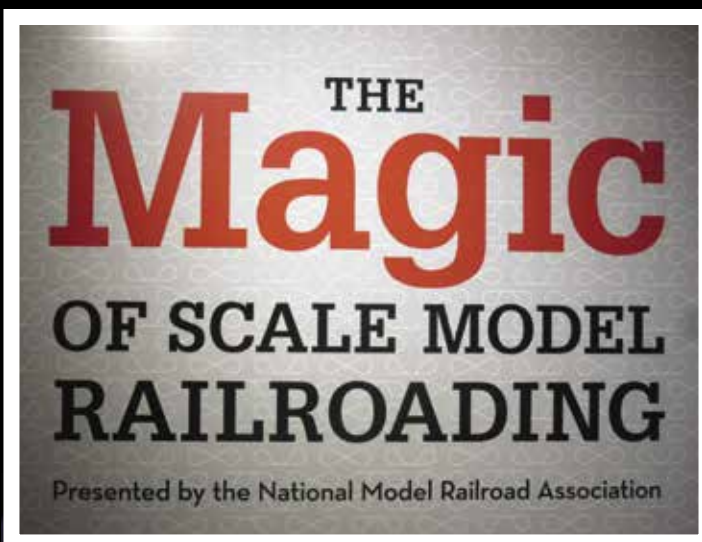


The NMRA Opens its Exhibit on the Magic of Scale Model Railroading at the California State Railroad Museum

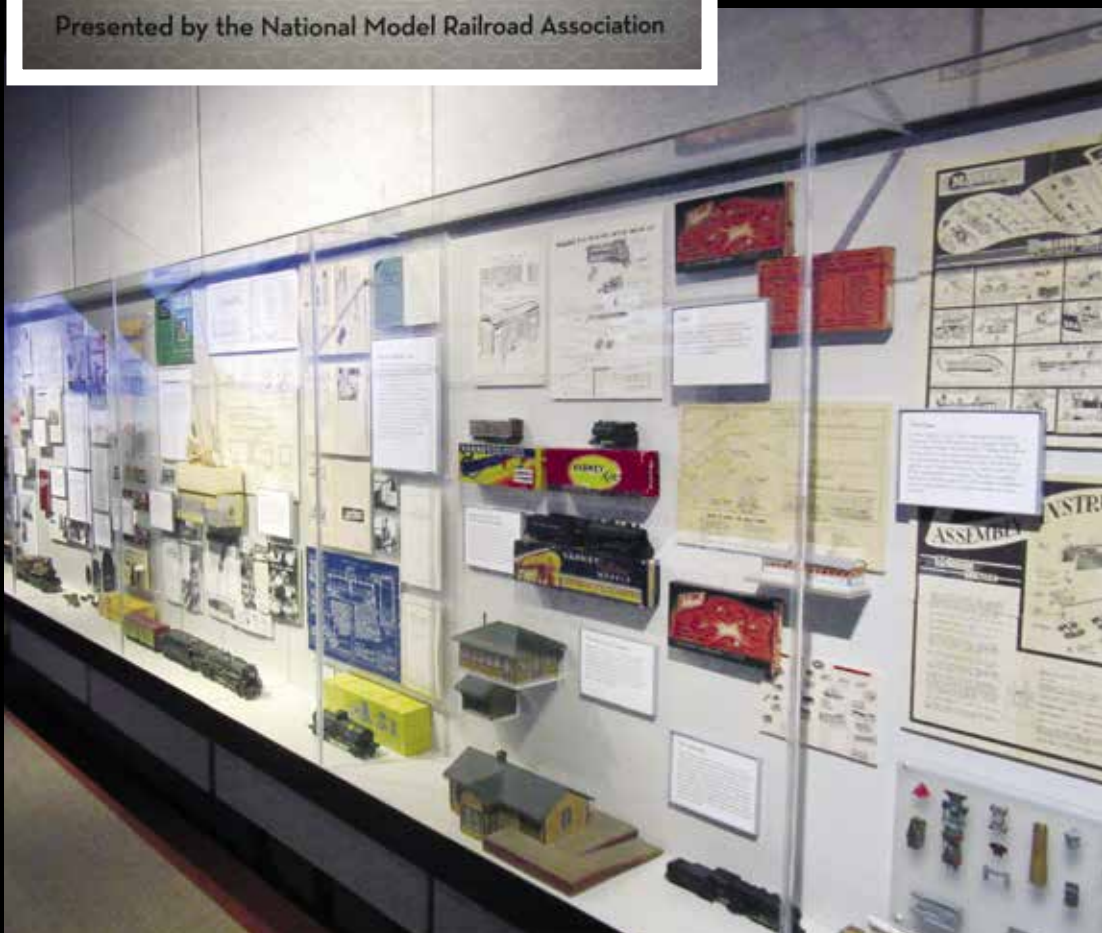
Article & photos by Charlie Getz, Howell Day Museum Committee Member

