

News from Houston N'Crowd



THE ORDERBOARD

September/October 2018



This issue:

Wi-Fi throttles • Black Widows invade the BC&G
When bad things happen to good trains • Crew training

1 Sunset Limited
Today, September 5th



Beaumont, TX
CANCELED

Scheduled Arrival

3:34p

Canceled

Scheduled Departure

3:48p

Canceled



Service Adjustments for
Tropical Storm Gordon



"GREEN EYE" - CLEAR BLOCK

by Tom Marsh, President

We have things to do!

We are a busy group! Here are some upcoming activities to note in your calendar.

Silent auction at September meeting: A number of N-scale locomotives and cars have recently been donated to the club, and most are surplus to our needs. So, at our Sept. 19 meeting, we will hold a silent auction to dispose of these items. Payment will be due at the end of the meeting and we'll accept cash or checks. Items not sold at the auction will be offered for sale at the Greater Houston Train Show in February.

Elections for 2019 officers and board member: We're a little behind schedule in forming the nominating committee for the annual election of officers and one board member, but we will sort it out at the Sept. 19 meeting. As usual, all four officer positions are open (see below), as is one board position. If you are interested in volunteering, be sure to step forward at the meeting, or send an email to tom@houstonNcrowd.org.

Play with the big boys at Zube Park: The NMRA LSR Division 8 Annual Meeting will once again take place at Zube Park, and the Sept. 29 date coincides with the Houston Area Live Steamers operations day. The operating session will start about 8:30 a.m. and the meeting and picnic will start about 11:30 a.m. or so. You do not have to be an NMRA or HALS member to participate, but you

may have to listen to our own Ray Byer's NMRA recruiting pitch. Don't worry, it's not too long!

Seats still available for rail and road excursion: We still have seats available for our Oct. 6 rail and road excursion to Lake Charles, La., and we can take reservations until Sept. 28. For more information, see the ticket order form that accompanies this newsletter or click the reservation link at www.houstonNcrowd.org.

New members: We have recruited 12 new members since the first of the year, and I want to take this opportunity to welcome them to the club again. Most have joined after visiting the layout at Papa Ben's on a Saturday and talking with the N'Crowd volunteers who give their time to run trains and help us meet our obligation to the store. I think every member who visits the layout or volunteers to run trains should consider themselves an ambassador for the hobby and the club. Along those lines, Tom Wayburn reports that his daughter Amy recently recruited two new members. Good work, Amy!

I hope you can participate in some of these activities. If not, just visit the layout and enjoy the trains.

Happy Railroading!

Tom

Houston N'Crowd 2018 Officers and Volunteers

President Tom Marsh
Vice President Richard Bartlett
Secretary James C. Senneff, Jr.
Treasurer Eddie Aycock
Board Member (2018) Joe Kingsberry

Board Member (2019) Allan Melton
Board Member (2020) Samuel Townsell II
Immediate Past President Samuel Townsell II
Layout Master Joe Kingsberry
Editor & Webmaster Tom Marsh



N'Crowd Wednesday Membership Meetings:
September 19 / October 17 / November 21 / December 19

N'Crowd Operating Sessions: First Sunday of even-numbered months. Watch your email for information.

Most activities take place at Papa Ben's Train Place, 4007-E Bellaire Blvd. Our monthly membership meetings start at 7 p.m. and are open to all. Operating sessions take place at various locations.

Black Widows invade BC&G



You never know what you'll see when you visit the N'Crowd's Bayou City & Gulf Railroad! As seen here, SP "Black Widows" were spotted recently on the railroad. These locomotives are the handiwork of Joe Kingsberry (above) and Andrew Monaghan (below).

Joe's EMD GP9 No. 247 is actually a T&NO unit. Delivered in 1954, T&NO Nos. 240-249 were the first GP9s on the SP system, according to *Southern Pacific Dieselization* (PFM Publications,

1985). All 10 were equipped with steam generators for passenger service, although the steam generators are believed to have been removed by 1960 following the discontinuance of most T&NO passenger service.

SP EMD SD70ACe No. 9540 is another in a series of "what if" locomotives from Andrew's paint shop. The modern locomotive sports Andrew's update of the historic SP "Black Widow" scheme with silver trucks and underbody.



