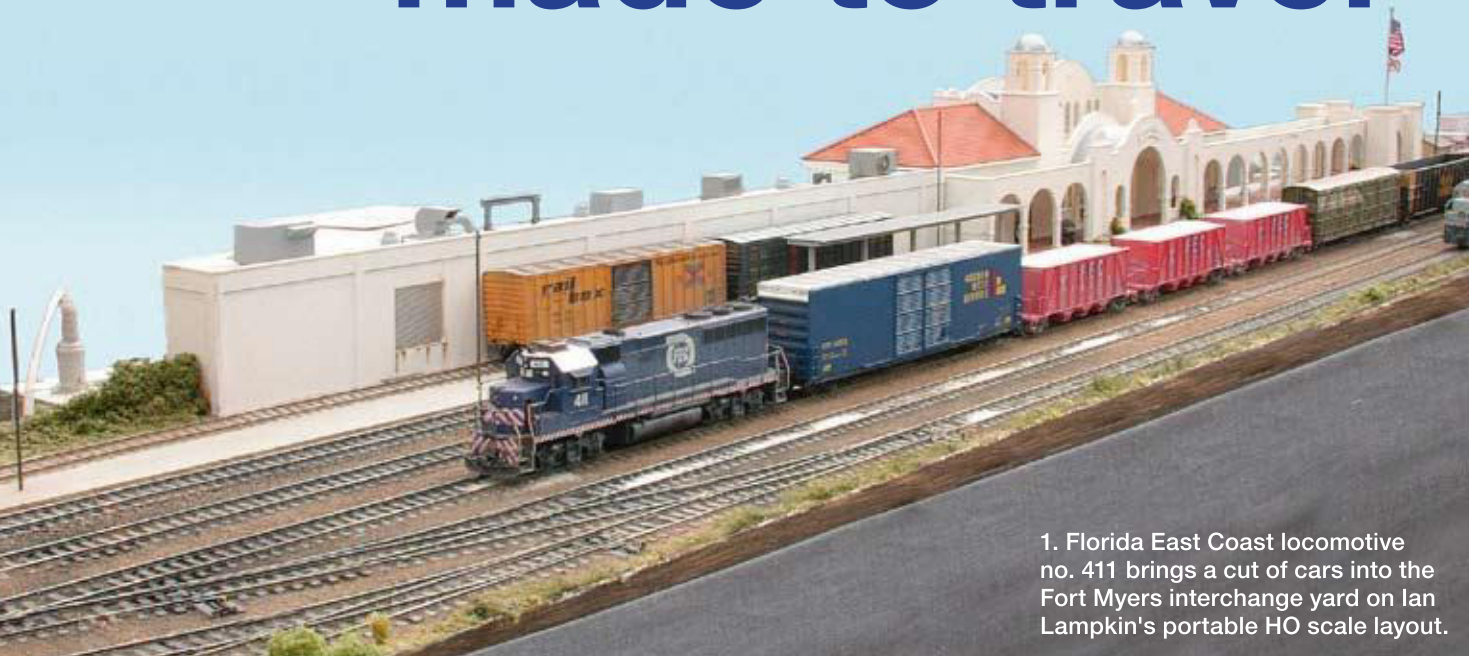


Fort Myers, Florida, made to travel



1. Florida East Coast locomotive no. 411 brings a cut of cars into the Fort Myers interchange yard on Ian Lampkin's portable HO scale layout.

Modeling modern Florida railroading in HO scale from the United Kingdom

By Ian Lampkin • Photos by Andrew Burnham

Inspiration for my portable HO scale Fort Myers layout came in 1993 during a vacation to Florida. Partway through that trip, I'd visited The Train Depot, a hobby shop in Winter Park near Orlando. Having spent the earlier part of the holiday watching trains around Orlando, I decided to purchase a few souvenirs from my trip, and these included an Athearn locomotive and a several freight cars.

Later during the same trip, I stumbled upon the Seminole Gulf Ry., a short line running from Arcadia through Fort Myers towards Naples in the southeastern part of the state. In addition to freight service, the railroad operates a dinner train that features a number of

restored coaches pulled by a rebuilt Electro-Motive Division GP9.

Once I got home, and while the memories were still fresh, I decided to look at the feasibility of building a layout based on what I'd seen. Impressed with the performance of my Athearn purchases, I pushed ahead and started some serious planning.

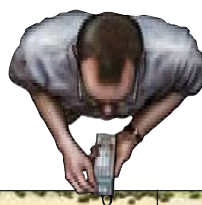
Putting the plan together

After sifting through the numerous photos I'd taken of trains in the southern half of Florida, I chose Fort Myers as the focal point. In designing my layout, this city

includes the Seminole Gulf Ry. and the terminus for its dinner train. I added an interchange with CSX, though the prototype interchange is farther north at Arcadia. There is also a connection with the Florida East Coast Ry.

