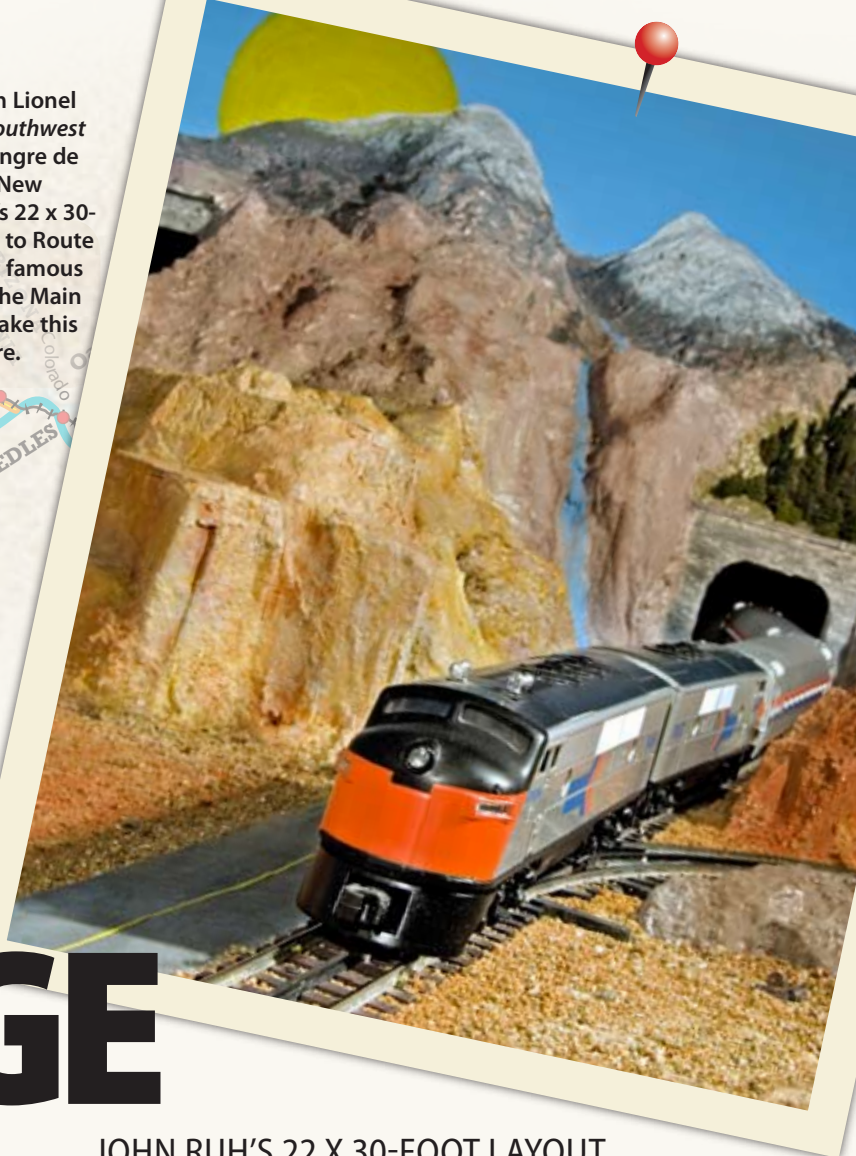
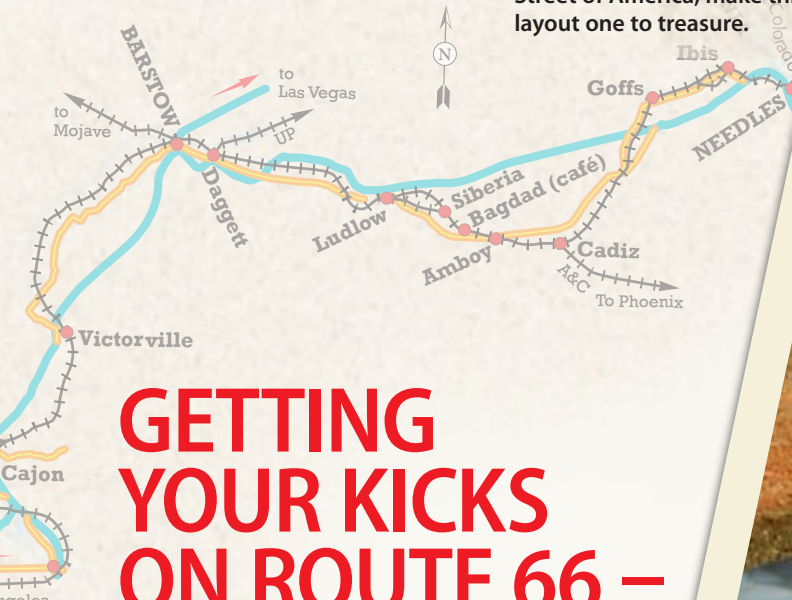




