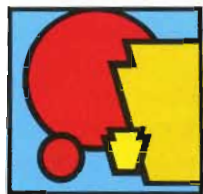


Prototype Models Certificate

article and model photographs by *Pete Magoun, MMR*

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According to the NMRA's web site, Master Builder- Prototype Models is "the category which many consider to be the most challenging" in the NMRA's Achievement Program. I found it to be one of the more interesting certificates in the program. In many ways I fell into it, rather than consciously attempting it, and I had a ball doing it. I found the Prototype Models certificate both exacting and exciting. The requisite paperwork was entirely rational and no more difficult than any other AP certificates. So let's have a look at the requirements and see how I completed them. But before we start, I should mention that I'm pretty much a lone-wolf modeler. I live about three hours away — on a good

day — from the nearest Division meeting. I had to find most of what I needed on the NMRA web site: <http://www.nmra.org/achievement/>.

The requirements state that you must "construct an animated or static model of a prototype scene containing at least six models of prototype equipment or structures." Within the six, you need to represent four different types of models, including rolling stock, a railroad structure, a caboose or passenger car, and motive power. You need to scratchbuild any two of the models and super-detail the others. You need to document what you did with plans or photographs to allow your Region AP Manager and the judges to verify the final prototypical appearance of each of your models and your total scene. And, since you're modeling here, you need to earn a Merit Award of at

least 87.5 points for your scene, awarded according to a schedule posted in the requirements.

Once that's done, you'll need the usual paperwork, including documentation (prototype photos, plans and so on) of what you did, a written description of what you were trying to model, including any towns or cities you were attempting to replicate, some color photos for the judges, and a completed Statement of Qualifications. Note that the photos do not have to be "contest quality" (mine weren't!): You're being judged on what you modeled, not how well you photographed it. Of course, like all documentation, the more professional it appears, the easier it will be for you to earn the intended certificate.

All this may sound onerous, but it really isn't any more complicated than the pa-



perwork for any other certificate — you're simply trying to replicate the prototype and document your efforts in modeling that prototype. That said, the NMRA web site notes that "This is one category where you cannot have too much documentation!" So how do you approach all this? You break it down into its elements, work on each one, and document what you've done. It's the same process you use for the other certificates.

One of the most helpful elements of the AP requirement descriptions on the NMRA web site is the "fine print." This is the official interpretation of the requirements, and it's designed both to answer your questions up-front and to guide your efforts to achieve the desired result. Don't skip over it! You'll note, for instance, that you have no size requirement to meet. My scene was constructed on a pair of 2.5x4-foot operating HO_n30 modules. Because the requirements state that it can be animated or static, I simply clamped a temporary backdrop along one end for the requisite photographs.

None of your models have to earn a Merit Award by itself: It's the overall scene that needs to qualify. Because you're going to be building various models anyway, and since they have to be super-detailed, consider using them to help you meet the requirements for Structures, Rolling Stock, Motive Power, and Scenery. If you do, your efforts here will pay off in four other areas; the NMRA allows you to use the models for other certificates. You get a very nice

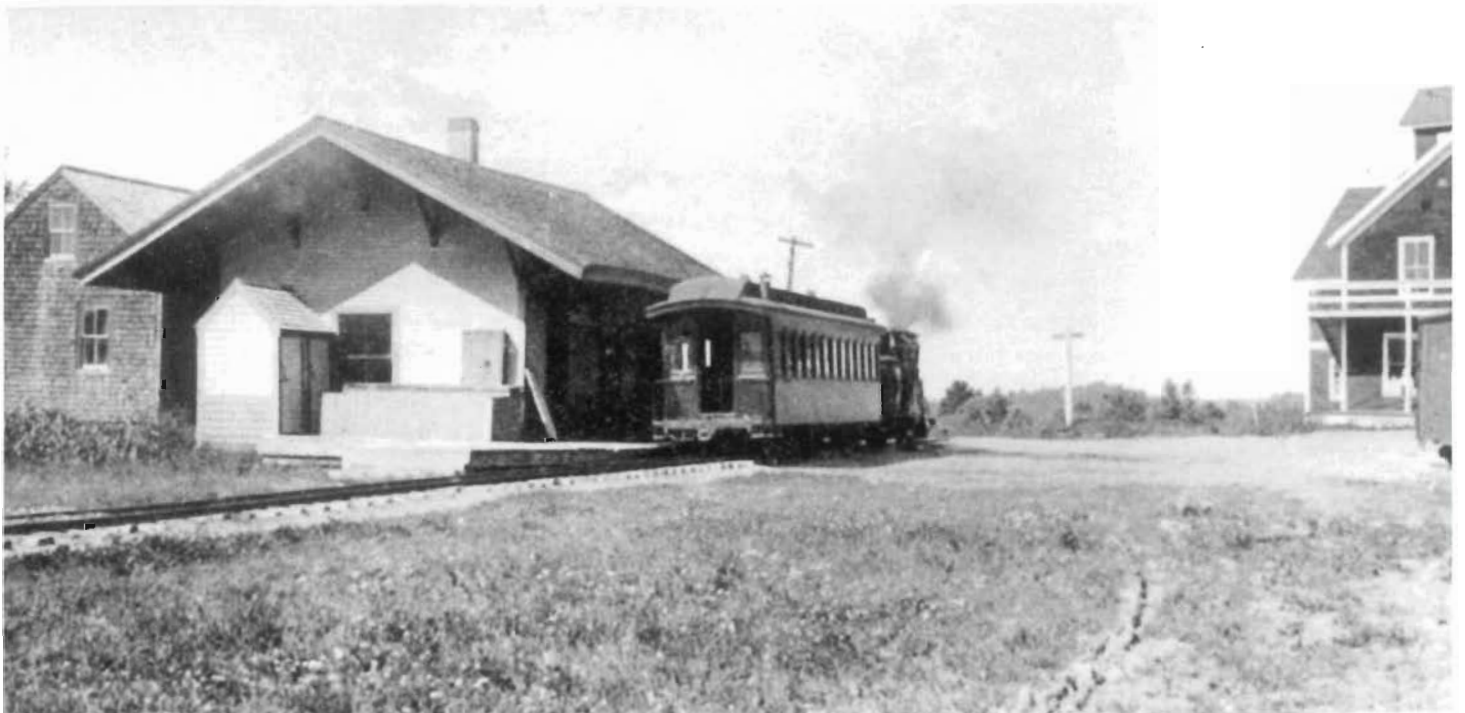
return on your investment in time, and you'll probably pick up some new skills as well!