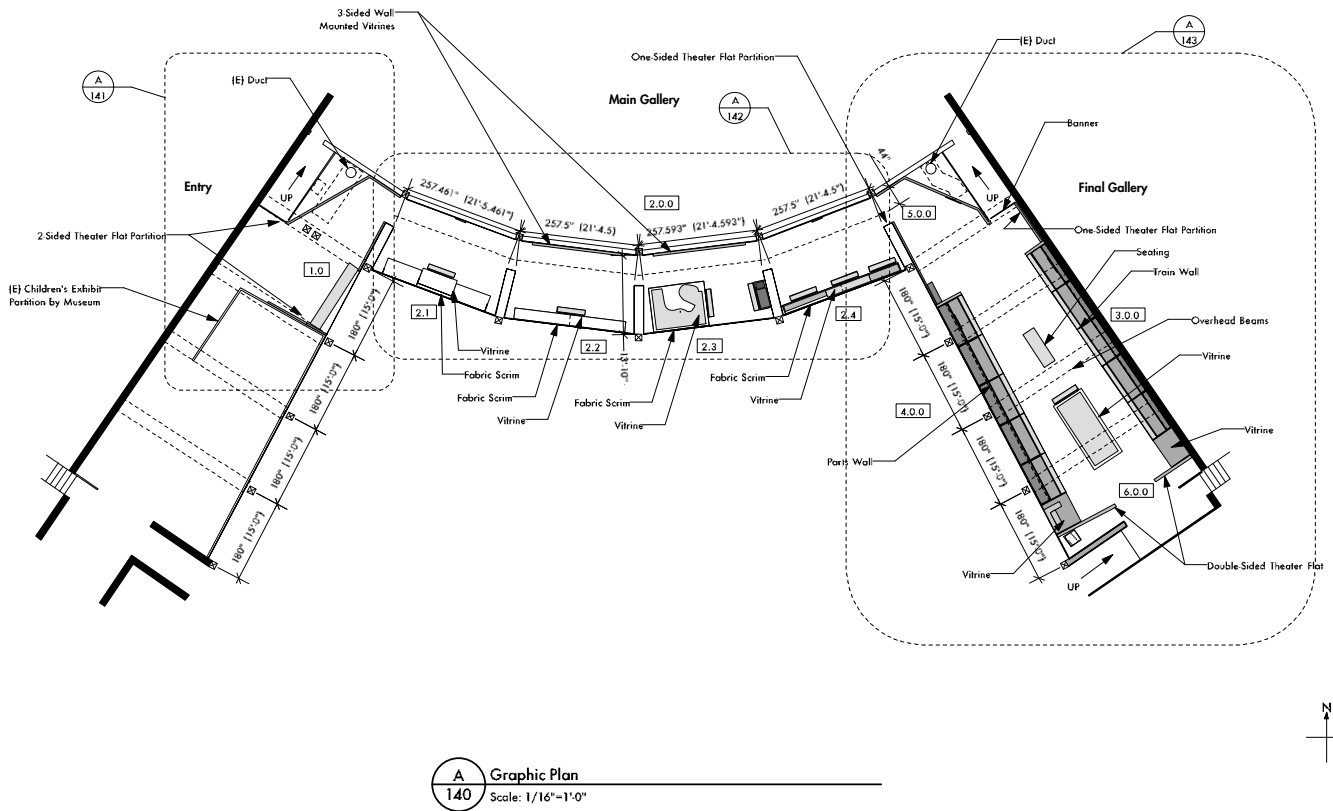
For many years, the NMRA has hoped to create either a Museum of Scale Model Railroading or at the least a major exhibit through the Howell Day Museum Committee's auspices and work, chaired by past President Allen Pollock, HLM. I am a member of that Committee and a past President of the NMRA. By this article, the NMRA proudly announces the opening of the Magic of Scale Model Railroading exhibit at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. Before describing the exhibit and explaining its philosophy, this is the story of how we got here.