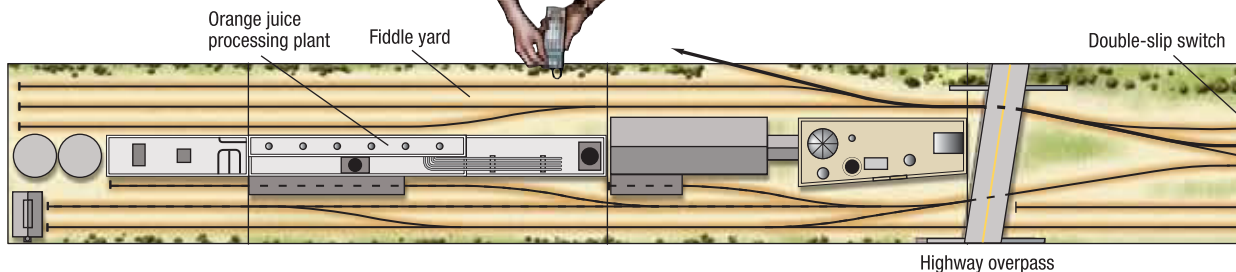
Although Amtrak had ceased running to the area in the 1970s, I reinstated Amtrak service on the layout to add operating interest.

Much of the freight movement on the railroad is in the form of interchange traffic. However, I also included some local industry, such as an orange juice processing plant and a distribution warehouse. The warehouse was originally a cement silo, but the model was too hard to transport to shows.



Fort Myers Ry.

HO scale (1:87.1)
Scale of plan: 5/8" = 1'-0"
All turnouts no. 5



Fort Myers on the move

So I can take the layout to train shows, I built it to be portable. I've always favored simple baseboard construction. (We call the benchwork sections "baseboards" in the United Kingdom.) I use 1 x 2s for the frame with either 1/2" MDF (medium-density fiberboard) or, as in this case, 1/2" chipboard for the deck. My Fort Myers layout is made up of six 3-foot and two 2-foot sections. When fully assembled the layout measures 18" wide, 22 feet long, and 48" tall.

I built the layout sections so that they can be bolted together in pairs to form boxes for traveling to shows. The boxes can then be stacked and fit across the back seat or in the boot (trunk) of most cars. I've used this same design for other layouts, and it has proved to be a real boon, since the entire Fort Myers layout has fit in every car I've owned over the years.

I support the sections on plug-in legs made from 1 x 2s with 1/4" plywood bracing to give them rigidity. These legs are solid enough that I can mount electrical sockets and several drop-down tables (for drinks and operating materials and such) to them. And, because the legs simply plug into the layout sections, I can set up the layout in about 10 minutes once it's unloaded from the car.

Recently, I've installed lights under the fiddle yard section on the layout. The lights illuminate two rolling stock storage trays mounted under the layout, so they're easier to see when swapping trains.

The two 3-foot car-storage boxes bolt to the legs under the fiddle yard. All stored trains are kept in designated slots in the boxes until it's time for them to be put on the track in the yard. The lights and storage boxes have sped up the time it takes to change trains during shows.

Track and control

All the track on my Fort Myers layout is Peco code 75. The turnouts are powered by Seep switch machines sold by Gaugemaster. These are mounted under the layout and are operated by



push buttons on a separate panel. Electrical connections across layout section joints are made with 25- and 37-pin computer connectors. These can be laborious to wire, but after a few nights in front of the TV with a soldering iron, I eventually finished the job. The payoff is that setting up and taking down the layout is very easy when using this type of connector.

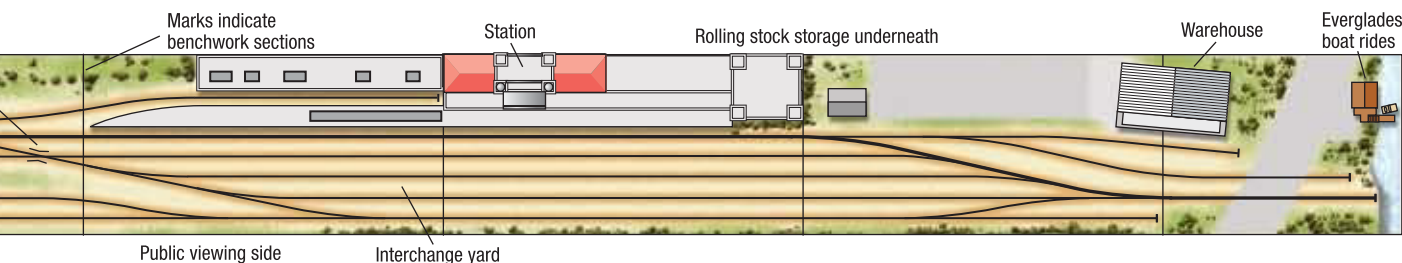
I originally wired the layout for DC cab control with handheld cabs that plugged into the fascia using 5-pin DIN plugs. My friends wired their DC control systems in the same configuration, so this allowed us to share handheld cabs between layouts.

