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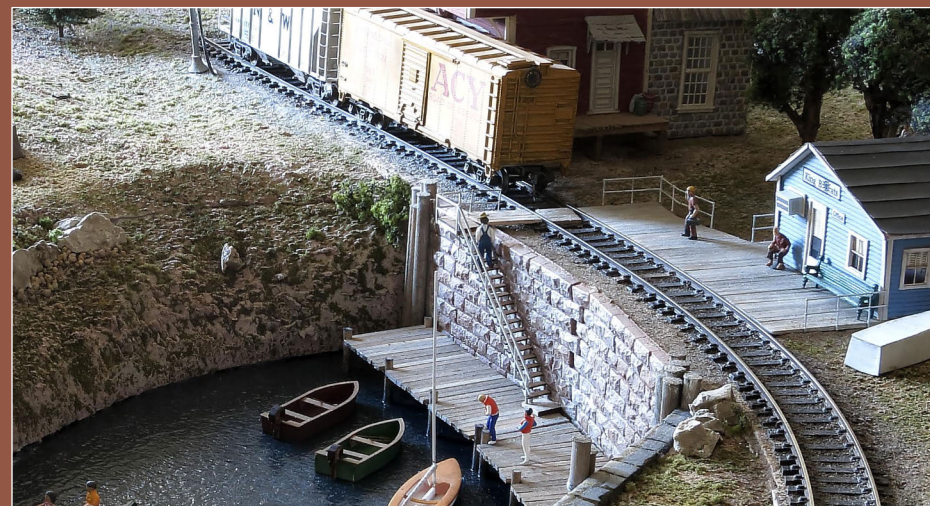
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Twenty-four square feet of model railroading fun!



Model Railroad Hobbyist | October 2021



PETER VASSALLO PRESENTS HIS TINY HO LAYOUT THAT HAS IT ALL ...

TUCKED IN A CORNER OF MY APARTMENT STANDS A SMALL 4x6' HO scale layout I've enjoyed operating for two years now. I call it the Northspur and Tiburon railroad, loosely based on two California prototypes (California Western and Northwestern Pacific). I'm proud of the design, particularly how it offers both mainline running and switching potential [1].



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[INDEX](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

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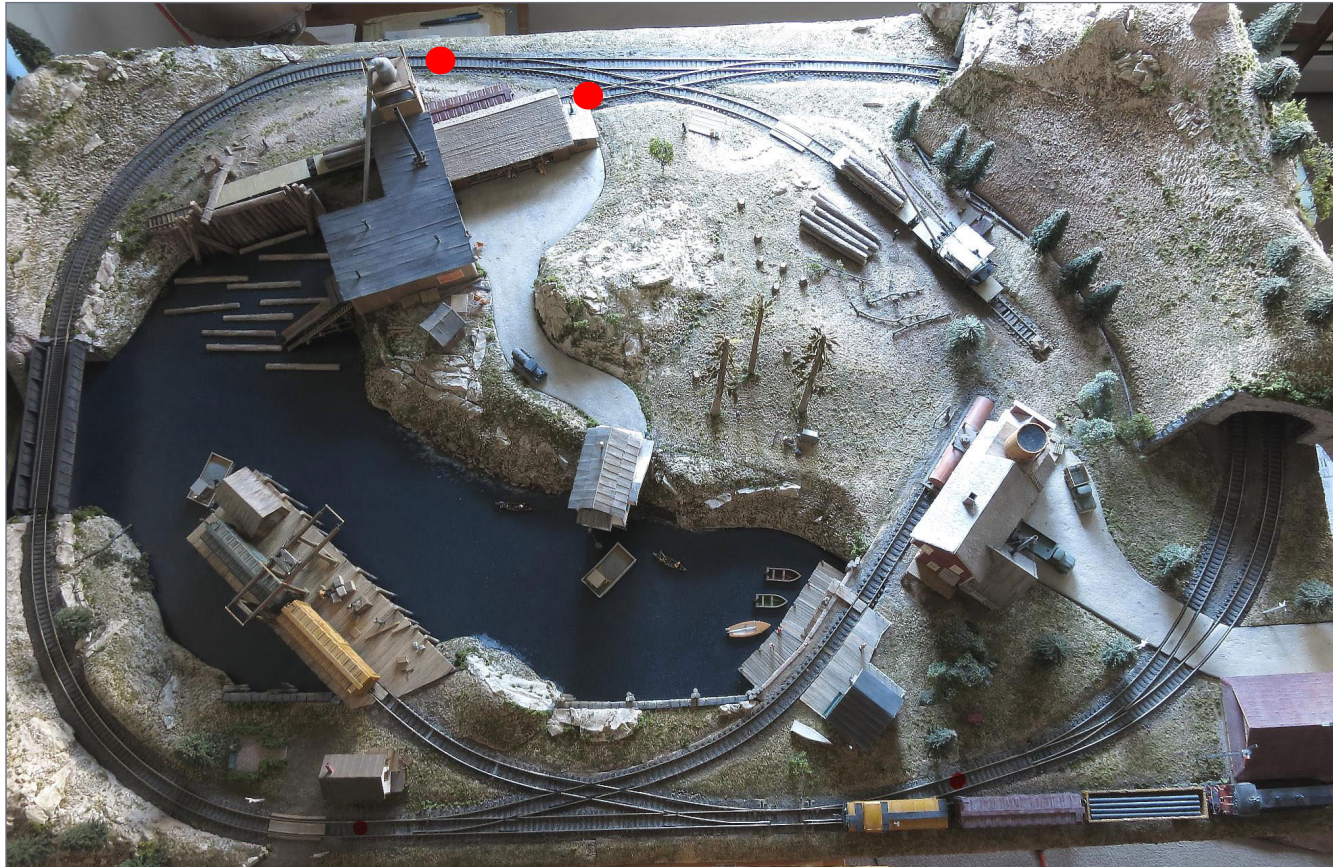
[INDEX](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

