)
Turnout minimum: no. 5
Minimum radius: 30"
Maximum grade: 1.5 percent
Scenery: hardshell (Sugg Bay) and extruded-foam insulation board (Muscote Valley)
Backdrop: painted on canvas
Control: North Coast Engineering Digital Command Control



Muscote Valley RR

HO scale (1:87.1)
 Scale: 1" = 1'-0"
 24" grid
 Numbered arrows indicate photo locations

Illustration by Rick Johnson



3 The MVRR earns its keep serving a variety of industries, including Mayer's Seafood in Port St. Jane. The SW1 seen earlier is now spotting a refrigerator car at a water-front business. The car will soon be loaded with fish.

4 John's interest in trains goes back to his childhood when he watched New York Central freight and passenger trains on the Hudson Division, so it's no surprise to find NYC equipment on his layout. A NYC gas-electric passes over the harbor. Rich Cobb kitbashed the Ocean View hotel in the background; Garner Bros. Shipyard is a modified Builders in Scale kit.



road. I often asked myself, "Wouldn't that building be fun to model?" and "Wouldn't that structure look great on the layout?" It wasn't long before I was photographing, measuring, and scratchbuilding structures.

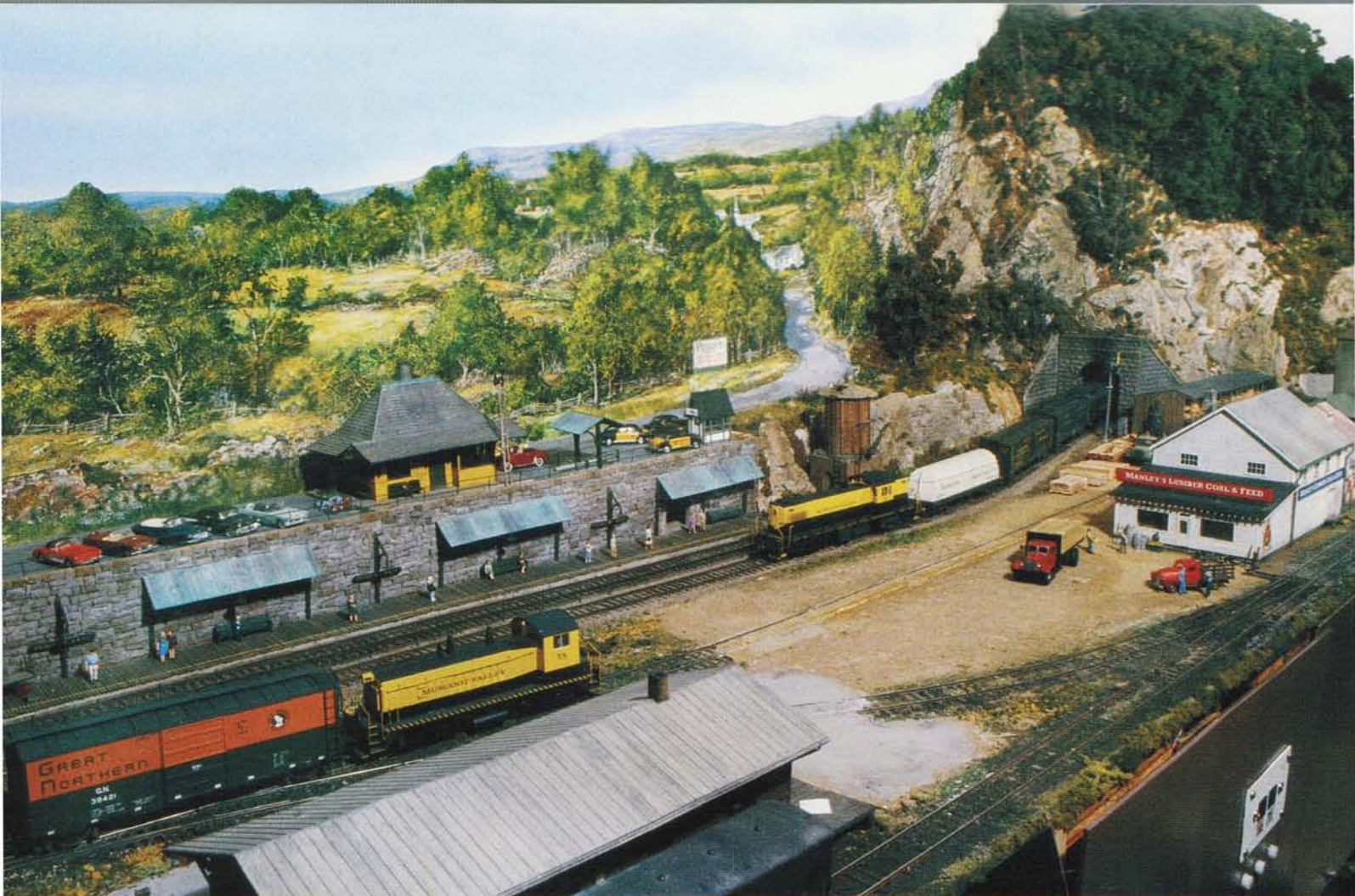
Then, in 1985, I began work on my own Muscoot Valley RR, a 9 x 15-foot layout. I

