

A JIGSAW PUZZLE SHORT LINE



Pieced together from the profitable bits of CSX castoffs, the Florida Northern is an intriguing subject for a modern N scale track plan

By **Christian Javier** • Photos by the author

The formation of CSX in the 1980s led to abandonments, embargoes, and scrapping of many Florida rail lines. Routes of the former Seaboard Air Line (SAL) and Atlantic Coast Line (ACL) that were previously vital became redundant and unprofitable. A few, though, were sold to short lines and regional carriers. One buyer of such trackage was the Pinsky Company. Since the late '80s, Pinsky has kept alive four of the five lines it purchased from CSX.

While not the busiest line on Pinsky's Florida network, the Florida Northern RR (FNOR), based out of the central Florida town of Ocala, is well suited for modeling. The way tracks were abandoned left just the profitable bits and

pieces behind, meaning the Florida Northern has some challenging track arrangements to incorporate in a plan. Nevertheless, I was able to place all of the important layout design elements in a reasonable space, with all currently active industries represented.

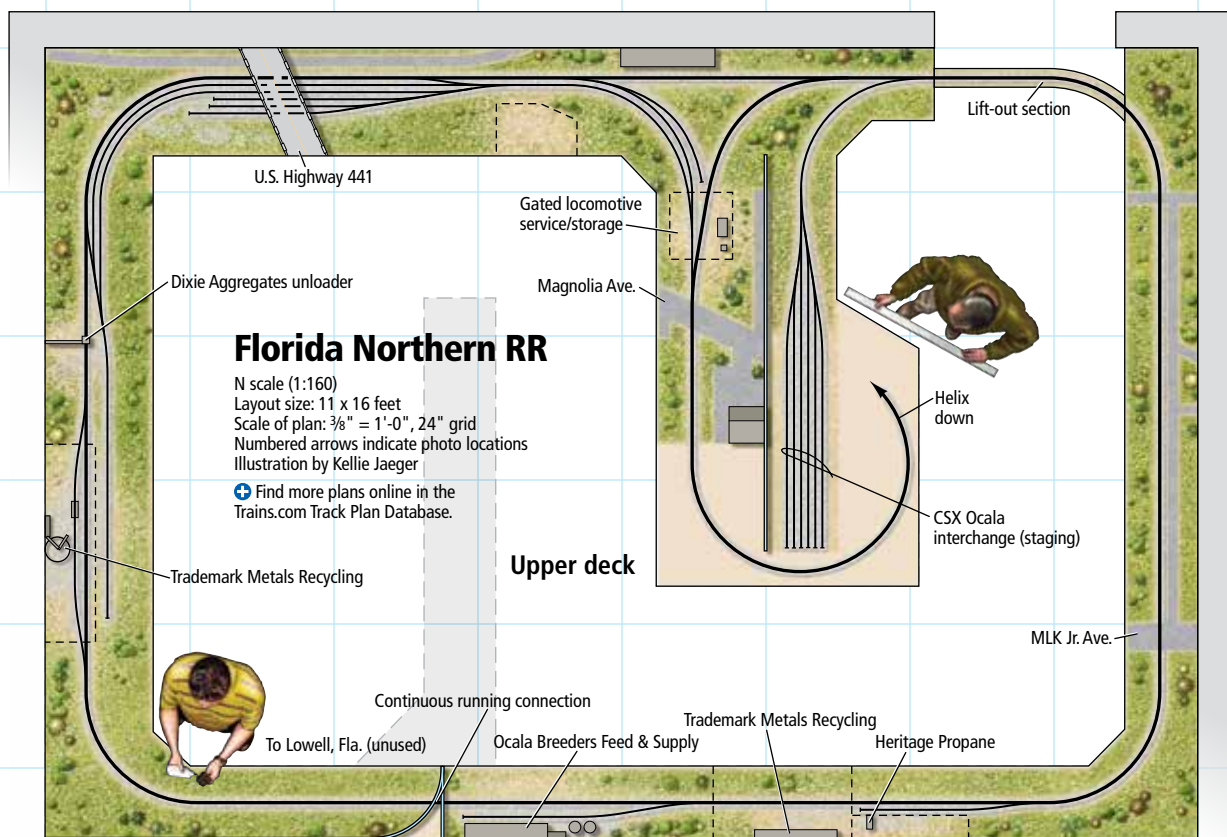
About the railroad

The current extent of the line includes three major portions: the Lowell Branch, the Candler Branch, and a small stretch of the former Silver Springs, Ocala & Gulf (SSO&G). All of the portions were under ACL's control for most of their existence. The original line started in Alachua, Fla., extending through Gainesville, Ocala, and Leesburg,

ABOVE: CSX AC4400CW No. 416 crosses under Pine Avenue in Ocala, Fla., with a train of Ortner rapid-discharge hoppers bound for Southern Landscape Supply on the Florida Northern (FNOR). While these cars used to be interchanged between CSX and FNOR, in recent years an FNOR crew simply takes over operating the CSX train the short distance to the destination.

eventually reaching Croom, Fla., where it joined another ACL mainline between High Springs and Vitis Junction. The line, part of the Ocala district, was the route of the famed *West Coast Champion* out of St. Petersburg.

