



Keep something running

How a small switching layout can help you stay on-task for a larger project/**Eric Hansmann**

In early 2009, my wife and I pulled up stakes and moved away from our home of 24 years. The 'new' home is a classic 19th century farmhouse, but it offered little in the way of traditional model railroad space. A spare bedroom was chosen for the layout space and a variety of modeling opportunities were reviewed. After a few months, a solid plan was developed inspired by the crossing of three railroads in Cleveland, Ohio. Benchwork was constructed, materials were organized, and new freight cars were built over the first few months. But something was slightly amiss and I was unable to figure it out.

Late in 2009 an old friend came to visit and he brought along a 2x8 switching layout we had built together many years earlier to offer a hands-on operating experience for non-modelers. It is a barebones layout with track nailed directly onto a luan plywood top that is

attached to a standard box frame made with 1x3s. There are no structures or scenery. I spent a week refreshing the track and adding wood barriers at the end of sidings. Industry tent cards and blank switchlists were printed. A selection of freight cars emerged from storage boxes along with a small Alco switcher. Several freight cars were spotted at industry locations, with the

remaining freight cars placed onto the yard tracks. A few spots and pulls were scribbled onto the switchlists, the power was switched on, the throttle cracked open, and the loco moved forward to couple onto a string of cars in the yard. About ninety minutes later, I had executed three switchlists in spotting nine freight cars and pulling nine others back to the yard.

Industry spots are noted using tent cards printed on cover stock and placed along sidings. Several industries have multiple spots.





The switching layout is set up in a spare bedroom and stretches across an old kitchen table and a small chest of drawers. Suitcase clasps hold the two halves together and an old power pack keeps the loco

running. Below are the main operating tools; the switchlists, uncoupling skewers and a handy Bright-Boy to keep the rails polished.

After this short operating session I realized how much I missed operating trains in my home. In the few months since that first session, I have progressed on several aspects of the new permanent railroad. But a little time is set aside once or twice a week to pull and spot freight cars around the small switching layout. The simple layout has become an inspiration and motivation to move work forward for the bigger project. It seems this smaller, temporary layout exercises a different part of my brain and subtly reminds my unconscious of the goals for the larger project.

The 2x8 foot layout design follows Keep It Simple (Stupid) principles. It sports three industrial sidings, a freight house and team track, two yard tracks and a passing siding to run around cuts of freight cars. Each industrial siding has multiple spots for a

variety of industries. Printed tent cards note each industry spot. These industry tent cards can be changed out easily, possibly to add a different industry that was featured in a recent Railroad Model Craftsman. All rail is used code 100 flex and turnouts found at train shows and from

an old club layout. The layout was originally built to show non-model railroaders how much fun can be had in a small space without a continuous loop, and at a low starting cost. Even the lumber was leftover from other projects.



The track design began as a line schematic, but never drawn to scale. After the frame was topped with the plywood, flex track and turnouts were taped into place. Once the design was approved, track lines were drawn on the surface. Turnouts were positioned and track was fit into place. Tweaks were made along the way to avoid kinks or too sharp curves. Many of the track joints are soldered and several sets of electrical drops were made to connect the rails to the bus wires that run the length of the layout. A regular DC power pack controls the operation, but a DCC system could be connected if desired. There are no electrical components and all turnouts are hand thrown. Bamboo skewers are used for uncoupling freight cars.

Over time there has been one part of the track configuration that may be altered soon. The space between the points of the

passing siding turnouts and the end of track is limited to a small switching loco and a box car. Substituting a few wye turnouts on the current plan should increase the points to end of track space to fit two freight cars and the locomotive. This isn't a priority, just something to play with if a couple extra turnouts can be found on the cheap.

As far as operations, two people often operate the layout. One person handles the throttle while the other operates switches and uncouples cars. A highlight of the layout occurred in Elkins, West Virginia many years ago. Two former Western Maryland Railway crew members took over and executed a few switchlists. They had a great time and only asked one question; how can they do a flying switch? They were a bit disappointed to find it wasn't really possible to do in HO scale.

As we begin a long model railroad journey in planning, design and constructing our next dream, a small switching layout can offer a breath of fresh air along the way. A simple, bare-bones layout can help to keep the focus on the larger goals while offering entertainment breaks that break the monotony of track laying or wiring. The small layout also offers a test bed for new rolling stock and locomotives in those months before any track is ready for use on the larger project. Just keep it simple, keep the costs down, and find time to enjoy a switchlist or two as a break from the latest phase of your dream layout.

A Pennsy flat car is spotted at the team track in one of many moves of an operating session on the small switching layout. Prototype crews were often more concerned with leaving the car in the correct spot for

the customer than in what the customer facility looked like. This bare-bones switching layout pushes the model railroad crews to think more like real railroaders.

