



# Tom Johnson's Logansport and Indiana Northern



– By Don Hanley  
Photos by author & Tom Johnson





## Modeling on a shelf layout ...



Lead photo: L&IN #29, a former Lehigh and Hudson River Alco C420, is passing the approach signal for the crossing with the former Erie Lackawanna main in DeLong IN. The Farm Bureau Co-op fertilizer is in the background.

1. It's mid-morning and 29 idles patiently, waiting for the crew to finish office work in the yard office.

In the middle of an Indian corn field near Kewanna, Indiana, sits a modest home that houses one of the most detailed layouts built to date. The layout is of none other than Tom Johnson's Logansport and Indiana Northern. Many on the MRH forum have admired and envied of Tom's work on the

MRH forum. I had the privilege of spending an afternoon with Tom discussing his approach to model railroading.

**MRH:** Tom, as a transplant from Indiana, when I see your work it brings back memories of my many years living near Fort Wayne. Let's start with the basic question. How did you get started in the hobby?

**Tom:** I got started when I was in the 5th grade, with an American Flyer train set followed by a Lionel FA Texas Special. I sold the Lionel train to help fund an Athearn set with the old rubber-band drive Santa Fe F unit. I purchased the Athearn set from the City News Agency hobby shop in Plymouth, Indiana. I didn't have enough money so I put it on layaway. At the time,



2. The yard office in Logansport is a nondescript metal building that serves the L&IN very well.

I earned \$2.50 a week sweeping the floors of my cousin's barbershop and used my earnings to get the Athearn set out of layaway.

My first layout, built on the typical 4' x 8' sheet of plywood, I operated throughout high school. After graduating high school I attended Manchester College. There was no time, or room for model railroading during my four years in college, so I sold them, and purchased a stereo system to put in my dorm room.



**3: Van Tower has been abandoned and sits forlornly at the crossing while Norfolk & Western hoppers rumble over the diamond it once protected.**



**4. Lucerne is a typical rural town in Indiana with mini mart to take care of the few locals' household needs and a grain elevator. The brick building houses the offices for Kent Feeds. The L&IN blocks South Street as the brakeman connects air hoses. The PRR cast iron crossbucks give clues to the heritage of the line.**

A couple of years after graduating college I began working for the Plymouth, IN school system as an art teacher, and I rediscovered the hobby. This time I began building shelf-type layouts and have built that type of layout ever since.

**MRH:** What time period have you chosen to model, and what lead you to this time period?

**Tom:** I model the 1980s. I love farm scenes and covered hoppers. Jim Six and I go back and forth about boxcars vs. covered hoppers servicing elevators. Jim is a member of the boxcar

camp, and I belong to the covered hopper camp. We go back and forth about it but all in good fun.

I also choose this time frame because it was before graffiti become a dominant feature of many freight cars. I don't like the graffiti on the cars, so that was also a determining factor of the era. During this time many short lines (some with very short lives) were created as the class 1 railroads spun off many lines that were not profitable or marginally profitable. Here in Indiana there are many old secondary lines that were spun off



**5. It's harvest season and three farmers are talking about the weather, crop yields, and politics, oblivious to the L&IN crew picking up carloads of grain behind them.**



**6. Thomas Hardware is the other business still in operations. The locals provide just enough business to keep it going, but no one is getting rich.**

and abandoned. So I stitched together a short line based on an old abandoned Pennsylvania branch line in northern Indiana.

**MRH:** Why did you choose to model typical Indiana flat land?

**Tom:** I grew up in Indiana, it's home, I know it, and I like modeling what I can see. This is farm country, I love the grain elevators, small towns, and rural areas of the state. When I want to model a particular structure or scene, I can go out and photograph and measure it. If I were to model say something in the Southwest, it would require special trips to go and photograph the area and structures.

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8. L&IN 29 is just easing across CR 650 S at a blistering speed of 10 mph. Even with a short train it takes a little time for it to clear the crossing.

**To view the track plan details, please zoom in.**

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It would be very difficult for me to create the feel of the Southwest when I live so far away.

Modeling the area also has its own challenges. Like how do you hide the entrance and exit into the area under the stairway? If I were modeling a mountainous area, it would be a simple, make a tunnel. The key was to align the track in such a way as



**9. The passenger station at Grass Creek sits in the weeds boarded up. Its days are numbered. If the railroad doesn't knock it down, Mother Nature will slowly do the job.**



**10. 354 is going through typical Indiana landscape of corn, fences and numerous small wooded areas.**

to block the view as much as possible. The view block is also enhanced by having the line go through a wooded area.

