Susquehanna Sidetracks

Official Publication of the Susquehanna Division 11 of the Mid-Eastern Region, National Model Railroad Association

February 2003
Volume 11, Number 1

Please visit the Official Division web site at http://moosevalley.org/nmra/index.htm

I hope you had a great holiday season. I know I personal enjoyed it. There is nothing like the holidays to receive new model railroad items or to use the holidays as an excuse to buy ones you didn't receive as gifts.

For those of you who were not able to attend the joint division meet with the Philadelphia Division in November, you missed a fun day. The clinics were very educational and I was shocked to learn that there was another railroad in Pennsylvania besides the PRR! It had been a while since I was at the Railroad museum, so I enjoyed looking at all the railroad equipment. We even had a guided tour of the outside area and learned about the restoration work they are doing. We might try other joint meets in the future if the interest is there.

Director Elections

It's hard to believe, but it has been two years now and it's time to elect our three division directors again. Some of you might be asking what exactly does a division director do? The division directors hold a 2 year term and a voting position on the Divisions Board of Directors. They also assist with scheduling and planning the division events, work on encouraging non-members to join the division and the NMRA, plus other duties as assigned by the Superintendent. The directors position does not require as much time as the division officers positions do, but still allows you to get involved more with the division. If you would be interested in running for one of the director positions or would like more information about the position, please contact Brian Brandt. His contact information is listed on page 2.

Next Division Meet Scheduled

The next Division 11 meet is scheduled for Saturday, March 8, 2003 from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM at Bob Martin's Central Pennsylvania Railroad. This is the first division event of the new year and a great way to shake off the winter blues, so please mark your calendar! For more information and directions, please see page 3.

Division Dues Reminder

Just a reminder to check the front of your newsletter and look at the mailing label. In the upper right hand corner is the date when your division membership expires. If it has already expired, please use the division membership application at the end of this newsletter and return it with your payment.

Down the Tracks

Great Scale Model Train Show
Timonium, MD
April 5-6, 2003
9 AM – 4 PM Saturday
10 AM – 4 PM Sunday
www.gsmts.com

Potomac Junction
MER Fall 2003 Convention
Reston, VA
October 10-13, 2003
https://members.cox.net/chyde/PotomacDivision/Potomac-Junction.html

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Submissions: The Susquehanna Sidetracks welcomes any model railroad or railroad related material. Members are encouraged to send in articles, letters to the editor, reviews, etc.

Super's Corner – Brian Brandt

Greetings,

I hope you all have had a great New Year. We are starting another year off a little later than usual. I say this because we have had a rougher winter than we have had in many years. Our first meet is going to be at Bob Martin's house. We are working on two small clinics. We hope they will be both informative and entertaining.

On another topic, we need to elect three Directors for a two-year term. I am going to ask both our existing and if any changes the new Directors to help set up meets for us in the future. Also when we have any elections, one will be picked to receive the ballots. If possible please let me know if you are interested by April 1, so we can have our election in May.

I hope to find some people to have us visit their railroads in the western area of our division, meaning Cumberland, Perry, Dauphin Counties. If you are willing to host a division meet, please let me know. I am also trying to repeat a meet we had a few years ago up in Shamokin. We visited the Club up there that was in the Model Railroader. I saw both the layout and the article and the article did not do the club justice. It needs to be seen to be believed.

Thanks,
Brian

Editor's Notes – Scott Turner

In the October 2002 issues, I asked for email addresses so I can add you to the division news email list. I have received some email addresses and I would like to get as many of you on the list as possible.

If you are having problems receiving your copy of the ***Susquehanna Sidetracks*** or know of someone who is, please let me know and I will get this corrected.

I am always looking for articles for the newsletter. They can be about anything related to model railroading, trains, or even letters to the editor. The length of the article doesn't matter. You can mail or email your articles to me. And remember, any articles you submit and get printed count towards your AP – Model Railroad Author certificate.