24 SQUARE FEET OF RAILROADING FUN | 2

Although I enjoy switching, I get bored if that's the only thing possible on a layout. I prefer to switch one location – even if it's just swapping a single car on a spur. Then I might run along the mainline for a while, and stop and switch another location.

On such a small layout, the mainline running consists of taking laps along the outer loop, but that's fine by me. I enjoy watching the trains traverse the loop (I keep the trains short at three or four cars).



1. Top view of layout highlighting track plan. Red dots indicate hidden uncoupling magnets. The mountain in the upper-right corner is easily removable for access.

24 SQUARE FEET OF RAILROADING FUN | 3

I think most negative views on roundabout model railroads come from layouts that lack finish. I agree that running circles on a layout that is little more than a sheet of plywood would quickly get boring, but running circles on a densely scenicked, attractive layout is another matter. I find it relaxing and fun.

I took lots of pictures during construction of this layout, and eventually turned it into a book, *Build Your First Layout* [2].

Despite its title, I think the book offers plenty to interest old pros as well: tips on working with foam to create scenes, tips on building structures, how to model a harbor, a pier, a sawmill, etc.

I like to do things as simply (and as cheaply) as possible while still ending up with something that's visually appealing.

Most layouts are built to be viewed from one side only. This layout can be viewed from three sides, so it had to be detailed accordingly. I like the different views afforded by simply walking from one side to the other.

I designed the layout to be operated from either side [3-4]. A single operator would run trains from the conductor's side (to readily handle the turnouts when switching). With two operators, the engineer would run the train from the side opposite the conductor.

A third person could handle dispatching duties on a simple track panel installed at one end of the layout. The only backdrop on the layout is at the end against a wall opposite the dispatching end.



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[INDEX](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

[MRHMAG.COM](#)

[INDEX](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)



2. Book describing construction of Northspur and Tiburon layout.

The trains are operated as turns. The Fort Bragg Turn runs from the station at Willits to the log loading site at Northspur, then on to Fort Bragg to switch the sawmill/lumberyard. From there, the engine runs around the train for the return trip, first to Northspur and then to Willits [5].

The Tiburon Turn runs from Willits to the brewery at Petaluma, then on to the pier at Tiburon. Again, the train reverses and returns to Willits, stopping at Petaluma along the way [6].

Each trip takes about one half-hour. I created simple train orders to govern the movements [5, 6]. The passing track on the end of the layout underneath the mountain may be used for any of the spurs (i.e., towns) on the layout.

