



# Rooster Creek

*Building a railroad and town you could live in*

by Carol and Richard Abate | Monte Sereno, California | Photos by Richard Abate unless otherwise noted

1. The GS-4 Daylight is slowing down just a bit to negotiate the turn as it winds its way through the maze of trestles on the Rooster Creek Railroad.





**M**y brother Ed and I grew up in downtown San Jose between the 1930s and the 1960s. Although we are 12 years apart, Ed and I were the only children in the family and we shared many of the same interests. The freight yards and roundhouse were within a few miles of our house. Our Dad used to take us there after school so we could watch the railroad men working on the engines. I was hooked!

### Beginnings

We became interested in garden railroading after attending our first Big Train Show in Long Beach, where Ed purchased an Accucraft K-27. During the following winter, we shopped for much needed accessories, and came up with great ideas for the coming season. We met Bob Poli, a close neighbor, who taught us how to weather the K-27. From him we learned

We dedicate this article to our good friend and chief engineer Marv Lang, whom we lost in July 2006.

the importance of weathering in all aspects of a railroad to achieve a realistic effect.

Ed's K-27 needed a place to run with a wide-radius track! Luckily, he had a large backyard. Over the July 4th weekend of 2000, while Ed and his family were in Lake Tahoe, I decided to begin clearing a space in his yard for the new garden railroad that we had been talking about for the previous couple of weeks.

In setting out, we had a general idea of what we wanted, but when you begin your first railroad, you really don't know what you are getting into. The area set aside for the railroad was sloping. We set out where we wanted the town and the railroad station, and began to grade the area.

We graded the area by moving tons of dirt and rock, then began to lay a rail bed. We put down pressure-treated lumber, track, and ballast, which was sealed with liquid concrete glue, diluted with water and soap. The trackplan started out fairly simple, but as we began coming up with ideas, things rapidly changed. We now have over 1,000' of Llagas Creek code-250 track, with 16 or 17 switches to keep things running smoothly.

**2. The district manager sits patiently in his inspection car as the K-27 is being turned. The roundhouse was scratchbuilt from plans of a full-size structure that once existed in San Jose.**

Track power is supplied by a Bridgewater 30 amp, four-throttle control unit, as well as a 15 amp, remote control, single unit. Our mining track has an automatic reversing unit on it. We can also run two, 10 amp, NCE Corp. DCC units to any part of the track via a plug-jack system that supplies power to different blocks.

We run quite a number of battery powered, remotely controlled trains. We have tried Aristo-Craft, RCS, and AirWire, and have found that the AirWire system has the best range for our railroad.

### Buildings

In the beginning, we shopped at train shows and on the Internet for building kits. As we began to customize the kits, we discovered that kitbashing a building was not that complicated. Our first completely scratchbuilt structure was an old out building. Soon we got the hang of it. About 20% of the structures on our railroad are



## The railway at a glance

**Name:** Rooster Creek

**Size of railroad:** 50' X 120'

**Scale:** Varied—1:20.3 to 1:32;  
buildings, 1:24

**Gauge:** N° 1

**Era:** 1930s to 1950s

**Themes:** Narrow gauge, Denver & Rio Grande; standard gauge, Southern Pacific

**Age:** Six years

**Motive power:** Narrow gauge: K-27, K-36 (2), K-37, 2-truck Shay, 3-truck Shay, Climax, Heisler, C&S 2-6-0, Porter (2). Standard gauge: Cab forward, GS 4 Daylight (2), F-3 A-B-B-A, PA A-B-B-A, and various small locomotives

**Length of mainline:** 260'

**Maximum gradient:** 3½%

**Type of track:** Llagas Creek flex track

**Minimum radius:** 8'

**Structures:** Approx. 45 buildings, kit built, kitbashed, and scratchbuilt

**Control system:** Bridgewater, 30 amp & 15 amp; NCE DCC 10-amp units (2)

**Battery systems:** Air Wire, RCS units



products of our fertile imaginations.

