Contents

1

W. Allen McClelland

CHAPTER TWO

Persnickety plagiarism

After the 1968 merger of the V&O, AM, and VM into the Appalachian Lines, locomotives of the three railroads were freely mixed. Here eastbound 262, the *Hot Rod* behind an AM U-boat and GP38-2, meets a pair of V&O Alco Centuries at Fullerton, Va. The two AM units and the lead V&O unit are in the AL's Avant Garde lettering scheme; the trailing Century is in the V&O's intermediate scheme, which used Helvetica lettering and a white accent panel only on the low nose.

I have never been one to create something out of thin air. I looked to the examples of respected pioneers who had already established a clear path ahead with types of railroading and model railroading that intrigued me (**1**). I then studied what they had done in considerable detail, determined what aspects of their work I most admired and what I either could not or did not want to replicate, came up with a new plan based on those considerations, and headed off on a similar yet in many ways unique course. So began the Allegheny Midland, which I usually referred to as the Midland Road—"persnickety plagiarism," if you will.

Making reasonable choices

I have lived my life with one overriding philosophy: Survey my options, make reasonable choices relatively quickly, and then work hard to convert them into really good choices. If an impasse soon becomes evident, no great loss of resources has been expended. Otherwise, considerable progress has been made.

So it is with layout design. The main concern, therefore, is to make a reasonably good choice from the outset. How does one do that?

Let me cite the two track plans that immediately preceded the plan for the Allegheny Midland. Neither was a good idea, one because of my lack of understanding of staging (few, if any, modelers other than Allen McClelland were employing staging yards back then, and initially even he underestimated their potential), the other because it was a patchwork quilt of every neat idea I had ever seen on someone else's model railroad.

Nickel Plate Road 1.0

Not long after I moved to New Jersey to work for Hal Carstens at *Railroad Model Craftsman,* Judy and I bought our first basement with weather protection and living quarters on top. While she was trying to get the kids settled in, I was feverishly drawing a track plan for the new basement. I was on solid ground, too; it depicted the same parts of the Nickel Plate Road's St. Louis Division as I model today (**2**). This plan had a lot of potential, but I made a couple of basic mistakes.

The big one was having the main line cross over to the far side of the peninsula as it entered Frankfort (Ind.) Yard. By keeping the main and yard on the same side of the peninsula, the yard would have been close to the aisle, keeping everything "linear" and avoiding the duckunder. It also would have moved the railroad away from the front of the electrical entrance panel, which as drawn was a code violation.

Moreover, any time you see an operating "pit," you can be sure that it's an outdated design. It precludes moving back and forth in the yard to reach switches and uncouple cars, and who wants to duck under a lot of benchwork to reach it?

The NKP main line through Frankfort Yard split in two at the west end, with one line going to Peoria, Ill., and the other to St. Louis. That was good, but then I got greedy by trying to model the Peoria Division with a lot of hidden track. It would have been much better to put a stub-ended staging yard directly under the Frankfort peninsula. A lot of hidden mainline running is another clear indicator of bad design. As we will see in chapter 4, the AM suffered from too much of that, something I worked hard to correct in later years.

It was much harder to model a specific prototype back in 1971 than it is today, but overall this plan and the resulting model railroad would have been successful by the standards of the day. I can only hope that I would have caught the major design errors in time to correct them with a minimum number of saber-saw erasures.

The freelancing bug bites

But then the freelancing bug bit hard. Allen McClelland, Jim Paine, and several others from the Dayton, Ohio, area's "Lichen Belt" had nice freelanced model railroads, and I wanted one of those for myself. Too bad I had yet to grasp Allen's "beyond the basement" and "part of the North American transportation system" principles, let alone the message about putting the mythical railroad on a map with connections to the real world.

Instead, my second plan for our basement was for a Ridgeley & Midland County RR. The idea was to have a railroad name that provided R&MC reporting marks as a play on RMC (which I then edited). I was working closely with Dave Frary and Bob Hayden, who were and are noted for their interest in the Maine two-foot-gauge railroads. The largest of these, the Sandy River & Rangeley Lakes, caught my eye, and the name "Rangeley" had a nice ring to it. The "Midland County" portion reflected a fondness for the word "Midland," as in Colorado Midland. A shelf layout designed for my office at RMC was therefore dubbed the Rangeley & Midland County RR.

