

What I Learned by Becoming an MMR

Iwent into the Achievement Program thinking I knew a lot of stuff. I came out of the AP realizing how little I knew. Either the program somehow sucked information out of my brain, or it was what's known as a "growth experience." I'm pretty sure it was the latter.

For me, becoming an MMR was a "life goal," the kind you hear about everybody else pursuing. So, in 2002 when I passed my half-century mile marker and realized that reaching the goal was never going to get easier, it became a total and complete commitment. I put down the plaster bucket and literally stopped all work on my beloved half-built Bona Vista Railroad to pursue each of the seven certificates, one after the other. Bang, bang, bang! Yes, indeed, I got "tunnel vision."

It was work. It was fun. And much to my surprise, it was fun work. And I learned a lot along the way, some of which I'd like to share.

Humility

This came in all shapes and sizes during the AP. Just when I was ready to show the world my "magnificent" scratchbuilt boxcar, I ran across a 31-year-old issue of *Railroad Model Craftsman* spotlighting the NMRA

National contest winners for that year. Mr. Leone, would you and your boxcar please sit down?

There were models on those pages I couldn't even dream of building. Models like a fully appointed, scratchbuilt Nn3 steam locomotive created with no power tools except an electric eraser.

Or an auto transport car with working, locking doors, each containing over 297 parts. They took my breath away. Boxcar? Heh, what boxcar?

The experience made me realize how really, really good the guys like Jack Work, Jock Oliphant, and John Allen were and how many more really, really good modelers there are out there.

Without having built my boxcar, without having tried myself, I'd have never realized the true craftsmanship of what I was looking at and how good some of those Old Masters were.

Judgment day

I hate being judged. I love being judged. I've often heard that the Merit Awards are the single greatest reason modelers choose not to enter the AP. They don't realize how they're short-changing themselves. Maybe it's testosterone overload, but guys, listen

up: Merit Award judging really isn't a me versus him contest. It's me versus me. That means I always come out the winner.

I learned big time from Merit Award judging. I learned that things I'd done that I thought were great weren't. I learned that things I took for granted were actually kind of great. I learned that there's always room for a cleaner cut, a smoother paint job, and a straighter window.

I learned that I can do things I thought I could never do. And that I can't do things I thought I could. Eye-openers, all of them.

It taught me how to take off my "loving creator" glasses and see my modeling objectively. Some of it really isn't very good. Some of it actually is. Most important, I learned that by raising the bar for myself, my joy in clearing that bar is multiplied. If that isn't a "life lesson," what is?

The kindest cut

I knew that rock beat scissors. I knew that scissors beat paper. Now I know that scalpel beats X-acto. And that nothing beats a good pair of tweezers.

I learned that "the right tool" really does make a difference. I learned that nobody makes a T-square shallow enough for cutting sheet styrene or wood. I learned that I want — no, *need* — most of the items in the Micro-Mark catalog. My wife, who pays the bills, learned that I'm well on my way to achieving that goal.

Put on the brakes

Before the AP, the most superdetailing I'd ever done to a freight car was gluing on the brakewheel. Now I know how to pipe an AB brake system. And what an AB brake system is. And why it is. I also learned that while there is a plethora of articles in the commercial press on scratchbuilding structures (including a few by yours truly), there are precious few on scratchbuilding freight cars. I'm not talking modifying kits, I'm talking "here's a pile of styrene; have at it" articles. My thanks goes out to John R. Porter for writing the 1977 *Model*



Left: Every MMR pledges in writing to help others in the hobby, whether they're in the Achievement Program or not. That's the easy part. The hard part is figuring out when — and where — to wear the official "MMR" shirt.



Railroader article that got me to jump in the pool for the very first time.

The good guys

I learned that there is an awful lot of really good guys in this hobby. I mean really good guys. Guys who are willing to help. Guys who are willing to offer advice and constructive criticism. Guys who are friends enough to be fair, impartial, objective judges when the time comes.

I started as a lone wolf modeler. I'm still a lone wolf modeler. But along the way, I met one guy, who introduced me to another guy, who got me involved with a group of guys, who volunteered me for... Doors opened up to learning, to fun, to a whole side of the hobby I never thought I'd like.

I don't know nuthin'

So in the end, three years later, I find that the MMR program has taught me what I don't know, has taught me what I didn't know, and has taught me what I always knew. That's quite a tall order for seven paper certificates. Has it made my modeling better? Without a doubt. But more impor-

tantly, the MMR program made my hobby better. Can't ask for more than that.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get back to slopping some plaster. 🛠️

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Above: The PFE reefer behind the engine was the second car Gerry scratchbuilt for his "Master Builder-Cars" certificate. This shot of No. 24 rounding the high bridge over Lake Wallace on Gerry's Bona Vista Railroad appeared in the 2007 NMRA Calendar.

Below: The Achievement Program stretches modelers' abilities and sometimes gets them to go where they've never been. This Pennsy flatcar is the result of Gerry's first jump into the "car scratchbuilding" pool.

to my extraordinarily supportive wife, Renay, who always told me it looked good, even when it didn't.

