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# RAILROAD MODEL CRAFTSMAN®



epilogue

## CONSTRUCTION:

- Train order board
- Stone depot

## LAYOUT PLANNING:

- The ultimate module?
- G.E.'s railroad



photography/JOHN ALLEN



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# John Allen: the man behind the legend

Jim Findley remembers his friend John

Some years ago, John Allen of Monterey, California, suffered a fatal coronary, and with his passing the hobby of model railroading lost one of its recognized giants. Even in his heyday very little reached print about John as an individual and it occurred to me that it might be of some merit to reminisce a little on the subject for those new comers to the hobby unfamiliar with John and his layout.

I met John in the late fifties and from then until his death, I saw him frequently and visited with him extensively. At that time his house was sort of a Mecca for model railroaders and I was privileged to sit in on many "bull sessions" between he and his guests. His callers included such mechanical geniuses as Cliff Grandt and Jerry White; editors Hal Carstens and Linn Wescott; as well as people in the commercial sector of the hobby like Leo Campbell and Bill Ryan; and a whole raft of general practitioners in the art and trailblazing like Whit Towers, Bill McClanahan and Cliff Robison. As long as I disguised my own ignorance, I was tolerated on the periphery of their circle. I was able to learn a lot from John's friends and I found that the people in the hobby were a very fine and special breed, which is as true today as it was then.

If my recollections of John and the G&D are random and somewhat disconnected it may be due to the fact that my visits were somewhat that way too.

It would be foolhardy to isolate John as being the first to explore some field or technique in the hobby. If I said he was the first to use mirrors to "open up" a layout, there would inevitably come someone to challenge the opinion with the fact that Xavier Fargargle first used mirrors on his No. 2 gauge loop during the Christmas of 1899. So, I will not claim that John was the first in anything, but I will claim that he was one of the pathfinders who developed, sophisticated, and added dimensions to a great many aspects of the hobby.

Still, despite his towering stature in model railroading, John was earthy, fallable and he had the sense of humor that allowed him to poke fun at himself among friends. When one of them asked him how he had ever thought to try some new approach, he would smile indulgantly and claim, "Because I'm the Great Poobah!" That title dates back to a Neanderthal comic strip called Major Hoople whose central character was a pompous omnipotent oracle given to making that claim himself. It was a caricature, of course, and John didn't act that way generally. However, honesty bids me record that among close friends he some-

times let slip the fact that he knew-it-almost-all.

After one particularly bruising encounter with his opinions, I had some cards printed with "THE GREAT POOBAH" in large letters and his name in small print below it. I had a lot of fun with the cards and one appeared in a national magazine at the time. I thought he would be furious, but he never even mentioned it when I next saw him. I guess that in that particular case he adopted the widely prevailing political philosophy that even questionable publicity isn't objectionable if they spell your name right.

An even handed treatment also bids me record that he almost single handedly raised the standards and elevated the sights of the majority of us. As a card carrying member of the "Great Unwashed" I know that I was introduced to such things as; super detailing zamac locomotives, realistic weathering, floor to ceiling scenery, ultra violet lighting, prototypical operations and a whole host of other mind expanding possibilities through his articles, photographs and clinics. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that a number of the pioneers of that era first warmed their hands at the lamp he lit.

During one period, John became immersed in the operational possibilities of a small switching layout he had put together. The success of his brainchild wildly exceeded his fondest hopes and he took to carrying it to local conventions to demonstrate the fun of shuffling cars in a relatively small area. It was so much fun that dozens of people spent thousands of hours playing with it. John called it the Timesaver, which I considered a perplexing misnomer since it saved time about the way canasta and golf provide more leisure hours, but I am staying off that subject. The Poobah was so pleased with his toy that he insisted on taking it nearly everywhere, and that included some curious and far away places as Dallas, Texas. A trip to Dallas in-





John Allen's love for bridges and mountains is well known. These two spectacular photos emphasize the dramatic floor to ceiling scenery he employed. John was a pioneer in many fields of model railroading, and this was only one of them. Additional scenic effects on the railroad included hidden mirrors, ultraviolet lights and weathered rolling stock (left). By 1953, John was well enough known to merit being put on the cover of *Model Railroader*.



# The man behind the legend

volved commercial air travel and since the Timesaver scarcely qualified as under-the-seat luggage John began running into problems.

While airlines happily sell extra seats to musicians for their base fiddles, it is a whole new ballgame when the guy plays an alphorn. Not that he entertained for one minute the idea of paying an extra fare. He understood Public Transportation to mean exactly that. It transported the public and that automatically included transporting their accouterments, however unlikely. A series of phone calls to United, Delta, and American to discuss the issue resulted in a series of referrals to a like number of air freight services; and a dead end as far as carrying it on his regular excursion ticket was concerned. I could hear his end of these conversations (even though I was in the kitchen at the time) and they were interesting to say the least. Especially when John suggested that his "package" was on the order of a suit bag and they recommended folding it. To make a long story short, John did take The Timesaver to Dallas on a commercial flight and at no extra expense to himself. He was uncommonly close mouthed about how he managed it and, in as much as he traveled alone (when he mentioned carrying the Timesaver as cabin baggage the rest of us pretty much lost interest in the trip), we never were exactly sure what took place at the Monterey airport - or the Dallas airport either for that matter. We just assumed that old good-hearted Cliff Robinson met him at the plane in a rented Ryder Van.