decided to build a medium-sized model railroad because I wanted a layout I could extensively detail and scenic yet still have time to work on the U Line. The original MVRR was an ideal layout because I didn't have to spend several hours working on benchwork or wiring. To me those were

necessary basics, but not the most interesting aspects of the hobby.

I spent many hours working on the MVRR's backdrop and scenery. My inspiration for these scenes came from dioramas at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. I carefully studied how the





artists seamlessly blended the three-dimensional foreground into the two-dimensional background and tried to re-create that effect on my layout.

End of the U Line

I was progressing nicely on the MVRR, but soon work time became scarce since my spare hours were being spent at the U Line. Unfortunately, Bob Arnold passed away in 1990. We kept the U Line running for a few years until his house was sold and the layout had to be removed. At that time the U Line was almost 40 years old, so the unsalvageable parts were thrown away.

5 John was a regular builder and operator on Bob Arnold's U Line. After Bob's passing in 1990, John acquired the Sugg Bay portion of his layout, which features this interesting harbor scene. Today MVRR no. 10, a 2-8-0 Consolidation, is busy shoving cars onto the rail barge. The locomotive is a Pacific Fast Mail brass import.

Sadly, much of the layout was thrown out. We were able to save some bridges, structures, and track. We also saved Sugg Bay, a 4 x 14-foot peninsula that included a waterfront scene, coal dock, and classification yard. We moved the peninsula into my basement in the room adjacent to the existing MVRR.

While the U Line no longer existed in its original form, we did have a layout for the operators to work on. The group started coming to my house for work nights and operating sessions. One of our first orders of business was putting a hole in the wall and building connecting tracks to link the two layouts.

Cutting the hole in the sheetrock wall was fairly easy. We determined the track level by putting a small hole in the wall and running track between the two layouts. Once the track elevation was established, we cut a larger hole in the wall to give us more room to work. We used tunnel portals to cover the oversized hole.

The hardest part of the project was adding the turnouts necessary to complete the wye. We used the ascending track from

6 The setting for the free-lanced Muscoot Valley RR is New York and New England, and signs of Eastern railroads abound. The paint scheme for MVRR's diesel locomotives, including Electro-Motive SW1 no. 58 and Alco RS-3 no. 62, was inspired by the New York, Susquehanna & Western Ry.

the staging yard to connect the MVRR with Sugg Bay.

A new, improved layout

With Sugg Bay connected to the Muscoot Valley RR, I now had a larger layout with expanded operating potential. The layout is a point-to-point operation, with cars leaving the layout via a car ferry at Sugg Bay and the New York Central interchange track at Watchubak Yard. My friends and I also included a track for continuous running, primarily so passenger trains don't end up in the yard.

With the expanded model railroad came regular operating sessions. Eight operators are needed for the two-hour session. We build up trains (milk, coal, and

>> Easy access

One of the challenges of maintaining a large layout is being able to reach all portions of it. We solved that dilemma on the Muscote Valley RR by constructing a lightweight lift-up section. First, we determined the location we needed to access and cut a hole in the layout. We then cut a piece of 2" extruded-foam insulation board to match the contour of the hole. Foam is an ideal medium to use because it's lightweight yet rigid.

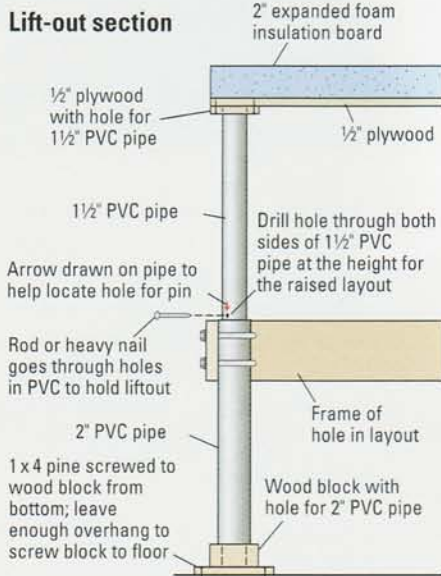
Next, we built a telescoping pole using 1½" and 2" PVC pipe, as shown in the illustration. Even though the foam is rigid, we added two pieces of ½" plywood to the corner where the PVC pipe connected with the lift-out section.