I have a schedule of six turns that cycles a total of 13 freight cars, including four flat cars, four box cars, a tanker, reefer, gondola, covered hopper and open hopper. I usually run one train a day –



3. Conductor's side for switching Petaluma and Tiburon.





4. Engineer's side for switching Northspur and Fort Bragg.

Fort Bragg Turn #2			
Arrival-Departure (actual minutes)			
0	Willits		Depart westbound with empty hopper for Fort Bragg
3	Northspur		Pickup 2 loaded flats, leave gondola in place
7			
10	Fort Bragg		Drop hopper and 2 loaded flats, pickup loaded box and 2 empty flats, reposition engine and caboose for return trip eastbound
17			
20	Northspur		Drop 2 empty flats, pickup empty gondola
28			
31	Willits		Return with loaded box and gondola

5. Train orders for the Fort Bragg Turn.

Tiburon Turn #2			
Arrival-Departure (actual minutes)			
0	Willits		Depart southbound with loaded tank for Petaluma and empty gondola for Tiburon
3	Petaluma		Drop loaded tank, pickup loaded box, leave reefer in place
8			
11	Tiburon		Drop gondola and loaded box, pickup empty box, reposition engine and caboose for return trip northbound
18			
21	Petaluma		Drop empty box, pickup loaded reefer
27			
30	Willits		Return with reefer

6. Train orders for the Tiburon Turn.

alternating between Tiburon and Fort Bragg turns – to complete the entire schedule in one week.

For each train, I consult my train order, manually place the cars on the station track, add a caboose, then go. I made log loads that I place on the flat cars at the Northspur loader and remove at the Fort Bragg mill. I also have loads for the gondola and open hopper.

I use four permanent under-the-track magnets to facilitate uncoupling (indicated as red dots in [1]). I like being able to push the cars back into the spurs for delivery without having to reach over and uncouple by hand. To prevent accidental uncoupling, I add resistance to the wheels when necessary to keep the couplers taut when traveling over the magnets.

My locomotive has an uncoupling sound effect that works well with the delayed action. After pressing the appropriate button on my DCC controller (Prodigy Explorer), I can hear the “clang” of the couplers opening as I reverse the engine and pull away from the released car.

I used Peco track, including Insulfrog turnouts. This allows me to run the entire layout using only two feeder wires connected to either a DC or DCC power pack, depending on the type of locomotive I’m using.

The DC locomotive operates with no electrical issues integral to the track (i.e., it will stall only if the track is dirty).

The DCC loco, on the other hand, experiences occasional electrical “hitches,” particularly when traversing the crossover tracks. Perhaps the DCC loco is more sensitive to the “steadiness” of the current and can have potential issues at track joints, turnouts, or crossovers. Although I don’t like the hitches, the overall experience of operating the DCC loco is better, so I generally use it.

I hope you enjoy the pictures [7-14] and the story of my little layout.



7. The Willits station, built from an AMB Northern Pacific Class C Depot kit. Trains depart here en route to Fort Bragg or Tiburon. The color scheme of this station bears an interesting resemblance to Ridgway’s on the Rio Grande Southern.



8. It’s late afternoon at the Petaluma harbor. The main industry here is Brett’s Brewery (from Campbell Scale Models) with a loading track adjacent to the back dock.

Neighboring King’s Boats does a healthy business renting boats to interested parties.



9. This is the front side of the brewery, showing freight being transferred by truck. Having a walk-around layout means both sides of a structure can be seen and detailed.



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hardboard covered with dabs of Mod Podge.

10. Dockworkers at Tiburon prepare to unload a boxcar—one that's a long way from home! I scratchbuilt the pier in place using wood dowels and basswood strips. The water is painted



11. Flat cars are positioned for loading at Northspur. The McGiffert log loader is a Rio Grande Models kit. The trees are from Grand Central Gems.



12. The sawmill/lumberyard complex at Fort Bragg. Flat cars are being unloaded at the poke at right. Wood chips in the elevated bin may be loaded into hopper cars, and finished lumber may be loaded into box cars, making this a versatile spur for switching.





13. Southern Pacific No. 2476 exits tunnel 2 with a short freight on its way to Fort Bragg.



14. A westbound train passes through the Noyo Canyon hills on the way to Willits. ☑



24 SQUARE FEET OF RAILROADING FUN | 14

PETER VASSALLO



Peter lives in Schenectady, NY and works part-time as a mechanical engineer.

He became interested in trains as a boy after discovering his father's N scale models in a box in the basement. He currently models in HO and HO_n3 scales. His favorite railroads are from the old West, particularly Colorado and California narrow gauge.

To this day, he continues to find inspiration in the works of John Allen, John Olson, Malcolm Furlow, Dave Frary, Bob Hayden and George Sellios, among others. ■

in the **OCTOBER 2021 MRH RUNNING EXTRA!**

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[INDEX](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

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[INDEX](#)

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)