

# A storm comes to Palouse



Agriculture is the focus of this bustling three-railroad town

By Mike O'Connell • Photos by the author

**W**elcome back to my Proto:48 Pacific Railway & Navigation Co. model railroad, first featured in the September 2022 MR.

This time, we're in Palouse, Wash., a small farm town in the eastern part of the state that's served by the Great Northern, Northern Pacific, and PR&N.

Palouse is the heart of a large agricultural region that's the seventh-largest

producer of wheat in the world. The state also leads the nation in growing apples and pears. In town, you'll find cold storage facilities, grain elevators, and all the supplies the surrounding farms need.

It's late in the afternoon in the fall of 1955, and it's sunny at the moment, but there's a storm coming. Before that pleasant breeze from the northwest brings rain, allow me to take you on a tour of the town and how it operates.

## The heart of town

The General Store is the center of town, both geographically and figuratively. It does double duty as the Post Office as well as giving the locals a place to get basic hardware, food, dry goods, and local baked goods. You'll often find a couple of local retirees spending their leisure time around the checkerboard on the front porch.

**1** Station crew on the platform await Northern Pacific train W3, which will stop for water and get orders from the agent at Palouse Depot on Mike O'Connell's O scale Pacific Railway & Navigation Co. layout. The Great Northern caboose is on the GN main track on its way to Spokane.



The feed and grain store next door sells to smaller farmers. For egg producers, baby chicks are often on display after being shipped in via U.S. Mail.

J.E. Work Mining Supplies sells machinery to the silver mining districts of northern Idaho. It may seem out of place to sell mining supplies in a farming community, but the owner, Ed Work, does well with it.

Ruth's Palouse Diner, which serves the best scratch-baked pies and cakes around, also makes claim to be the center of town. This is where the crews tie up and "go for beans" in the middle of their switching duties. Western National Bank is next door and finances most of the farmers in the Palouse region.

### An agricultural hub

Before arriving in Palouse, the crews switch the nearby East Spokane Cattle Pens and Armour Packing House. Today, all 10 cars have unloaded their cattle and are being washed down nearby. Cattle drovers from western Montana who ride the old 60-foot coach insist on clean cars prior to reloading. The PR&N dominates the stock trains in this region. Great Northern only serves

the Armour plant, which processes beef and pork.

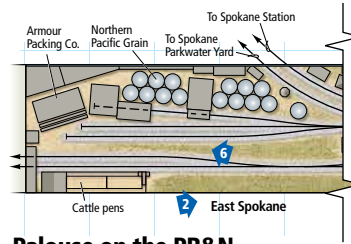
North Pacific Grain Growers Coop in East Spokane can hold wheat, barley, and oats. Large Coop growers can store grains for over 36 months and wait for a better price in the Chicago markets.

Northern Pacific serves a huge facility with 20 car service spots. Great Northern and Northern Pacific also share an interchange track nearby with cars usually originating from Spokane.

During the apple harvest season, the volume is so great that NP and GN stash cars on every available siding. Oftentimes in the fall, and if it's a good year, there could be as many as 1,000 cars hauling the harvest shipments.

Cascade Fruit Shippers acts as a transfer service and ships Washington pears from this location. During the peak season, pears are only stored for 24 hours before they are shipped, usually to the East. Palouse Cold Storage stores Washington apples here for immediate shipping or under long-term deep refrigeration, waiting hopefully for the market price to go up.