As it currently exists, the FNOR operates about 10 miles north out of Ocala to



Lowell, 10 miles south to Candler, and less than 5 miles west to serve a few industries on the former SSO&G. The busiest portion today is the Candler branch, though there used to be substantial traffic from two mines in Lowell. Today, the Lowell branch is essentially abandoned past the FNOR's yard.

Since 1989, traffic on the FNOR has shrunk. In the early days, long trains of recycled oil, lumber products, aggregate, scrap metal, propane, and more rolled on FNOR's rails. But by 2015, it became rare to see a train longer than 10 cars.

I chose an intermediate era to maintain medium-sized trains for switching but also to make sure there wasn't too much to model. For instance, modeling the Lowell branch would have required much more space. On my track plan, the abandoned Lowell branch lead leads to an optional continuous-running loop.

The motive power used by the Florida Northern in 2004 was a pair of former Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Cleburne, Texas-rebuilt CF7s. Power is pooled between Pinsly's short lines throughout Florida, so locomotives lettered for Florida Central and Florida Midland can also be seen. Today, for example, a GP9 and GP18, both lettered for Florida Central, have replaced the CF7s. One of the last CF7s on Pinsly's system awaits its fate in a storage track in the Ocala yard.

Operating the FNOR

On the prototype, the day begins with picking up interchange traffic from the CSX yard. Usually a single locomotive can handle the tonnage for the day. These cars are pulled out of the yard into the switchback connection between the SSO&G branch and the FNOR wye, then backed north into the yard. Cars are separated into their destinations by the branch they are destined for.

Repurposed Coalveyors and high-side gondolas for the Trademark Metals Recycling facility at the north end of the FNOR yard are switched first. Then, cars for the former SSO&G – including covered hoppers of feed for Ocala Breeders Feed & Supply, 33,900-gallon LPG tank cars for Heritage Propane, and long mill gons for a smaller Trademark Metals recycling facility – are taken down the branch in a reverse move due to the lack of a runaround.

Finally, the Candler branch train heads south. Just beyond the wye, the FNOR crosses the double track supersiding of the CSX S-line, right next to the former SAL/ACL union station. Only a few hundred feet later, the FNOR enters a long section of street running on Osceola Avenue through downtown Ocala. This is an impressive modeling feature I wanted to accommodate as

