

My Quest for Master Model Railroader

My 3rd AP Certificate: Master Builder – Cars

article and photographs by Jim Wanlass

I initially liked the idea of earning my Master Model Railroader in only 32 square feet. In other words, a layout and all the cars and structures would fit on a 4x8 sheet of plywood. When I realized doing it that way would actually take me longer to achieve MMR, I decided against it. I had already started a number of structures and cars that would not fit on the little layout I wanted. In addition, I wanted space to do some switching, so I added a 2x4 extension, which would make it 40 square feet. After deciding not to take on the 32-square-foot challenge, I came up with another idea. I would build some cars in another scale! In the notes about the Cars Certificate, it says, “They don’t even have to be the same scale.” I knew I could work in multiple scales, but I got excited about another side project I had been thinking about that would be perfect to do in a different scale!

Another decision I made before starting was to strive to achieve Merit Awards for all the cars, even though only half of them need Merit Awards. I figured I was doing the work anyway and would want to achieve the level of detail and quality that would earn a

Merit Award, so why not go for it?! I don’t think everyone needs to do that; it’s just a personal decision I made.

One last big decision I made to help me on “My Quest for Master Model Railroader” was that whenever I had “train time,” I would only work on items that would get me one step closer to completing MMR. This, of course, excludes time for meetings and train shows and the like, where I earned my Volunteer Certificate early, but continued with my volunteer duties. Since I needed seven certificates in total, this still gave me a lot of variety on what I could work on. For example, I decided to finish the sawmill I started 10 years ago, but the portable module I had already built for the whole sawmill complex would be put on hold. If I felt like getting some ballasting done, I would not ballast track on that module; instead, I could ballast the track on my 4x8 that would be used for my Civil Certificate.

Being able to work on all the certificates concurrently is a big advantage. While working on my cars, I was also getting some structures done and did a lot of the planning

— and even building — of the work for Civil and Electrical. Having so many facets to this hobby is why I would classify it as “The World’s Greatest Hobby,” and working on AP Certificates in no way limits you. In fact, in my opinion, it gives you more options and helps you expand your modeling experiences.

I have liked narrow gauge from early on and model primarily in HO and HO3. Having the two together in the same scene is striking, and I like the visual difference. On30, however, is a different “beast,” and those who model in that scale and gauge embrace it so much that they even say, “Welcome to the Dark Side,” when someone joins their ranks. When it comes to cars and structures, I prefer building craftsmen kits and already had two On30 cars completed. I entered them in a local train show contest where they earned Merit Awards! It wasn’t until I thought about building an Inglenook — a switching puzzle similar to a Timesaver — that I got excited about scratchbuilding some On30 cars. I wanted to have it as short as possible, so building in On30 was a perfect fit.

All the cars needed to be exactly the same length, so I made a master frame out of wood and cast as many as I needed. I made one in metal and the others using resin. I wanted each car to be unique for the switching puzzle, but they all used the same frame. I could have bought kits (on which I based some of my ideas), but this was a perfect situation to expand my skill set and practice casting the parts I needed. Later on, I even did a clinic about my experiences in casting, but I’ll discuss that in another article.

I needed eight cars for the Inglenook, but I already had two with Merit Awards. Remember my mantra for helping me on my quest? Only work on what will get me one step closer to MMR. I allowed myself a little diversion at times, but I knew it was important to get back to my goal of MMR. I’ve found that when partially working on a project and then coming back to it much later, I sometimes need a little more time



to do it with the same efficiency. That is why I cast enough frames for the project but only super detailed four cars. I made a PDF for each car to include with the papers for the judges when I submitted them for Merit Awards. If you wish to see more detail about those cars, download the PDFs from my website: www.jamestowntrains.com.

Now I only needed two more cars. I wanted to finish an interesting car I had started many years ago, using a pair of HO3 logging disconnects (from a craftsman kit) and a “special load” I had seen in a photo that I had already scratchbuilt. All I needed was to finish one of the four disconnects. This is one of those “nearly finished for almost 10 years” projects that working on the AP helped me finish. I have found that in many projects — work, home, school, model trains — it is often the last 10 percent that requires the greatest effort. For me, the AP has really helped me focus on getting projects completed!

When researching this Certificate online, I found the passenger car requirement is what causes people the most problems. “I don’t need one,” or “the railroad I model never had passenger service.” So what? The intent of the AP is not to help you with only what you think you need, but in this case, it is to show that you can model a variety of types of cars. As I work on the AP, I often find myself learning something I’d never thought of before. If you don’t need a passenger car, try one in a different scale and then have it in a display case after. You could also donate it to a club or a friend’s layout.

The Boxcar, Flat Car, Gondola and Pulpwood Car use frames cast from a mold I made using a master I made out of strip wood. The Flat Car was cast in metal so it would be heavy enough to run with an empty load. The others were cast in resin and if their load was not enough weight, additional weight was hidden within the load. These were made specifically for the Inglenook switching puzzle that I started.



There are so many other opportunities. I found a plastic kit I already had and decided I could super detail it to get it to the point it could earn a Merit Award. I decided to add full interior detail with seats, people, and powered pickups so that I could have interior lighting. I had wanted to do this for a long time but never got around to doing it until the AP gave me a good reason to get it done.

Even though I had confidence in my skills and thought I had a model worthy of a Merit Award, every time I was a little nervous to have it judged or evaluated. It helped ease my fears to know what the judges would be looking for. My suggestion is to volunteer to be a judge, and the training you will likely receive will help you know what is important in your models. You can also just ask. It isn't a secret. There is a certain set of standards that don't change. You

can also ask for a pre-evaluation, at least I would do that for people in my Division. A second set of eyes might see something that you overlooked that might be easy to correct for a few more points. If you do get it judged and it doesn't get enough points, you can always have it reevaluated after making the suggested changes. We had a Division member do just that. He took our suggestions, and when he brought his model back, it looked so much better, and he earned the Merit Award! I'm glad he didn't get discouraged because he was rewarded for making improvements and the extra effort he put into it.

Don't get caught up in the necessary paperwork either. Include what is necessary or at least information so that the judges know you know what you are doing — and why. Not all judges are experts in all areas. Including documentation will help them

know why you made certain decisions. For example, if you left off the brake gear without telling them why, you might lose some points, but if you let them know that the prototype photo you were working from didn't have the brake gear, then it makes sense that you did not include it. I believe most judges will want you to earn a Merit Award. Help them by including the appropriate information regarding your model.

In the end, I really enjoyed working on this Certificate. I was able to finish a few cars I had wanted to complete and build a mini fleet of cars with a skill I was able to refine and improve. If it seems like a lot of work, just take it one car at a time. They don't have to be perfect. Ask questions. There are many things I still do not know about rolling stock, but the process is easy if you take it one detail at a time. There are many willing to help, and as we share and learn, we can enjoy the journey together! 🚂

