

# Climbing Aboard the Achievement Program

article by *Alan Saatkamp* and photographs by *Matt Saatkamp*

**T**wo years ago, as the recently elected superintendent of the Dakota Southeastern Division (Thousand Lakes Region), I asked members to brainstorm ideas for projects and activities for the coming year. One of the talented fellows (who even used to own his own train hobby shop) said, “How about we get more involved in the NMRA Achievement Program?”

The reaction was underwhelming, to say the least: almost dead silence among our 15 or so members present at the monthly meeting. I recall responding with some lame comment like, “Yeah, that’s a possibility,” but spoke the words without any conviction. Actually there was conviction — that few, if any of us (me included), could ever aspire toward that lofty goal of MMR or even earn any of the recognition offered within the AP.

However, during the very same meeting, the topic of the Golden Spike Award came up. In fact, if I recall correctly, our host for that meeting was a recent recipient — someone from our own division! This set my mind to wondering — if Bruce could earn recognition from the NMRA for his layout (though larger and more decorated than mine), could I?

A year and a portable layout later, here I am, recipient of not only the Golden Spike

*Below:* The Airlake Industrial Park portable switching layout provided opportunity to meet the Golden Spike award requirements for displaying cars, track laying, as well as scratchbuilding industries. Menasha Packaging (yellow walls, green trim, right) and National Polymers (gray walls and roof, rear) were scratchbuilt using N Scale Architects brick sheet styrene.



award, but also the Volunteer Certificate. In addition, certificates for dispatcher, official, and author all appear on the horizon next year! Maybe that MMR isn’t an unattainable height, but rather within the realm of possibility, not only for me, but also a number of the talented members of the division. How can that be?

It is possible — just check the AP pages conveniently located on the NMRA web site, [www.nmra.org](http://www.nmra.org). Especially of note is the reminder not to read more into the standards than what’s required. Example: For the Golden Spike, often the initial recognition for modelers, certain basic requirements for rolling stock, structures, scenery, and engineering skills must be met. My



*Below:* Progressive Rail Freight House No. 1 was scratchbuilt after development of careful plans and incorporated previously untried techniques in scratchbuilding. Security lighting, down spouts, interior and exterior detail parts, loading dock flooring, and signage help make the building more interesting as well as faithfully represent the prototype.

portable Airlake Industrial Park switching layout helped meet many of the track-laying skills and model construction requirements for this award. I’ll wager that if you’ve built your own layout(s) using today’s technology and available equipment, you probably qualify either off the bat or with a bit of tweaking and effort.

I learned the same for several of the other AP categories. For example, by participating in fellow layout owners; operating sessions plus hosting and dispatching during monthly sessions on my own layouts meet most of the 50-hour requirement for Chief Dispatcher. As a second year member of the Thousand Lakes Board of Directors and about halfway through my first year as President, the Association Official award isn’t far away either. And with several articles under my belt in national publications, plus contributions to the regional *Fusee* news-

letter, and publishing monthly newsletters for our Dakota Southeastern Division, the Author award shows steady progress.

Those are well and good you say. But what about building stuff? This is where the hobby became even more fun for me. Because of my experience during my management career, skills such as organizing, leading, and writing come fairly easily. But constructing buildings other than the way they’re intricately described on the instruction sheets from the box? No way. That was beyond my scope and capabilities — I thought. Admittedly, it seemed beyond my capabilities — at least ten years ago and before. Up until that point, I thought one had to use a Walthers Cornerstone kit for the industry

described on the instruction sheet!

Not so anymore. In fact, by taking things one small step at a time, today I find kitbashing and scratchbuilding structures an inviting and stimulating challenge. Once I drew my own plans and began adding details to the basic structures, it became enjoyable to see how much detail I could add to enhance the realism or fabricate something from scratch using raw materials. One recent example is including drain spouts. Rectangular strip styrene, cut to the proper length, bent at one end a bit on each section to represent the spout and painted, created a realistic replica, ready for use. I not only saved a few bucks, but also have the satisfaction of scratchbuilding another component of the model. The same holds true for security lighting above the doors on the Freight House No. 1, created from ½-inch rod strip styrene. None of that would have occurred to me before attaching myself to the AP.