Albers Feed operates two mills in town. These are rather small facilities, but they are essential businesses for the



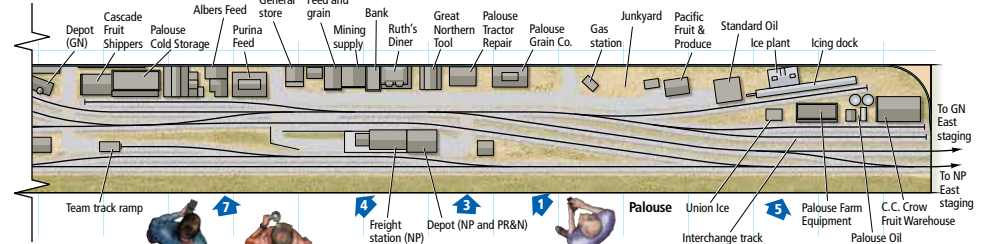
### Palouse on the PR&N

0 scale (1:48)  
Size: 4 x 38 feet  
Scale of plan: 1/4" = 1'-0", 24" grid  
Numbered arrows indicate photo locations  
Illustration by Rick Johnson and Kellie Jaeger  
Find more plans online in the ModelRailroader.com Track Plan Database.

smaller farmers with smaller crops. And they can store a variety of special grains like rice, milled wheat, and barley.

### Stations and other structures

The Great Northern's Palouse Station was built in 1905 and is solely owned by GN. Once an electric line, the station is only used for way freights and interchanges. The agent here makes sure all goods are handled quickly and efficiently. Two first-class trains come



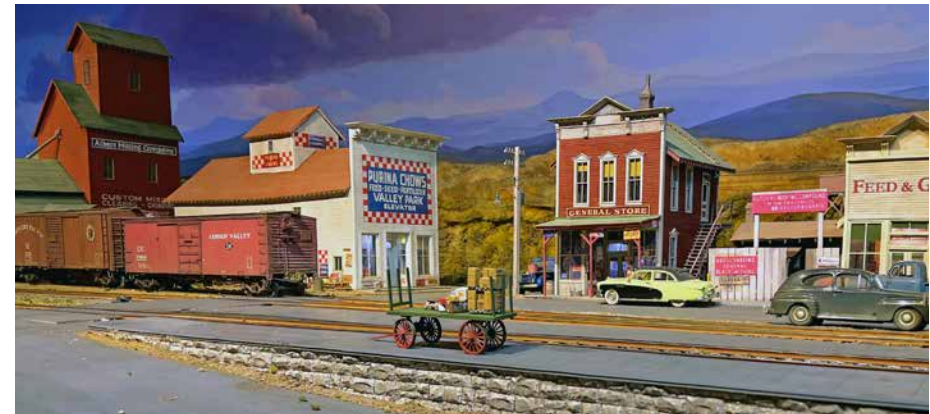
3 Northern Pacific EMD F9 No. 6701A pulls out of Palouse Station with one of three daily passenger trains in tow.

### The layout at a glance

**Name:** Pacific Railway & Navigation Co.  
**Scale:** Proto:48 (O fine scale)  
**Size:** 4 x 38 feet (Palouse), 40 x 60 feet (entire layout)  
**Prototype:** Great Northern; Northern Pacific; PR&N; and Spokane, Portland & Seattle (elsewhere on layout)  
**Era:** mid-1950s  
**Locale:** Pacific Northwest  
**Style:** walk-in multi-deck  
**Mainline run:** approx. 1,200 feet  
**Minimum radius:** 84"  
**Minimum turnout:** No. 7 (spurs), No. 8 (main)  
**Maximum grade:** 1.75%  
**Benchmark:** modular  
**Height:** 40" to 90"  
**Track:** handlaid code 100 and code 125 rail with cast-resin pre-ballasted ties  
**Backdrop:** hand-painted on 1/8" tempered hardboard  
**Scenery:** plaster cloth and Sculptamold  
**Control:** NCE DCC with wireless throttles



2 This long view of Palouse, just part of Mike's 40 x 60-foot layout, looks east from the general store to the icing platform and fruit warehouses at the far end of town. The Northern Pacific depot and freight station are at center right. A storm is rolling in on the hand-painted backdrop.



4 The Lehigh Valley boxcar is waiting to be picked up and shoved into the interchange track. The GN engineer left the rest of his train here while doing other switching in town because there's a strict 10-minute limit on blocking the road crossing.