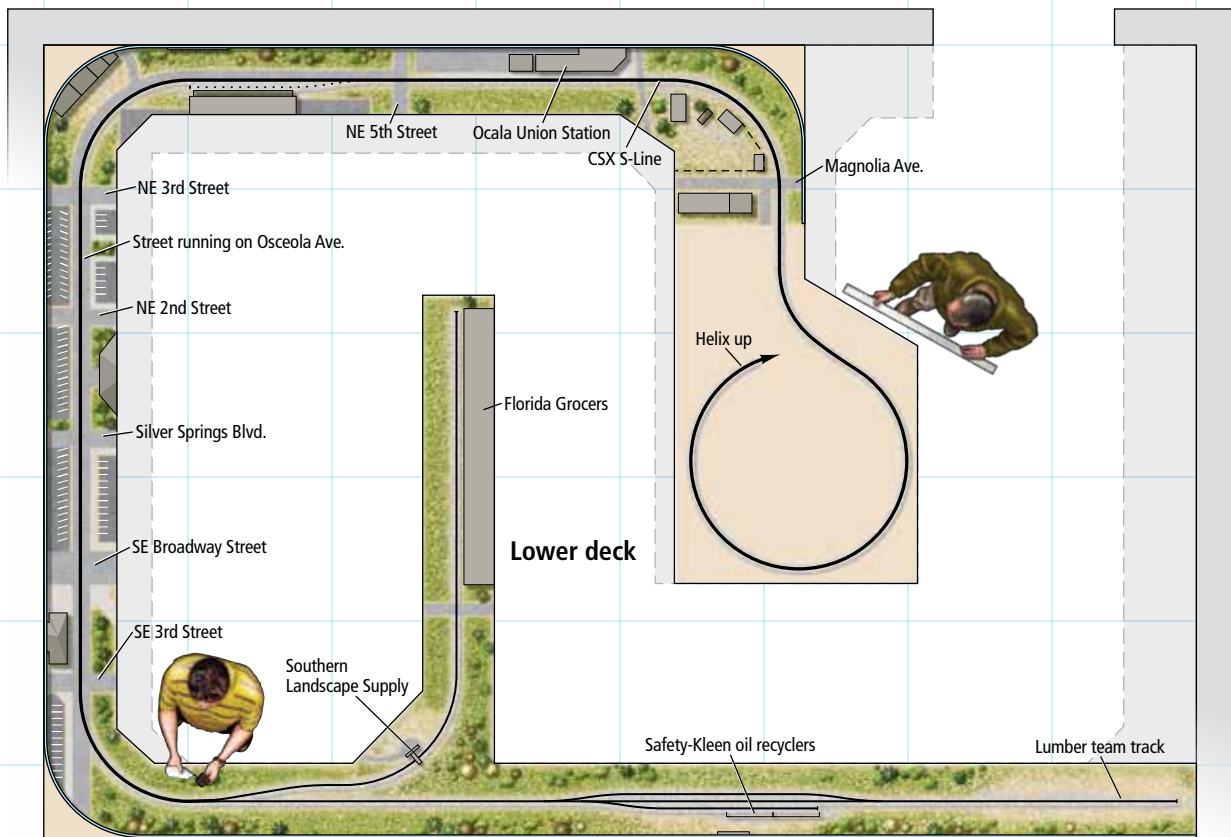
Track plan at a glance

Name: Florida Northern RR
Scale: N (1:160)
Size: 11 x 16 feet
Prototype: Florida Northern RR
Era: 2004
Locale: Central Florida
Style: double-deck walkaround
Mainline run: 88 feet
Minimum radius: 18"
Minimum turnout: No. 6
Maximum grade: none

close to the prototype as possible, so an entire wall is dedicated to this scene, with streets prototypically spaced crossing Osceola Avenue.

Scenes become a little compressed as we exit the street running. The Silver Springs industrial branch is one such example. Here, the primary industry is Southern Landscape Supply, so the focus is on that industry. Some trackwork around Florida Grocers and the elimination of a disused building supply industry located at the junction of the mainline and the industrial spur are the sacrifices made to create a better representation of Southern Landscape Supply.

A long track is needed to receive the numerous CSX Ortner hoppers that are



delivered here, filled with decorative volcanic cinders, pebbles, and other aggregate products. These are unloaded into an under-track bay where a conveyor belt transloads them into a small dump truck. The truck then makes the final delivery to piles on the property, less than a quarter mile away.

Florida Grocers occasionally receives 60-foot high cube boxcars which are filled with dry food products that don't require insulation or refrigeration. The final two industries at the end of the line include an oil recycling plant and a team track for unloading centerbeam flatcars of wrapped lumber.

Service to the oil recycling facility and the previously mentioned Southern Landscape Supply is pretty regular. But Florida Grocers and the lumber team track are served less frequently. Today, the team track appears entirely disused, but in 2004, four or five cars were often jammed into the paved section at the end of the line.

After switching all the branchline industries, the FNOR crew gathers the return cars and brings them back to the CSX interchange yard. They usually ending the day by tying down the power at about 6 p.m.

An entirely separate train that can occasionally be seen on the Florida Northern is the CSX train that brings an



Florida Central No. 63, on loan to the Florida Northern, sits in FNOR's Ocala yard on March 1, 2015. The former Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe CF7 was the primary motive power for FNOR at the time. Florida Northern and Florida Central are both owned by the Pinsly Co.

entire block of Ortner hoppers filled with rock to the Dixie Aggregates unloading bay just north of the FNOR yard. Once, FNOR's own CF7 pair would handle the train by taking it from the CSX interchange, but later FNOR crews began to simply swap with the CSX crew and keep the CSX power on point.

That small railroad feel

In my opinion, the Florida Northern is a fantastic piece of railway to model. Rarely does a modern short line consist of a single line branching from an

interchange and following a simple path through the towns and industries it serves. It's more often parts of old wyes, switchbacks to reach an interchange, and the short line's own branches from previous junctions. All of these form the Florida Northern's cost-saving character, and are reminiscent of other short lines in the United States. **MR**

Christian Javier lives in central Florida, not far from the FNOR's stomping grounds. His last MR byline was "Modeling the ACL's Palmetto Sub" in the July 2018 issue.