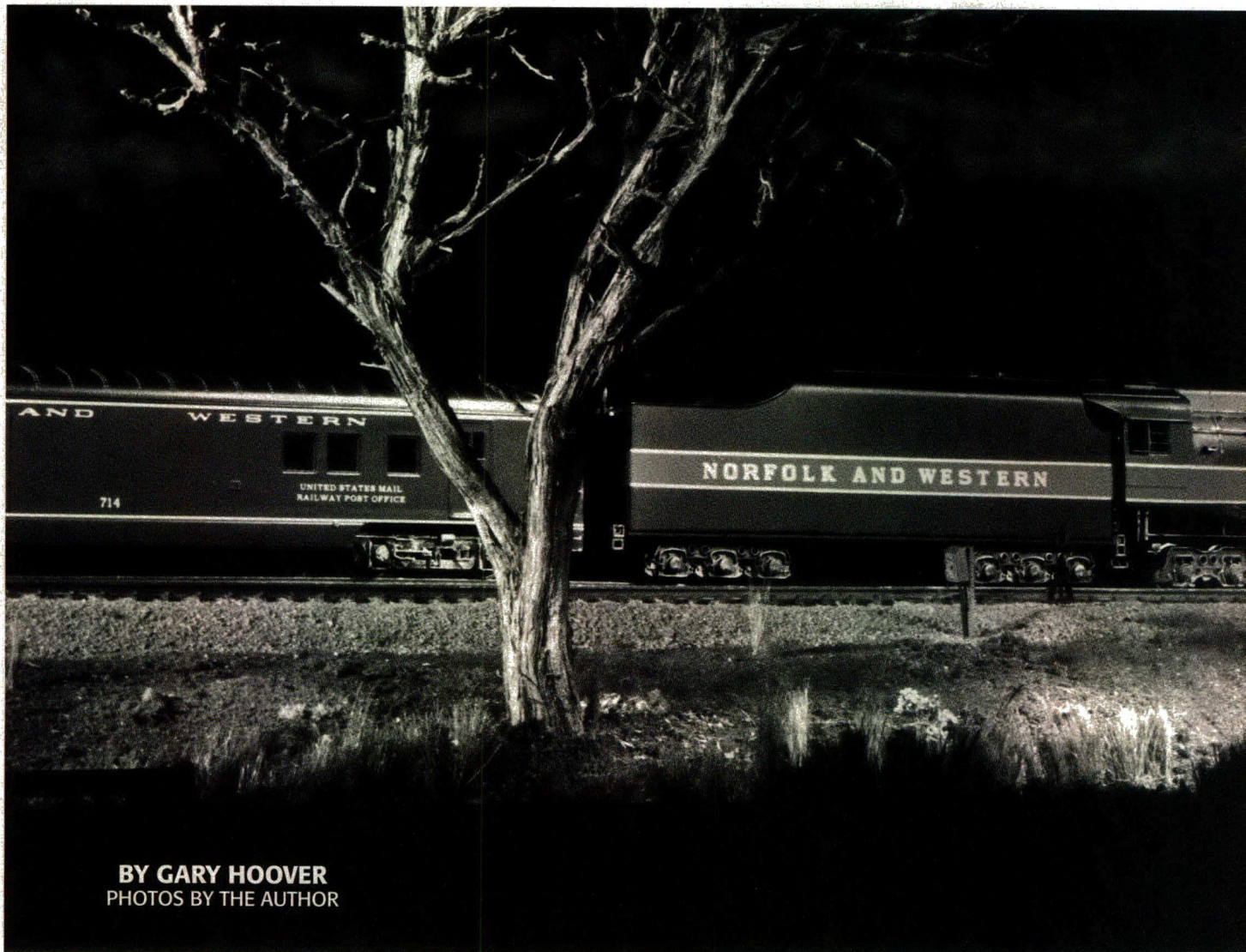


An HO tribute to O. Winston Link's classic

Final days of steam on the Norfolk & Western



BY GARY HOOVER
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Imagine one of your model railroading buddies calling to ask if you would be interested in photographing some full-size trains. Sounds good so far. He further explains that you'll need to travel several hundred miles to get to the photo location and you'll be shooting steam locomotives at night. Those engines will be traveling at track speed and you'll be using 1950s-vintage cameras and lenses. And for the lighting, you'll be using an elaborate battery-powered multiple flash system with miles of cord strung in all directions. By now you're beginning to question your friend's sanity. But when he tells you not to worry because he has

secured the full cooperation of the railroad and has enlisted the help of many of the locals, you're convinced that this is just a cruel practical joke.

