

NMRA BULLETIN

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2025 NMRA National Convention Dates and National Train Show Reservations:
July 14-19, 2025 – Novi, Michigan <https://nmra2025.com/>
Train Show Booth Reservations—Jenny Hendricks Registrar - P.O. Box 1328, Soddy Daisy, TN 37384-1328
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• 2026 Chattanooga, Tennessee • 2027 Tacoma, Washington

rev 2/24/25

M. DAVID MERRILL

EARNs

MASTER MODEL RAILROADER® #784

Keep the Steam Up

“Please! Please!” Despite their limited resources, my parents finally yielded and gave my younger brother and me an O-27 Lionel train — the spark that ignited my lifelong passion for model railroading. We purchased turnouts, expanded our circle of track, bought a second locomotive, and tried to figure out how to run two trains simultaneously with minimal success. But the thrill of the hobby had already taken hold of me.

“I have something for you,” said a business associate of my father, who presented me with a copy of *Model Railroader* magazine. “Wow, these trains look very real compared to our Lionel train!” From that day forward, I was inspired to create scale models rather than tinsplate.

While in high school, at age 15, on a trip with my parents, my brother and I wandered around a town in New England while my father worked and my mother stayed in the hotel writing. “There is a hobby shop that sells scale model trains!” I exclaimed. I was raised in Farmington, a tiny Utah town, and I had never seen a hobby shop of any kind before this experience. I was wholly engrossed as we wandered the shop for over an hour. Before we left the shop, I used some of the money I had brought along for the trip and purchased two Roundhouse boxcars, which I assembled after the trip. (Both are still running on the Ascape Tension & Sulphur Gulch Railroad more than 70 years later.)

My brother and I embarked on the ambitious task of building a layout in our bedroom for our new HO railroad. We purchased a Mantua switch engine to pull our boxcars. However, we soon discovered the challenges of corrosion on brass track and the difficulty of attaching the track to a piece of plywood. We never got to scenery or even structures. The one issue of *MR* did not provide sufficient instruction for constructing a successful model railroad. Despite these setbacks, my passion for model railroading continued to grow.



The next ten years were occupied by finishing high school, a couple of years at Brigham Young University, and a two-year mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I married my high school sweetheart, finished my undergraduate degree, attended graduate school for my Ph.D., and started my career as a university professor.

We lived in Palo Alto, California, where an announcement for an open house for a scale model railroad club came to my attention. My son (age 8) and I spent the evening captivated by the most marvelous model railroad I had ever imagined. My love of scale model trains

rose to the surface despite my busy schedule at the university.

My son earnestly requested, “May I have a train for Christmas?” It had to be HO, so we purchased a diesel locomotive, several freight cars, and some nickel-silver track (I learned my lesson about brass). We fussed about starting a layout but never got the train running in California.

When we moved back to Utah, I built a small under-the-bed layout for my son, and we finally had a working model railroad with some limited scenery. By now, I also had a subscription to *MR*, had joined NMRA, and became a life member (1968).

We built a new house on top of a basement with a shop and a railroad room. I designed a modest track plan, built some benchwork and roadbed, and began laying Code 70 rail on individual wood ties with scratchbuilt turnouts. At this point, more than 50 years ago, I decided to participate in the Achievement Program.

Based on *MR* articles, I scratchbuilt a bobber caboose and a coal shed. I also built several craftsman wood kits, including LaBelle passenger cars, Silver Streak boxcars, and several craftsman structures from Campbell, Scale Structures Limited, and Fine Scale Miniatures. I also acquired a brass 0-6-0 switcher. However, the layout moved slowly, and we never got to the scenery stage before we moved again.

During a consulting trip to Monterey, California, I was granted a private visit to John Allen's world-class railroad. During this visit, I vowed to have a floor-to-ceiling mountain on my layout someday. His many articles in *MR* had already inspired me, and the opportunity to visit the Gorre & Daphetid Railroad in person made me determined to build my dream railroad someday.