► 1. Amtrak F3s from Lionel lead the gleaming *Southwest Chief* through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico on John Ruh's 22 x 30-foot O gauge tribute to Route 66. Sights along that famous highway, known as the Main Street of America, make this layout one to treasure.



# GETTING YOUR KICKS ON ROUTE 66 – O GAUGE STYLE!

JOHN RUH'S 22 X 30-FOOT LAYOUT PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE MOTHER ROAD

by Roger Carp • photos by William Zuback

**ROUTE 66** – the two-lane highway that winds its way from Chicago to Los Angeles – has been immortalized in popular music, literature, and television. Who doesn't remember the Joads making their way west on the Mother Road of the U.S. in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or Tod and Buz tooling along in a gleaming Corvette in the hit TV series *Route 66*?

Many folks who love American railroading also share a fascination with this famous byway, most of which has been lost to time and the Interstate Highway System. Vintage photos and Route 66 memorabilia help them keep its heritage alive.

Count John Ruh among the enthusiastic and dedicated students of the country's best-known sliver of asphalt. Besides traveling as much of Route 66

as possible, he's built a 22 x 30-foot O gauge layout that captures many of the highlights of that road.

### Preserving memories of John T.

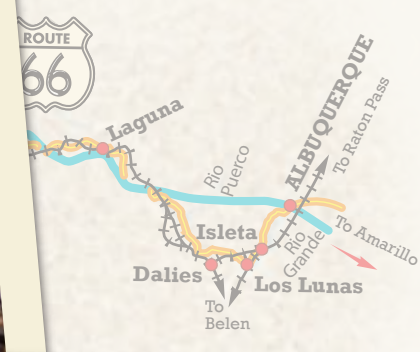
Over the past 20 or so years, John has assembled a veritable library on Route 66. Even better, he has traveled most of what's left of Route 66, often with his wife Darlene beside him in their 1967 Ford Mustang.

Those excursions through Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, and the other five states that were traversed by the Main Street of America gave John first-hand looks at the topography of the Midwest and Southwest. He saw the old motels and gas stations, not to mention the signs that had beckoned tourists to examine giant statues, Indian relics, and weird critters.

John found himself wanting to learn more about the road that had brought so many people from the prairie states to the desert and then the Pacific. More than curiosity and an interest in American history motivated his passion. Travel through the West at high speeds lures him, just as it did his paternal grandfather, who was known to family and friends as "John T."

And those friends included people who made headlines in the 1940s and '50s. Movie stars such as Pat O'Brien





▲ 2. Our journey west along the old Route 66 begins as we rush to get to Union Station in Chicago to catch an Amtrak train. Maybe the CTA cars (RailKing models from MTH) will stop at Gina's Diner so we can pick up a couple of hot-dogs, done Chicago style.

