A slice of postwar Maine

BRIAN INCH BUILT A LAYOUT TO SHARE WITH HIS CHILDREN

Art teacher and model railroader Brian Inch began building his 16 x 20-foot O gauge layout with a handful of specific goals in mind. No confusion on his part about why he was undertaking an ambitious railroad in his basement in 2006; he knew exactly what he wanted to accomplish, which always makes execution easier.

To start, Brian aimed to revive a family tradition launched by his father, who had played with Lionel trains in the postwar era and later constructed a 16 x 16-foot layout for his son. Now Brian had his own son, and he looked forward to an O gauge railroad he could enjoy with young Riley and younger daughters Elise and Meghan.

▲ **Jessica Inch on the left holds Meghan while Riley and Elise (right) snuggle on their father's lap. Brian reports with delight that everyone in the family plays with his spectacular O gauge layout.**

Brian hoped as well to use the layout to express the artistic talents that had enriched his life and advanced his career as a schoolteacher in his native state of Maine. Similarly, his railroad would pay tribute to Maine's residents, industries, transportation, and natural beauty. Finally, the layout would serve as a showcase for Model Rail Scenes, the layout-building business Brian had begun.

Getting started with a plan

Planning can mean a lot of different things to a model railroader. On one level, it typically involves reading books and magazines to see just what other hobbyists have done. Sources like *Classic Toy Trains* open up a world of ideas about developing benchwork, wiring main lines and sidings, and making scenery.

On a second level, planning may plunge a dedicated hobbyist into the past. Devoting time to studying the history of a particular railroad or region is often essential in creating relevant scenes in miniature and successfully conveying viewers what it was like to live during a specific era or to ride a prototype line.

Of course, there are model railroaders who look at planning with a little disdain. They prefer to jump in to their next project, taking the skills they've honed and the knowledge acquired and depending on them to guide their decisions. Their layouts come together quickly and may depend on trial and error.

Brian, despite considering himself a creative and spontaneous person, opted to follow the more conservative approach. Plunging forward, while not without its advantages and enjoyment, seemed a bit risky. Instead, he thought it best to investigate the recent history of Maine so he could re-create scenes with a strong sense of its past. He wanted to ensure his modeling would proceed with confidence and order.

By formulating a solid foundation for his modeling before buying any wood for benchwork or a variety of landscaping materials, Brian prepared himself to capture in less than 350 square feet a slice of life in postwar New England while improving his array of skills. Better yet, he was laying the groundwork for bringing his young son into the fold as they handled key tasks as a terrific team.

Winter is the right time

Brian and his family make their home in rural Maine, which, as you can imagine, experiences some pretty nasty winters. Spending time indoors can hardly be avoided, which is the reason smart residents find plenty to do at home. For the Inch family, starting with Brian's folks, that has always meant model railroading.

Brian recalls the layout his dad built for him and the appeal it had for every kid in his neighborhood. "It was a simple affair," Brian says, "with a spur for coal loading and a town. The highlight of the railroad was being able to run trains over and up a Lionel trestle set and a wood bridge my father and I built together. That was a terrific bonding experience."

Brian dreamed of duplicating that experience and the way a shared project tightened the ties between a parent and his children by involving Riley from the start, although the youngster wasn't old enough to attend kindergarten. As you'll learn, command control turned out to be a critical element in this task.

created in O gauge

By Roger Carp
Photos by Brian Inch

▲ **1. Brian Inch, the owner of Model Rail Scenes, enjoys taking us back to rural Maine in the years after World War II. First-generation diesels, including this Maine Central RS-11 from MTH Electric Trains, stand at the head of most of his freight trains. The scenery attests to Brian's vast array of skills; he's just as good with track, electronics, and structures.**

In the meantime, Brian took the initial steps in finalizing the track diagram of his most ambitious layout. Besides pinpointing the location of main lines, scenic features, and more, he determined the size of the railroad and decided it would stand 40 inches from the floor of the basement and be adjacent to the coal bin there.

As envisioned, the layout was going to feature main lines and about a dozen spur tracks, an engine-servicing yard complete with a roundhouse and a turntable, runaround tracks and a crossover, three bridges, and a long tunnel.

The lumber necessary for the combination of open-grid and tabletop types of

▲ 2. **The basement in the Inch homestead may be far from finished, but the O gauge railroad Brian constructed there impresses every visitor. Don't miss the towering grain elevators he erected in the center. Elsewhere on this 16 x 20-foot layout you'll find logging and dairy facilities.**

▲ 3. **Ask many railfans what they remember about the Bangor & Aroostook RR, and they'll start describing the BL2 diesels from the Electro-Motive Division of General Motors that plied the rails of this regional line for so many years. The striking O gauge replica from MTH is gliding by a dairy farm on a summer morn.**

benchwork came from a local home improvement center. Brian picked up lots of 2 x 4 pieces, along with some sheets of ½-inch-thick plywood for the platform.