Crew training on the Santa Fe - All the Way

In lieu of a regular N'Crowd operating session in August, N'Crowd member Gordon Bliss hosted a train crew training session on his Santa Fe - All the Way. For the session, the timetable was not adhered to absolutely, giving everyone who attended a chance to operate a least one train over all or part of the railroad, work some yard and local jobs,

interact with the dispatcher and observe how others dealt with operating situations. There was even time for a bull session or two.

As usual, Gordon's layout operated flawlessly. Just as important, the train crews managed to have relatively few cornfield meets and similar incidents. Thanks, Gordon, for hosting the group!

Gordon gives some preliminary advice about yard operations at the start of the crew training session.



The Santa Fe - All the Way uses car tabs to facilitate car moves. Gordon has found this to be a good way to keep tabs on the cars.



Below, dispatcher says, "Oops!"



Engineers check in with the dispatcher for their train assignments and check out throttles before starting their runs on the Santa Fe - All the Way.



The action can get heavy enough on the railroad that good communications between train crews can be as important as communications with the dispatcher.



The Santa Fe - All the Way features wide aisles to accommodate both train crews and "supervisors".



BC&G WiFi interface upgraded *by Dejan Suskavcevic*

Using cell phones and tablets to control model trains has been on the rise in recent years. While there is no substitute for the tactile feel of knobs and buttons of a “real” throttle, the apps WiThrottle on the iPhone and iPad and Engine Driver on Android-based devices can be very useful in some situations, and for some people even preferable.

Sometimes your throttle battery may not be charged, or the throttle needs to be plugged in, or you may not be familiar with someone else’s throttle, or there just may not be enough throttles for everyone. Why not use your own primary personal computing device, your phone, instead?

In the last couple of years, the N’Crowd layout had an experimental setup for phone-based WiFi throttles. It was a full JMRI system running on a Raspberry Pi device, connected to the CS100 command station via a PR3 interface. It turned on and off at the same time as the layout, so it was supposed to be available at all times. It was an improvement over the same system previously running on a laptop computer, which needed to be manually started every session; very few club members bothered to do so. Despite its small physical size, the system was a full Linux computer, and as such was quite complex. At least twice the memory card that hosts the operating system experienced data corruption, probably due to an unexpected loss of power, and needed to be reimaged. This was a serious reliability issue, and beyond that, there were times when club members were not able to connect to the system.

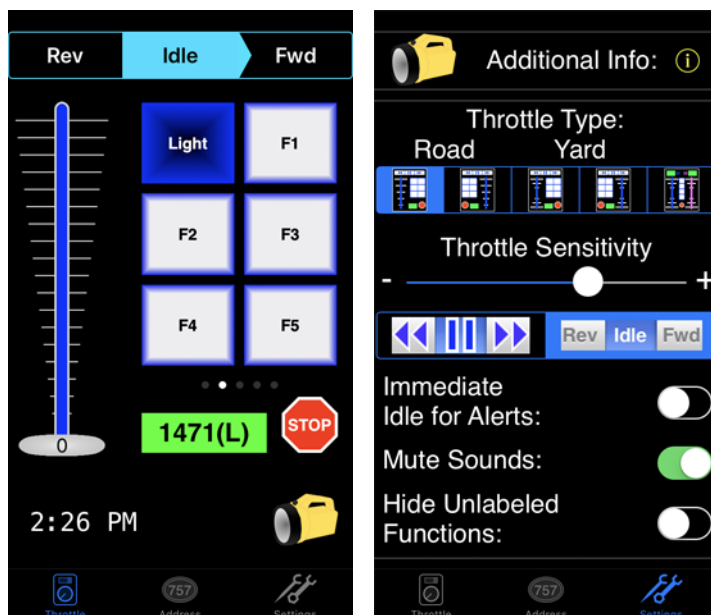
The club decided to try a Digitrax product that was introduced last year. The LNWI LocoNet WiFi Interface, which is a much more streamlined device that supports only the wi-fi throttle functionality rather than the full JMRI system, connects to the command station directly (no PR3 device required). It has no memory cards or operating

system to get corrupted. It does have one limitation, however: Due to the small memory size, it only supports up to four simultaneous connections, although up to eight devices can be used on a single layout. The club already ran into this limitation at the August club meeting when multiple members tried to test it at the same time, so we have added an additional LNWI device to allow more users to connect. Thanks to Ray Byer for connecting the units.