As we gained skills in modeling, we began to think big! The first of our “big projects” was the roundhouse, which was modeled after the one on Lenzen Avenue in San Jose, which existed from about 1900 through the 1970s. A preservation group had architectural plans drawn up, which I came across. I scaled the structure down to 1:20.3 to fit our largest locomotives. I found room to expand the railroad to include not only the roundhouse, but a turntable and a yard. After more dirt and rock moving, and an entire winter’s work with friends who helped with the metal work, we had a working roundhouse and turntable.

We run the turntable on a DCC system that allows us to do things like automatically reverse polarity. An infrared sensor aligns the turntable to the track. We designed two motor-driven plates that lock into the opposing track for smooth alignment. A sound system with a warning air whistle sounds before the turntable moves, to safely clear the area. All this is done with just two wires from the DCC controller.

### 3. D&RGW K-27 has been turned on the scratchbuilt turntable in preparation for the evening’s servicing.

In deciding what we wanted to include in the town, we first looked at the types of trains we planned to run. We definitely wanted mining equipment, and Ed really loved the D&RGW narrow-gauge railroad. After Ed’s first K-27, a pair of K-36s soon followed. We wanted to run both standard- and narrow-gauge trains. We also needed a logging industry, since we had Shays, a Climax, and a Heisler, and I have been in the woodworking business for over 40 years.

We also wanted to honor our family and their interests. Some of the buildings represent actual businesses that our family once owned, while others are enterprises that they would like to have had. An example is the Abate Bros. Dairy. Our grandfather and his brothers owned the dairy in north San Jose in the 1910s to 1930s. Vivian’s Coffee Shop was owned by our mother from the early 1950s to the late 60s in downtown San Jose. The Arlington Hotel was owned by my wife Carol’s family in Carson City, Nevada,

from the early 1900s until after WWII. The money used to purchase the hotel came from family-owned mines in the Tonopah, Nevada, silver strike of 1900.

### Getting the details right

In our day jobs, my brother and I are both detail oriented. This translates well to garden railroading. Bob Poli not only taught us weathering, but the importance of scale and detailing in the railroad.

Each new project seems to get more and more involved. We add details to buildings, such as electrical boxes, garden hoses, mail boxes, hanging plants, children’s toys, swings, and anything else you would see in 1:1 buildings of the era. Some of our detail ideas come from books. We have tried to research not only the history of the trains, but a complete history of the time, which we incorporate



into the railroad. We are constantly adding to and reworking scenes to make them more realistic. For the streets we used concrete mixed with decomposed black granite to give them the right texture. Our goal is to be able to look at Rooster Creek, and just “walk into town and live there.”

This year we discovered the fun of animation for the ice facility. We wanted the ice cubes to run down the long conveyor at a slow speed. We used two, 1.5V gear-driven motors to pull the chain conveyor belts. C-cell batteries, installed in a

nearby building, work perfectly, supplying power that lasts for days. The platform worker that pushes the ice blocks into the hatch is driven by a similar battery-and-motor system in the PFE car.

### Open houses

One of the first things we learned after joining the Bay Area Garden Railway Society (BAGRS, our local club, and one of the largest in the country) is that hosting open houses is part of the fun of garden railroading. While an open day is great for learning and getting ideas for your own railroad, it is really just a fun day to get together. Since our first open house in 2002, we have hosted many for the club and for family events. In the last five years, over 1,500 people visited Rooster Creek. They have come from 44 of the 50 states, and from as far away as England, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

In 2006, our railroad was on the tour at the National Garden Railway Convention. Bringing Rooster Creek to life takes three to four 16-hour days and the assistance of a team of at least 10-15 people. Ed’s grandchildren, Emily, Abby, Oliver, and Evan, have wonderful imaginations

**4. The Rooster Creek Fire Department is always ready. Attention to detail brings the scene to life.**

in setting up the scenes and towns. We have many “gardeners” to keep the foliage in check, and, of course, the “hardware guys,” who make sure the track is clear, switches are working, and all the wiring has power. By the morning of the convention we were ready!

### Flora on Rooster Creek

While Ed is the gardener of this twosome, neither of us really understood what was meant by gardening to scale. Bonsai was just a concept to us—something we had heard of, but really had no idea what we were getting into. Luckily, again, we found wonderful people to help.

