

News from Houston N'Crowd



July/August 2022

THE ORDERBOARD



This issue:

Easy street lamps ♦ Working Montalbano

Amtrak performance ♦ Members go trainspotting

...and more!

“GREEN EYE” - CLEAR BLOCK

by Naz Hally, President

Model railroading and the supply chain

As obvious and irritating as the recent rise in price for a gallon of gas or a couple bags of groceries has been, so too is the rise in prices for almost everything related to our hobby. Scarcity has replaced abundance for nearly everything from pre-cut T-TRAK module kits (no Russian birch any time soon!) to locomotives with factory-equipped decoders. From Papa Ben's to Amazon, e-Bay, and M. B. Klein, what was a seemingly well-oiled supply chain has transformed into a sometimes frustrating morass of uncertainty.

So, what else is new, right? What can be done? Is it all really Vladimir Putin's fault? Personally, I doubt that, but how shall we adapt until complex supply chains stabilize? And, for how long? Six months? A year or more?

Many of you know the Austin-based supplier of T-TRAK modules, Masterpiece Module Kits. Their pre-cut T-TRAK module kits were made from imported, high-quality Baltic (mostly Russian) birch, a relatively strong, light, and dimensionally stable material compared to other wood products. A few months ago, visitors to the website read a message that said they're selling all remaining pieces in inventory. As I write this, the website says they are no longer offering T-TRAK module kits.

How to adapt? Surely, there are other materials that can be substituted for Baltic birch. Is 3D printing of module components an option? These types of disruptions create opportunities for new players to step in. If a reasonable substitute material can be sourced, are there any ambitious members in our

club with some carpentry or woodworking or 3D modeling skills, and the proper tools, who can step into this supply chain vacuum and earn a few bucks?

Elsewhere, there are some signs of recovery. At Papa Ben's, the Digitrax decoder inventory has improved significantly in recent weeks. Also, online decoder suppliers are slowly rebuilding inventory. For example, for more than a year, locomotives factory-equipped with LokSound decoders have been nearly impossible to get; just ask Allyn! For Kato USA, “factory installed” means independent contractors install decoders in dozens of chassis in large batches, including all the milling and soldering.

I don't have the tools or skills for milling chassis. But, for a drop-in LokSound 5 decoder and sugar cube speaker installation on a Kato FEF-3 Greyhound, it took longer to set up my soldering station than it did to actually install the components in the locomotive and tender. I'll gladly help you with your install if it's similar. Let me know.

So, is it feasible to pool skills and tools among our more experienced or specialized club members to help each other bypass some of these supply chain problems? I believe so. Perhaps this could be a topic for the next meeting or on our Discord forum. We already have a “trade channel” there. Should we set up a new channel for decoder installs, T-TRAK module construction, 3D printing, or anything else we can think of? Again, let me know.

Naz

nazhally@houstonncrowd.org



N'Crowd Wednesday Membership Meetings:

July 20 / August 17 / September 21 / October 19

Meetings start at 7 p.m. at Papa Ben's Train Place.

N'Crowd Test & Tune Sessions: First Wednesday of odd-numbered months. 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Papa Ben's.

N'Crowd Even-Month Ops Sessions: August 7 / October 2 / December 4 / January 8. Operating sessions subject to change or cancellation.

Members go trainspotting!

Yes, it's hot, but just like mad dogs and Englishmen, railfans go out in the midday sun.



Above, N-Crowd member David Crawford recently spotted Union Pacific Track Evaluation Car EC-5 alongside SH 225 near Battleground Road. According to the UP website, the railroad has two track evaluation cars, which travel up to 80,000 combined track miles per year. The cars inspect all of UP's mainline track at least twice each year.



At left and below, your editor got lucky near downtown at Tower 26 on July 10, spotting three trains in just 19 minutes - in 102 degree heat. First to rattle across the diamonds at 1:40 p.m. were three big UP road units with a long string of mixed freight cars in tow. At 1:49 p.m., Amtrak's Train No. 2, the eastbound Sunset Limited, moseyed through the junction about an hour and a half late. Ten minutes later, a BNSF freight picked its way through the junction heading north. Then your editor left to find a cold beer.



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Quick and easy street lamps

by Mauricio Varon

As industrialist Harvey S. Firestone noted, “Success is the sum of details”. Attention to details definitely applies to model railroading. On my most-recent T-TRAK module I made an effort and dedicated more time to adding details that would make it stand out as a photo-worthy piece.

