

A few of my favorite things

Yes, I like puppies and snowflakes

and all, but give me a good job at an operating session any time. If anyone asks why I like operating model railroads, the talk pretty soon turns to replicating the jobs railroaders do to move freight and passengers over the road. Here's some of what I'm likely to say.

Engineers get all the glory, of course, and most of us enjoy that role. Who doesn't want to pull the throttle on a gutsy steam engine or a sleek but power-packed diesel consist? Whether the train is a fast through freight, a local shifting loads and empties on industrial sidings, or a passenger run speeding to distant places, it's the engineer who makes things happen. The advent of operator-controlled sound only makes the attraction greater.

However, that engineer running his train alone is assuming the roles of the entire train crew. That may be okay for a layout set in the most modern times, but if you set the date on your model railroad time machine back a few years, you know that a train crew often numbers between four and six. That's likely too many for most layout rooms, but we can usually manage one more crewmember per train, at least on locals and other freights with switching work. We can give those trains conductors.

"The big 'O'" is one old slang term for the boss of a train crew, from the large letter that adorned the Order of Railway Conductors' badge. I've written before about the fun of working with a partner in a two-person crew. It's a good way to share the fun and to train inexperienced operators. It helps remind us that it takes many people to make the big roads work, and to give us a sense that our layouts represent large enterprises.

We can remember too that a two-person crew is good reason to try the techniques I described in "Switching with hand signals" in *The Operators* for Feb. 2015. Some readers mistakenly got the impression that this is something to try only on large layouts, where the crewmembers might be some distance apart. Actually, it's good for any situation where a crew can be distracted by what's going on around them, even if they're close together.



My friend Steven Otte at MR likes the "Norman Rockwell quality" of this photo of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy towerman at Mendota, Ill. All the tools of his trade are at hand while he watches the action on the CB&Q at 6:22 p.m. Friday, Dec. 10, 1954. Philip R. Hastings photo from the David P. Morgan Library collection

And I can go on from there. My fondness for yard switching and train dispatching are by now well known to many. The general point is that I like operation that draws groups of friends together to re-create the scope of railroad functions.

In fact, there aren't many jobs I'd say I don't like, as long as they try to re-create the railroad's workings realistically. I recall, for example, an evening spent hostling engines at the Dunsmuir roundhouse on Otis McGee's HO scale Shasta Division (*Great Model Railroads 2011*). Mostly I just ran incoming Southern Pacific "Backward Malles" and "Decks" (2-10-2s) through their servicing routines and set them on the ready tracks for their next road or helper jobs.

And it was great fun to get those massive steamers lined up and see their engineers get them out of town. I wrote about this kind of job in *The Operators* in the April 2007 *Model Railroader*.

Up in the tower is another job I've sought lately. It's especially good when the layout host has installed a working signal system with authentic controls, along with realistic surroundings for the towerman. That's what I found at Orford Junction Tower on Don Ball's HO Stockton & Copperopolis. (Read about it in Don's article, "Build a working interlocking plant, Parts 1 and 2," in the January and February 2015 MRs.)

Working Orford Tower let me enjoy the action of Don's well-made machine, interaction with the dispatcher and train crews (the towerman also makes OS reports of passing trains and copies and delivers clearances and train orders), and "raillanning" Don's excellent model work. (The design of Don's S&C was covered in "Turning the clock back to 1895," *Model Railroad Planning 2011*, page 66.) It's about as close as we get in the model world to the scene in this month's photo. [MR](#)