Next Division 11 Meet - Saturday, March 8, 2003 - 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM

Susquehanna Division 11 is pleased to announce the next division meet will be held at Bob Martin's Central Pennsylvania Railroad (CPRR) in HO scale on Saturday, March 8, 2003 from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM. This meet is open to all division members and their guests. Planned activities include a brief division meeting to bring you up to date on the division happenings, two clinics, a mini operating session on the CPRR, a White Elephant Table and several train videos for your viewing pleasure. Master Model Railroader Charlie Potter will be giving one of the clinics on painting HO figures techniques. Brian Brandt will be giving the other clinic on "Installing a decoder in a locomotive - A live Demo!!". Feel free to bring along an engine that you need assistance on installing a decoder in (and the decoder) and Brian and a few others will be available to assist you and to help answer your questions. The mini Ops session will include several "switching" jobs as well as a few trains just to run around the railroad. The CPRR has converted to Digitrax DCC (see the following article from Bob Martin for a story on this conversion), so if you are thinking about switching to DCC, this would be a great time to give it a try! If you have some items that you would like to sell, bring them along for the White Elephant. So make plans now to spend the afternoon with your fellow model railroads.

DIRECTIONS:

CPRR
45 West Locust Lane
York, PA 17402

From Route 30:

Turn north on to N. George St (left if eastbound & right if westbound); go about 1 & 7/10 miles to Longview (on left across from Hayshire Plaza); left on Longview to stop sign (Locust Lane); right on W. Locust Lane; third house on left at red caboose mailbox. Go round right side of house and enter through screen porch.

From I-83:

Exit 24 (old exit 11); turn left if southbound or right if northbound; go about 9/10 mile to signal light at "T" intersection (George St); right on N. George St for about 9/10 mile; just before top of hill turn right on to W. Locust Lane. Third house on right at red caboose mailbox. Go round right side of house and enter through screen porch.

Park in Bob's driveway or along the north side of the road (same side as the house) along fence in front of Bob's or one house west at 55 (Bob's son).

CAUTION: WHEN LEAVING, NO LEFT TURN ONTO GEORGE ST FROM LOCUST LANE. GO TO LONGVIEW (ABOUT 200' WEST) AND TAKE LONGVIEW TO GEORGE ST). RIGHT TURN FROM LOCUST LANE ON TO GEORGE ST IS OK.

Covering My Railroad To DCC by Bob Martin

Several months ago, Sidetracks Editor Scott Turner asked me to write something on the conversion of the Central Pennsylvania Railroad (CPRR) from conventional DC cab control to DCC. Sure, I said! Next thing I thought of was what should I write. After going through the almost agonizing decision making process regarding which system to buy I thought, NUTZ to that, you don't want to hear about that. Or, if you really do want to know, ask me and I'll be happy to bore you to tears. So here it is, the foible (or is it fable) of Bob's switch to DCC.

Once upon a time . . . nah, not a good way to start. How about, Carole (the wife of 37+ years), I need some money! Hey, works for me. But, it didn't work for her. How much, she said. Oh only about $1,400, I said. For what, she said. Why a DCC system, I said. What's that she said. A new way to run the railroad, I said. Ha, she said, then ha, ha, ha! So, over a period of six months I wheedled, groveled, begged, washed windows and other lowly things. And I got the CPRR operators involved. Every operating night, when Carole brought the snacks downstairs somebody said to her, gee Carole, Bob sure needs a DCC system. Finally, last November (2001) my ship came in (in the form of a blank check) and over the next three months, I managed to spend around $1,500 on the way to becoming the proud owner of a Digitrax DCC system.

In January, with the help of some friends, I got started on the installation of the system. I knew what I was doing (yep!, shor did!). After all, my good friend and MMR Charlie Potter helped me sort out what components I needed and even went along to help me spend my money (Charlie likes to do that-spend my money). And, I attend Bob Geiter's DCC clinic at the Lancaster convention so I really knew what I was doing. And, Dave Trone showed me and told me how DCC worked. (All of those guys are regular operators on the CPRR) Plus, I went to a couple other DCC clinics during the past 18-24 months, read a lot and I was primed!

So, out came the old wiring. Don't let anybody tell you that installing DCC is so easy you can let the old block wiring in. You can, but ya gotta tie it together and, believe me, it's easier to tear it out and put in new bus (buss, busses, bus's) wires. Anyhow, over a period of several weeks, out came the old and in went the new. Slowly, the CPRR came to life again and finally, in February 2002 we were sort of operational again.