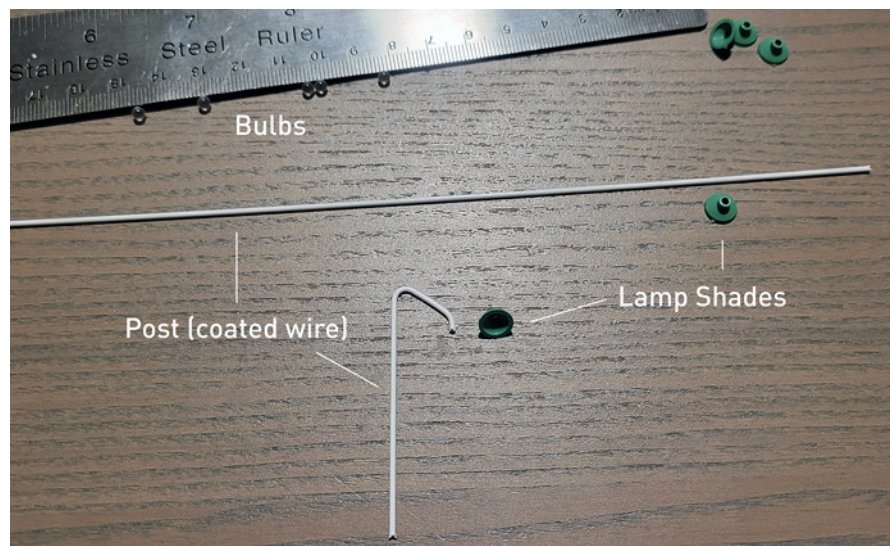
Some elements, including the street lamps and a chain link fence, were scratch built. I was not following any real-life prototype for the street lamps, but rather worked from photographs and imagination to create realistic-looking additions to my Japanese town module.

There are only four parts to the street lamps on my module: the post, the “bulb” (the lamps do not light), the shade and the base. Materials for the first three parts were sourced from G&G Model Shop. This included coated wire, Plastruct lamp shades and Plastruct acrylic balls to represent the bulbs.

First I cut the coated wire to the approximate height of a two-story N scale building, then bent it at angles to form a typical looking lamp post. I painted the post a matte metal gray. Next the bulb was glued to the shade, which I then glued to the post. Last I glued the post to the base, which was also painted gray. The bases were made from plastic sprues from the plastic structure kits I built for the module. Once placed, the

finished lampposts really enhanced the overall look of the module.

My advice: Take your time but don’t be shy about adding extras to your modules or layout. You can never have too many details!



Left, the elements that make up Mauricio’s street lamps.

Below, the module with three scratchbuilt street lamps enhancing the scene.



FRA issues first Amtrak performance report using new on-time standard



Amtrak's Sunset Limited departs Houston one hour and 50 minutes late on Sunday, July 3, 2022. Timekeeping continued to slip: The train arrived at its destination, New Orleans, two hours and 46 minutes late. Photo by Tom Marsh

The U.S. Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is required by the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 to publish a quarterly Amtrak performance report. The report for the federal government's first fiscal quarter of 2022 (Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, 2021) was released May 16, 2022. This report is the first to apply the 2020 on-time performance standard of 80 percent for any two consecutive quarters. It is also the first to include public benefits metrics, which will be published annually going forward.

The Q1 2022 report is the third issued since the FRA in 2020 established metrics and minimum standards for measuring intercity passenger train on-time performance (OTP) and service quality. OTP is included for all routes and trains in operation during the quarter. The routes with the highest OTP in FY2022 Q1 were the *Hiawatha* (95.1 percent), *Ethan Allen* (93.3 percent) and the *Keystone* (93.2 percent). Routes with the lowest OTP were the *Auto Train* (24.2 percent), *Capitol Limited* (35.0 percent) and *Sunset Limited* (40.0 percent).

According to the FRA, delay minutes are tracked for each Amtrak train according to 40 individual delay

codes across three major categories: "Host Responsible Delays" (including freight train interference and slow orders on the track); "Amtrak Responsible Delays" (including equipment problems and delays related to passenger loading and unloading); and "Third Party Responsible Delays" (primarily weather-related).

Amtrak trains experienced approximately 1.3 million minutes of delay during the first quarter of FY 2022, up 9 percent from the previous quarter. System-wide, train miles increased by 8 percent from the fourth quarter of FY 2021 to the first quarter of FY 2022 (from 8,168,324 train miles to 8,790,595 train miles), as Amtrak continued to restore service.

The largest cause of delays was freight train interference at 299,252 minutes of delay, 22 percent of total delay minutes, an increase of 12 percent from the previous quarter. The following host railroads were responsible for 92 percent of the freight train interference delay minutes: Union Pacific (84,000 minutes), Norfolk Southern (69,116 minutes), BNSF (69,079 minutes), and CSX (54,810 minutes). Other significant causes of delay were unused recovery time, passenger train interference and slow orders.



Amtrak's Sunset Limited glides past Montalbano Lumber Co. near downtown Houston. Montalbano is a "loose car" small business served by Union Pacific.

Working Montalbano

by Tom Marsh

Montalbano Lumber Co. is an independent building materials supplier in Houston, Texas, that has been in business since 1900. Montalbano's lumber transfer and storage facility near downtown Houston is on the former Southern Pacific Sunset Route mainline; Union Pacific now makes the regular deliveries of centerbeam cars loaded with lumber. The Montalbano spur accommodates two centerbeam cars inside the fence; forklifts are used to unload the lumber.