**MRH:** Modeling to your passion, it keeps you focused and enthused with the hobby. Could you tell us some of your thoughts on model railroading?

**Tom:** Wow, that can cover a wide range.

I believe it is important to focus in on a specific era. Pick a range of two to three years. Next is the season you want to model, winter, spring, summer, or fall. Finally pick a location. When you define these parameters, it will help you focus in on what you are attempting to create. It also has an added benefit; it keeps you from purchasing a lot of unnecessary things.



**11. The elevator at Kewanna is a part of the Wayne Feeds group. During harvest season elevator sidings are full of hoppers waiting to be loaded with either soybeans or corn.**

Be sure that you are modeling what you really want to model. Pay attention to what you like and what gets you excited. I choose what I like, and I haven't been bored with the layout. I believe that the same will be true for everyone.

I also like to keep the layout simple. I finally converted to DCC and onboard sound. When I was using my DC system, I used an old PBL sound system and ran the sound through eight speakers located under my layout. I like the effect from the larger speakers. There is a lot more range and richness of sound that come from the larger speakers compared to the small speaker in a locomotive. I simply felt that DCC is the present and future of

model railroading and it was time to convert. I do like the sound coming from the locomotives instead of under the layout. But I will admit the under-layout speakers had great sound.

As a former art teacher I view model railroading as painting in 3D. You have to think about the composition of the scene, the focal point, the peripheral areas of the scene and so forth. It is also important to have your lighting in place. Colors change depending on the light on them. (Tom turned some lights off and then back on, and the effect on the scenery blending in with the backdrop was very noticeable.)

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**12. Here is an nice view of the Kewanna elevator. It is typical of most elevators that have grown over the years as crop yields have increased.**



**13. The DeLong Farm Bureau CO-OP fertilizer plant is in the foreground and the elevator behind. The PRR standard signal is the approach signal for the crossing of the former Erie Lackawanna.**



**14. The Farm Bureau CO-OP is typical of many grain elevators in the Midwest, which starting as a single structure and expanded over the years as crop yields improved.**

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Overall I would say my philosophy is model what you love, and less is more. I like to keep it simple. Even a simple layout can keep you busy for years. As I said before, I love the rural Indiana country and I am still excited about the layout.

**MRH:** You answered my questions regarding your control system and your sound system. Could you tell us a little about your operating sessions?



**Tom:** There are times that I will begin an operating session switching Logansport and put my train together, then head north to DeLong. I will stop the train under the stairway where it is hidden from view to simulate time and distance, and go do chores. I will come back later in the day or evening and finish the operating session. I also allow the engine to sit and idle by a country store while the crew goes inside to grab a snack and a bottle of pop. These operating practices help increase the size of the layout.



**15. RI 507841 sits on the siding of the Farm Bureau CO-OP fertilizer facility waiting to be unloaded. Fertilizer and herbicides are a part of the farming industry and are used in large volumes in the Midwest.**



**16. The station at DeLong shows its heritage with the PRR Keystone station sign. L&N now uses the station for maintenance-of-way storage. The port-a-john, spare crossing guard, and pallets along with numerous barrels complete the scene.**

The trains are run slow, like a typical short line operating on less than ideal track. My train lengths average about five covered hoppers. Sometimes, I might only have one or two. Yes I do have other types of cars. I will spot a tank car at times for anhydrous unloading at my Farm Bureau CO-OP fertilizer facility.

**MRH:** A lot of readers who have seen your posts in the forum have made very positive comments about your weathering of

rolling stock. Do you have any tips that you could share with our readers?

**Tom.** I gave into the prototype weathering bug a while back. The key to making it look realistic is to follow photos. It really makes the weathering much easier. I also use photos, lots of photos, to get a good visual of how the prototype is weathered. Then I follow the same patterns for weathering the structures that I use on the layout. Then it becomes a matter of replicating what I see. The weathered equipment really adds to the scene as the train rumbles through it.



**17. Grain hoppers wait at the DeLong Elevator for pickup, a scene typical during harvest in Indiana.**



**18. Mr. Jones and a customer enjoy the autumn weather and watch L&IN 29 approach. Their conversation will take a brief pause while the locomotive blows the horn for the road crossing.**

**MRH:** Any final comments that you would like to share with our readers?

**Tom:** Many modelers, once they have built their layout, they are not all that happy with it. They will settle with what they have until they get totally fed up and tear the whole thing apart. Instead, don't be afraid to remove or renovate portions of your layout that you don't like. I have rebuilt several sections and permanently removed track and structures in others.



