

>> Follow the Soo Line across

Transition-era scenes highlight this 18 x 34-foot HO layout

By Ray Grosser • Photos by Lou Sassi



the plains

My wife Renee and I built our HO model railroad to showcase the granger setting of the Soo Line in northern Minnesota during the 1950s. Granger refers to the farmland and farmers of the upper Midwest who often belonged to the local Grange or farmer's association. We both grew up in that time and place and have strong connections to railroading.

Since we modeled so many of our favorite places, we call our layout the Grosser's Nostalgia Trip.

Watching trains run through each detailed scene conjures up many pleasant memories for us. After years of taking our sectional layout to shows and conventions, we retired it from the road and added to the main line.

1 A GP9 hauls a local passenger train past the Fasen Farm on Ray and Renee Grosser's HO layout. Renee Grosser scratchbuilt the structures from photos of a farm belonging to family friends. The layout features many superdetailed scenes.





>>The layout at a glance

Name: Grosser's Nostalgia Trip
Scale: HO (1:87.1)
Size: 18'-0" x 34'-0"
Prototype: Soo Line
Locale: plains of Minnesota
Era: 1954
Style: sectional doughnut with peninsula
Mainline run: 130 feet
Minimum radius: 48"
Minimum turnout: no. 6 yard, no. 8 main line
Maximum grade: .8 percent
Benchwork: modified L-girder
Height: 35½" to 42½"
Roadbed: ½" Homasote on ½" plywood
Track: code 70 flextrack
Scenery: Sculptamold over foam and hardshell
Control: Digitrax Digital Command Control

