



PLAYING TRAINS WITH THE BOYS

The story of the Historic Lionel Layout at Riverhead

By Ron Hollander

In the early Fifties, when I read over and over Bantam's *Model Railroading* book "prepared by the Editorial Staff of the Lionel Corporation" and dedicated to J. Lionel Cowen, there was one chapter that I always skipped. In fact, in 65 years, I had never read it until now. For one thing, it had only one picture, a squished drawing of a layout captioned "Club Pike" that could have been anyone's. For another, the text was dense like my school history book. Finally, it didn't seem to have anything about trains. The chapter was "Model Railroad Clubs," and I had no interest in joining a club.

Until now, and the Railroad Museum of Long Island.

I was looking for someone to repair my prewar trifecta of 97 coal elevator, 164 log loader and 165 magnetic crane for my fledgling layout. My friends Peter Hoffman, John Germano and I were touring the club layouts open for the holidays near me on Long Island, about 78 miles east of New York. RMLI was our last stop.

We walked into a fully landscaped wonderland such as I had once salivated over in the Lionel showroom of 1949. There was the din of steam whistles and of diesel horns. Trails of smoke hung over the ballasted GarGraves track (though the original had tubular) as thirteen trains added to the happy racket.

A Long Island Rail Road 4-6-0 steamer, a model of number 39 the museum is hoping to restore, climbed the grade from the "subway" level at the front of the layout, just as in the showroom of 68 years ago. The fourteen by forty foot layout (eight feet longer

than the original on which it was loosely based) seemed to stretch into the immeasurable distance of my eight-year-old memory.

Best of all, there were 74 push buttons around the three-foot-high layout with which children could operate a who's who of Lionel accessories. Most of the great ones were there: Milk car, crossing gates and watchman, diesel coal loader, barrel loader and unloading gondola, water tower, newsstand, switch tower, oil derrick, icing station, log dump car, even American Flyer's Gabe the Lamplighter and drum loader. After a while I even let the kids get to the milk car. I talked with a few volunteers. I was hooked.

True to its name, RMLI, founded in 1990, is an educational, non-profit 501(c)3, state-chartered museum. But the sheer joy of playing with the trains made it a club for me.

Joining was as simple as coming to the Tuesday work sessions, and almost as an afterthought paying yearly dues of \$50 (\$30 for seniors). There was no probationary period, no forcing plebes to sing "I've Been Working on the Railroad" while jeering members threw smoke pellets at them.

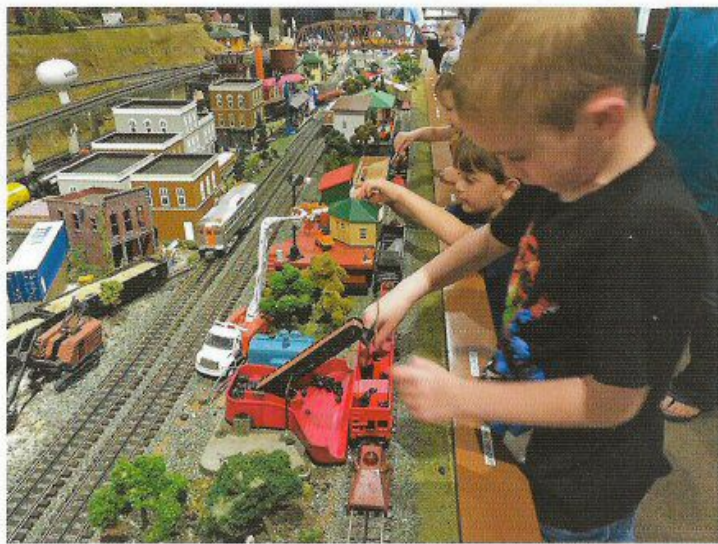
I was among kindred spirits. We talked the same short-hand of "700E" and "F-3" and "standard gauge." I didn't have to temper my enthusiasm. I

didn't have to apologize, nor to justify playing with trains as I did at neighborhood barbecues: Yes, they're the same trains I had as a kid. No, they aren't for my son. And—yes, again—I am still buying more. At RMLI I was back with my best friend Mitch on his mother's,



blue, living room carpet, racing my turbine against his 622 ding-donging around the track. I was home, with the gang I never had.