Working alongside his father had helped Brian gain familiarity with the myriad tasks required for benchwork: measuring and sawing wood, taking those pieces and forming them into a strong and sturdy framework, and doing whatever was necessary to finish that lumber. Invaluable experience that came in handy now that a grown-up Brian needed to get his benchwork up and together quickly.

Brian proceeded to cover the plywood tabletop with Homasote, a pliable and sound-deadening material modelers have long called one of their best friends. Sections of cork roadbed went on next to provide the perfect foundation for track.

Track offers many choices

When it comes to designing and constructing model railroad benchwork, the choices available seem rather limited. Just a few possible methods and a menu of wood no longer than the list of complete meals at most fast-food restaurants. Brian's attitude toward benchwork was, consequently, straightforward, which did not give him very much to say about it: basic materials and traditional techniques.

Track, however, turned out to be a whole new ballgame. Several manufacturers produce an enormous range of O gauge items, and a wise modeler will give each of them the opportunity to present its line in hopes of being the ultimate choice. In other words, there's no point in choosing hastily.

Brian investigated an assortment of brands on the market and compared their advantages and limitations against the goals he had for his layout.

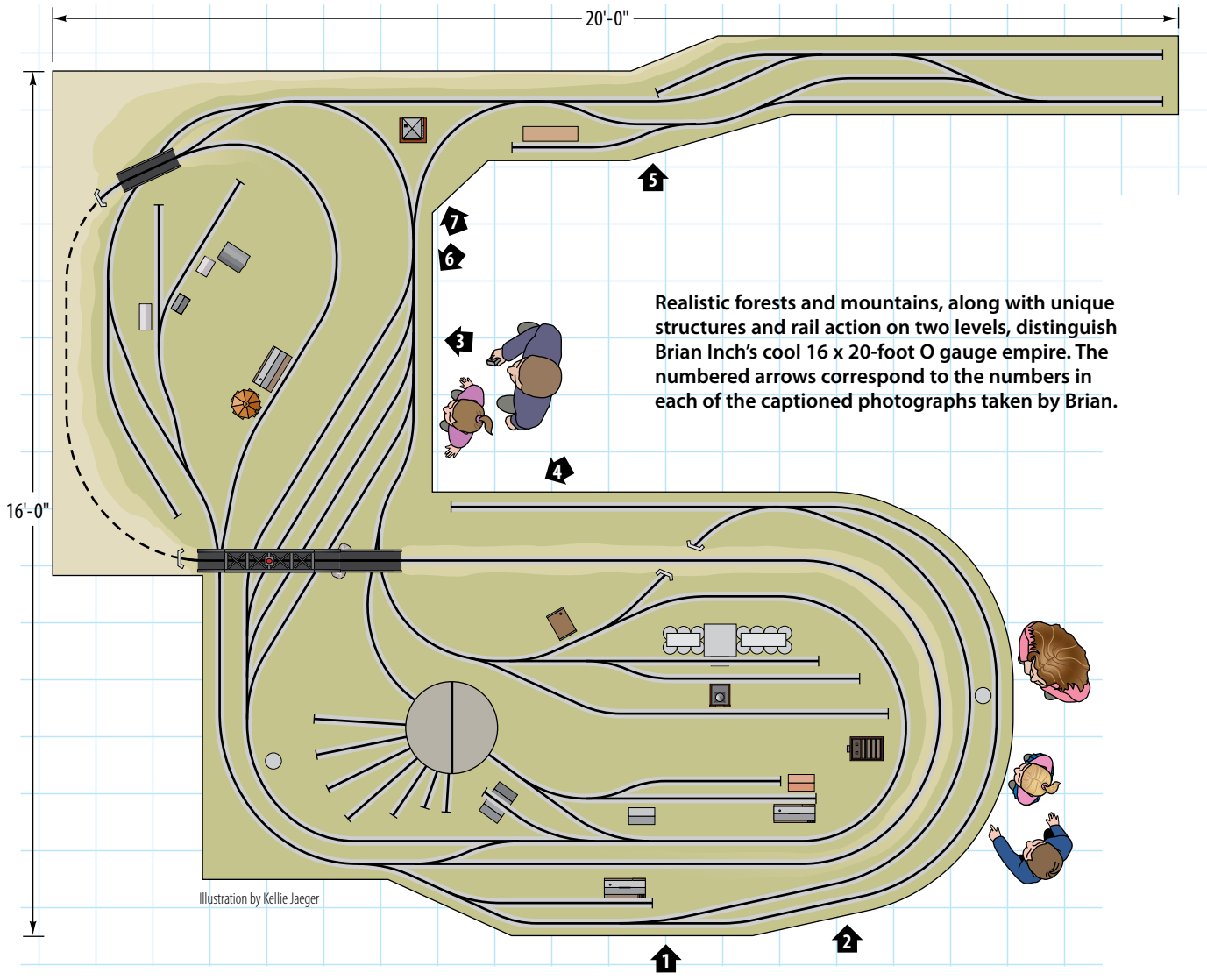
Believing the realistic approach known as hi-rail modeling fit his hopes, he favored the 21st Century line of track from Atlas O. "This is a great system for the price," Brian explained, "with features like non-derailing switches and nickel-coated 40-inch-long sections. Also, it looks great when weathered and ballasted."