We moved to Logan, Utah, for my appointment to Utah State University's faculty. By now, four of my six children had already left the nest. We built a custom house with a shop, train room, and family room in the basement. I continued to build craftsman structures and freight cars. I also purchased several brass locomotives: Balboa UP 0-6-0 Switcher, United Denver and Salt Lake 2-6-6-0, United Pacific Coast Shay, and United Logging Climax. I was determined to build my dream layout.

I designed a layout for the train room and started construction with a small yard near the door and merely a track loop around the rest of the room.

One particularly frustrating day in my career, I told my students I would be gone for three weeks, gave them assignments to complete, and went to the hardware store to purchase the lumber I needed to build the railroad's benchwork. During the next three weeks, I built most of the benchwork and roadbed for the railroad I had planned.

If John Allen could use a fanciful name for his railroad, so could I. Because frustration at my job had motivated me to move forward with constructing my railroad, I decided to name it the Ascape Tension & Sulphur Gulch Railroad. It

was to be an imaginary branch line of the D&RG, set in 1937 (the year of my birth) in the fall when the scenery was the most colorful.

As a faculty member, I sponsored a professional workshop every summer. I suggested that our guests might appreciate a social in our home as a more personal part of the conference. The first person to arrive said, "I understand you have a model railroad in the basement. Can I see it?" I descended to the railroad room with this guest and never left the basement for the entire evening. Each year, the finished portion of the railroad expanded, a few more structures were added, and our guests visited the railroad to see how it progressed.

With the benchwork mostly completed, the plan's implementation began in earnest. Much of the track was installed, and the scenery started. I used turnouts and track from the previous railroad but did not continue to lay individual rails on wood ties; but extended the railroad with flex track and some commercial turnouts. The layout was open-grid benchwork. The first mountains were created from crumpled newspaper covered with plaster-of-Paris-soaked paper towels, finished with ground foam and some weed trees. Each year, the finished portion of the railroad expanded, and a few more structures were added.

Several years after we arrived in Logan, I took a group of Boy Scouts to see Lee Nicholas's world-class Utah Colorado Western Railroad in Corinne, Utah. After the visit, Lee indicated they wanted to find more operators for their regular monthly op sessions. I operated on the UCW once a month for several years until I moved to Saint George. Unfortunately, I did not keep track of my time during these op sessions, or I would have easily qualified for the Chief Dispatcher Certificate.

Operating on the UCW was a fantastic learning experience. This interaction taught me more about model railroading than I had learned in the previous part of my life. Based on what I learned at the UCW, I revised my layout to include cardboard armature-cheesecloth-plaster scenery, used a spline roadbed under the remainder of my track, and redesigned the railroad for realistic operation.

The crowning scenic element on my railroad was a large trestle set in a mountain that went from the floor to six feet (my John Allen dream).

The original control system for my railroad was standard DC. I did have a power pack that would allow me to plug in a controller at different points around the layout and run more than one train. However, the railroad had sections that had to be switched between controllers. Lee's UCW used a wireless infrared control system called Rail Lynx (an alternative to DCC). After operating on his railroad, I replaced my DC system with Rail Lynx for wireless, walk-around, and multiple train control.

I thought I was in my forever house and that my railroad could keep growing. However, my wife died of cancer, I remarried, and we decided to move to Saint George to escape the cold (my wife was a California girl). I lamented having to leave the railroad that had been evolving for 16 years. "You can always build another one," was her attempt at consolation. Later, she admitted that little did she realize the amount of labor and time involved.

I packed everything I could salvage, hauled the scenery and benchwork to the landfill, and put the packed-up railroad in storage, where it spent the next five years. We built a new house with a second story on one wing for a train room (a basement was impossible).

The new ATSGRR was designed for operation. The railroad can accommodate up to six simultaneous operators. Trains travel eastbound from staging via the midpoint of the helix across the railroad, returning to staging via the top of the helix or westbound to staging via the top of the helix to the midpoint of the helix. In either direction, cars for the industries on the railroad are switched out at the Ascape yard, and eastbound or westbound cars from the railroad to destinations represented by staging are switched into the through trains.

The railroad has 15 locations for local traffic. A coal train serves Clear Creek Coal, and a mine train serves Park City Silver King mine.