"The kids come here and they have fun," said Lenny Joerg, a retired construction supervisor who helped frame the renovation of the 1910 lumber shed



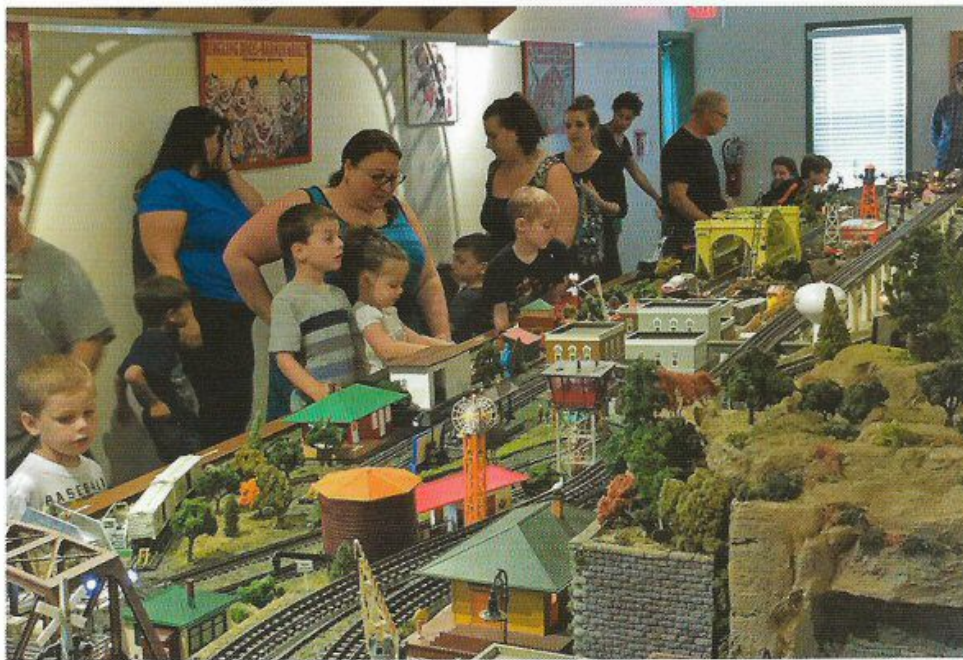
now housing the layout. "That's our selling point. That, and the way everyone gets along in a special kind of camaraderie."

That camaraderie is evident in the volunteer work crew that by the grace of the model railroading gods has an expert in every phase of operation. Though there are only 25-30 in the regular group (the museum's total membership is 300), it's kind of like a ball club with MVPs at every position.

Lenny is the master repairman (he did my accessories and a wall of my locomotives), Bill Doyle can do anything with wood, from building a curved, three-track trestle on the layout to restoring original 1914 coal mining carts outside. Les Orlick matches him in metal.

Ed Hertling is a retired electrician and steam fitter. Dennis Straus builds electronic circuit boards to control the layout, while Steve Musso has traveled for Lionel and MTH, demonstrating TMCC, Legacy and DCS systems.

Russ Lowell, who worked in electronics at



Brookhaven National Laboratory, built the Christmas "train in the tree," a tight helix within the outline of an evergreen, while at the other end of skills, John Thompson taught himself to operate heavy machinery for outdoor projects. Al Hamilton does most of the painting, including restoring the outdoor 86-foot turntable, and the indefatigable Garry Brooks oversees all layout maintenance.

While some of the regulars are not train collectors in the conventional sense, and do not even go to York (horrors!), Ray Frankie is the tinsplate expert on the pre-war 0 and especially standard gauge circling above the layout on a suspended metal right-of-way built gratis by the local Craftsman Storefronts and Glass contractors. And me? Why I guess I'm the one inexplicably omitted in the Bantam book, the skilled worker every good club needs. I'm the writer.

Unlike other clubs that may only be open two holiday weekends, RMLI is open from April to November, an astounding 34 straight weekends for an all-volunteer organization, plus seasonal events and educational programs that draw some 6,300 visitors annually at \$12 a head.

Presiding over all this is volunteer president Don Fisher whose daily uniform of engineer's overalls reveals his passion for railroads of all sizes, from a Z-gauge display layout in the gift shop under Francis Amendola, to the mammoth 1926 G5s Class 4-6-0 steam locomotive #39 on a nearby siding. Fisher, who has been reelected president annually since 2008—the year before the layout was acquired from Lionel—sees his mission as preserving railroad history as a window through which to view Long Island's growth.