Off Brian went to purchase the array of Atlas O straights, curves, and turnouts necessary for his track plan. The widest radius he selected for outer routes was 72 inches. For inner loops, the maximum radius was 54 inches.

Soon, Brian was screwing the track and turnouts into the Homasote (he had already used screws to secure this material to the plywood surface). Then he installed standard switch machines under the tabletop to control the operation of his 35 right- and left-hand turnouts. Brian bought ground-up foam rubber to serve as the ballast. That common material further reduces noise generated by trains.

Landscapes of Maine

The landscape of Maine varies tremendously. Rocky shorelines rim the North Atlantic Ocean. Rugged mountains push



Realistic forests and mountains, along with unique structures and rail action on two levels, distinguish Brian Inch's cool 16 x 20-foot O gauge empire. The numbered arrows correspond to the numbers in each of the captioned photographs taken by Brian.

up at the northern tip of the Appalachian range. Fertile valleys are comprised of fields where farmers raise potatoes and blueberries grow wild. This is the state Brian loves and wanted to model.

But there's no way to get all of Maine on an O gauge layout, even one measuring 16 x 20 feet. The mind of a model railroader took over: Brian made tough decisions about what he could capture in miniature and what he could not.

The Atlantic coast would have to wait for another layout. On this railroad mountains, rivers, and forests were going to dominate, along with the industries related to them, notably logging. Dairy farming would also be represented.

Here, Brian's artistic training and constant reading of hobby publications made all the difference. He never felt limited to following a single technique or adopting just one popular material the way many of his peers in the hobby might. To the contrary – he delighted in using a variety of new and old ways of making hills, ranging from plaster slathered over metal screen wire to papier-mâché.

Foundations for the towering mountains characterizing the layout included scraps of plywood cut to shape and cardboard; missing was that current favorite, sliced-up sheets of Styrofoam. This framework Brian covered with thick paper as well as the wire screen, with plaster going on last to provide a very solid shell.

Consider that outer layer the canvas on which Brian, like any artist, would apply the colors for a landscape done in three dimensions instead of two.

Diluted latex house paints (various earth tones) worked wonders turning the white hardshell into a realistic brown surface. Over this, Brian might brush on watered-down acrylic paints or perhaps commercial stains, all depending on what looked best to his trained eye. Being an art teacher has its benefits!

Observing the mountains in Maine helped Brian make educated choices about finishing his modeling. Much of the surface was left bare to suggest crags and rocks there. Elsewhere, he added a variety of types of ground foam differing in color, texture, and consistency.

LAYOUT AT A GLANCE

Name: Brian Inch's O gauge layout
Dimensions: 16 x 20 feet
Track and switches: Atlas O 21st Century Track (72-inch maximum radius)
Motive power: MTH
Rolling stock: Atlas O, Lionel, MTH
Controls: Lionel ZW transformer with TMCC
Accessories: Atlas O, NJ International, Z-Stuff for Trains
Structures: American Model Builders, Branchline Laser Art, Deerfield River Laser, Imagine That Laser Art, Korber, scratchbuilt, Sidetrack Laser
Vehicles: Berkshire Valley, Yat Ming
Figures: Model Power, MTH, Woodland Scenics

▲ 4. **The Canadian Pacific has never been a stranger to folks living in New England. An Alco RS-3 decorated for the railroad approaches a semaphore from Z-Stuff for Trains. Modelers can benefit from seeing how Brian has weathered everything.**

▲ 5. **Brian made sure when he designed his layout to leave a section for his children to enjoy and change at will. Here, his son, Riley, loads Atlas O pulpwood flatcars.**

Brush and scattered trees inject visual interest in the mountains and valleys. Brian depends on products from Scenic Express, especially its Super Trees line. He typically cuts them to size.

What about the rivers and ponds? Brian says with a laugh, "I used that standby of art teachers everywhere – Mod Podge!" This crafts product from Plaid Enterprises is a thick glue that dries clear. After developing the bed of the river (painting it and adding rocks on the banks), Brian poured Mod Podge over it and let it dry.