► 3. Nobody objected when we learned that our Amtrak train would need a pair of Chicago & North Western E8 units to guide it through Illinois. The K-Line diesels are smack dab in the heartland of the Land of Lincoln, with a small town and cornfields in the distance along old Route 66.



and Charles Boyer, and popular entertainers such as Bing Crosby and Jimmy Durante were among John T.'s friends. John T. wasn't an agent or a golf pro in Hollywood. He tended bar on the Union Pacific's streamlined *City of Los Angeles*, which plied the rails between that coastal paradise and Chicago. When celebrities hit the trail between the Windy City and L.A., they often took the train, spending hours relaxing in the car where John T. reigned. Although the Union Pacific's main line didn't run within earshot of Route 66, John wanted to preserve memories of his grandfather and "The Little Nugget," the bar car where John T. served drinks and listened to people. Therefore, when you stroll through John and Darlene's basement and admire the O gauge railroad that he has constructed along the walls with help

from his good friend Michael Erzen, don't be surprised if the Union Pacific makes unscheduled stops at Litchfield, Ill., and San Bernardino, Calif. It's just John T. picking up whiskey or decks of playing cards for his guests.

**An optimistic estimate**

"Two weeks, that's all it will take to do the whole thing." Darlene listened as her husband outlined his project in 1994. Just 14 days, John promised, were all he would need to build a Route 66-themed layout in part of the downstairs of their home.

More than a decade later, John continues to putter. And the O gauge layout keeps growing. It wraps around the walls of half of the basement before three sets of three-rail tracks pass through holes punched into a wall and fill the other half. A furnace and other

appliances share space in that section with John's cool versions of the Painted Desert and the Petrified Forest. For John, the challenge was not how to weave a double-track main line around a water heater or construct a mountain above a sump pump. What he had to figure out before advancing too far was how to compress hundreds of miles of blacktop and steel rail into a typical basement so that he gave visitors the feeling of traveling on Route 66. The decisions John made work so well that hobbyists in any scale who are considering modeling a specific area should pay close attention to what he did. There's plenty to be learned here. First of all, John recognized the importance of giving viewers a starting and an ending point. By creating very compact versions of Chicago and Los Angeles, he helps visitors understand



▲ 4. Nostalgia rode the rails when a Union Pacific observation car was coupled on to our train. The Lionel model brought back memories of John T. pouring drinks on the *City of Los Angeles* half a century ago. Replicas of the Gemini Giant in Wilmington, Ill., and the Chain of Rocks Bridge at St. Louis highlight this section.

where their journey opens. He needed to add just enough landmarks, notably Union Station in the Windy City. City Hall in L.A. would be a terrific addition.

Second, John decided that a blend of specific and generic scenes would



▲ 5. John Ruh is flanked by his wife, Darlene, and Michael Erzen, who contributed to John's Route 66 layout. The black-and-white photo at the edge of the pool table shows John's grandfather, "John T.," presiding over the bar on the Union Pacific's *City of Los Angeles* streamlined passenger train in the late 1930s.

strengthen the impression that visitors were motoring west. These features would guide friends and family through three time zones and many more topographical and climatic regions.

Therefore, after pulling out of Chicago, whether by train or automobile, you dash by a farm like any that you might encounter in central Illinois. Artist Michael Erzen created a field of corn, placing dairy cows in the pasture and horses in a corral next to the farmhouse.

Nothing out of the ordinary so far. Nearby, however, John and Michael installed a drive-in theater that, thanks to a VCR player, shows actual flicks to the teens parked in their tiny convertibles and pickups. Cool ... but what about the towering figure attired in green overalls and a welder's face mask that stands at attention by the movie theater's entrance?

"We weren't hallucinating," John says with a laugh. This mysterious fellow, clutching a silver cylinder in his outstretched arms, is based on an actual sight. Anyone passing through Wilmington, Ill., on what was Route 66, can check out the Gemini Giant at the Launching Pad Drive-In. A detail like this adds credence to the layout.

So does the model of the Chain of Rocks Bridge in St. Louis. A part of the original Route 66, this span over the Mississippi "bends" about 22 degrees in the center before reaching the opposite shore. John located his model away from the O gauge tracks in the foreground and used small Hot Wheels vehicles to create the illusion of distance.