Retired as a public school audio-visual director, Fisher is a fulltime president who may give a presentation at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania one day, and work with volunteers driving tent pegs for RMLI's two-day Rail Fest the next.

"The history of railroads on Long Island embodies the human experience," Fisher said. "It's the progression of our existence, and it excites and

fascinates me. It's a worthy story that needs to be preserved and told."

The museum is actually two museums, one in Riverhead, NY that has the layout, and another in the seaside resort town of Greenport, 25 miles farther east on the Long Island Rail Road, the oldest railroad in the country still operating under its original name after 183 years.

The Greenport museum is housed in an 1892 freight station, an exemplar of 19th century railroad architecture. Greenport also has a 1927 LIRR wood caboose, an insulated Pennsy boxcar from 1960, and a vee-shaped snowplow affectionately dubbed "Jaws" whose plow is decorated with gaping teeth. There is also a 32-foot HO model of Greenport.

Riverhead has a slew of real rail equipment in addition to the Lionel layout which for me is the heart of the museum, despite some older preservationists who have been known to wonder why toy trains are in a railroad museum at all. They have only to see the children's faces when the Texas Special emerges from a tunnel to have their answer.

The 1.6 acres are circled by a 16-inch-gauge, ride em' F-7 from the 1964 World's Fair in New York pulling three, open passenger cars at a maximum speed of six miles per hour. Joe Tibaldi, a high school sophomore, moves the train out from its shed, but is too young to drive with passengers over the 750-foot right-of-way. At fifteen, Tibaldi is the youngest of the regular crew. Richie Miller, who built the magnificent circus at one end of the layout (he used to sell the tents at York), is the oldest at 90.

The museum owns three steam locomotives. Two are being renovated at Strasburg, PA, but an 0-6-0 industrial tank locomotive from 1923 has been cosmetically restored. Brooklyn Eastern District Terminal #16 was the last steamer in regular revenue service east of the Mississippi when it was retired in 1963 from the Brooklyn water front. Now children line up to pull the bell cord above its boiler number plate, and in December, Santa Claus "rides" to Long Island on it.

RMLI also owns two diesels and nine pieces of

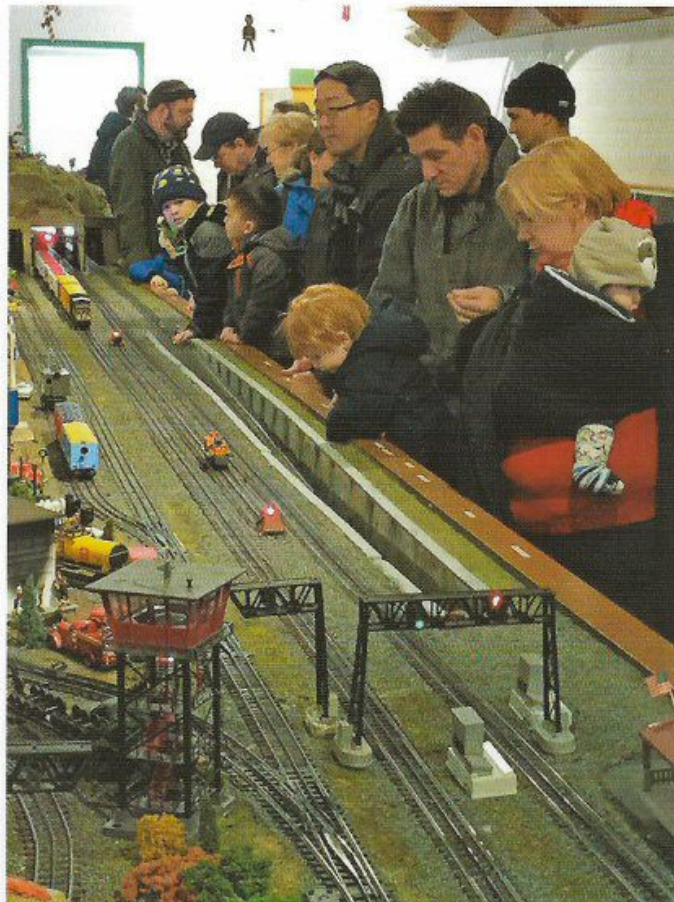


retired rolling stock. There is also an outdoor, 36-foot G-gauge layout. But it is the Lionel layout that is the jewel in the crown of the museum. Many museums have rolling stock and even working steam locomotives, but none but RMLI can claim stewardship of the last in a line of legendary layouts that from September 5, 1900 graced the showrooms of the company synonymous with toy trains, Lionel.