In the past few years I've run the Fort Myers layout with a Digitrax Digital Command Control (DCC) system. However, I still use the same type of 5-pin DIN cab plugs. I've also left the DC cab control wiring in place and run the DCC system with all the conventional cab-selector switches set to the same position. This way I can revert to conventional DC within seconds should there be a problem with my DCC equipment. To date, the DCC equipment has been extremely reliable.

2. A pair of CSX Geeps are tied up on the engine track awaiting their next assignment. On Ian's layout, Fort Myers serves as an interchange point for the Florida East Coast, CSX, and the Seminole Gulf Coast Ry.

Layout at a glance

Name: Fort Myers Ry.
Scale: HO (1:87.1)
Size: 18" x 22'-0"
Prototype: Seminole Gulf Ry.
Locale: Fort Myers, Fla.
Era: 1990s
Style: portable sectional layout
Mainline run: 18 feet
Minimum radius: 32"
Turnout minimum: no. 5
Maximum grade: none
Benchwork: 1 x 2 frame with 1/2" MDF top
Height: 48"
Roadbed: cork
Track: Peco code 75
Scenery: plaster
Backdrop: none
Control: Digitrax Digital Command Control





Show operation

When my Fort Myers railroad is on display at a show, my friends and I operate the layout. The railroad normally takes two people to run, but sometimes we include a third person for short periods of time during the session.

I use a sequence system that has two sets of cards mounted in an old file binder: one set each for the two operating positions – the station and the fiddle yard. The cards are numbered (indicating the step in the sequence) and provide operating instructions for the crew members, such as where a particular train is to go and which cars are to be picked up or dropped off. How the crew member carries out those instructions is part of the challenge, as not all the moves are straightforward.

I like the system as I believe the switching work keeps the mind active, especially when the yard is nearly full of cars. – I.L.

The big benefit with DCC has been the addition of lighting effects on all my engines and sound decoders in many of them. As more friends convert their layouts to DCC, our familiarity with the system is improving greatly.

Scenery modeling

I find modeling scenery to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of model railroading. Florida, however, is pretty flat, so I focused a lot of my efforts on the layout's structures.

One of the major structures on the layout is the orange juice processing plant, which is located at the left-hand end of the railroad. The plant conceals the fiddle yard, so it needed to be big. I

3. Though he models Fort Myers, the station on the layout is actually modeled after the one in Orlando, Fla. Ian scratchbuilt the model from styrene.

kitbashed the main buildings and warehouses using pieces from various Walther's kits, and I added a lot of extra details, such as air conditioning units and piping. I've also included detailed interiors in some of the buildings. All my structures with completed interiors have lighting so that the details can be fully appreciated.

The largest single building on the layout is the station. I based the model on the prototype at Orlando. I chose to build the Orlando station instead of the one in Fort Myers because I'd not yet visited that station in the daylight. In fact, at the time, I had no idea that it still stood, so I modeled the ornate Orlando station. As it turns out, the real Fort Myers station still exists and is now a museum, complete with a coach mounted on rails outside, but by the time I discovered that, I'd already built the Orlando station.

I scratchbuilt the station from styrene. The arches were the biggest challenge, as each one is made up of four layers of styrene, and all were cut individually. The time I spent building these has been well worth it, however, since the structure has shown no signs of warping after more than 10 years. I now have the photos necessary to build an accurate interior for the station and plan to do so, including illuminated cold drink dispensing machines.

At the other end of the layout is a modern warehouse made up from versatile Pikestuff/Rix plastic parts (marketed in the United Kingdom by Modern Structures in Miniature).

The warehouse area features some typical Florida scenery, including tall grass and a few palm trees. In addition, I've added a number of details to enhance the layout. These include a company offering tours via a propeller-

4. The layout's major industry is an orange juice processing plant. The large kitbashed factory hides the railroad's fiddle yard.

driven airboat, a couple of alligators basking in the sun, and a drug bust by the local police.

A first step

Building the Fort Myers layout has been very enjoyable, and it was my first step in modeling American prototypes. Since starting the project, I've done a lot more research on American railroads, which has led me to add more details to my layout and rolling stock. It has also inspired more trips to the United States and Canada, and I've since built two other North American-prototype layouts.

What's next, you may ask? As the layout is now quite a few years old, my thoughts have turned to building a replacement. However, the challenge will be to build something in the same space that would be more interesting. So for now, the Fort Myers railroad continues to be improved and travel to shows. **MR**

Ian Lampkin's story and Andrew Burnham's photos are used by permission of Peco Publications.

Meet Ian Lampkin

Ian was five when he got his first model train for Christmas. Fort Myers is his sixth layout, and he's since built two more. Ian lives in Surrey, United Kingdom, with his partner Sarah. They enjoy foreign traveling, finding good ale houses and micro breweries, and photographing railroads around the world. Ian's layout was most recently featured in the September 2005 *Continental Modeller*.