Vital to my effort and energy during this process came from friend and MMR Gerry Leone. He encouraged me, offering ideas and suggestions. This provided a big boost. It’s important to recognize the value of col-



*Below:* Alan Saatkamp, 60, is a retired civil servant. He enjoys substitute teaching and received seminary training the past two years toward lay ministry. He completed six years as an officer of the Dakota Southeastern Division in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He's also serving his first year as president of the TLR. This portable switching layout debuted in 2007 at the Chicago & North Western Historical Society convention in Huron, South Dakota. Since then, its two-person crews experienced realistic weather conditions, ranging from a 50 degree morning in early April to an 85 degree sweltering evening in May (operating in the garage). Over 100 crew members have enjoyed switching cars during its brief lifetime, including a constant stream of all ages during "Trains at Christmas," a two-day swap meet and train show held at the Sioux Empire Fairgrounds.

laboration and sharing wisdom with fellow modelers. In fact, it's almost impossible not to meet people (folks who admire and judge your models, among others) and make new friends in the process. NMRA describes the experience as "fellowship," which seems an apt description to me. The AP definitely provides a framework within which to grow not only in your circle of acquaintances, and therefore enjoyment of the hobby, but also to enhance your skills and develop new talents.

Adding prototypical weathering and details enhance a model's realism and heighten interest. Some of that derives from observing real life and noticing how imperfect it is. For example: I periodically take a critical look at structures, such as those found in a nearby industrial park. Lo and behold: The brick work and paint jobs aren't brand new or perfectly symmetrical. Nature takes its toll — whether wear and tear, natural disasters, settling of the foundation, and so on. I recognize too that all freight cars in real life don't have a fresh coat of paint from right out of the paint shop. Likewise, the same holds true for structures — especially those that have been around awhile. I tried to keep this in mind when constructing the Progressive Rail Freight House No. 1 from scratch. I didn't worry anymore that my building might not look perfect. In fact, the better weathering job I did (rust on air handling units or equipment exposed to the elements and wear and tear, such as the truck loading dock plates), the more realism it added.

As superintendent, I see an opportunity and responsibility to do education within our division. Many of our DSED members operate regularly at my monthly sessions of the Wisconsin Dakota Railroad. They probably never thought twice about how that experience counts toward the qualifications. They're like I was two years ago before my late friend Bruce earned the Golden Spike.

It's quite a challenge to venture into uncharted waters, such as the scratch-building and kitbashing world. But guess what? I keep reminding myself that the re-



quirements for Master Builder don't require 12 models that earn 87 ½ points in official NMRA model judging. Only six have to be judged at all and achieve that level. In all honesty, I can't wait to submit a few of my structures for judging at our regional convention next May. Even if they don't earn the requisite scores the first time around, I'll learn what I can do differently to improve my modeling techniques.

After all, our family has a history of achievement in this arena, and there's someone to (literally) look up to. It's my 6-foot, 5-inch son, Matt, who, when he was a good deal shorter six years ago, earned the TLR Youth Modeler of the Year award at the regional convention. All that detail in his buildings, including the painting, figures, and weathering paid off then. He's a graduate student at North Dakota State University this year, finishing his master's degree in — guess what — architecture. And he still consults on my layout, providing scale models he built for architecture class, which I "lease" (helping him pay for his college education). After all, even though they're 1/96 on my HO scale layout, who can tell? Matt's also my photographer for the photos in this article. It's been fun to have him share the hobby with me over the past 16 years — from the time I returned to model railroading, this time as an adult.

This isn't to say that achieving MMR status is a shoo-in or easy to attain. But it is to say that many of these certificates that demonstrate an attainable level of competence and achievement deserving of recognition. For my part, a chance to schedule more learning clinics within the DSED next year is a worthwhile objective. We can learn together and from each other, just as we

have the past two years with clinics on constructing a river bed (Tim), soldering (Mike, our chief clerk and electrical engineer), and a host of other talented people, who just happen to have the talent and knowledge to help each of us on our journey, enjoying the hobby, and improving our skills.

One final observation, which I shared with my friend Gerry: Near the end of constructing my second new structure this summer, I remarked, "You know, once I learned a new skill and achieved a certain level of competence, such as in detailing roofs, I'll never go back to the way I used to do it. There's a new standard or benchmark now." Gerry agreed wholeheartedly. When we learn a new skill, it raises the bar — one not likely to be lowered in the future. It means not settling for taking the easy way out in the future — but rather making and taking the time and effort to model better. In the business world, we called it continuous quality improvement.

One caveat — of the 11 categories, the required Master Builder – Cars, admittedly appears the most challenging. My talented friends keep telling me that a freight car is "nothing more than a structure on wheels." I'll try to keep thinking and believing that as I make my way down the pike toward earning the seven certificates — including the Master Builder category. I hope you'll take a look at the NMRA Achievement Program for yourself as well as your fellow hobbyists, whether you're in a club, division, or a lone wolf. It's good to have a goal to work toward, celebrate your successes along the way, share knowledge and ideas with others, and perhaps most of all, improve your skills and satisfaction as a model railroad hobbyist. 🚂