SUSQUEHANNA SIDETRACKS

An official publication of the Susquehanna Division 11
Mid-Eastern Region of the NMRA



SUPERINTENDENT'S DESK

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From the Superintendent's Desk

As we move into November and December, we also move into a season associated with trains. November is National Model Railroad Month where hobbyists are encouraged to share with others by having an open house, taking a model to work, or sharing photos of their railroad or models with friends and family. As the superintendent, I wonder how the Susquehanna Division might incorporate some of those ideas into our activities. Perhaps we can explore more community engagement. Luckily a number of opportunities already abound in our widespread division.

The https://modelrailroadopenhouse.com/ site lists a November schedule of model railroad open houses in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. Take a few minutes to look over the site and you are likely to find a railroad to visit this November from their schedule page. I know that with a quick perusal, I found one possible railroad to visit not too far from my home. Although I am a bit in over my head with learning the new skills needed in trying to put creating a video together, I hope to film a visit to a friend's model railroad and share it on an upcoming Susquehanna Division Zoom meeting in December.

The holidays and railroading have traditionally been bound together. Particularly if you have

younger family members, consider keeping the tradition alive by taking them to visit one of the tourist trains or model railroad clubs over the holiday season. We list eleven tourist railroads with active links to their websites here: https://susquehannanmra.org/resources/. Most, if not all, of the tourist railroads have holiday themed trains already listed on their websites. Many of the railroad museums listed on our resources page also have holiday themed exhibits or train excursions.



On our events page: https://susquehannanmra.org/events/ we provide links to a number of model railroad clubs featuring open houses of their club's railroads during November, December, or January. These clubs are located throughout our division. Whether you are introducing grandchildren to trains or model railroads for the first time or rekindling your own association between railroads and the season, a lot of opportunities exist around here!

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Photo by Alan Mende

Tracks to Tidewater: 2026 MER Convention Recap

Article and photos
by David Ellis

I attended this year's MER convention in Virginia Beach in mid-October. During the Thursday through Sunday event, I touched base at one point or another with five other Susquehanna Division members: Alan Mende, Howard Oakes, Keith Franz, Scott Unger, and Bob Charles. On one hand, I attended because I had agreed to give a clinic and I wanted to familiarize myself with my new role in the division as superintendent by attending the "Superintendent's Breakfast." Even beyond what might be seen as obligations, I enjoy events such as NMRA conventions and RPMs. They provide an excellent chance to meet with other model railroaders and learn from them.

The convention's schedule included numerous layout tours along the routes into Virginia Beach, both before the convention's opening and afterwards, to allow visits both to and from the convention. On the way down I visited Mat Thompson's Oregon Coast Railroad.



Forest Park Lumber Mill
on the Oregon Coast Railroad



Another typical 1950s industry
on the Oregon Coast Railroad



Not only was Mat's railroad right along my route and open on Thursday as I traveled, but the setting and era of his railroad, the Pacific Northwest and the 1950s, match what I am modeling. Seeing a model railroad in person and meeting with its builder provides quite an immersive experience. As he was set up for an ops session later in the day, I could observe the paperwork (car cards and waybills) including some simple job

cards that appealed to me, as I am in the process of designing an operations plan for my railroad.

Regional conventions feature ops sessions, but signing up early is often necessary as the slots tend to fill. While I have had railroad friends who focus on operations, I see myself as more of a novice operator beyond solo ops and end up not signing up for ops sessions myself. Mat's switching railroad is the kind of system I would have been more comfortable with, and I regretted not having signed up for his later session that afternoon.



For me, clinics provide appeal and purpose at the regional convention, and Tracks to Tidewater had lots to offer. With three clinic rooms fully scheduled over three days, a wide variety of topics were available. The clinic rooms were comfortable and the technology worked well. I gave one clinic and attended around ten. For the most part, I took notes, rather than photos. I attended a couple of clinics that fed my curiosity and gave me some solid advice about building a micro layout in narrow gauge. Clearly, going down this side quest (rabbit hole) would enable a questionable step that would *not* help my already slow progress on my main layout. In hindsight, I wish those clinics hadn't been so helpful or inspiring. On the other hand, I wish the clinic, Videoing Your Railroad for YouTube, had answered more of my questions. The presentation was fine, but it focused on a specific application rather than the one I am using. All in all, I came away with at least a couple of new ideas, suggestions, or support that I will be able to use from each of the clinics that I attended.