As my interests shifted toward the V&O and hence the central Appalachians, I still wanted to retain the R&MC reporting marks but needed a more regionally correct name. I recalled Ridgeley, W.Va., the location of a Western Maryland engine terminal near Cumberland, Md.

No matter that it was more of a montage of every neat model railroad photograph I had ever seen; no matter that I didn't have a clue as to where it was located and hence what it should be doing for a living; no matter that it was supposed to be a Class 1 railroad like the V&O but had a name that sounded like a short line (**3**). It wasn't a railroad in miniature; it was simply a model railroad. It might have been a scenic wonder, but scenery should play a supporting role and never assume dictatorial powers.

Perhaps its worst feature was, like the first NKP plan, a lack of linear, walkaround capability. The "Potpourri Pacific" (a little of this, a little of that, with no central theme) would have required crews to duck under the railroad to keep up with their trains.

Anyone who has tried to operate a model railroad realistically quickly discovers that one should never, *ever* design the main line so that it crosses through the neck of a peninsula and appears on the other side. There is no way for crews to follow their trains in such cases, so they hang back at the end of the peninsula and wait for the trains to reappear. That's long-distance model railroading at best and harks back to the awful days when the maestro sat at a huge control console and ran his railroad like some railroad tycoon tugging the operating strings from a distant big-city office.

I'm not going to waste space by printing the plan here, but keep my comment about the name sounding like it belonged to a short line in mind. We'll come back to that later.

Saved by the bell

Fortunately, in 1973 Carstens Publications moved to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in the

CHAPTER FIVE

Creating a plausible roster

The L&N's sharp yellow-and-gray livery brightened up the coalfields, but it was still sedate compared to, say, Santa Fe's warbonnets or Burlington's Chinese red paint schemes. Six-motor power was common on Old Reliable's coal drags, but the Eastern Kentucky branches were home to a plethora of RS-3s and Century 420s, many acquired through mergers.

Tempting as it was to acquire one of these and two of those and then to declare them to be fit candidates for equipping my new railroad with suitable motive power, that was unlikely to produce a plausible roster. Locomotive and car types usually reflect the main reason for being of a railroad. Think of the Chesapeake & Ohio, Baltimore & Ohio, Virginian, Western Maryland, Louisville & Nashville (**1**), or Clinchfield, and the image of strings of hopper cars comes to mind. That each of them hosted fleets of beefy steam locomotives and first-generation diesels covered with gallons of black, blue, or gray paint (**2**) is similarly to be expected of Appalachian coal haulers, where pulling power trumps speed and utility bests image every time.

Plagiarism is a virtue

One of the primary reasons for choosing to build a freelanced railroad is that it seemingly allows the builder to do whatever he or she desires. But, as John Armstrong pointed out, it's usually much harder to do a credible job of freelancing than it is to model a specific prototype. That's because the prototype has already made all of the major decisions for you: standard structure architecture and colors; locomotive types and details; caboose designs; and so on. But the freelancer has to make all of those decisions on his or her own, and the opportunities to do this in a less than plausible way are legion.

Take diesel paint schemes, for example. There were maybe a half-dozen stylists at Electro-Motive when most of the first-generation paint schemes debuted on FTs, F2s, F3s, and F7s. Those who visited the EMD styling department's offices in McCook (near La Grange), Ill., reported seeing French curves marked with the familiar arcs that typified EMD-designed paint schemes, which included most of those seen on first-generation prototype locomotives.

So if a freelancer gets a bit too entrepreneurial, especially when painting EMD cab units, a knowledgeable observer can almost instantly spot the discordant note sounded by a paint scheme that is not a slight variation of the EMD play book. (See chapter 5 of my book, *Realistic Model Railroad Design,* Kalmbach 2004.)

Alco and Baldwin also had distinctive paint scheme design elements, **3**. It therefore pays to study prototype railroads and their motive power from the same era and region that a freelanced railroad represents to avoid the more obvious visual clangers. The good news: Creating a new (yet comfortably familiar) paint scheme for your freelanced line may be as simple as replacing the road name on a factory-painted model, **4**.

Close but no cigar

In the case of the Allegheny Midland, I planned to avoid this problem

The Clinchfield finally gave up trying to keep its yellow-trimmed gray units clean and simply painted everything basic black, including the third unit—a rare U36C—in this northbound freight getting underway out of Dante ("Dant"), Va., in May 1976.