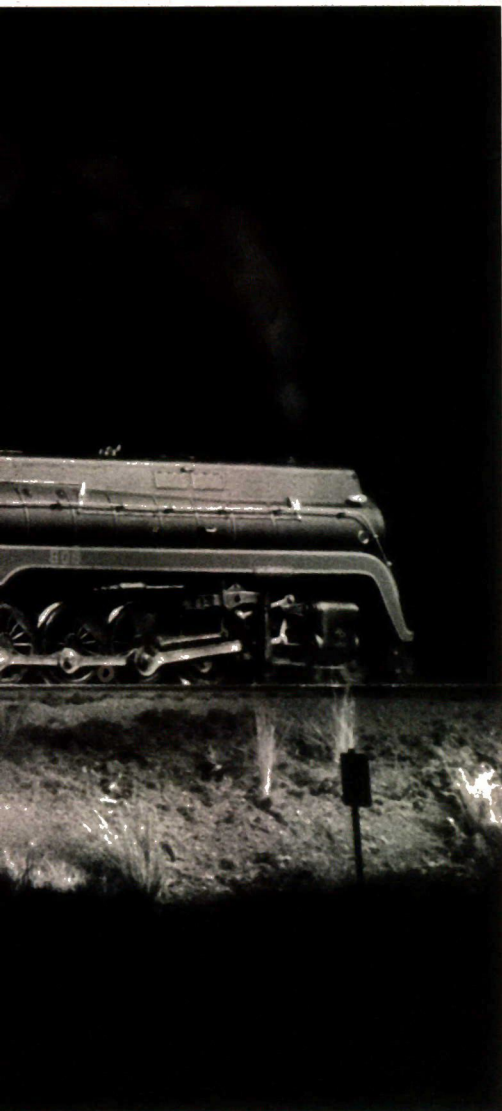
Well, this very scenario actually happened over 40 years ago when a professional New York photographer named O. Winston Link set out to document the last steam operations on the Norfolk & Western. Between 1955 and 1960, Link and his assistant traveled to Virginia and photographed steam's last breaths on the N&W. Most of these photos were taken at night. They are classics, masterfully composed and exhibiting technical excellence. Today, thanks to Link, we not only have a historical record of N&W steam, but a

true slice of American life as it centered around the railroad in rural Virginia. His most popular photos can be found in his two books, *Steam, Steel and Stars* and *The Last Steam Railroad In America*, both published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

The modeling project

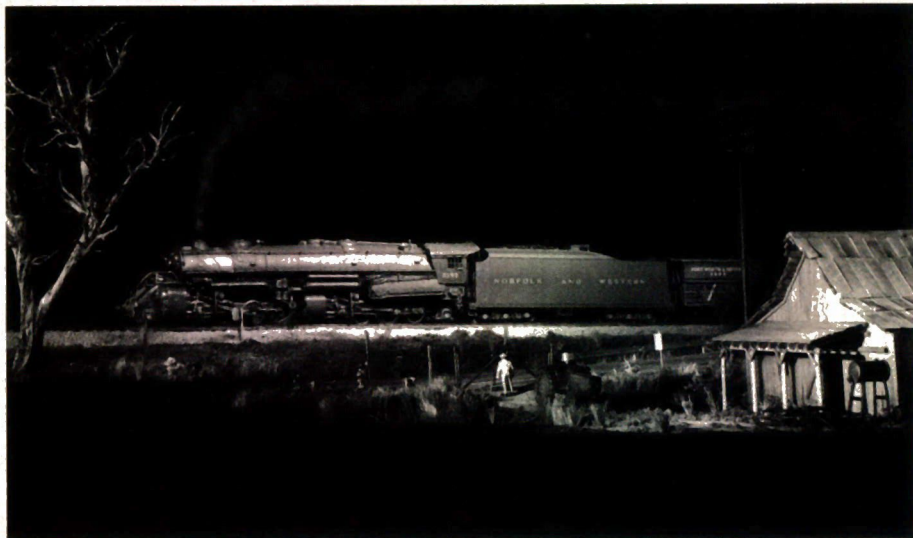
After studying and admiring Link's books, I decided to try capturing the essence of his photographic magic using a model railroad. A section of my Missouri, Kansas & Quincy HO layout that was originally modeled as a rural Illinois area (Oak Grove) was temporarily transposed to the Virginias and backdated to the 1950s.

photography



▲ This photo was inspired by one of O. Winston Link's photos taken near Max Meadows, Va. Back in the '50s, Link spent hours rigging hundreds of flashbulbs to fire simultaneously so he could take his haunting nighttime shots. Author Gary Hoover says taking similar model shots made him appreciate the master even more.