I planned my trip to Virginia Beach to also include a brief stay in northern Virginia to break the drive into two sessions. On Monday, before heading home, I followed a ranger-led tour at the Manassas National Battlefield Park, the site of two Civil War battles. To return to the railroad theme, the first battle of Manassas was one of the first times troops were directly delivered to battle by railroad.



Second Section

Susquehanna Sidetracks

Official Newsletter of the Susquehanna Division 11

Mid-Eastern Region, NMRA

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Mid-Eastern Region

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https://susquehannanmra.org/

Note From the Editor

As the editor, I see at least two purposes of our newsletter. First of all, dissemination of information will be a major goal: both about upcoming events and what is going on with the division. A second goal, that I need help with, is helping model railroaders move forward with building or improving their railroads. I will be asking for contributions from you to help with those goals.

Whether you know of an upcoming event that may be of interest to division members or you have an idea for a model railroading related article, the first step is to contact me at editor@susquehannanmra.org. In general, if you would like to contribute an article, attach the text to an email in Word (.doc or .docx) with minimal formatting. Attach any photos or illustrations in jpeg format separately. Please make sure that the photos are yours or used with permission and credited.

Notes From the BoD

Your board of directors and officers

- Welcomed Dave Smith, our newest board member.
- Approved rolling over our CD to a new 13 month CD.
- Suggest that you write in an emergency contact on the back of your ID badge.
- Discussed different approaches to next year's meeting formats and schedule.
- Discussed creating a membership survey.
- Approved moving the planned November Zoom meeting to early December.
- Approved a tentative meeting date and location for an in-person joint meeting with the Philly Division in Allentown on February 13, 2027.

Working as an informal committee, several of us came up with a draft survey. Dave Smith suggested that we use Google Forms and Chris Kier put our final draft together in that format. The link to the survey will be sent out on the email blast with the link to this newsletter. It should only take a couple of minutes to complete the survey. You just check off up to three choices on a couple of questions and then answer a couple of short questions. *PLEASE* take the few minutes to fill it out as it will give us some real information, rather than just our guesses and biases, as to what the membership desires as we move forward.

We hope to put together at least a tentative schedule for 2027 to include in the January *Susquehanna Sidetracks*. Please help us include your input in our planning by completing the survey by November 10.

Modeling Pages

CONVERTING A QUALITY CRAFT READING USRA CABOOSE KIT INTO A CNJ CABOOSE

Article and Photos

By Alan Mende

Long before plastic ready-to-run steel USRA type cabooses became available, I had converted an old Varney caboose into an accurate CNJ caboose. My article on how I did it appeared in the May 1987 issue of ***Model Railroader*** magazine. To be honest, I don't like ready-to-run models. They generally cost more than I'm willing to pay, and I like to build things.

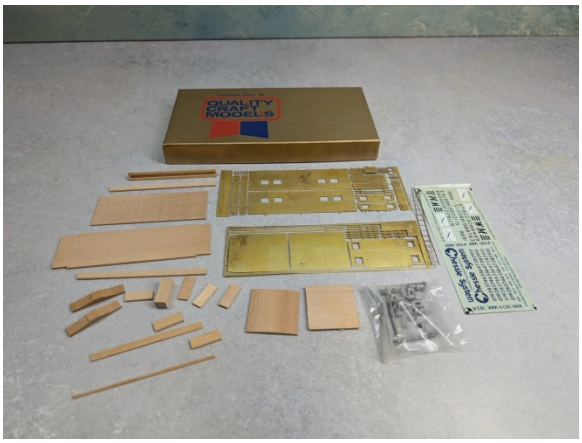

Figure 1

In this case, I found a Quality Craft Reading steel caboose kit (I pulled this photo with Chessie decals online) on eBay and decided to buy it. **See Figure 1.** The kit was a composite of wood and flat brass parts.

To begin construction, I built the wooden substructure. I followed the instructions and once assembled, I rounded the basswood roof. **See Figure 2.** Note that I also added the metal rear walls, the steps, trucks, and brake gear. For a CNJ caboose, Andrews trucks are the correct ones. I had a pair of Gloor Craft sprung trucks and used them.