EMD photo courtesy John B. Corns

This comparison of the Alco-designed paint scheme applied to NKP (and AM) PA-1s (top) with a pair of F7s in an "EMD-ized" version of the same scheme shows the latter's insistence on smoothly flowing, almost standardized curves and stripes. Freelancers deviate at their peril from such first-generation norms, most created by EMD stylists.

CHAPTER SIX

From track plan to benchwork

These two photos of the North Durbin and Big Springs areas show the full-size kraft-paper drawing used to check precise track alignments (on the floor, above) and the resulting benchwork, ¾" plywood subroadbed, and ½" Homasote roadbed cut by using it as a template. The plywood-Homasote laminate was initially positioned atop the 40"-high benchwork (opposite page) and then elevated to the desired height with 1 x 2 risers. This approach provided a uniformly flat working surface around the entire railroad, and the varying fascia height reinforced the idea that the railroad was climbing to the summit at Altapass, Va., just south of the Virginia/West Virginia state line. Valances and light fixtures were screwed to L-girders.

I am old school when it comes to benchwork. I am not a fan of the popular and flexible L-girder type of benchwork, as I prefer to have a solid grid of 1 x 4 lumber (or ¾" AC plywood cut into 3½" strips) to which I can fasten the fascia, shelves, and so on. This is as true on my current NKP layout as it was on the Allegheny Midland (**1**). But it really doesn't matter which method one prefers, since, as Jim Boyd once observed, you can fill an entire gymnasium with benchwork in a single weekend. The key is to quickly define the aisles and then build the benchwork around them. You can make adjustments later on.

First things first

Before I could tackle the benchwork, however, I had to finish the basement to ensure I had a clean and attractive environment for the railroad. Little work gets done in some dark hole. The builder had finished the perimeter walls, but I had to add a ceiling.

I'm not fond of dropped ceilings for a variety of reasons, reduced headroom being one. So I fastened 4 x 8-foot sheets of wallboard to the ceiling, therefore making it potentially more difficult to access water lines and wiring. However, neither has been a major concern in the 37 years we've lived in this house.

As soon as the ceiling was up and the edges of the benchwork were defined, I fastened wood L-girder brackets to the ceiling, then attached single- or twin-tube (depending on distance to the layout) fluorescent fixtures to them. I then screwed 9"-deep hardboard valances to the L-shaped wood brackets, **2**.

I used cool-white (around 4200 K) tubes; I still do today. I cannot detect any shifting of colors (such as blue to purple or red to maroon); they are very bright; you can readily find them on a Friday night or Sunday afternoon if need be; and you can buy almost any diameter or length without having to special-order it.

Dimming fluorescent fixtures, even modern electronic ones, is expensive and problematic. Were I starting over today, I'd probably use compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) while wishing that the cost of LED strips would drop dramatically.

The full-size plan

Today we have the option of designing our layouts using computer-aided design (CAD) software especially tailored to meet our needs. We can print out full-size templates, usually one small sheet at a time, and tape them together on the floor as a final check of the design.

Back in 1973, I did the same thing in a manual way: by redrawing the plan full size on rolls of brown wrapping paper taped together to cover the entire basement floor (**1**, **3**). My main goal at this point was to ensure that I had allowed sufficient aisle width, and that I could reach the more-distant track.

I knew that my 30"-minimum-radius curves would look and operate much better if I put a transition easement between the end of the straight (tangent) section and the beginning of the fixed-radius arc. I therefore located the center of the curve, drew the arc, and drew the tangent so as to deliberately miss the outside of that arc by about ½".

I then enlisted the aid of son David to help me draw the easement as I held a yardstick or strip of lath (**4**) to create a smooth blend between tangent and fixed-radius curve. I think I wore out his enthusiasm, as to this day Dave sees building a model railroad as an extraordinarily repetitive, boring excuse for a hobby.

From my standpoint, all of that went rather painlessly. I used the plan to define the edges of a level grid of benchwork made from 1 x 4s set 40" above the floor. Other tests and experiences had shown that 43" was a good elevation for both main yards, so a 40" benchwork height meant that there would be room for risers and switch motors between the joists and subroadbed.

By setting all benchwork at the same height, I accomplished three things: I could cut out the aisles from the full-size kraft-paper template and unroll the track plan atop the level surface (**5**); I could easily attach a