Track buses, turnout motors with LED indicators, return loops, traffic-controlled turnouts, locomotive receivers, and structure lighting provided sufficient opportunities to qualify for the Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical Certificate.

Special scenic features include Whetstone Ridge, a six-foot mountain hiding the helix, Echo Canyon cliffs and tunnels, and five photo backdrops with integrated scenery qualified for Master

Builder – Scenery. The scenery was constructed using cardboard strip armature-cheesecloth hand-carved plaster and the Woodland Scenics technique learned from the builders and operators at the UCW.

Selections from 23 scratchbuilt and 26 kitbuilt structures, including the large trestle at Sulphur Gulch, qualified for the Master Builder - Structures Certificate.

There are more than 75 freight cars and two passenger cars on the ATSG, most weathered. Four scratchbuilt cars and four craftsman kit cars, including a passenger car, qualified for the Master Builder – Cars Certificate.

Members of the Color Country Model Railroad Club occasionally assisted with the construction of the railroad. We

had several work sessions where I demonstrated the construction techniques I learned from UCW.

Doug Whetstone, who often helped construct the ATSGRR, encouraged me to run for the board of directors of the Rocky Mountain Region. Surprisingly, I was elected and served on the board for three years, qualifying for the Association Official Certificate. I was then elected to serve as Superintendent of the Southern Utah Division, where I've served since 2017. Each year since 2009, except for 2020 – 2022, along with the Color Country Model Railroad Club, I've sponsored a three-day open house for my railroad, receiving more than 100 participants each year, thus qualifying for Association Volunteer.

A full-page photo from my Logan ATSG was published in *Model Railroader* (2002); an RMR convention clinic on Scenery Challenges (2019); articles Building Whetstone Ridge (2021), and Echo Canyon: Challenging to Spectacular (2024) appeared in the *NMRA Magazine*, qualifying for Model Railroad Author.

Certificates Earned
M. David Merrill, MMR® #784
Model Railroad Engineer–Electrical
Master Builder – Scenery
Master Builder – Structures
Master Builder – Cars
Association Official
Association Volunteer
Model Railroad Author

MMR EARNED

DAVID ADAMS

EARNs

MASTER MODEL RAILROADER® #780

While I have been a member of the NMRA since 1972, I was a latecomer to the Achievement Program — not for lack of encouragement from Jim Vail (MMR #207, deceased) and Jack Burgess (MMR# 136), who encouraged me to work through the requirements prior to the NMRA 2000 convention held in Santa Clara, California. In April 1994, Jim Vail even showed up at the house and presented the Golden Spike Award to me to encourage me to get started. Jim was the PCR AP Chairman then, and as he dated the award April 1, 1994, I was not quite sure what to think other than this was pretty neat.

I admit I was unfamiliar with the requirements in the various categories, but it seemed like a lot of work with an underlying expectation that models would be entered into NMRA contests for judging. As it turns out, meeting the requirements was a lot of work, but models did not have to be judged in an open NMRA contest. I model narrow gauge, and back then, I thought my time could be better spent working on my layout — the Denver & Rio Grande Western Durlin Branch in On3 — and the models needed to support realistic operations. Jim and I developed a narrow gauge operating/builders group in the area and organized monthly operating sessions. Over time, that group list was used to share ideas, modeling progress, and tips and techniques, and it continues to this day.



For the past 30-plus years, I have served as one of the organizers of the annual PCR Layout Design and Operations meet held the week before the Super Bowl. With help from the operating group, numerous oper-

ating sessions and open houses have been hosted for many model railroad events in the San Francisco Bay area. During operating sessions, I signed time books for guest operators who were working on their

Chief Dispatcher Certificate. My most recent attempt to give back to this wonderful hobby is as one of the organizers of the National Narrow Gauge (NNG at Groups.io), which hosts a monthly Zoom meeting focused on narrow gauge to keep the interest alive between National Narrow Gauge Conventions. We are in our sixth year of “Off the Beaten Track” Zoom shows. Giving back to the hobby has always been important to me, and I have presented several clinics and published drawings and articles aimed at narrow gauge.

