

My Quest for Master Model Railroader

Golden Spike and My 1st AP Certificate: Association Volunteer

article and photographs by Jim Wanlass

Nearly 17 years ago, I was introduced to the Achievement Program as a part of the National Model Railroad Association (NMRA). In 2000, I joined the NMRA and attended the National Convention when it was in my hometown at the time, San Jose, California. It was an exciting time to be around people who loved trains as much as I did for an entire week!

Over several articles, I will share my Quest for Master Model Railroader (MMR) and some of the things I have learned along the way. It is this sharing of knowledge and experiences that we can truly enjoy the journey together. You see, this Quest of mine began as a solo journey, but I came to know that by including others, the journey becomes more rewarding. The joy of working together and helping each other becomes the bigger reward than a piece of paper with your name on it.

These articles will not be a series of “how to” tips and tricks but rather my experiences. Let me say that I know many

great modelers, and I also know that there are many NMRA members who have no interest in the AP at all. That is fine. For me, being involved in the AP has increased my modeling skills, as well as the friendships I’ve made. The AP encourages members to not only be better modelers, but also to give back to the hobby. Without both of those things, one cannot be an MMR.

I was drawn to the AP because it reminded me of being in Boy Scouts. I know others have made the comparison, but the idea of setting goals, working toward those goals, and then being recognized for the accomplishments is what I really like. I know that the recognition part puts many people off — as if they’re boastful. But for me, the reason to recognize someone for his/her accomplishments is two-fold. First, it is to acknowledge someone for a job well done. That person has put in a lot of effort and at a certain standard of proficiency. Second, it is because, in most cases, they did not get there on their own; they had help. The work is their own, but most often they learned about

a technique through an article or clinic, or how to improve their work from suggestions and critiques of fellow model railroaders. It is by celebrating the accomplishments of the individual that you honor those who helped get him or her there.

After attending that first National Convention, I learned what I could about the AP, but at that time, I was mostly a “lone wolf” modeler. I figured the Association Volunteer would be the last Certificate I would earn! I attended a few meetings here and there and did some modeling on my own as I had the time. There was a club I would have liked to join, but they met at an inconvenient time for me. A move from California to Utah allowed for a larger space to model but, unfortunately, not more time.

Eventually, in 2011, I heard about a new 100% NMRA Club starting. One of the biggest benefits for me was that they were going to meet on a Saturday afternoon once a month. My children’s soccer games were in the morning, so I finally had a chance to meet with other modelers at a time I could fit into my schedule. Joining that club really helped me get started with the AP for several reasons:

The Golden Spike Award is to help you get used to having your work looked at and covers several topics you have likely already done if you have any type of a layout. I knew I had nearly done enough over the past 10 years to get my Golden Spike Award. Meeting with those fellow modelers set my resolve to actually finish a couple of specific items I needed to complete. It wasn’t hard, I just needed to do it! I think most model railroaders could get the Golden Spike Award. Get with your Division AP Chair, and he or she can help you figure out if you have it done or what you have left to finish. For some, I think the scary part is actually showing your work to someone else when you are not used to doing that.

In preparation for my move to Utah, I had dismantled my 4x8 layout, so I completed the scenery and track requirements with

a couple of modules and a micro-layout. The rolling stock and structures did not need to be on a layout, so those were already done. With so many projects on my workbench at different stages of completion, it felt so good to have my Golden Spike finally completed!

Another way the club helped me get going on the AP was by helping me earn my first AP Certificate. I had been a Railroading Merit Badge counselor for several years without actually passing anyone off on the Merit Badge. I told people I was a counselor and my name was on the local list of counselors, but I had never had the opportunity to work with the Scouts in that area. After joining the club, I gave a Railroading Merit Badge clinic at the next train show as one of two counselors who could officially pass the boys off after they completed the requirements. After a couple of years of being a counselor and signing Scouts off, I had earned the Association Volunteer Certificate! One thing I liked about earning this one so quickly is that I no longer have to keep track of my service. I continue to serve and have probably earned this Certificate three more times since receiving it. I am on our Division Board of Directors, and I continue to be a Railroading Merit Badge counselor. I estimate that I have passed off more than 100 Scouts. I am also our Division Webmaster and Division AP Chairman and have served on a number of other committees and positions.

I once heard at a Court of Honor for an Eagle Scout — the highest rank in Scouting — that “This is only the beginning.” What he meant was now that you have earned the Eagle rank, it is your turn to help others earn it. The same goes for the Achievement Program. When you have finished the requirements in a certain category, you sign your name below the following statement:

“I certify that I have completed all of the requirements for this Certificate of Achievement as listed above and that I will agree to assist other members in this subject whenever possible, whether or not they are participants in the Achievement Program.”

Fortunately, model railroaders are very willing to share what they have done and help others learn new techniques. We love this hobby and want others to love it too!

Looking back to when I considered myself a “lone wolf” modeler until now, I have met a lot of people and feel that I have grown a lot. Sure, I can enjoy my trains by myself and often do, but when I include others — adults and kids — I find there is a lot more enjoyment. That is why I like the phrase “We can enjoy the journey together!” If you feel



Above: Earning the Association Volunteer AP Certificate is just the beginning. Pictured is most of the team that hosted the Rocky Mountain Region Convention “Golden Spike Limited” in 2014 in Salt Lake City along with Bruce Chubb, and his wife, who were speakers. That convention was good practice for preparing to host the upcoming NMRA 2019 National Convention in Salt Lake City. www.nmra2019slc.org



like you don’t know where to start, just ask, “How can I help?” and there will most likely be someone to answer you! This Association is made up of volunteers. As you get more involved, you learn things, little by little.

Volunteering is a great way to improve your modeling skills. As you get to know others better, you get to share how you do things and learn different techniques. As you share your techniques, you find there are even more ways to accomplish things. It just builds on itself, and the more you get involved, the more you can learn while helping others to learn too! You don’t have to be an expert to get started. You might not even be an expert when you finish, but you will have gained knowledge, grown from the experience, and even gained new friends.

Like I said before, this is a volunteer association where we all need to help each other. I don’t always have time to go to every meeting, but I do what I can and find joy in helping others have a better experience. When it comes to the Association Volunteer AP Certificate, don’t worry at first about counting how many points you have (or don’t have). Just volunteer when you can, and keep track of your service. Before you know it, you will have served enough to earn the Certificate. It might take a couple of years or so, but you will be busy building models and making new friends and the time will seem to go quickly. Once you do earn it, continue serving, and you will find that by helping others, we can enjoy the journey together! 🚂



Above: I normally present the Railroading Merit Badge to Boy Scouts but was asked to give information about model railroading at a Cub Scout Pack Meeting. It is really fun to see the kids so excited about the trains!