We then made a base for the telescoping pole using scrap wood. We started by drilling a hole in the wood

block and sliding the 2" PVC pipe in place. We then set a piece of 1 x 4 pine under the wood block, leaving enough excess wood to screw the base to the floor.

Once the lift-out section was in place, we raised it to a height all of the

operators could comfortably stand up in. We then drilled a ¼" hole through both PVC pipes to accommodate a removable pin (either a heavy nail or small metal rod works well) used to hold the lift-out section in place. — J.S.



local freights) in the Watchbak Yard and Sugg Bay, and we have hidden staging tracks to hold passenger trains and through freights. We use the car-card-and-waybill car-forwarding system, and we operate with timetables and train orders.

My regular crew isn't just a talented group of operators; it's a talented group of modelers as well. Jack Wemp, a professional artist, painted the backdrops on canvas and affixed them to the wall with wallpaper paste. Others have shared their

talents by modeling trees using armatures and ground foam, making lakes and rivers with Enviro-Tex resin, and casting rock outcroppings with Hydrocal.

The structures on the layout are kit-bashed and scratchbuilt, and a few are out-of-the-box kits. With a quality paint job and some weathering an inexpensive plastic kit looks great. Some of the buildings on the layout, such as Wemp General Store, are named after members of the MVRR operating crew.

Layout environment

Dust is one of a layout's biggest enemies. To minimize the dust, we installed a drop ceiling and we continuously run air filters in both rooms. We also replaced the incandescent lightbulbs with screw-in fluorescent bulbs, which give off far less heat and better illuminate the room. Since we've all worked hard detailing structures, freight cars, and scenery, we want the room to be sufficiently lit so people can enjoy the fruits of our labors.



7 One of the more interesting jobs on the MVRR is operating the Sugg Bay coal dock switcher. An MVRR 0-8-0 switcher is working the dock today, pushing a loaded coal hopper to the chutes near the empty barge. Real coal is dumped into the barges via operating chutes. Empties are pushed down grade and free roll over to a kickback.

8 Stauffer Chemicals, scratchbuilt after a real plant in Ardsley, N.Y., is one of the biggest industries on the MVRR and requires frequent switching. Alco RS-3 no. 62 carefully moves a tank car through the sidings at the plant. With tight clearances and lots of turnouts, crews have to exercise caution while switching cars at the chemical factory.

>>Blending in backdrops_

While trains are the focal point of any layout, it's the backdrops that serve as the frame for a model railroad. Over the years many articles have appeared in the hobby press that state backdrops should be simple and not detract from the trains. However, I think backdrops can add a lot to any model railroad layout.

While studying dioramas at the Museum of Natural Science in New York City, I noticed how well-done backdrops can add depth and dimension to a scene. On most of these dioramas the

main subject was done so well that the backdrop didn't compete with it at all.

We are very lucky to have the talents of Jack Wemp, who is both a great model railroader and superb artist. Some of the philosophies we have for backdrops include:

- **Establish the scene you want.** A backdrop should give a sense of perspective. We develop a horizon line on the backdrop and blend the rest of the scenery into it.

- **Consistency.** Whether it's roads or trees, the colors on the back-

drop should match those of the foreground items. If the colors don't match, the transition between the foreground and background can be quite jarring.

- **Use scenery to your advantage.** Blending trees into a backdrop works well because there aren't sharp separation lines such as those on structures.

There are spots on our layout where there is only two feet of separation between the foreground and backdrop. However, the backdrop makes these scenes appear much deeper. – J.S.

Celebrating success

The Muscoot Valley RR has come a long way since the 9 x 15-foot model railroad I started in 1985. While it was a sad event that led to my layout's expansion, it's great that part of the U Line is still running with some of its original operators.

My years operating on the U Line and MVRR have been enjoyable. Being part of an operating crew has greatly increased my enjoyment of model railroading. I've formed many life-long friendships and have had the pleasure of working with talented modelers. I look forward to hosting operating sessions and work nights on the Muscoot Valley for many more years. GMR



>>Meet John Stamatov_



John and his wife live in Armonk, N.Y. His interest in trains dates back to his childhood when he watched steam locomotives on the New York Central and milk trains passing through Yonkers on the Hudson Division.



9 As a tribute to the late owner of the U Line, the tugboat at Sugg Bay is named the *Robert J. Arnold*. The tug is seen here waiting in the harbor for the rail barge to be loaded. Steve Cryan built the Crow River lighthouse kit.

10 This overall view shows how Sugg Bay fits into the rest of the layout. The tunnel that connects Sugg Bay with the original 9 x 15-foot Muscoot Valley can be seen just above the coal dock in the background.