Choosing the best plants for our railroad was especially new to us. Our local club held a seminar at a nursery that specializes in bonsai and small plants. We began to learn which plants would work with the scale of the railroad, as well as which ones could be adapted to our area. We also needed plants that would grow quickly enough to add a realistic look within one season.

BAGRS members were the first people



**5. A policeman enjoys a donut outside Carol's Bakery, named after the author's wife. All of the signage is hand painted.**



## Plants on the Rooster Creek

Monte Sereno, California  
USDA Hardiness Zone 10

### CONIFERS

Dwarf Irish juniper  
*Juniperus communis* 'Compressa'  
Dwarf Japanese garden juniper  
*Juniperus procumbens* 'Nana'  
Dwarf Alberta spruce  
*Picea glauca* 'Conica'

### SMALL SHRUBS AND TREES

Japanese maple

*Acer palmatum*  
Green Beauty boxwood  
*Buxus microphylla japonica*  
'Green Beauty'  
Dwarf myrtle  
*Myrtus communis* 'Compacta'  
Rosemary  
*Rosmarinus officinalis*  
Dwarf Chinese elm  
*Ulmus parvifolia* cultivars

### GROUNDCOVERS

Blue Star Creeper  
*Isotoma (Laurentia) fluviatilis*

Irish moss  
*Sagina subulata*  
Scotch moss  
*Sagina subulata* 'Aurea'  
Baby tears  
*Soleirolia soleirolii*

### ANNUALS

Geraniums  
*Pelargonium* varieties  
Sweet alyssum  
*Lobularia maritima*



6. A view of the Abate Bros. Dairy, below, from the Quail Ridge enginehouse. Newly planted groundcovers and annuals will quickly fill the slope leading to the barn.



7. The Arlington Hotel, with the Twin Rivers stamp mill in the background. Both structures were scratchbuilt. Low-growing groundcovers provide foundation plantings, but artificial flowers are used in the hanging baskets on the balcony.

PHOTO BY BOB POI

to give us ideas. From there we found a nursery that offered programs on plants for garden railroads. We began stockpiling plants as if we knew what we were doing. After a winter, and losing some plants to frost, we got serious. While we will probably never be bonsai experts, we learned more about what will work in our area, and how to adapt standard annuals to our needs.

An example is alyssum, which we use to represent scale hydrangea bushes. It is easy to contain and inexpensive to replace. Nancy Norris, who has a very green thumb, has been our other saving grace with plants. She not only gives good advice, but also helps to trim and maintain our garden.

Ed wanted a water feature in the railroad. We found a plumber who worked with us to set up first a pond, then the river. Because we really liked the sound

of the gurgling water as it flowed over the rocks, we later added another creek and two waterfalls.

### Power center

The real heart of Rooster Creek is in the gazebo. This strategic structure was part of the original landscape of the yard, before the railroad came. We completely rebuilt it for the railroad, adding a control cabinet with a weatherproof counter top. The lid hinges from the back, with pneumatic lid stops so we don't break fingers. The cabinet houses the air-switch regulators and the track switches, as well as controls for the water pump for the river, waterfalls, pond, and sprinklers. All train power is housed here, too. The air compressor to power the pneumatics is located next to the garage.

In the gazebo we installed a 17" TV monitor with a built-in recorder that

enables us to see the track from an engineer's viewpoint. We mounted a camera on the C&S N° 60. This is helpful to our engineers, especially kids at the open houses, when we let them run the trains. All the different systems that we utilize enable us to run up to five different trains at once.

### Things we've learned along the way

As with all endeavors in life, hindsight is always 20/20. Rooster Creek is no exception. The first thing we did not think of

[www.gardenrailways.com](http://www.gardenrailways.com)

For videos of the Rooster Creek Railway, courtesy of Tim Csabanyi, visit [www.gardenrailways.com](http://www.gardenrailways.com) and click on the "For beginners" link.



was that locating the railroad in a large grove of pine trees might be a problem, with the needles constantly dropping.