The process began in 2004 when we initiated a search for space for an exhibit on scale model railroading. We concluded, with the help of Museum Consultant Johnny Gruber, that a full-fledged model railroad museum would be a multi-million-dollar prospect. Likewise, the then-Cromwell Road NMRA Headquarters was not appropriate for such a museum or even an exhibit due to its remote location and lack of visitors. Consequently, the Committee made some policy decisions about the exhibit. First, we hoped to locate the exhibit at an established railroad museum due to its existing visitor base. By so doing,



we would not need to build our own visitor base or even advertise. Secondly, we decided that no dues money would be used for the exhibit. We were well aware of controversy concerning either a museum or exhibit, with some members believing it was not worth the effort or money. Consequently, we decided only through voluntary fundraising would such an exhibit be possible. We did not want to create another controversy for the organization.





A Graphic Plan
140 Scale: 1/16"=1'-0"



NMRA Scale Model Railroad Exhibition
California State Railroad Museum
Sacramento, California

THE SIBBETT GROUP
1055 AVENUE SAN ANSELMO, CALIFORNIA
415.432.1111, SIBBETTGROUPOF.COM

Date: 06.02.2019

Title: Graphic Plan

Lead Design:

Drawn by: Chiko Kuratki

140

Floor plan courtesy of Sibbett Group

We began fundraising and raised a surprising amount of money in a relatively short time. In addition, we received a major bequest from the Estate of Howell Day — a pioneer manufacturer/retailer for whom the Museum Committee is named. We simultaneously investigated several potential museum locations nationwide. Many, such as the Baltimore & Ohio and Pennsylvania Railroad Museums, had no space or interest. Others were amenable but wanted us to pay for an expanded facility or, in the case of the Colorado Railroad Museum, a new building on adjacent land. The price tag for this was prohibitive.

Ironically, at the time, I was an attorney for the CSRM. When I mentioned to the then-executive director our search for a location, the executive director immediately thought of space on CSRM's gallery level it had trouble filling. The gallery level is immediately above the museum's roundhouse section and above that section's curved front wall. Because of intrusive roof trusses and the segmented curved space, the museum could not locate its customary exhibits in this space. Thus, it had been the repository for several temporary exhibits by various

outside museum groups, including the Smithsonian.

We, however, were thrilled with the space. CSRM offered us the curved space and the large South Gallery adjacent to it. Although there was a slight adjustment in space when CSRM added a children's play area to the South Gallery, the overall space actually increased when CSRM substituted the entire adjacent equal-sized North Gallery, along with a small portion of the South. Best of all, the space was offered at no rent or utility cost to us. It was also offered for a minimum of ten years with a renewable five-year term thereafter and with the understanding that, if the exhibit proved successful, it might be extended. CSRM/Old Town Sacramento is the sixth most popular tourist attraction in California, with a museum annual paid gate of more than 600,000 visitors and a reputation for hosting senior tour groups and school tours. Thus, for our purposes, the CSRM was a no-brainer, and it was only coincidental that I had a workplace relationship with them.

CSRM is now a Smithsonian-affiliated museum and is one of the premier railroad museums in the United States with the largest rail library west of the Mississippi.

As a side benefit, I convinced CSRM to administer our Kalmbach Memorial Library, saving the cost of having our own librarian, also giving our members access to a huge resource of materials at CSRM at no additional charge.

Although CSRM is a prototype-oriented railroad museum, model railroading was not unrepresented. The Sefton Toy Train Exhibit on the same level as our exhibit was installed many years ago as the result of a \$1 million bequest from the Sefton family. Displaying oversized recreated Lionel accessory parts and the Sefton toy train collection, as well as featuring an operable tinplate layout, this exhibit exposes the public to the charm of toy trains. In addition, CSRM created a series of small display cases illustrating the different scales in model railroading with some very nice mini-dioramas and models in each major scale. Fortunately for us, CSRM recognized it needed more of a presence for scale model railroading, and thus our exhibit, in many ways, was heaven-sent.