It may have been because he lived alone so much, but John was a talker of noteworthy dimensions. He loved nothing so much as a good heated conversation and he was by no means singled minded about the subject under discussion. I think it was Whit Towers who once emerged from a particularly electrifying deluge of words and mused in awed bewilderment, "Talking to that guy is like trying to take a drink from a fire hydrant!" As a matter of course John talked at a steady 250 words per minute - with occasional gusts of over 400. I used to accuse him of ending his offering on a subject with the word "and" - figuring the courtesy of his listener would prevent his losing the floor while he got his breath and decided on the next subject to attack. Yet, he was one of the most fascinating conversationalists you could ask for. He seemed to know something interesting about nearly any subject under the sun and he voiced such a variety of unorthodox opinions that you felt both entertained and enlightened, even if your contributions were minimal.

John was rarely out talked in a give and take exchange, but I do recall one memorable evening when I got carried away and held forth at great length on some trivial point. After a while I noticed the strangled look on John's face and paused to ask him what was wrong. "You keep right on talking when I'm interrupting!" he accused.

To say that traveling with John could be unsettling would be as charitable as saying walking through minefields is not the best route to physical fitness. They are both blatant understatements. Although he loved visiting layouts, attending conventions and seeing tourist attractions, the actual process of getting there seemed to affront his dignity. It

also severely tested his uncertain temper and made him belious for weeks thereafter. On this subject the number of illustrative anecdotes must be roughly equal to the number of people who had occasion to make a trip with him multiplied by the number of trips actually made. His unhappiness with the traveling itself was all pervasive. If he drove his car at all, he did it with the utter abandon of a demeted Kamikaze pilot. He followed the quaint theory that the less time he spent on the road, the less danger involved. If someone else drove, he fidgeted, fussed and fumed until passengers in cars two lanes removed were uncomfortable when we passed. Airplanes spent entirely too much time flying and too little arriving at their destinations, and on a train he was the original Man Who Came to Dinner in the Diner.

He journeyed most often in company with his operating crew and I used to listen to their travel accounts in stunned disbelief until I made a couple of trips with him myself, and then I felt they were guilty of criminal understatement.

One trip I remember in particular was the time a whole bunch of us attended a national convention in San Francisco. We were leaving and the drivers of the two cars had brought the vehicles to the front entrance of the hotel where all of the luggage was waiting. Confronted with the prospect of the several hours in a car necessary to get back to Monterey, John reacted normally for him - he got in one hell of a hurry to get it over with. Taking over supervision of the loading process he danced around in the group doing the actual loading, gesticulating wildly while alternately admonishing us to hurry and authoritatively designating which suitcases went where in which car. What our departure lacked in efficiency it more than made up for in speed and tumult.

Later in Monterey we discovered to our chagrin that we had accidentally included a

strange bag that didn't belong to any of us! (I personally regarded it as a minor miracle that several bags and an innocent bystander hadn't gotten caught up in our chaotic exodus.) John didn't even consider that any responsibility for this might rest on his door step. He grumbled about our stupidity for days and forever after referred to the incident as "That time one of you donkeys stole some poor guys luggage."

No monograph on John could possibly be complete without a glancing blow at his car. For nearly all the years I knew him he drove an old relic that was just this side of the disc wheel era. It was also just this side of the junk heap, but we'll get to that in a minute. Over the years that car became John's pride and his agony. He developed the sort of affection for that old Plymouth you would normally associate with something very much alive, and he was partially on target. I had an uncle who felt very much the same way about a spavined mule. It wouldn't work and became downright dangerous to get near, but it had been around for so long he couldn't bear to part with it. That description fits my uncle's mule or John's car . . . take your choice.

Cudgeling my mind for redeeming traits in that car I recall that Texans liked the fact that they could ride comfortably in it wearing a Stetson; and that it was a cinch to pick out in a parking lot standing, as it did, two feet taller than everything but the lightposts. But that was about the extent of its virtues. In its later years the radiator leaked spectacularly, but instead of replacing it John poured some kind of gunk in it that was supposed to seal the leaks. This pouring process continued for several years until you could fill the radiator with three or four quarts of water. I ought to know for it fell to me to fill it anytime the car had been standing for more than an hour. That's how long it took to drain completely dry. If we went to a friends house for an evening of trains, or to a movie, or anywhere else other than a quick trip for groceries, it was absolutely vital that I stash a spare jug of water in the rear boot. It was the only car I ever saw whose range was determined by the level in the radiator instead of the gas tank.

Speaking of the level of the gas tank, John seemed to live in mortal fear that the gas gauge would get above one quarter full. We ran on empty so much that I acquired the warped fixation that he was somehow trying to wean the damned thing. Once we came into a service station on a lonely back road late at night by cranking the last 200 yards with the starter, and he asked for five gallons! I was horrified after such a near thing and told him so in unmistakable terms. It left him completely unperturbed, "I got us here didn't I?" He argued loftily.

If I had to describe John in an irreducible number of words I would have to say that he was a gentle tyrant. It never occurred to his legion of friends and acquaintances to fault him for his unpredictable behavior simply because his many attributes made the matter relatively unimportant. He could, and did, on countless occasions help someone less gifted than himself; and he did it with understanding, thoughtfulness and dignity. John had a natural enthusiasm for model railroading and that is how I like to remember him. For, as I look at it, John never did run out of steam, he just ran out of track.