One thing I learned from the project was how versatile and adaptable a model railroad can be. In just a few square feet of layout, I took over two dozen different N&W steam photos in both city and rural settings with the seasons ranging from winter to summer. Some of the photos were taken at the exact same location on the layout



▲ It's late fall and well after dark as this farmer finishes his chores for the day and locks the gate. Link carefully posed local people for such shots. Such nocturnal visions will be possible for only a few more months, then mainline steam on the N&W will be gone.

▼ The wig-wag crossing signal has no customers on this occasion but performs its duty diligently anyway as this Y6B breaks the still country air. Gary temporarily relettered the bridge with decals placed on thin styrene panels tacked on with rubber cement.

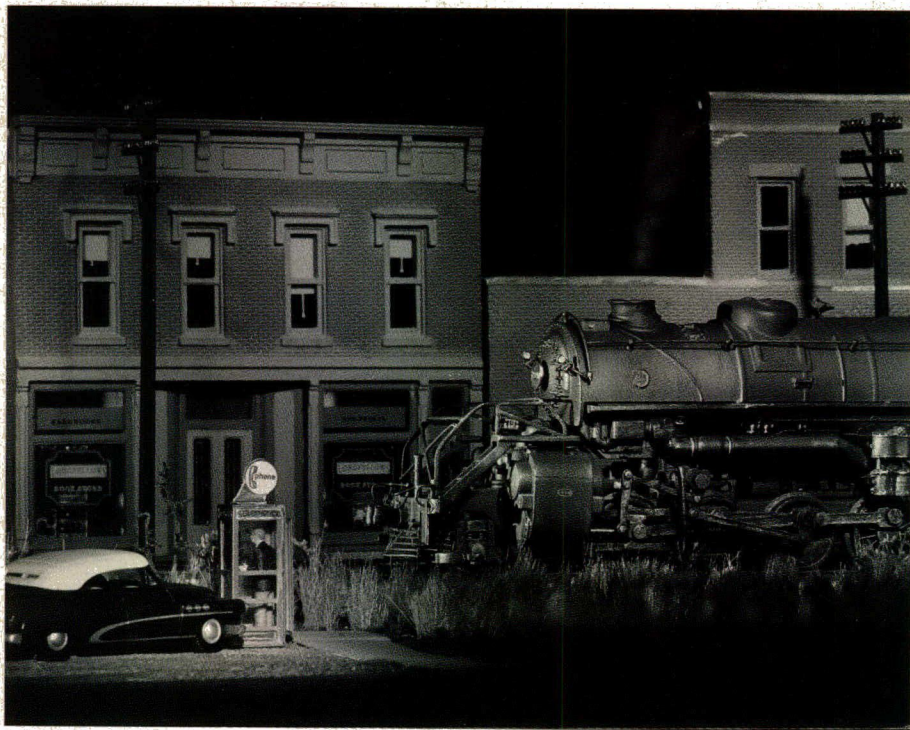


but with the buildings and scenery rearranged to give a different look.

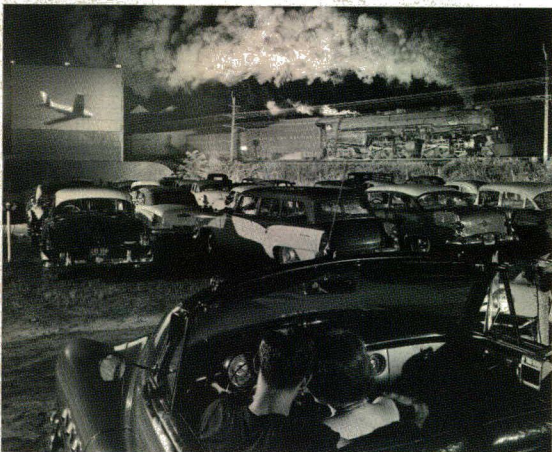
Most of the original, contemporary buildings fit in quite nicely for the N&W project. I removed the TV antennas from the roofs and on some buildings added a few old advertising signs. In buildings that were to be illuminated during the photo, I added several 12-volt interior lights. One important task for illuminated buildings is to patch all the light leaks. Many of the wall joints and roof peaks have small gaps that are unnoticeable during normal daylight viewing. But at night, with the interior lighted, the gaps are clearly visible. I found ordinary electrical tape quickly sealed the leaks.