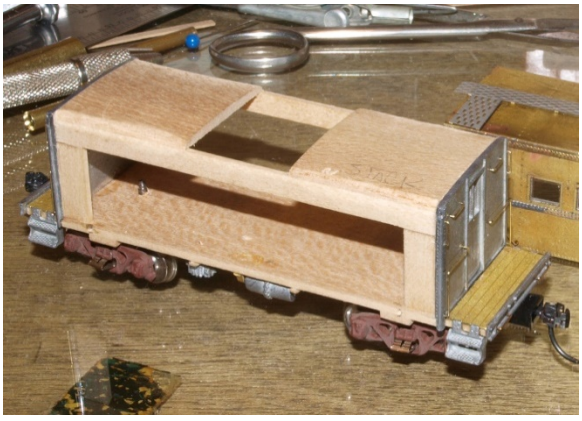

Figure 2



Figure 3

The brass shell is flat etched brass and had to be carefully bent around the wood substructure. The cupola also had to be formed. **See Figure 3.** To make a CNJ specific model, I had to plate over the window adjacent to the smoke jack and add an Allen Wood Super Slotted roofwalk, a Sunshine Models part. When I built the cupola, the only things I added were window sashes made from thin styrene sheet and the CNJ's characteristic sun shade above the side windows.

After washing the body, I painted it with Tru-Color TCP-79 Vermillion and painted the roof TCP-010 Black. The steps, platforms, trucks, and underbody I painted TCP-009 Grimy Black. I painted the grab irons with TCP-311 Safety Yellow. The decals were ones I had on hand. **See Figure 4.**



Figure 4

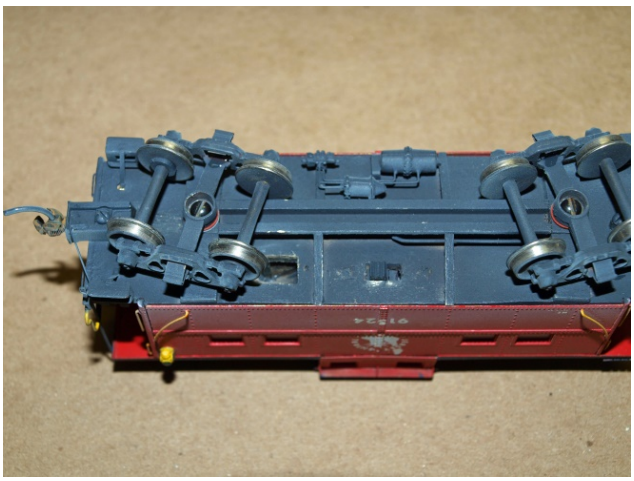

Figure 5

As an afterthought I added Utah Pacific lighted marker lights. I should have planned for them while I was building the body, but I only added them after the caboose was completed. That caused a bit of a problem since the lights needed a 1-1/2 volt battery. I had to remove the brass shell to add a homebuilt battery box and an on-off slide switch. **See Figure 5.** The battery had to be accessible from the underside of the caboose.

Upcoming Events

SUSQUEHANNA DIVISION:

ICYMI: We had some technical issues with one of the presentations during our September meeting, but Keith Franz's presentation "Something About Signals" is now available on our **Presentation Library** page.

Early December, 2026: Virtual layout visit on Zoom. This continues in the planning stages, but we are going to try to tour an outstanding railroad from "the far north of the division" on pre-recorded video during our online meeting. We hope to have others share what they are working on as well. We will also be experimenting with recording the meeting and providing a link to the recording for those who miss the on-line interaction.

February 13, 2027: Save the date for a joint in-person meeting with the Philadelphia Division in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

During 2027: On the board, we discussed several new approaches including one presented in the September 2026 *NMRA Magazine*, The Cincinnati Division's program: "Model Railroading Roundtable." Basically, a member hosts a small group to focus on one model railroad skill or technique. This happens outside the regularly scheduled division meeting. An invitation is sent out to the division members and if interested you would contact the host with a first-come-first-served approach to capping attendance.

NON-NMRA EVENTS:

First Frost Train Meet – November 14 and 15, 2026 in Allentown, PA

Amherst Railroad Hobby Show – January 30 and 31, 2027 in West Springfield, MA