I mentioned that in many ways I fell into, rather than consciously attempted, the Prototype Models certificate. I was modeling the two-foot gauge Wiscasset, Waterville & Farmington Railway's route through the village of North Whitefield, Maine, circa 1912. There are a number of very knowledgeable people in "Two-Foot Nation," and I wanted to ensure that my module would not disappoint them, or me. I was nosing through my major reference book, *Narrow Gauge in the Sheepscot Valley*, Vol. 2, one evening just before bedtime, trying to ensure that I had captured the signature elements of the area surrounding the depot, and I was idly looking at a picture of an inspection train I'd seen many times before in the process of building the module. Earlier that evening, I had read the Prototype Models requirements, more to ensure that I had the sorts of things that should be on the module than for any conscious attempt to earn the certificate. The light snapped "ON," and I began counting the elements in the photo. There were more than six elements in the photo, and all four of the requisite types were present! Suddenly, the Prototype Models certificate was a very real possibility. I did not get much sleep that night.

The new day brought with it some cold, hard realities. The requirements call for "final prototypical appearance," and that meant having lots of things line up,

preferably exactly like the photo. I didn't know which passenger car was in the scene. I didn't know which locomotive was pulling it. I didn't know which boxcar was sitting on the team track. And I didn't know whether I could achieve the requisite spatial relationships to duplicate the photograph. Obviously, I had work to do. The good news here is that the railway is well documented. A photographer had made "my photo" as part of an inspection trip by the Brass Hats during an era when photography was expensive and required a great deal of skill. When I found photographs obviously taken on the same trip both north and south of North Whitefield, many of my questions were answered.

A clear photo of the train (a locomotive and coach) taken at a flag stop a few miles north of the North Whitefield depot provided the locomotive and car numbers, information on the configuration and markings of both, and a good look at the board of directors. Another photo taken at a similar stop south of the depot called into question the dates on various captions and cemented the idea that the images were all made on the same trip. And a look at the "fine print" (remember that?) for the Scenery certificate noted that "selective compression is acceptable as long as the character of the original is preserved (modeling a six-door prototype freight house as having only four doors to save space, for example)." A quick e-mail to my Region AP Manager established that the same thing is true here, so my spatial







relationships issues were resolved — I had compressed only the raw dirt between the mainline and the team track to fit the scene onto the module! I began to work on the certificate in earnest.

One nagging issue remained: identifying the boxcar on the team track. It had

an interesting modification/repair to the door and a stovepipe indicating that it had formerly carried potatoes, yet no number or other identifying information was visible. It was research time again.

Wiscasset, Waterville & Farmington was just over 40 miles long and connected

with no other railroads. Its “interchange” was with the standard-gauge Maine Central in Wiscasset, where cargos were manhandled between the railroads. The probability of any given boxcar being on the North Whitefield team track on that date was, therefore, high.





After a long, sometimes frustrating, yet fascinating series of consultations with historians, knowledgeable modelers, WW&F Museum folk, and others, I had established that the car was of a specific series, and that the only other known photograph of the car provided no useful information on the car's number. By a process of elimination, I narrowed the search down to about five cars, but which of the five was it? My only options seemed to be to pick one and continue, or forget the whole thing. Another e-mail to my Region AP Manager established that picking a car number without hard data on a century-old railway was a viable option, so that's what I did:

With the models built and photographed, I packed the requisite documentation into an envelope, mailed it to my Region AP Manager for judging, and held my breath. Shortly thereafter, I was pleasantly surprised to find a copy of the judges' score sheet in my mailbox — I had scored a Merit Award of over 100 points for the scene! The certificate followed shortly thereafter.

Along the way to this certificate, I found that the AP management, from the top down, is extraordinarily helpful, that the requirements and their intent are



well documented, yet open to interpretation, and that many elements involved can do "double duty" with other certificates. Careful reading of the requirements indicated that the scene didn't have to operate (although mine did); it could have been a diorama. And although my prototype had the requisite passenger car/caboose, I really wasn't required to model my prototype or even my era!

So, have a good look at the requirements. Read the "fine print." Because the scene does not have to operate, you can pick one, even if it's not your prototype. And, if you have questions, be sure to ask your Region AP Manager. When you're finished, sit back and enjoy the "Oh, wow — look at that!" comments from those who see your scene. You've earned them. 📷