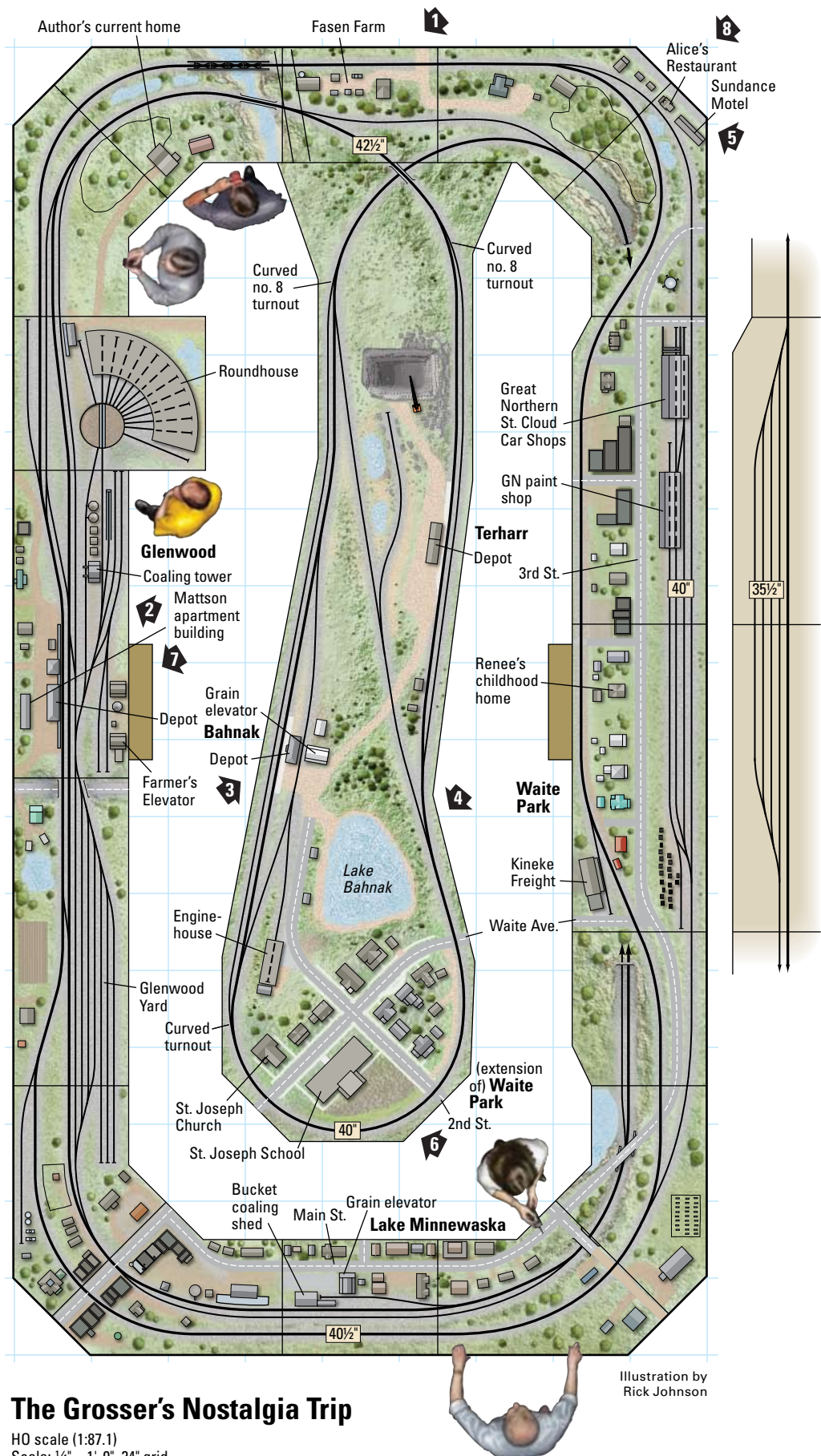
Expanding the railroad

We began building our Nostalgia Trip in May 1996. Featured in the April 1998 issue of *Model Railroader*, the layout was originally designed to be sectional so that we could more easily transport it to shows and conventions.

By 2002 we'd stopped transporting the layout to shows and constructed a new building to permanently house the railroad. Because we no longer had to worry about regularly moving the railroad, we expanded the layout from 14 x 34 feet to 18 x 34 feet. This also allowed us to add a peninsula in the center, representing the fictional towns of Bahnak, Minn., named after Renee's sister, Donna Bahnak, and Terhaar, Minn. named after another friend that we knew back in Minnesota.

Even though we no longer take the layout to shows, we still enjoy sharing our railroad with visitors. We designed the room around the layout to be comfortable for a large group of people. Just like at a train show, we want our guests to be able to view each detailed scene on our Nostalgia Trip from as many different angles as possible.

2 Engines no. 4000, a 4-8-2, and no. 1017, a 2-8-2, take on coal at Glenwood. Ray Grosser scratch-built the coaling tower using plans from the Soo Line Historical & Technical Society.



The Grosser's Nostalgia Trip

HO scale (1:87.1)
 Scale: ¼" = 1'-0", 24" grid
 Numbered arrows indicate photo locations



3 A family waits at the Bahnak depot for Soo Line train No. 53. Renee Grosser scratchbuilt the depot, grain elevator, and most of the rest of the buildings on the layout.

4 Campers arrive for the weekend at Lake Bahnak while train No. 53 meets train No. 6, a local freight. The red enginehouse was scratchbuilt by Bob Hundman.



The new section, like the rest of the railroad, represents the plains of Minnesota in 1954. We are very careful to make sure that all of our structures, automobiles and vehicles, and other details are appropriate to that date.

An accurate roster

The Soo Line was near the end of its steam-to-diesel transition in 1954, so we can run some of our favorite steamers as well as first-generation diesel power.

Before factory-painted Soo Line models became available, I painted my own Soo Line F3s and other diesels. I have a large collection of brass steamers including at least one of every Soo Line engine ever modeled. We run all the

5 Not all the buildings are northern prototypes. Although it fits the layout's setting, the motel is based on a structure in Kentucky.

>> Scratchbuilding tips

Like many modelers, Renee started scratchbuilding out of necessity. When she couldn't find model kits that resembled the structures that she wanted to model, she developed her own set of techniques that have helped her complete many superdetailed, award-winning models.

First she finds as many photos of a structure as she can. If the structure still exists, we'll take photos of all four sides and the corners. We'll also compile any dimensional data that we can, especially if the structure no longer exists.