Then the fun started. One day there was a short; you've all heard the beep, beep, beep. Then, a locomotive took off. Just started running all by itself! I caught up with it and took it off the track. Gee, I said, wonder what caused that. Probably just a once and done glitch. Sure! Anyhow, next I tried to run a locomotive that hadn't been "decodered". The book says it can be done; Geiter says it can be done; others say it can be done. Well gang, I'm here to tell you that it ain't gonna happen on the CPRR again! I cracked the throttle on the loco with no decoder and it did run. BUT, so did a loco, with train, sitting on the main line. Off it went and I had no control! None, zip, nadda! The sucker just ran and ran and ran until I turned off the master power switch. That'll fix it I said as I turned the power back on. But guess what, off it when again so I grabbed it and took it off the track. Meanwhile, another loco started blinking and winking at me, yep, the lights were blinking. I got that stopped by taking it off the track too. Meanwhile, back to the first runaway. I sat it back on the track and off it went, again! I finally got Geiter on the phone and he told me what to do to get everything back to normal.

Meanwhile, the command station and booster started acting strange. I called Digitrax and they talked me through a bunch of trouble shooting stuff. Nothing worked. Bad equipment they said, send it back they said. So I did. Both of them over a period of five weeks. Each one came back with a note that said checks out OK. I hooked'em up and they worked fine. Go figure! Nope, you're wrong, they didn't charge anything.

Next, I installed a DZ121 decoder in a switcher. Ya know, those little suckers are expensive! Problem is, I followed some directions I got on the Internet and they weren't right! Poof, there went a $37 decoder! It crackled, sparked and smelled really bad. Anyhow, $17 and two weeks later, Digitrax sent me a new one (or repaired the old one?). This time, I almost got it right. Would you believe I almost fried it again?! Got it turned off before the whole thing went poof. The decoder has a small burn hole in it but the loco runs fine. Only thing wrong was the rear headlight wouldn't come on. No problem though; I wired the front and rear light together.

Things finally settled down and we had two or three monthly operating sessions with very minor problems. I did finally get tired of hearing the beep, beep, beep when somebody ran a closed switch (it also stopped trains for a second or so), or a car with metal wheel derailed so I thought let's hook up the PM 4. But before I get to that, another side story. Seems as though almost every time there was a beep, beep, beep, an engine with an Atlas decoder started running all by itself. I fished those suckers out of the turntable pit, pulled them away from trying to poke a hole in a fence, ran a couple into the end of the round house. 'Nuff of that, I said and wired all engine stall tracks through a cut off switch. OK, now the PM 4. A PM 4 is a Digitrax power manager/automatic reversing electronic gizmo. I had heard bad things about the PM 4 and its not so good auto reverse so I only hooked it up as a power manager. What that means is I used it to zone or isolate two different area's of the railroad from the main boosters. Anyhow, it worked - for two months! Then, one day it indicated a short but I couldn't find the source. Then, a few minutes later, the other zone indicated a short; then a third zone indicated a short (really weird because only two zones were hooked up). Finally, I disconnected it and all was well. No short! I connected it again and the thing indicated short again and nothing worked. Finally, I just recently (mid September) sent it back to Digitrax for warranty repair.

I could go on with weird stories but I'm running out of space. So, seriously, after almost nine months of operation, I can honestly say that despite the problems in the beginning, most of which were beginner's dumb stuff, I love DCC. Installation of decoders in new loco's takes about five minutes, most of which is spent taking off the body. Installation in older locos was intimidating at first. Now, however, even the older locos are almost a piece of cake except it takes awhile to hard wire everything. I even started converting Hobbytown locos to can motors and installed decoders (decoders aren't recommended for open frame motors). I also installed an MRC auto-reversing module that works great and saved some bucks by wiring in two reverse loops to one module.

Almost all of the regular CPRR crewmembers use a DCC system. Most are Digitrax but Easy DCC and Lenz are also used. As far as which system is better, I can only say that I've operated on Digitrax and Easy DCC and can honestly say there isn't really a big difference for an operator. I would, however, recommend Digitrax. They have good customer service and there's almost always someone available to talk you through a problem. Otherwise, make your own comparison and flip a coin.

Many of you know that the CPRR is a true operating model railroad. We don't just run trains. We operate them! DCC has made the operation of the railroad much more fun, more realistic, and much easier than traditional cab control. Sure it's expensive initially. But, you don't have to spend $1500 all at one time like I did (plus a couple hundred more since). DCC works on a 4 x 8 tabletop railroad as well as a large club layout. And, it can be had for probably under $200. So, have at it. In my opinion, DCC is the best thing to come along since . . . well you get the picture.