To my knowledge, we were the first non-museum group allowed to prepare an exhibit for the CSRM. Ours would also be the first non-state-owned exhibit and

had to meet Smithsonian standards — a daunting task. We had to convince a skeptical administration that only the NMRA, the world's oldest scale model railroad organization, had the expertise and bona fides to create such an exhibit.

A memorandum of understanding between the NMRA and CSRM was signed in 2009 to outline the initial terms. A “carpet-cutting” ceremony took place in 2011 as part of the NMRA National Convention held in Sacramento with the anticipation the exhibit would be finished and installed by 2012. However, a significant delay occurred because of controversies within the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the department in charge of CSRM. These issues were unrelated to the NMRA or the exhibit. It was not until 2017 that a final formal agreement was signed between the parties. This “Proud Partnership Agreement” was signed between the Department of Parks and Recreation and the NMRA, outlining each party's respective duties. The agreement legally memorialized all the favorable conditions listed above.



We initially selected a fabricator in 2010 located in Irvine, California, with offices in the Bay Area near Sacramento. However, we never finalized an agreement with them due to the aforementioned delays within the department. By the time we signed the partnership agreement in 2017, that original fabricator was no longer in business. Since we needed a local fabricator for cost-savings, we started over.

Museum Committee member Bob Brown, HLM, MMR[®] interviewed Gizmo Productions in San Francisco, as well as several other local entities, and we selected Gizmo. Gizmo is a fabricator of museum and commercial/industrial exhibits with clients such as Disney, for whom they have created exhibits. Bob, who is also editor of the *Narrow Gauge and Short Line Gazette*, developed the exhibit's original design. Gizmo and its affiliated design company, Sibbett Group, refined this design with many agreed-to changes. While we may know model railroading, it helps to have professionals like Gizmo/Sibbett who know museums and display dynamics. Fortunately, the final design captured all the important features of Bob's design.

My role was coordinator and project supervisor, overseeing (with Bob's able assistance) the thousands of moving parts and



arranging for the crew of volunteers, specialists, and corporate partners who supplied expertise, labor, and items for the exhibit. An exhibit this complex and built to these high standards required a massive coordination effort, and knowing who to call to solve a problem or to provide a crucial piece of the puzzle was essential. It is not I alone who deserves the credit, as will be explained later.

After almost two years of planning, revisions, and acquisition of artifacts, including those within the NMRA collection, Gizmo began fabrication in 2019. Early in 2020, COVID-19 struck, stopping most work. Fabrication did continue in the San Francisco studios of Gizmo; however, there was a limit to what they could do without access to the museum and under California's strict shelter orders. It was not until September 2020 that work could resume in the museum, although the facility was now closed to the public, with final installation completed by mid-December.

The philosophy of the exhibit is simple. As Bob Brown says, to attract new people to the hobby, we need to show them what we do. The Sibbett Group and Gizmo added their expertise in museum exhibit design to that goal. They suggested the exhibit begin with a simple presentation leading to more complex displays as the visitor proceeded through the exhibit. The entrance is immediately beyond the children's play area in the South Gallery. A wall-sized picture of the Gorre & Daphetid greets visitors across from an impressive large-scale trestle with a short passenger train. Within that trestle is a matching N-scale

version. Hannah Sawyer, who works for Gizmo, built both trestles. A large sign announces the "Magic of Scale Model Railroading presented by the National Model Railroad Association."

In the curved Gallery portion, a visitor sees several non-operational layouts/dioramas across from an intriguing Timeline of Scale Model Railroading. Beginning with an 1847 Tennyson poem, "The Princess," describing an English garden party where: "...a petty railway ran..." the Timeline traces the history of our hobby with graphics and more than 400 items to the present digital age. Here, visitors learn the hobby's connection to the *Titanic*, the surprising growth of the hobby during the Great Depression, and the steady progress in realism through commercial and scratchbuilt models and products of all ages. Also on display for the first time are all nine of Pacific Fast Mail's gold-plated locomotives and their production run equivalents. These were gifts from the Japanese makers to PFM President Bill Ryan in appreciation for orders for brass locomotives. Reid Dennis, a premier collector of brass, donated these and several other rare brass locomotives.