Using the photos as a guide, Renee then sketches scale drawings of each side. These drawings provide templates for cutting the walls out of styrene and show the proper placement of the doors and windows.

Renee's preferred material is .060" thick styrene that she purchases in 4 x 8 sheets. She cuts out main pieces of the structure using a band saw then sands all the edges. She uses files for window and door openings.

With the quality and variety of commercially available window casings, siding, and doors, Renee rarely has to scratchbuild these details, which saves a lot of time. She also uses a lot of American Model Builders laser-cut shingles.

One detail that she includes that many modelers neglect is the metal flashing between the roof sections and roof and walls. For HO scale flashing, she cuts strips from aluminum foil that she then glues to the appropriate joint between wall or roof sections.

After a finished structure is painted and weathered, she mounts it to a 1/2" thick piece of Homasote using Liquid Nails. This helps make the walls look like they're resting on a foundation rather than bare earth when the finished model is installed on the layout. — R.G.





locomotives on the layout. Renee and I worked hard on our model railroad and think that's the best place to display such fine models.

I've also taken care to accurately represent Soo Line's rolling stock roster. I've built many resin car kits sold by Dennis Storzek as well as Des Plaines Hobbies Soo Line grain cars. I also built eight passenger cars using car sides sold by the Soo Line Historical & Technical Society [See the SLH&TS Web site at www.sooline.org. - Ed.]. Two of the cars on the layout are completely scratchbuilt:

a wood baggage car converted for tool storage and a gondola used at the cinder pit in Glenwood.

Hometown scenes

We've done our best to make the scenery on the layout look like the northern plains. The maximum grade on the layout is less than 1 percent. Along with commercially available scenery products, such as ground cover from Woodland Scenics, water effects made with Enviro-Tex, and tall prairie grass by Noch, we used some natural materials.

Much of the ground cover includes real dirt and gravel that we brought back with us from trips to Minnesota.

Railroads are significant to both of us. Renee grew up in Waite Park, Minn., across the street from the Great Northern Ry.'s St. Cloud car shops where her father and other relatives worked. As a boy in Glenwood, Minn., I saw many Soo Line steamers firsthand. My father was a rear brakeman on the Soo for 47 years, and our house was 300 feet from the depot.

Both towns are represented on the layout, including the yard at Glenwood



and the car shops in Waite Park. When we can, we include models based on actual structures from 1954. A few of the houses are based on photos of some of our friends' homes and businesses from other places.

Scratchbuilt structures

I consider the scratchbuilt structures to be the highlight of the layout. Although we didn't have space to model everything in the two towns, we did our best to capture some of the favorite scenes from our childhoods.

Renee scratchbuilt most of our structures from photos and any available dimensional data, and her skills are extraordinary. (See "Scratchbuilding tips" on page 68.) Along with the structures on our layout, she has built more than 200 models for others. She has won many National Model Railroad Association awards for structures and scenery.

Some of the structures were built from plans provided by the SLH&TS. These include several depots as well as the roundhouse and the McHenry two-pocket coaling tower at Glenwood Yard.

6 Train No. 53 heads past St. Joseph School and St. Joseph church. Both the school and the church are based on prototypes in Waite Park, Minn., which is Renee's hometown.

Originally Renee and I started scratchbuilding because we couldn't find kits that looked like the buildings that we remembered or wanted to model. We do have some kit-built structures on the layout, but all of the models are superdetailed or modified to fit a specific location. These include many of the bridges





and the buildings in the fictional town of Lake Minnewaska.

Running the railroad

Since we designed the layout mainly for display purposes, it features a two-track main line that supports continuous running. That way we don't have to worry about the trains as we talk to visitors or answer questions. Although we don't hold any formal operating sessions, there are some locations that would support some switching work should a visiting operator like to give it a try.

We run the railroad using a Digitrax Digital Command Control (DCC) system. Although we usually use only two DT-400 throttles, the layout has had as many as four operators at once running trains. Except for the turnouts at the yard in Glenwood and Waite Park, which are connected to control panels, most of the turnouts are also operated with DCC. The

7 Engine no. 473 switches cars at Glenwood Yard. The brown building behind the Glenwood depot is a model of the Mattson Apartment House where Ray grew up.