Some structures had to be temporarily modified to fit the N&W theme. The bridge with Norfolk & Western spelled out on the side was an example. Not wanting to permanently modify the bridge, I cut, painted, and decal'd thin styrene panels of the appropriate size, then tacked them in place with rubber cement so that they could be easily removed after the photos were taken.

Never having modeled any eastern roads, I faced the challenge of finding some well-detailed yet inexpensive N&W steam power. Since these engines would be serving as props for just this project, investing a lot of money in them was out of the question.



▲ Following the master's lead, Gary placed a figure in the phone booth. In many of Link's railroad shots citizens go about their everyday business and the trains lurk like ghosts in the background. The people were carefully posed, as the trains had to be caught on the fly.



► This shot was inspired by one taken in Luray, Va., that won Link the 1957 Graflex photo contest. Gary built an Atlas signal tower for the scene, modifying the roof to better match the prototype.

◀ The best known of O. Winston Link's nighttime Norfolk & Western shots is this one, taken at a drive-in theater in Iaeger, W. Va. In documenting the final days of steam, Link also recorded a way of life that has now nearly passed from the American scene.



Locomotives and figures

Getting appropriate engines proved rather easy. I bought an inexpensive Bachmann streamlined J-class 4-8-4 and a Rivarossi 2-8-8-2 Y6b. The J was bought new and retained its factory paint job. I found the Y6b at a swap meet. It was in horrible condition but the price was right. A fresh coat of Modelflex Grimy Black paint made the locomotive look better than new.

On hindsight, I wish I had painted the J Grimy Black also. Being a slightly lighter shade than Engine Black, Grimy Black seems much easier to photograph and print. Both engines received superdetailing and weathering. One lesson learned when photographing

steam locomotives, whether day or night, is to lightly drybrush the details and contours of the model with flat silver paint. This brings out details and gives the model shape.

In many of Link's photos, people are the first thing to catch the eye. The train is often seen only as the eye begins to scan the entire photo. I wanted to capture the same effect but knew that this would be difficult if the figures didn't look real. Mostly I used Preiser and Merten figures, painting them with light colors so they would stand out better in the photos. To get better facial detail, I applied a diluted solution of black ink and alcohol to the faces. Finally, I sprayed Testor's Dull-

cote on each figure to kill as much shine as possible.

Photographing the scene

The most important item for successful night model photos is a light that puts out a strong but narrowly focused beam. At first, I used a small battery-powered quartz halogen scuba light. This worked great, but ate batteries faster than the camera ate film! I finally made a 120-volt AC-powered light using a small 50-watt quartz halogen spot bulb and a compact housing found at a local hardware store. I taped a black construction paper tube on the front of the housing to better focus and control the light.



The technique used for the night photos started out just like that for daylight shots. First the scene was roughed out in the viewfinder under full light. The structures, locomotive, people, trees, and so forth were placed where they looked best. I used loose ground foam to hide anything looking unnatural, such as gaps between foundations and the ground.

Next, all the room lights were turned off and the portable light on. Using the spot meter feature in the camera, I recorded the recommended exposure time for the structures, locomotives, and any other prominent features in the photo. The room lights were then turned back on and the camera was

focused and set on the BULB setting. Then, with the room lights off and the portable light on, I opened the shutter and painted each detail in the scene with light for the length of exposure recorded previously. For each photo, I took at least a dozen frames, varying the exposure times for each. I found the best photos came from negatives that were overexposed 1 to 2 stops from the meter reading.

Printing is an art form in its own right and much too involved to go into here. However, one item is worthy of mention. On any black-and-white night photo, great steam effects can be easily made right on the developed print in normal room lighting by applying

Kodak's Farmers Reducer (potassium ferricyanide, or ferri) to the area where steam is desired. Follow the Kodak instructions, and work in the effect gradually by allowing the ferri to stay on the print surface only a few seconds before rinsing with water. Reapply ferri until the desired intensity is obtained. Practice first on an old print.

A better appreciation for the master

This project has made me appreciate Mr. Link's efforts even more. After all, I had it easy. My photo location was as close as my basement, I could reshoot the scene as many times as I wanted, and best of all, the locomotives were standing still! ♦