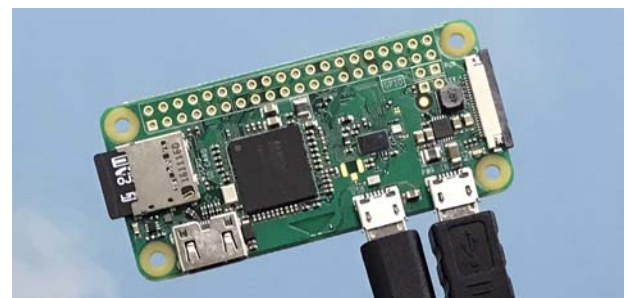
The instructions to connect, including the wi-fi name and password, are displayed on the layout room door. If you use an iPhone, the app you need is WiThrottle. If you use an Android phone, you’ll need the app Engine Driver. The two apps, developed by different teams, are functionally equivalent, although they look quite different. Once the correct app is installed, the following steps need to take place:

- We need to connect to the wi-fi network provided by the device. The network name looks like Dtx1-LnServer_XXXX-7, and the password is listed on the layout room door.
- Once we have joined the wi-fi network, we can start the app and connect to the Digitrax device. The app is supposed to figure out its network address and port automatically, but it is possible to enter these values in the app: address 192.168.7.1 and port 12090. I recommend leaving this on automatic and not entering the values, as most connectivity issues result from not being properly connected to the wi-fi network.
- Once connected to the Digitrax device, we can acquire a locomotive, and control it using the app. Remember to release the locomotive when done with it, just like with any other DCC system.

Enjoy running trains using your phone, and let us know if you run into any difficulties.



Above, two WiThrottle iPhone screens. At left is one of the throttle configurations, at right, the settings screen. The app is easy to use.



Above, one of two Digitrax LNWI units now operating on the BC&G, and the Raspberry Pi device that was replaced.

When bad things happen to good trains *by Tom Marsh*

Sunset Limited operations were disrupted by bad weather in early September, depressing an already lackluster third quarter on-time performance record and resulting in the annulment of service east of Houston on Sept. 4-5. *Texas Eagle* time-keeping troubles also affected the westbound *Sunset Limited* at San Antonio on Sept. 6. Due to the annulment at Houston, all of the troubles over these three days in early September affected the same *Sunset Limited* consist.

This consist, along with Chicago through cars, departed Los Angeles as Train No. 2 on time at 10 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 2. By the time the train left its first stop 31 miles from Los Angeles, it was over an hour and a half late. Over the next 1,200 miles, the train made up some time, arriving at Del Rio, Texas, just 32 minutes late.

However, heavy rains in West Texas caused flooding, and the train was two hours and 27 minutes late at its next stop, San Antonio. The train left San Antonio three hours and 45 minutes late, arriving in Houston on Tuesday, Sept. 4 at 3:53 p.m., four hours and 43 minutes late. The decision to annul the train at Houston due to the threat of Hurricane Gordon to the east had already been made, and the late arrival time in Houston was exacerbated by Union Pacific's decision to turn the train for the Sept. 5 westbound departure before unloading the passengers. This decision kept passengers on the

late train for an additional 35 minutes. Passengers destined to points east of Houston were put on two busses.

No busses operated the next day, Sept. 5, from New Orleans to Houston, and the train left Houston three minutes late with only a handful of passengers on board. Now running westbound as No. 1, the consist arrived in San Antonio 12 minutes late at 12:17 a.m. on Sept. 6.

However, the *Texas Eagle* with connecting cars from Chicago was running over 10 hours late. As a result, the *Sunset* did not depart San Antonio until 11:10 a.m., eight hours and 25 minutes late. The train made up no time on its way to Los Angeles, arriving in the California city on Sept. 7 eight hours and 24 minutes late.