A third tip that John and Michael endorse is making good use of unique products on the market. You should



▲ 6. Graffiti artists have added their own touches to the autos buried up to their dashboards at the Cadillac Ranch, near Amarillo, Tex. Even the engineer at the helm of our Amtrak Genesis slows down to see this sight, erected in the 1970s, after the heyday of Route 66.

expand your search for details and structures well beyond the sources that toy and scale modelers usually rely on. Then create scenes that highlight models that are sure to interest visitors, regardless of whether they are immersed in the hobby.

A great example of John's thinking appears after we leave the Gateway to the West (including a version of the skyscraping silver arch that greets visitors to St. Louis). We're soon in Oklahoma, where oil wells and cheap gas are hallmarks. John has the highway and the main line passing by two filling stations complete with details and signs.

The Mobil and Texaco gasoline stations aren't likely to be found on toy train layouts. These ceramic pieces, part of the Chronicles Unlimited series from Claytown Collectibles, caught John's eye at a flea market. He knew in a flash that they would look terrific in this part of the layout, amid a few other structures and the flat, arid landscape.

Yet another bit of advice that John hands down involves the use of toy train accessories. His willingness to install vintage items and his skill at melding them into realistic settings reminded me of lessons learned years ago from hi-rail guru Joe Lesser.

So, before the main line and highway duck into tunnels to reach the

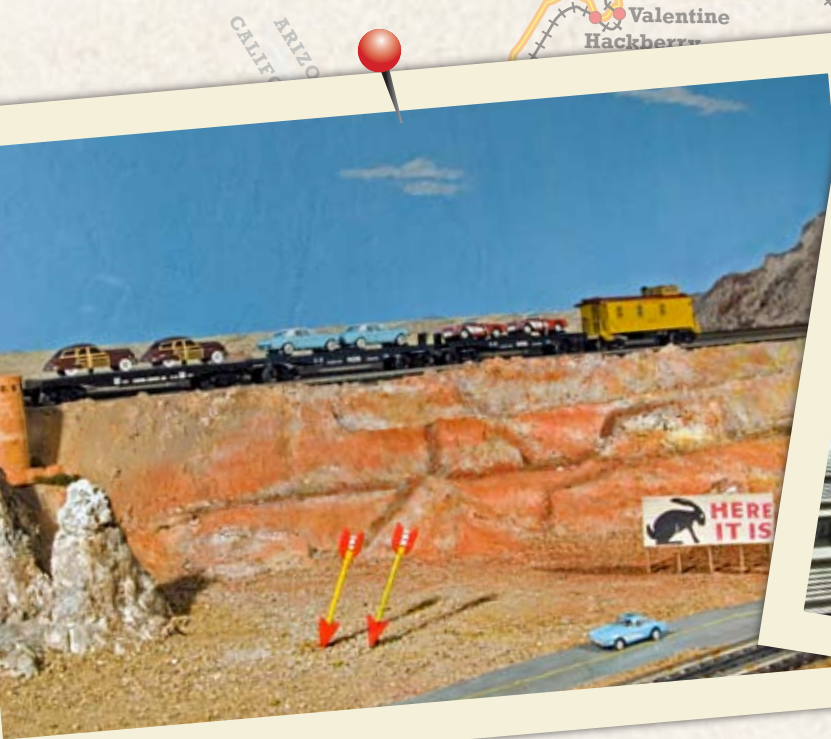


## LAYOUT AT A GLANCE

- Name:** John Ruh's O gauge layout
- Dimensions:** 22 x 30 feet
- Track and switches:** GarGraves
- Locomotives and cars:** K-Line, Lionel, MTH
- Controls:** Lionel ZW (2), MTH Z-4000 (2) transformers
- Accessories:** Lionel, MTH
- Structures:** Claytown Collectibles, scratchbuilt, Walthers
- Vehicles:** Hot Wheels, Matchbox, Seerol
- Figures:** Life-Like

▲ Whether you live near the Pacific Ocean or have never been farther west than Pennsylvania, you're sure to enjoy traveling from Illinois to California on John Ruh's O gauge tribute to famed U.S. Route 66. The numbered arrows correspond to the numbers in each of the captioned photos.