One of the things that we did right the first time was to realize that, while putting the town, residences, and businesses together, we needed input from people who were not so focused on the railroad.

Initially, we wanted Rooster Creek to be a town where we would like to live and work. As Main Street took shape, we quickly realized that, for a more authentic look, we needed store fronts and business

names hand painted by someone who knew the art of sign painting. We contacted our neighbor, Rey Giese, who has been a sign painter in the Santa Clara Valley for over 50 years. Even though he's in his 80s, he hand lettered all the signs we brought to him and also came up with some great ideas that we had not thought of. Thanks to his skill and knowledge of the "right look" for the era, Rooster Creek has just the feel we were looking for.

Using kit buildings to begin our railroad was a great idea at the time, but if we knew then what we know now, we probably would have learned more about scratchbuilding in the first place. One good thing about kits is that they quickly make your railroad look like it is beginning to come together. We gradually learned that it is easy to modify kits with paint, moldings, signs, and other details to make them unique.

We also began by thinking too small. We thought only of one small town, a rail yard, and some track. Human nature being what it is, we probably would have been scared off if we had begun by initially dreaming up what our railroad has become today. We started small and kept adding on. This might not have been the

**8. The Union Ice Company is a necessary stop on the Pacific Fruit Express route. The ice platform has an automated conveyor that brings the ice out to the cars. The facility is modeled after the Roseville, California, PFE Company. Blue star creeper, a small-leaved groundcover with pale blue flowers, is just beginning to cover the ballasted areas.**

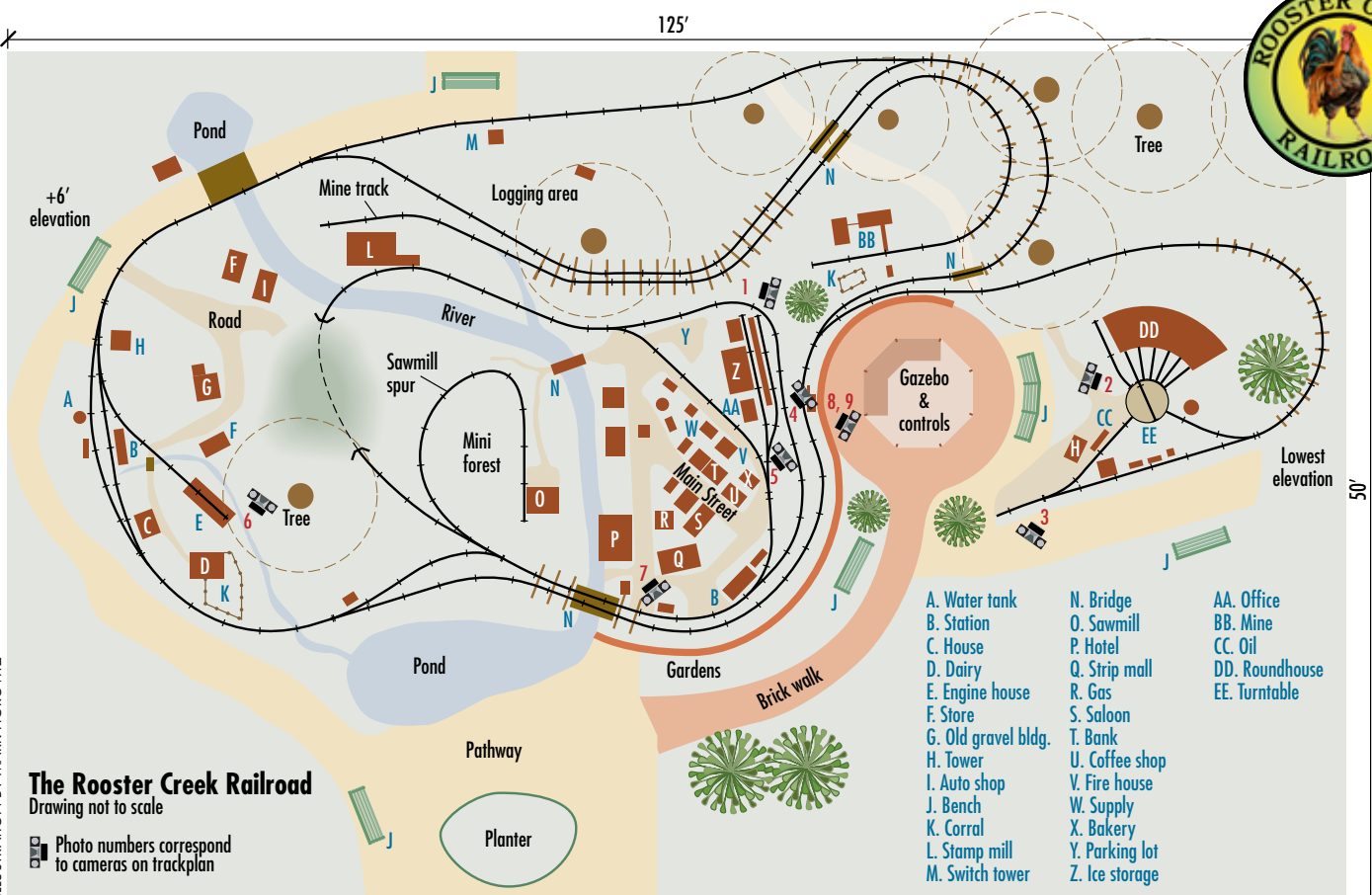
best urban planning, but tackling one area at a time seemed more doable then.