Structures are the highlights

You get the idea about Brian – his layout doesn't follow a familiar script because his knowledge of artistic materials and techniques is incredibly vast. He can be conventional – scenery products widely known in the model railroad hobby – and he can blaze a unique trail – grabbing a container of Mod Podge for his river.

What ties everything together, from benchwork to scenery, is Brian's desire to create authentic settings using the best methods. He can be extremely imaginative, and that is nowhere more obvious than with the many impressive structures.

To gain an appreciation of the commercial, residential, and other buildings on the layout, start by reading the list of manufacturers found under "Layout at a glance." Companies such as American Model Builders, Deerfield Laser, and Imagine That, to name a mere three, are not the names typically found in CTT. Brian tries to avoid preassembled structures and easy-to-assemble plastic kits.

Laser-cut kits appeal most, and Brian takes pride in the amount of time required to put them together. Of course, he seldom quits after gluing on the final parts. "I really enjoy adding details to the outside and interior," he says. "Then I'm likely to install some kinds of lights to the inside. And I wouldn't think of putting something on the layout before I weathered it with pastel chalks, stain, and paint."

Scratchbuilding brings Brian a lot of pleasure, too. Beginning with vintage photos and drawings of structures, notably the lumber facilities, he constructs them piece-by-piece until the replica has come together. Count among the finishing touches desks, clocks, telephones, chairs, tables, and garbage cans.

When Brian is feeling ambitious, he'll take the time to wire an appropriate Micro-Mark sound module to a structure. As an example of his handiwork, he directs attention to a sawmill and then to a coaling tower. The sound effects emitted enhance the impressions of onlookers and keep them riveted to individual areas.

"Don't forget the streets in my towns and the roads linking industries," Brian spoke up. "I made the highways with sifted sand glued to the plywood surface. And I weathered the roads so they looked worn and highly realistic."

Time to get things running

"You know what I like most about this layout?" Brian asked rhetorically. "The fact that Riley could operate it by the time he was old enough to enter kindergarten. He learned how freight cars could be coupled and uncoupled and whole trains put together before being sent off on their journeys."

The key to helping his young son accomplish so much on their layout lay with command control. Brian taught Riley how to use the Digital Command System developed by MTH. You read correctly – a child barely able to read learned how to move trains using a DCS handheld controller.

"My command-control system is what drives the entire layout," says Brian. "It not only determines which locomotives Riley and I run but also the types of engines and the road names. I am impressed with DCS because it has the most realistic sounds and is highly reliable. MTH just needs a little more time to get the correct accents for the crew chatter on engines representing railroads based in Maine!"

▲ 6. **Various railroads and paint schemes can be seen on this October morning in Dover Foxcroft, a community in Maine. While a Maine Central RS-11 guides hoppers brimming with coal past the depot, a Boston & Maine RS-3 leads a freight over the truss bridge. The water tower is scratchbuilt; the station comes from Branchline Laser Art.**

▲ 7. **A lonely railroader leans on his pickup truck to watch a MTH Bangor & Aroostook GP7 round a bend and accelerate to the main line. The line poles, debris, crossing, and weathered switch tower make this an area to linger over to learn Brian's secrets.**

Beyond the hardware necessary to operate DCS, Brian points out the Z-4000 transformer that provides power for his trains. Feeders are 16-gauge wires that go to the MTH blocks (one for every four pieces of track).

According to Brian, the blocks are used with toggle switches on the sidings and in the roundhouse to turn off power to a locomotive not being run and as a safety measure should anyone lose control of a train. You can never be too careful, even with an adult at the throttle.

Other sizes of wire found on the railroad include 16-gauge for the ground that loops the entire layout and the power leads to the track and uncoupling sections. Brian relies on 18-gauge wire for the turnouts, and 18- and 20-gauge types for the lights, sound modules, and other "accessories." He has wisely color-coded everything and made it all accessible to ensure that troubleshooting is a breeze.

ON THE WEB CTT+

Subscribers can view a video of Brian's layout by going to ClassicToyTrains.com and clicking on "Operating" and then clicking on "Layout Visits."

Looking ahead with a smile

Brian looks at his layout with a satisfied grin reminiscent of how he felt when each of his children was born. He feels that way because Riley and sisters, Elise and Meghan, consider the model railroad a part of their lives.

As Brian explains, "I built a section specifically for the kids at the end of the river. It has a working spur, where Riley can arrange the buildings and industries. One day, the area can be handling the shipment of coal; the next day, Riley or one of the girls may be more interested in loading logs on flatcars or gravel in gondolas. I watch and join in the fun!"

Brian intends to preserve the appearance of this O gauge layout, but imagines the structures will change according to what his children want. Together, they'll have a blast running trains and keeping alive his distant memories of what life in the interior of Maine once was like. CTT

To learn more about Brian Inch's layout-building business Model Rail Scenes, you can contact him at modelrailscenes.com or by calling 207-564-0705.