Illustration by Kellie Jaeger



▲ 7. A freight train carrying classic autos to a car show in Flagstaff rolls through the Painted Desert of Arizona on a sizzling August afternoon. I'd rather be in the air-conditioned Sting Ray tooling along by signs for the old Twin Arrows and Jackrabbit trading posts.

opposite side of the basement, John decided to indulge his love of postwar Lionel operating cars and accessories. His version of Oklahoma features platforms developed for the nos. 3462 automatic milk car and 3656 operating cattle car, along with a no. 362 barrel loader and a no. 364 conveyor log loader.

"Look," John says, "this is a toy train layout. I wanted to add some of the old models that I've always loved. Oklahoma seemed like as good a place as any for these accessories. Besides, children love to play with them. I think that even John T., a true railroad man, would have approved of having them here."

### Waltzing across Texas

Once our train bursts into the sunshine again – or is it fluorescent lights by the furnace? – the landscape has changed. Flat lands give way to barren hills that seem to stretch out to the horizon. No way to know whether we're passing through the panhandle of Texas or if so much distance has been covered that our streamliner is in New Mexico, known as the Land of Enchantment.

But John overcomes any confusion a guest may have with a scene found only on the outskirts of Amarillo. There, a group known as the Ant Farm partially

buried several vintage Cadillacs with their tail fins skyward as a work of art. (Okay, it ain't the Sistine Chapel!) Wouldn't you know that John has created a version of this unforgettable sight for his layout.

If you've waltzed across this finger of Texas, seeing John's replica of the Cadillac Ranch is sure to elicit a smile. Then you'll start reminiscing about the smells emanating from the stockyards in Amarillo and the billboards for the Big Texan Steak House, which still offers a 72-ounce slab of beef free to anyone who can devour it in less than an hour.

John combines generic southwestern landscapes with specific landmarks to model the Painted Desert and other memorable sights along Route 66 in Arizona. A sign for the Jackrabbit Trading Post in Joseph City and the namesake monuments of Twin Arrows (east of Winona) break up the monotony of speeding across the Grand Canyon State.

A few steps to the left and you're suddenly in California. High tension towers and a lonely café in the town of Daggett remind you that Route 66 is crossing the Mojave Desert, about to rendezvous with other roads and the tracks at Barstow. Soon the highway winds into Los Angeles, where it will terminate on the bluffs above the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica.

The hills, Michael modeled using a familiar method. He secured chicken wire to wooden forms for the foundation. Plaster-impregnated gauze formed a solid shell over which they added

▲ 8. All's quiet as our train drifts into southern California. Motels with rooms that were built in the shape of teepees existed along Route 66 in Holbrook, Ariz., and here in San Bernardino.

Sculpey, which has the consistency of modeling clay.

Next, Michael painted the shell with earth-colored latex paint and sprinkled on a little ground foam. Not much vegetation was necessary to capture the look of the Mojave Desert between Needles and Barstow or the nearby San Bernardino Mountains.

To be honest, though, the scenery is not what distinguishes John's layout. Rather, it's the combination of generic and specific scenes that creates a plausible replica of particular sections of America. "Believability" is John's real achievement.

### Getting more kicks

Considering that Route 66 survives only in a few places, it's a tribute to John's research that he can still add so much to his layout. New Mexico is hardly represented, so replicas of such landmarks as the neon-infested Blue Swallow Motel in Tucumcari or the Native American rock inscriptions in Petroglyph National Monument would look great.

Also terrific would be models of the U Drop Inn in Shamrock, Tex., and the sculpture of a guy that, as the Eagles sang, is "standin' on a corner in Winslow, Arizona." In fact, John and Michael will be modifying the layout for years to come, proving that long after the Interstate bypassed the highway you can still get your kicks. – **CTT**

