Fun Time

Last time we explored what you can do with model trains, such as creating a locomotive collection for display or operating model trains on a layout. This time we will look at what historical era might be most interesting to you and which railroads you might want to model.

What Era?

You may want to consider is what historical era interests you most? While you can model anything you want, you may want to focus on a theme, regardless of whether you are creating a locomotive collection or an operating layout. For example, you could decide to build a locomotive collection showing the evolution from early railroading until the present, or you could build a collection of modern steam locomotives or first generation Diesels. Or you could model passenger trains for a specific railroad or era.

Steam locomotives changed the world by making railroads practical, and reigned supreme until the end of WW2. This period was the golden age of railroading due to the importance of railroads both economically and culturally.

Diesel locomotives entered switching service in the mid-1930s and by the late 1930s were developed enough to haul both streamlined passenger trains and freight trains. Once developed to adequate power and reliability, Diesel locomotives quickly manifested a number of economic and operational advantages over steam locomotives. Probably the most important was the greatly reduced maintenance requirements of Diesels, which enabled the railroads to cut costs by eliminating large numbers of maintenance workers. Diesels also were at least twice as fuel efficient as steam locomotives and produced much less pollution. In addition, Diesels used almost no water – very significant in the dry West, had high starting tractive effort to start long trains in motion, and, if properly equipped, were able to use ‘dynamic brakes’ to maintain safes speeds down hills. The dynamic brake was the ability of the Diesel to use its traction motors as generators when being pushed downhill by the weight of the train; the power generated electric current that was directed to banks of resistors in the Diesel and cooled by large fans. Particularly in mountainous regions, this was a significant operational advantage.

During WW2 the War Production Board controlled what locomotives were built; Diesel locomotives were especially hard to obtain due to production of submarines and other war material that competed both for the raw materials and the Diesel engines and accessories. So, during WW2 many railroads that wanted Diesel locomotives had to settle for steam locomotives instead. The incredible amount of war traffic, coupled with the deferred maintenance, wore the railroads and their rolling stock and locomotives out. After WW2 ended the great steam to Diesel transition era began; worn out steam locomotives were rapidly replaced by new, more economical Diesels. By 1959 the mainline steam locomotive in the United States was history.

In addition to the evolution of locomotives, the types and sizes of railroad cars has also been in a constant state of evolution. Passenger cars evolved from wood construction, which was very dangerous in accidents, to partial steel then all steel construction, and

finally, in the late 1930s, to lightweight, streamlined cars. Freight cars evolved from wood construction to wood and steel and finally all-metal construction. Along the way freight cars grew larger and new types were introduced.

It may come as no surprise that the steam to Diesel transition era is easily the most popular era with modelers because it offers the greatest variety of locomotives, including all but the earliest steam locomotives and early, first generation Diesels. This is the era I chose to model because it gives me the most choices in locomotives. Although as a modeler I prefer the personality of large steam locomotives to Diesels, I am also somewhat interested in Diesels, especially the large and unusual Diesels of the 1960s and 1970s and their relatively short-lived turbine cousins. So I do not completely limit my modeling to the transition era. It is also possible to model much earlier eras, but far fewer models are available for the railroads of the 1800s. Furthermore, the largest, most modern steam locomotives did not appear until the 1920s. So modeling an era prior to the 1920s eliminates a lot of interesting locomotives, but the smaller locomotives used prior to the 1920s are well suited to a small layout.

The modern era, with all Diesel locomotives, is also popular. Model Diesels are generally less expensive than model steamers and, similar to their prototypes, are easier to keep running smoothly. Furthermore, you can look at an existing railroad today, take photos, and model it. On the other hand, modern technology is resulting in an ever-increasing supply of high-quality, smooth-operating model steam locomotives, so your modeling choices now are greater than ever.

What Railroads?

While the era you model is a personal choice, certainly, the railroad – or railroads – you choose to model is an even more personal choice. For example, the mighty Pennsy, the Pennsylvania Railroad, was once the world's largest railroad and is still very popular with modelers, especially those who live in the area it served. You may be most interested in the railroad that served the area where you grew up. Or, like me, you may be more interested in the mighty railroads of the West and the mountain ranges and other difficult terrain they had to battle to deliver the goods – and passengers.

Whatever railroad you choose, most likely there is a book, perhaps a lot of books, on that railroad. And most major railroads, even if now 'fallen flags' (that is, bought by other railroads and no longer existing under their former name) have historical societies devoted to them.

Resources

Railroad Books & Videos:

- New Railroad books: www.amazon.com
- Out of print railroad books: www.addall.com
- New railroad books and videos at a discount: www.goldenspike.us
- New railroad books and videos at a discount: www.karensbooks.com
- Model Railroader Magazine: www.trains.com/mrr
- Back issues of railroad magazines and out of print books: www.railpub.com

Railroad Historical and Technical Societies:

- Southern Pacific Historical & Technical Society: www.sphts.org
- Union Pacific Historical Society: www.uphs.org
- Santa Fe Railway Historical & Modeling Society: www.atsfrr.com
- Feather River Rail Society: www.wplives.org
- Pennsylvania Railroad Technical & Historical Society: www.prrths.com
- National Railway Historical Society: www.nrhs.com
- California State Railroad Museum: www.csrmf.org
- More than 5,000 railroad links: www.railroaddata.com
- Index to Railroad Historical Societies: ribbonrail.com/rrpro/database.html