5 Though a break in the clouds is illuminating Palouse Farm Equipment, the storm building to the north is looking pretty ominous. The GN boxcar of machine parts is in an off spot, waiting for space to open up on the town's team track.



6 The Northern Pacific reefer and PR&N stockcar have just been shoved into the NP interchange track. Both cars are bad order and will go to Spokane's Parkwater RIP track for repairs.

through in each direction, one being the Oriental Limited.

The Northern Pacific's Palouse Station is central to Main Street. Three passenger and three fast freight trains come through daily, east and west. The agent is in close contact with all the shippers and handles all the clerical duties for the railroad. Northern Pacific shares this union station with the PR&N.

The Palouse Oil Fuel Facility is one of two sources for diesel, oil, and gasoline in town. The other is the Standard Oil Co. facility, which is served by pipeline and truck but has no rail service.

Palouse Farm Equipment Co. provides machinery to area farms. Larger machines arrive on flatcars, unloading on a team track east of town. Farmers can expect fast turnarounds for equipment well before the harvest season.

### Modeling lessons

I have learned so many skills in this hobby. There are several techniques that

I would like to explain in detail. Weathering my models to give them dimension, texture, and color is my favorite part of modeling. I weather in three stages. First, I tone down the initial color, for example Boxcar Red, by applying acrylic washes of other reds, whites, and brown umber. (I stay away from black, because black is usually too dark for colors to come through in our indoor layout lighting.)

Second, I like to brush on acrylic washes of colors adjacent to the initial color, such as yellow or orange for our example red car. This brings the model alive. Finally, I apply a final wash with earth tones to simulate the dust, dirt, and grime the car would accumulate when it's out in the weather.

Lighting is critical for me. I put a lot of time and energy into the layout's lighting. I once used fluorescent lights, but they caused an unpleasant glare and bleached out the colors in the layout. Fortunately, light-emitting-diode (LED) lighting came along just in time.



7 The GN boxcar has to have grain doors nailed across its doorways before it can be loaded with grain at the Albers feed mill. The pre-war, truss-rod wood boxcar would probably be scrapped by now if not for the demands of the grain rush.

Primarily, I use PAR 20 and PAR 38 lamps for overall lighting. They are dimmable and work very well in track lights.

You can even rig stage-lighting gels to change the overall colors of the lights. For example, Palouse is lit with cool LED lamps from the right and warmer LED lamps from the left. This gives the scene a nice feeling of depth with vivid colors. My previous article ["One Night in Spokane," September 2022] shows more examples of my use of lighting for dramatic effect.

I run the layout with Digital Command Control, so the wiring is not too complicated. But, as I got older, I realized I didn't want to duck under the layout to troubleshoot or repair wiring. So, we figured out a way to bring the wires to the front of the layout and create a cover of removable 1 x 6 Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF). Wires are not joined under the layout, only at the front. I also make sure everything is tagged so I know what's going where and how it gets there.

My last lesson concerns people, big and small. One thing I learned is how important it is to put miniature people on the layout. I thought the empty look would work, but having figures on the layout gives it life and purpose. There are so many 3-D miniature figures coming to market that it's possible to find almost any figure you might want.



### Meet Mike O'Connell

Mike is an avid photographer whose love of railroad history and architecture led him to found Chooch Enterprises, a supplier of model railroad details and scenery products. Now retired, Mike lives in Maple Valley, Wash., with his wife, Jeanne. They have four children and four grandchildren.

More important, though, are the people I have met through this hobby. When I started building the model railroad, I thought I could do it all by myself, letting my ego get in the way. Boy, was I wrong. Throughout the years I have met many wonderful people who have offered to help on the layout. Most of them turned out to be more talented and smarter than me! These people have become lifelong friends. In the layout room, I have a tribute wall full of their pictures. [MR](#)