

Hobby has been 54 year excursion

Robert O'Brien earns MMR No. 217

I am a 77 year-old retired mechanical engineer and professor of engineering technology. Along with my wife of 54 years, I now own and operate a model railroad hobby shop (Whistle Stop Train Center) serving Western Minnesota and the Eastern Dakotas.

I was born and raised in Dayton, Ky., across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. This meant that I grew up with the street cars of Northern Kentucky and Cincinnati — I cannot remember when they did not fascinate me. When I was in the third grade we had to draw a picture of what interested us the most — I made a drawing of a Bellevue & Dayton street car.

Although I lived on the main line of the C&O, my interest in trains did not start until Christmas of 1928 when my brother and I received an American Flyer train. For the next couple of years Lionel was added to it until we had quite a lot of equipment. During the depression when we were sent to a private high school in Cincinnati we had to dispose of the train.

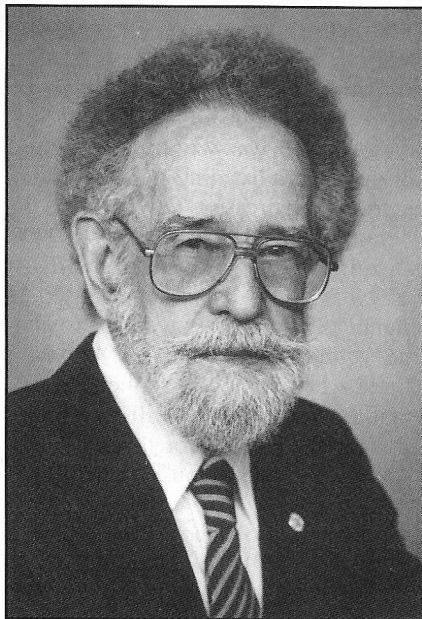
During these high school and college years (University of Cincinnati) I rode street cars every day and even on Sunday. I

would buy a 50 cent "Sunday Pass" and ride all day. Model railroading would have been difficult during this time so I became a prolific builder of all kinds of models; ships, airplanes and trains. Throughout the four years I was eligible (Age 14 to 18), I won many prizes with these models at the "Boy's Hobby Show" in Cincinnati.

When I was married in 1940 I was working long hours in the machine tool industry so there was no time for anything but work. In 1943 I entered the US Army and spent the next three years in the ordinance department.

Upon discharge from the Army I returned to the machine tool company. After a year I left to take a position as a professor at a local technical college. This college is now a part of the University of Cincinnati. There I taught classes in manufacturing, mathematics, electricity and physics.

Within two months after my discharge from the Army I was buying Lionel equipment and in two years had quite an empire. Almost right away I was modifying the Lionel locomotives and building my own cars. In 1949 the last Kentucky street car line was abandoned and Margaret (Mrs. O'Brien) suggested I build a



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technical program at a State College in Bluefield. In a couple of years we moved again.

This time we went overseas spending three years in India and Pakistan. In these countries I worked for USAID and the Ford Foundation as a classroom teacher and consultant on technical education.

In 1967 we returned to the US and settled here in Southwest Minnesota where I was an associate professor of mechanical engineering technology at a state university.

After selling almost of the O-gauge equipment we settled into HO-gauge. This time we decided to go "heavy" electric with catenary overhead. As the railroad grew so did the overhead wire until today there is over 600 feet consisting of approximately 20,000 parts. Except for the wire, which is bronze, every part is brass and carefully soldered together. Contrary to what most modelers think, the maintenance on this overhead is just about zero. Parts are now 25 years old

model of these cars. I sold all of the Lionel and plunged headlong into O-gauge trolleys.

It was during these years that I served on the NMRA traction standards committee and was on the staff of the *Whistle Stop/O Gauger* magazine. At the St. Paul, Mn., National convention in 1956 one of my trolley cars won a second prize.

By 1962, when we moved to West Virginia, I had built three large trolley layouts and almost 100 cars. In West Virginia I was the dean of the

and I have no trouble with it, At present there are 45 pieces of equipment that run from the overhead wire and I am planning to build five more very shortly. One pair will be the Chicago/IC gallery electric cars built of brass. The railroad is in an area 32 x 12 feet and has three main lines with about 650 feet of track.

The original 300 feet of track was hand laid. Now I use all "flex" track. Since I make no effort to design trackwork for standard components the layout has many custom turnouts and crossings. It is so arranged electrically that I can run one, two or three trains at the same time. Since I am a "juice" fan going back to my trolley days this means I operate mostly passenger equipment. Although I do have a few freight sidings I rarely do any switching. Although I am partial to the Pennsylvania Railroad because of the electric I will run anything with a pantograph — and I do. I design all my own electrical and electronic circuits. As a result there are automatic crossing signals, station stopping, turnout operation and traffic signals. Even the "rides" in the carnival area start and stop automatically. There are "smoking" chimneys and other operating accessories.

I retired from the University in 1980 and for three years I was employed by the Government of Korea as a consultant on technical education. Even in Korea I could not stay away from model railroading. So I shipped over track, turnouts, power supplies and rolling stock and built a large layout in our apartment. While there I worked very closely with several of the "brass" manufacturers.

When we returned I resumed modeling. One of the model locomotives I built received RMC's Dremel Award and I had an article published in the magazine on how this locomotive was built.

In 1991 Bill McKean, then TLR president, asked me to take over the job of Achievement Program Chairman for the Thousand Lakes Region — a position I still hold today. I suggest that every member participate in the division, region and national activities. This way they will find out how much fun the NMRA can be.

A special word of appreciation must go to Margaret who for the last 54 years has been married to a dedicated model builder who not only has filled the house with trains but also many glass cases with ships. •