**19. Looking east down the former EL main we see 29 continuing on its journey north towards Culver, IN and more switching. Harvest time means lots of business for the L&IN and overtime for the crews.**

By removing some of the clutter it actually makes the layout better.

Finally, I really like the magazine and the way the MRH uses photos that really helps tell the story. MRH is also a great resource for finding things. I have been able to find a lot of the

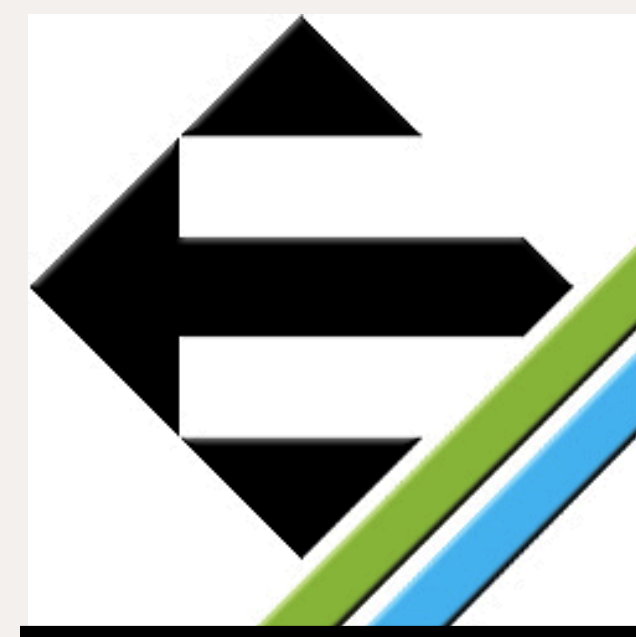
detail parts as well as other things I need through the magazine advertisers. It is really a great resource. I make sure that I tell the manufacturers I saw their product in MRH.

**MRH:** Tom, thank you for your time, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks for sharing your layout with our readers.

## Rewinding time to 1980

Since the interview with Tom, he has been busy rewinding the layout time period back four or five years to 1980-81, before the L&IN/INRAIL was incorporated. Who operates the line?

The Erie Western. What is the Erie Western, you ask. The Erie Western was a short-lived company that operated the old Erie/Erie Lackawanna line in Indiana:



“The line I model is based on the old PRR South Bend Branch (Vandalia Branch) that ran from Logansport to South Bend serving the Studebaker plant there. The Erie/Erie Lackawanna crossed the former PRR branch

that I model at Delong. For me it was a simple matter of having the EW take over operations of the line after Conrail ceased operations on the branch in 1979.

“I wanted to move my short line closer to a prototype while still freelancing just a bit by moving to the Erie Western. I want my motive roster to be made up of only five to eight locos. During the process of back-dating and acquiring new locomotives, it was a great time to make some major changes. I moved

from DC to DCC and sound-equipped locomotives. I really like the DCC control and sound now that I have been operating with it.

“As I continue to up-date (backdate) the layout I will keep the MRH readers posted with updates on my blog. Until then, have fun with the hobby.”

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21. 1602 has just picked up a hopper from the DeLong elevator and is coupling it to the train. A quick run around of the train, air brake check, and it's time to head back to Logansport.

22. Next page. 1602 is crossing Olson Road. as it pulls a hopper from the DeLong elevator. The line goes along the east edge of town. After crossing the railroad, drivers have many miles of country roads before arriving at the next small Indiana town.

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20. EW 1602, a former CNW RS-3, and EW 25, a former PC transfer caboose, are waiting by the yard office in Logansport for the crews to arrive.





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23. It's early evening and the crew has a few more miles to go before arriving in Logansport and calling it a day. Typical of many a rural crossing, there are no warning lights for the crossing so drivers need to be alert for the trains.



Tom Johnson grew up along the Nickel Plate in Plymouth, IN. The PRR main out of Chicago and the South Bend Branch (Vandalia Branch) were each about two blocks away. Tom's family held reunions in Delong, IN at his aunt and uncle's farm located beside the Erie Lackawanna and PRR South Bend Branch diamond. The interchange track literally ran

right through the front yard.

Tom has been involved with model railroading most of his life. His first serious layout was published in *Railroad Model Craftsman* in November 1985 and was also the Logansport and Indiana Northern. Tom later tore it down and built his current layout, which was first published in the 2008 issue of *Great Model Railroads*. Tom has since made several changes and improvements. Tom's latest change has been to switch over to DCC and modeling the Erie Western which served the former Erie Lackawanna. Tom reports he's having lots of fun with this latest change!