I have attended a lot of National Narrow Gauge Conventions, a few NMRA National Conventions, a few Region Conventions, and very few Division meets (they seemed to always fall on scheduled operations dates). Thanks to Charlie Getz, Bob Brown, and Jim Vail, plus experience gained at the 2004 NNGC in Santa Clara, I knew a lot of the NNGCs were a partnership between the local NNGC organizing committee and NMRA Region. In fact, a lot of the volunteers at the NNGCs were not narrow gaugers themselves, but were NMRA members and standard gauge folks. In 2018, I decided to take another look at the Achievement Program and the connections to narrow gauge modeling.

I reviewed the list of MMRs and found a number of narrow gauge modelers in that list, including friends of mine. Who knew? I then reviewed all the requirements and concluded I had already done the work needed for Author, Chief Dispatcher, Model Railroad Engineer – Civil, Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical, and Master Builder – Scenery. I am a record-keeper, so for the Author and Chief Dispatcher certificates, I just had to make sense of all the records and present them so Frank Markovich, Earl Girbovan, and Jack Burgess could read through the package and see the requirements were met.

The next three certificates were a lot more work. The layout met all the technical requirements, but I needed to shoot photos, scan diagrams, schematics, and plans to show how the technical requirements were met. The goal of this was to have Frank and Earl be familiar with how the requirements would be met before they showed up to witness the work on the layout, and hope others in the certificate approval path could also see how the requirements were met. In some cases, I put together PowerPoint files so I could integrate photos, diagrams, and text. During this time, I started to read all the MMR stories in *SCALE RAILS*, eagerly

awaited the next installment of *NMRA MAGAZINE* Senior Editor Cinthia Priest’s “Destination MMR,” and reread all of Jack Burgess’ articles on the Achievement Program and everything on the NMRA website. I also let my railroad buddies know I was working on the program, and in turn learned several of them were also working on the AP (Hello Joe Green, Keith Stamper, Gerry Cornwell, and Marc LaChey). The encouragement from those who had already earned their MMRs (Craig Symington, Bob Brown, Pete Smith, Russ Segner, Earl Girbovan, Frank Markovich, Dave Clune) and those working toward that goal was amazing. With five certificates in hand by November 2022, I had two left to work on: Master Builder – Cars and Master Builder – Structures.

The layout had a lot of structures, many scratchbuilt, and a lot of rolling stock, some scratchbuilt, but mostly kit-built. I did not have the variety or quantities needed for the certificates. Fortunately, structures and rolling stock planned for the layout would fill in the gaps. I asked Jack if the scratchbuilt 5-inch scale, 15-inch gauge caboose on display in the lobby at the 2004 NNGC in Santa Clara could be considered for merit judging, and he politely said no. To meet the requirement for a passenger car, I scratchbuilt a model of the D&RGW’s second name parlor car “Durango” to bring up the rear of my San Juan passenger train, and the last structure needed was the Chama roundhouse and shop complex, circa 1920, scratchbuilt during the COVID lockdown in California. Clinics on both of these endeavors were presented. When Frank and Earl showed

up to evaluate for merit award the last of the rolling stock and structures, I benefited from the structure rule change put through at the Long Beach NMRA National Convention in July, allowing for three-sided structures up against a backdrop to be eligible for a merit award.

While working toward the last two certificates, I experienced what so many before have noted — the program makes you a better modeler. I tried new materials and techniques and scratchbuilt many parts rather than using commercial parts, which (in my eyes) resulted in better models than my previous efforts. Along the way, I used methods shown to me by friends and, in turn, could share those with another (Hi Keith) on his path to MMR.

In retrospect, I should have started on the Achievement Program when Jim and Jack first encouraged me. I would have built better models, and the “paperwork” would have been much easier! I know a lot of narrow gauge modelers who should be MMRs based on their work, and I hope my journey offers some inspiration for them. Who does not want to build better models? We also need more narrow gauge modelers. What a great hobby!

**Certificates Earned
David Adams, MMR® #780**

- Model Railroad Author**
- Chief Dispatcher**
- Model Railroad Engineer–Civil**
- Model Railroad Engineer–Electrical**
- Master Builder – Scenery**
- Master Builder – Cars**
- Master Builder – Structures**

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