Obviously the railroad has no control over the weather, and this extreme example of tardiness on the part of the *Sunset Limited* highlights some of the challenges railroaders face while moving trains over the line. But what is happening at other times? According to the Federal Railroad Administration's most recent report on Amtrak performance covering the quarter ended March 31, 2018, Train No. 1, the westbound *Sunset*, was on time at its end points 78.9 percent of the time, but its all-stations on-time performance was just 24.2 percent. Eastbound No. 2 had an end-point on time percentage of just 36.8, and an all-stations percentage of 45.8.

Troubled Train

This *Sunset Limited* consist made up Train No. 2 (eastbound), arriving late at Houston on Sept. 4, where the train was annulled. The consist became Train No. 1 (westbound) on Sept. 5, originating at Houston rather than New Orleans. The train departed Houston close to on-time, arrived at San Antonio a little late and then was delayed at San Antonio for more than eight hours. The train reached its ultimate destination of Los Angeles more than eight hours late on Sept. 7.

The *Sunset Limited* east of San Antonio usually includes two coaches, but this consist had only a single coach.

168	GE P42
113	GE P42
61015	Viewliner baggage car
39008	Superliner transition sleeper
32032	Superliner sleeper
38066	Superliner diner
33034	Superliner lounge
31043	Superliner coach

Below, after unloading passengers on Sept. 4 at Houston, annulled Amtrak Train No. 2 is moved to Track 1 to layover until the next day, when it will depart as westbound Train No. 1.



LCL

Less than Car Load: a few notes from your editor

CORRECTIONS: Last month's story about the N'Crowd's visit to the Texas State Railroad contained a couple of errors. First, the wheel arrangement of T&P No. 610 is 2-10-4, not 2-10-2 as stated on page 4. On the same page, a typographical error in the photo caption resulted in TSRR 2-8-0 No. 28 being referred to as No. 128.

Thanks: Thanks to Dejan Suskavcevic for contributing the article on page 6 about our new wi-fi setup. We still need **YOU** to contribute to *The Orderboard*. As I've said before, this does not work unless others pitch in! I know many of you are working on interesting projects, so take some photos and put together a few words, and enlighten us! Deadline for the next issue is Nov. 2.

World not ending: By now, most everyone has heard

that one of the major Chinese factories supplying the model railroad market has closed. While many companies have said that new product deliveries will be delayed, unlike in other instances when factories shut down, companies also report they have access to their tooling and are moving it to other factories. So have no fear, cool new stuff will still be hitting the market!

Train show season is here!: Check the Time Table below or at www.houstonNcrowd.org for upcoming train shows that are within driving distance of Houston. Shows in September will take place in Temple and Plano, the fall New Braunfels show will take place Oct. 27-28, and the big daddy in the region, the Oklahoma City Train Show, will take place Dec. 1-2. The next Greater Houston Train Show will be held at the Stafford Centre on Feb. 16. N'Crowd will have a presence at the show.

HOUSTON N'CROWD 2018 TIME TABLE - SUBJECT TO CHANGE

September 15-16

36th Annual Temple Model Train Show, Frank Mayborn Center

September 19

N'Crowd Membership Meeting at Papa Ben's Train Place, 7 p.m.

September 22

Rosenberg Railroad Museum Fall Fun Fest

September 29

NMRA LSR Division 8 picnic and annual meeting, Zube Park. Coincides with HALS operations day! You do not have to be an NMRA member to attend. See page 2 for details.

September 29-30

Third Annual Fall Plano Train Show, Plano Centre

October 7

N'Crowd Operating Session

October 13

LSR NMRA Division 8 Clinic Series, Bayland Community Center, Houston

October 17

N'Crowd Membership Meeting at Papa Ben's Train Place, 7 p.m.

October 27-28

9th Annual New Braunfels Fall Train Show, New Braunfels Civic/Convention Center

November 10

LSR NMRA Division 8 Clinic Series, Bayland Community Center, Houston



THE ORDERBOARD *from Houston N'Crowd*

Tom Marsh, Editor

Published fairly regularly for members and friends of N'Crowd Model Railroad Society, Inc., Houston, Texas.

Send newsletter contributions to: tom@houstonNcrowd.org.

Please note: We reserve the right to edit submissions for clarity and length.

Visit our Web site:

www.houstonNcrowd.org

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