The compact transfer and storage yard would fit the bill for anyone looking to model a modern small industry served by a big railroad. The facility would work well on either a permanent layout or a module.

Even though this is a small industry, it takes longer than you might think for a local crew to work the Montalbano siding. This photo sequence taken in the late afternoon of March 22, 2018, shows the set out of a single car at Montalbano.



Top left, heading eastbound long hood forward on the Sunset Route, Union Pacific EMD GP38N No. 847 with its four-car train stops short of the Montalbano switch. Note the empty "opera window" centerbeam car inside the Montalbano facility. The locomotive was built as a GP38-2 in 1974 for MKT.



Far left, after uncoupling Montalbano's car from the rest of the train, the locomotive pulls past the switch. The brakeman aligns the switch for the Montalbano spur.



Left, the brakeman next aligns the derrick and unlocks the gate.



Left, No. 847 shoves the centerbeam car into the Montalbano yard and couples it to the empty car already on the property. At this point, I am thinking they will pull the empty out then spot the loaded car.



Left, I thought wrong. No. 847 uncouples from the loaded centerbeam car and backs out of the spur, leaving both cars on the property. The brakeman locks the gate and re-sets the derail.



Left, No. 847 pulls onto the mainline, the brakeman aligns the switch for the main, the locomotive couples on to the three coil cars and the engineer pumps up the air. The brakeman checks that all is well with the brakes and the red flag is still in place on what had been the rear coil car. That car becomes the lead car in the train, as it will now head westbound to tie up for the day.



Left, with the brakeman riding what had been the rear car, No. 847 shoves the coil cars westbound into the sunset - on the Sunset Route.

With the brakeman on the ground taking care of business, setting out the centerbeam car took 18 minutes from arrival to departure of the local.

The time expended by the brakeman on the ground

throwing switches and unlocking gates is seldom included in model railroad operations, but in the interest of realism, maybe it should be, even if it's on model railroader "fast clock" time.

LCL

Less than Car Load: a few notes from your editor

Thank you!: Thanks to this issue's contributors; your support is appreciated. There are more of you out there who can contribute! Remember, this is your newsletter, and it does not work without you. The deadline for the September/October issue is Saturday, September 3.

Carpool to Northwest Crossing Club Sealy event: NWX will be running N and HO-scale trains on Friday and Saturday, July 22-23, at the United Methodist Church in Sealy. The HO division will be setting up Thursday, while the N-Trak division will set up Friday morning. Anyone interested in carpooling from Papa Ben's to Sealy on either Friday or Saturday afternoon (departing about 1 p.m.), see me at the July membership meeting or call me at 281-468-3276.

The event will be open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. both days. Visitors are welcome to watch the action, or for \$10 per person per day, you can bring your own train and Digitrax compatible throttle (including smart phone throttles) and run on the layouts.

HATTA fall layout tour news: The San Jacinto Model Railroad Club has confirmed that northside/ College Station layouts will be grouped together on Saturday and Sunday, Nov. 12-13. Houston Area T-TRAK Association (HATTA), will have a layout operating both days at the home of Debbie and Rusty McLaughlin in Montgomery. As the location is about 60 miles from Papa Ben's, we will try to make some carpool arrangements. We'll have more information about the activity in the near future.

HOUSTON N'CROWD 2022 TIME TABLE - SUBJECT TO CHANGE

July 6

N'Crowd Test & Tune, Papa Ben's Train Place, 4007-E Bellaire Blvd, Houston, 6 p.m.

July 20

N'Crowd Membership Meeting, Papa Ben's Train Place, 4007-E Bellaire Blvd, Houston, 7 p.m.

July 22-23

Northwest Crossing Club Run Date, United Methodist Church, Sealy. See LCL above.

August 7

N'Crowd Operating Session **To Be Confirmed**

August 12-14

NMRA National Train Show, Collinsville (St. Louis), Illinois

August 17

N'Crowd Membership Meeting, Papa Ben's Train Place, 4007-E Bellaire Blvd, Houston, 7 p.m.

August 27-28

Austin Train Show, Palmer Events Center

September 7

N'Crowd Test & Tune, Papa Ben's Train Place, 4007-E Bellaire Blvd, Houston, 6 p.m.

September 17

2022 Galveston County Model Railroad Club Train Festival, Texas City Museum

September 17-18

40th Annual Temple Model Train Show, Mayborn Civic & Convention Center, Temple

September 21

N'Crowd Membership Meeting, Papa Ben's Train Place, 4007-E Bellaire Blvd, Houston, 7 p.m.

October 2

N'Crowd Operating Session **To Be Confirmed**

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N'Crowd Model Railroad Society, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization incorporated in the State of Texas.

Tom Marsh, Editor

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Send newsletter contributions to:
tom@houstonNcrowd.org.

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

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