The row of layouts/dioramas from various sources and different scales demonstrates the best in scale model railroading. They came from literally

all over. Michael Flack and the late Geoff Knott from the Australasian Region built the first layout, Smuggler's Cove, in On30. Contributed and shipped by the Australasian Region, this incredibly detailed layout portrays a fictional New England harbor-front town served by a two-foot-style railroad.

The second is Chama, an accurate Sn3 recreation of Chama, New Mexico, on the narrow gauge Denver & Rio Grande Western, circa 1955, built by Bill Peters and Jimmy Booth of P-B-L, a purveyor of Sn3 equipment. Chama was displayed for years as P-B-L's demonstration layout at conventions and trade shows. It was donated by the subsequent owner, the Narrow Gauge Preservation Foundation, and driven to California from Chama by Jimmy Booth, where it had been on long-term display at the NGPF's visitor center. Needless to say, the good people of Chama were none too happy about losing their popular display.

Next is the HOn3 San Juan Central, built by Malcolm Furlow as a project railroad for *Model Railroader* magazine.



This 8x10-foot layout was the subject of a series of articles in *MR* in the early 1980s, as well as a book published initially by Kalmbach Publishing Company and subsequently by Benchmark Publications. I was the fifth owner of this layout and donated it to the NMRA.

Across a short aisleway is Occidental, an O-scale recreation of a 19th-century California town on the North Pacific Coast by the late Boone Morrison and restored by Bob Brown, who arranged for its donation from the estate of Boone Morrison. Adjacent is MMR® Mike Blumensaadt's donated "The Dictator,"



is a wall of testimonials from NMRA members about the hobby, an exhibit on the NMRA (designed by Gerry Leone, MMR®), a display of past and present model magazine covers, plus a bookcase with how-to books and the Gorre control panels from the G&D. The Wall of Trains features 18 forty-foot-long shelves with full-length trains in all scales from Z to large-scale. Mostly donated by Kevin Shanahan and Reid Dennis, this wall features full-length and prototypically accurate passenger trains

an N-scale recreation of a displayed Matthew Brady Civil War photograph showing that named mortar and short freight train. Beyond is the late Irv Shulz' HO turn-of-the-last-century ore dock, Great Lakes freighter, and hillside station. A camelback ore train is shown. This section of Irv's St. Clair Northern model railroad came from the NMRA collection, donated by Nancy Shulz.

Finally, two scenes from the late Jim Vail, MMR®'s HOn3 layout are featured. The Westside sawmill and Holmes Lime Works each portrays California rail-served industries. Both came from the estate of Jim Vail, MMR®. Mike Davis, who had obtained the sawmill portion from an estate sale, felt it belonged in the exhibit and therefore donated it. Bob Brown and I restored the scenery and added a small farmhouse to an otherwise bare corner. Jim Vail's

daughter Katie donated the Holmes Lime Company in his memory.

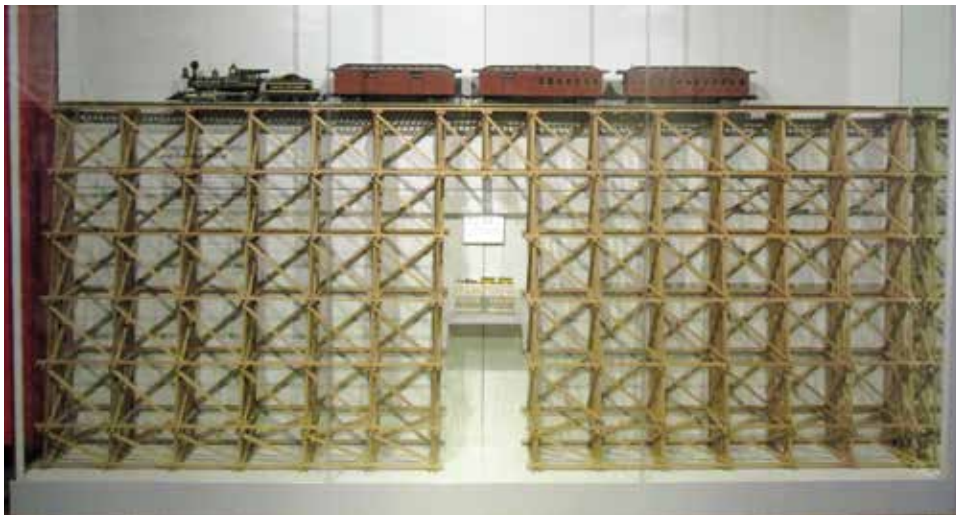
Although non-operational, all these layouts/dioramas are backed by rear-projected moving sky/cloud backgrounds, creating a dynamic animated feature. The effect is stunning. I saw a similar effect in 2019 in, of all places, Shanghai, China, at a fantastic commercial HO layout in a shopping mall. That layout featured a wall-sized projected sky with clouds, sunset, stars, and even meteorites flaming into the atmosphere.