Our advice to anyone thinking of beginning a new railroad is, "Think as big as you can, then add some more, and begin drawing out what you would like." Track radius is hard to change once all has been laid. Find the largest locomotive you'll ever want, note the radius needed for turns, plan accordingly, then add a little more.

Take the time at the beginning to accommodate anything that will be underground with accessible PVC or metal conduit. We buried air lines and wiring directly in the ground and thought we were doing a great thing, until we began planting and using a shovel and trowel. Not only will conduits protect your buried wires and lines from humans, they will also help stop animals from gnawing on anything they find.



**9. This fellow works all day, pushing ice into an unending line of PFE cars. The figure is animated by a motor concealed in the car he's standing atop.**



It is a continuing battle to keep gophers, moles, raccoons, deer, squirrels, and opossums from taking up residence in Rooster Creek. We have learned what plants our uninvited guests love to snack on. We set no-kill traps for “relocation” purposes, but we still have lots of unwanted visitors. With the advent of West Nile virus, it has become vitally important for any railroader who has a water feature to take steps to avoid creating areas of standing water where mosquitoes can breed. We constantly monitor the mosquito fish in the pond and keep filters and pumps working properly.

### Maintenance and storage

Although we live in a mild climate, we do not leave everything on the railroad out in the cold. As we began acquiring locomotives and cars, we decided to store them in their original boxes. We soon realized that we couldn't enjoy them if they were stuffed away in boxes. We needed a room! A small guest room in the house became our train room. We built three powered tracks on the long wall so we could work on engines without going outside.

We measured all the rolling stock and designed a deep storage unit built into

Ed (left) and Richard Abate, known in their local train circles as “The Brothers,” have been interested in railroads, both model and full size, since they were children growing up in San Jose.

### About the authors



PHOTO BY CHRIS ABATE

the wall, with shelves and track so the cars can be slid back and forth. Then we got the Super Chief with lighted cars, so we added a shelf with track above the closet and desk area, with a power switch so we could turn on the car lights.

We get a lot of rain that can wreak havoc with the buildings, so most of the buildings in Rooster Creek come in for the winter, housed in the garage, where we also have our workshop. For the few structures that remain out all year, we have made covers from wood or heavy plastic. This is especially important for

the turntable to keep the wiring intact.

All accessories come inside too. We steam clean everything and store them in covered, see-through plastic boxes so they will be ready to set out the next season. We also repair and touch up any damage before storage.

If you went to the movies in the 1950s, you may remember a musical called *Brigadoon*, about a magical town that appeared once every 100 years. Rooster Creek, like *Brigadoon*, disappears in the winter and reappears in the spring, bigger and better than ever. **II**