The layout came to RMLI in 2009, when Lionel was leaving Chesterfield, MI for North Carolina. The museum was already working with Lionel on its collectible car program that now has 21 cars and nets about \$30,000 towards RMLI's \$225,000 annual

budget. The layout, built by employees in 1992, was going to be discarded. RMLI asked if it could save it. Lionel agreed...if it could get it immediately, and move the 7,000-pounds of wood, wire screening and plaster the 700 miles to Riverhead.

"It was 40 feet long," said volunteer John Peck who went to Chesterfield in the first scouting party to prepare the layout. "It don't bend that easily out the door, you know." Peck, who had done some construction on his own home, crawled under the layout in a forest of two-by-fours, marking ten saw cuts (eventually expanded to fifteen) to divide the layout into manageable sections.





"We were under pressure, and it wasn't always the sweetest time," he recalled, grinning. "There were lots of arguments that took a two-by-four to settle, but we got the planning done."

Richie Walker, another volunteer who received a Marx freight set literally when he was born, was in the second group that actually moved the layout. "I took one look at it, and my first reaction was, 'Are you kidding me?'" Walker said. He and six others worked for almost three days cutting the layout into 300-pound chunks. "You'd have a couple of Scotches, a burger, and fall into bed, you were so tired," Walker remembered.

The museum bought a 40-foot container for trucking the \$250,000 layout to Long Island. They needed every inch of it. "When we were done, you couldn't fit a magazine in that container," Walker said.

The layout hibernated for the almost two years it took to renovate the decaying lumber shed and turn it into the Lionel Visitors Center which opened April 9, 2011. Today the museum has about 90 locomotives that rotate on the layout under Brooks's direction, but the Tuesday crew still has work orders waiting for it after the trains have run twelve hours over the weekend, and a few, little, wandering hands have done their mischief.

The layout is intentionally less than three-feet high for children to push the buttons which have doubled since the original 37. To my surprise, there's no Plexiglass shield around it, despite one of the four main lines running right along the edge.

"The worst thing we find is maybe a truck gets moved from one side to the other," Lenny said.



The layout's main lines are powered by five ZWs on the elevated con-

trol "tower" overlooking the central mountain level as on the 1949 layout, with KWs and MTH Z1000s on set voltages under the floor for the overhead tinplate trains and accessories. The first time I went up in the tower to run it, under the tutelage of Kent Howell who does cleaning and painting along with Joe Finora, I was torn between being lord of the largest layout I'd ever run, and nervous over embarrassing myself. Would I push that tempting ZW throttle too far, wrecking the Amtrak limited? Would I forget and over-accelerate the freight down the grade? (Impossible, I learned, because both legs of the grade are on fixed voltages just for first-timers like me.)

Actually, large as it is, the layout is intentionally easy to run, and only requires one operator in the tower. Once the trains start, there's really nothing to do but blow a whistle or horn occasionally (if the engines have them). There are only three operating switches which throw automatically to vary the route on one of the main lines. Besides the engineer, two volunteers are at the layout to reload the milk car and icing station, put logs back into the dump car, refill the 397 coal loader, and to help the kids.

The historic displays in the yard notwithstanding, the museum feels most like a club at the Tuesday lunches. It's all casual: Long tables in the work room, paper plates, plastic forks, easy food like pizza, fried chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs. I was never a fire fighter, but I think this must be the comradeship of a fire house. Talk is relaxed about why the Long Island passenger cars are shorting, when will the eight-foot Hell Gate bridge above the layout be finished, what's delaying the suspension bridge, and how many more locos can we get at York. It only falters when somebody blunders badly, and slips into politics!

Otherwise it's a club. We're together in a joint venture we love. What we are on the outside or before we retired doesn't matter. Here we're all linked by the toys of our childhoods.

*It's a wonder we don't do
our homework together.*

2019 © Ron Hollander



416 Griffing Avenue,
Riverhead, NY 11901
www.rmli.org