



meet a member

Staying on Track with Gordon Geiger

Lynne Robinson

The River City and Western Railroad



Gordon Geiger with the “American Steel Company” blast furnace that he built for his model railroad.

begins its journey in desert orange groves, eventually traveling through the iconic rock formations of the American West and the town of Mineral Springs, with its oil refinery, limestone quarry, and cement plant. After

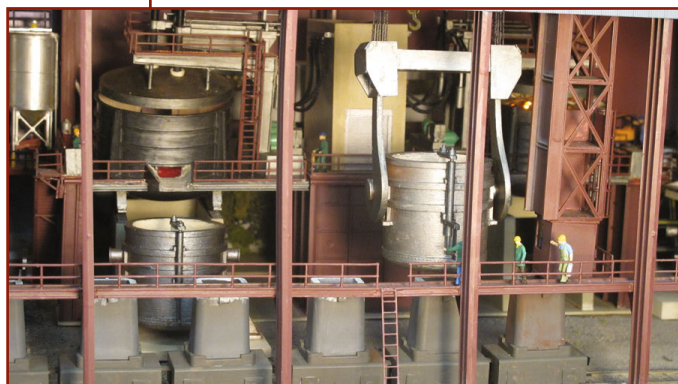
passing a stretch of farm land and a golf course, the train enters the bustling steel town of River City. From there, it pushes on through a series of tunnels and bridges that take it past cattle country, an iron ore mine, and a snowy lumber and coal mining

region before heading to the terminus of the line in Chicago.

The entire trip takes about 300 feet, in a 30x30 foot square building at the home of Gordon Geiger, 1992 TMS President and avid model railroader.

Geiger’s love of trains, both large and small, began at the age of three when his late father, Harold, bought him his first Lionel train. During the course of growing up, Geiger helped his father construct a model railroad layout in the attic of their Wilmette, Illinois, home, supplemented with regular visits to the model railroad at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry for inspiration. Bringing the technological wonders of the real railroads to life were his father’s experiences as a metallurgist and head of INCO’s Chicago field office for research and development. “Railroads use a lot of steel for a lot of parts and dad was involved in specifying various steels for those uses and would tell me all about it,” said Geiger. “There was always something about the size and power of trains that intrigued me, particularly when watching the trains on the Milwaukee Road near my grandparents’ house and the Chicago and Northwestern line near our home.”

As an adult, Geiger followed his father into metallurgy and the steel industry, eventually starting his own business, Qualitech Steel Corporation. “Over the years that I was working, I never had time to build or complete a layout, although I started several,” he said. “I kept many of the cars and buildings from my parents’ house after they tore that layout down, and collected a few more cars over the years.” Geiger also kept up with his hobby by reading model railroad magazines and monitoring the advances in control systems made possible by microelectronics and home computers. “By the time I retired, I realized that most of my old locomotives



A peek inside the amazing miniature world of American Steel.

(Above): A furnace and ladle in the electric arc furnace shop. (Below): The soaking pit in the rolling mill.



were obsolete, and so I slowly rebuilt my locomotive fleet with modern models representing the period between 1955 and 1965,” he said. “This was an era in which some steam engines were still to be seen, as well as several classes of new diesels.”

“Building models of industries that trains serve is particularly rewarding, because I learn something every time I build one, and am still learning as I continue to plan, modify, upgrade, and improve my current layout,” Geiger continued. “The history of various industries, as well as the railroads, is fascinating and stimulates a lot of reading.”

Since his retirement, Geiger has poured his memories, research, talents, and passion into creating a detailed miniature of a bygone, industrial age. A highlight of his layout is the American Steel Company complex in his fictional River City. The steel mill features two electric arc furnaces, with simulated steel in one and scrap to be melted in the other. The scene is completed with sound and light effects of arc making and breaking during meltdown, and a ladle preheater with an ignited burner. “It’s always a hit with visitors,” said Geiger. Checking the ingot temperature at the soaking pit in the rolling mill is a tiny metallurgist, patterned after Geiger in 1956. Geiger has already published two articles in *Railroad Model Craftsman* on the construction of the electric furnace shop and rolling mill, and is working on a third that covers his entire layout.

On that point, Geiger has applied the same drive for accomplishment in his hobby as he did in his career. As a member of the National Model Railroad Association (NMRA), he has given a number of lectures, entered competitions, and is close to completing his Master Model Railroader designation as a means of learning new techniques and improving his skills. Many of his favorite experiences, though, involve visits to modelers’ layouts for “operating sessions” in which the trains are run as a crew, according to schedules and operating rules developed to simulate actual railroads.

Geiger himself hosts an operating crew of about ten “good friends” once a month. “I use a computer to generate the manifests



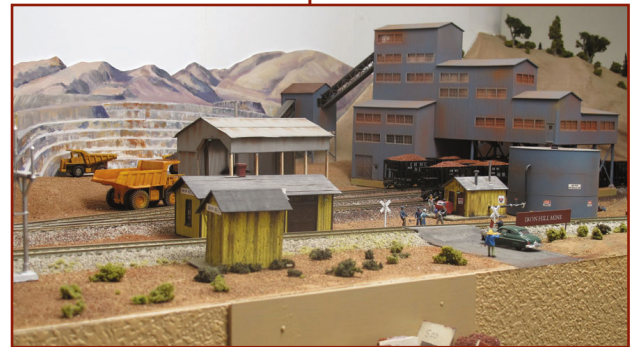
Geiger's layout recreates the topography, scenery, industries, and towns located along a fictional railroad line that runs from Los Angeles to Chicago.



for each train and the switch lists to tell each engineer how to run his train and where to spot cars at their destinations,” explained Geiger. His computer system also operates the signals set along the track that can be controlled by a dispatcher in an office adjacent to the layout.

In addition to historical research, Geiger draws on carpentry, electronics, computer programming, and artistic skills to create the detailed scenes along his railroad, like this oil refinery.

Geiger doesn’t give a hard date for when his railroad will be “finished.” He notes that his real fulfillment comes from the process of recreating the past with wood, metal, wire, and model paint, saying, “I have had fun painting and lettering switch engines from various American steel mills, many long gone, which now roam my American Steel Company plant.”



Nearly every aspect of the steel industry supply chain from the mid-20th century—including this iron ore mine—is represented in Geiger’s train layout.