8 The layout was designed in sections so that it could be easily moved. No longer a traveling railroad, it's housed in a newly constructed building on the Grosser property.

walkaround operation offered by DCC is a great way to run a model railroad.

Another feature of DCC that has added to the realism of the railroad is sound. All of our steam and diesel locomotives are equipped with SoundTraxx sound decoders.

Moving on to O scale

Even before this layout was completed, we started work on an O scale model railroad, also based on the Soo. Housed in an old barn on our property, this layout provides a place for me to run some of the O scale equipment that I've built over the years. It will also be a showcase for Renee's modeling efforts in this larger scale.

We've enjoyed building our model railroads and sharing them with others. For both Renee and I, this hobby has been a great way to celebrate some of our favorite memories. GMR

>>Meet the Grossers



Residing on a farm in central Kentucky, Ray and Renee Grosser got back into model railroading in 1990. Both are accomplished modelers and have built several model railroads together. Ray is an National Model Railroad Association master model railroader and Renee has won many NMRA awards for her models.

In 2002, after years of taking their layout to shows and conventions, the couple and 24 of their friends raised a new building to permanently house their Nostalgia Trip.

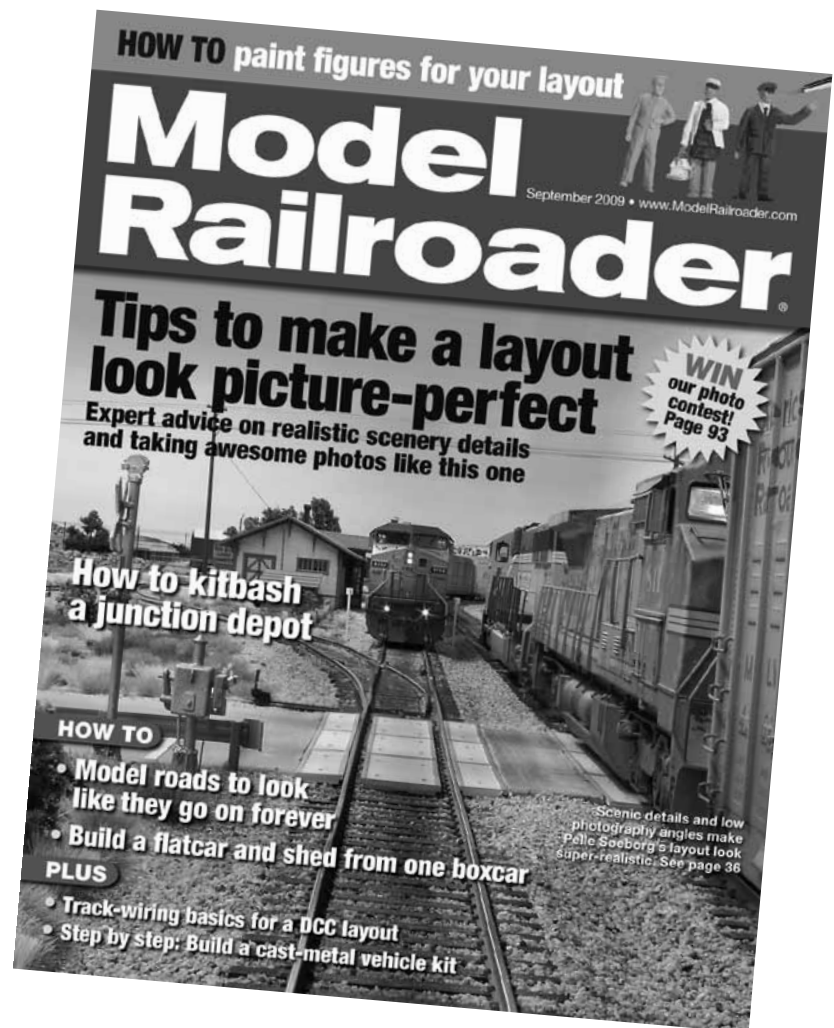
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