Next, the visitor enters the large and very busy North Gallery. Here there

such as the *California Zephyr* and *San Joaquin Daylight*, as well as freights from both the steam and diesel era. Here you will also see a shelf of venerable Howell Day refrigerator cars, an Irv Shulz turn-of-the-last-century train, and interurbans from different Western lines. A handrail of model railroad passes separates the wall from the aisleway.

The most important section is a 40-foot-long "parts wall" with hundreds of parts and pieces, featuring a message on how to become a model railroader. Bob Brown, a retired teacher, wrote the message as a logical progression in the





decision-making used. Adjacent is a display on operations with Tony Koester's operational CTC machine and non-operational short HO Alleghany Midland train, working fast clocks, and John Allen's original Timesaver. When visitors push a button, the CTC machine comes to life as programmed by Seth Neumann, MMR®.

Across the gallery is the Modeler's Corner with models from John Allen, Jim Findley, Bill McClanahan, Mel Thornburgh, Irv Shulz, and Whit Towers, among others. A circa-1873 live steamer built by Eli Whitney's grandson and matching Currier & Ives print completes that display.

Finally, the operational HO Layout under Construction, constructed by MMR's Frank Markovich and Mike Blumensaadt, illustrates three stages of layout construction. Visitors can activate a train with a button. Frank and Mike also offer clinics on building the layout. They designed and built it using commercially available components, especially for the exhibit. The layout features primarily Woodland Scenics products with trains from Bachmann.

As you can imagine, the large North Gallery is indeed busy with many displays, hopefully ones that inform and inspire.

The exhibit fabrication/installation's total cost was close to \$1 million, and the

contents represent another million dollars of value, all either raised or bequeathed for museum purposes. We own the exhibit, and its design allows it to be used elsewhere in the future. The purpose of the exhibit is to explain our hobby to the public, educate them on its history, teach them how to become a participant, and provide information about the NMRA. However, this exhibit is not focused on the NMRA, rather upon the hobby. Once we attract new hobbyists, we can capture them more easily. Through this exhibit, the public will be exposed to the best in scale model railroading. Although this exhibit is designed for the public, there are many items and features of interest to model railroaders.

Going forward, the Pacific Coast Region, through President Chris Palermo, and docent-volunteers will be responsible for the upkeep and tours of the exhibit. CSRM will maintain the exteriors and utilities at no cost. Bob Brown and I have acted on behalf of the NMRA since the inception of this project, and we happily turn the reins over to PCR and members.

It has been a long journey, but with our many volunteers, donors, and corporate partners, including Walthers and World's Greatest Hobby, we can all be proud of the result. There is a plaque listing our partners and major donors. I cannot possibly list the many who have contributed, but Bob Brown and the rest of the Museum Committee members with Chair Allen Pollock deserve special recognition, as do NMRA Chief Financial Officer Frank Koch and Chief Administrative Officer Jenny Hendricks. We also appreciate the support of the NMRA leadership and Board of Directors, plus the many modelers who donated their dollars, artifacts, time, labor, and expertise, including those mentioned in this article. Mark, Joel, Hannah, Eddie, Sequoia, and company at Gizmo and Don and Brianna at the Sibbett Group are fantastic professionals who brought our dream to a reality we could not otherwise have accomplished. Without all of them, and especially Bob Brown, none of this would have happened. A formal grand opening will be held post-COVID-19, although it is difficult to predict when that will occur. Until then, the exhibit will "soft-open" when the CSRM reopens. Please do visit the CSRM and the exhibit when you can, and please share your reaction when you do. 📷