The Northeastern Alberta Rys.

HO scale Canadian prairie railroading in a 4 x 8-foot track plan

BY GREG PANAS

ONE ADVANTAGE of a center backdrop over three-dimensional scenery as a scene divider on a small layout is its adaptability to even the flattest topography. A backdrop makes it possible to depict flatland prototypes on "island" or tabletop layouts while concealing the toylike mainline oval. Granted, there is still the challenge of camouflaging the "tunnels" where tracks pierce the backdrop, but this can be taken care of by judicious placement of foliage, structures, or other features.

The accompanying track plan shows how this idea improves an otherwise ordinary 4 x 8-foot HO layout. Called the Northeastern Alberta Rys. (NEAR), it is set in the rolling farmland east of Edmonton, the capital of its namesake province. The NEAR makes its living forwarding that region's mostly agricultural freight traffic to the outside world via the Canadian National's line from Edmonton to Lloydminster, Alta. I envision the NEAR as having been chartered before the First World War, when convenient, reliable rail transportation was a necessity for western Canada's small, isolated communities.

The plan provides ample room for scenery without severely penalizing operation. At Mann Lake, the layout's operational center, there is a short passing track and a good-sized frame depot serving as both local station and railroad

general offices. On the opposite side of the backdrop, a small passenger shelter and company-stores shed mark Royalite, a village that largely owes its existence to the United Grain Growers elevators. In addition, a spur leaves the main line at this point to connect with a drop-leaf fiddle yard, which I'll discuss in detail later in this article.

The plan is drawn for Atlas no. 4 Custom-Line turnouts, and it could use Atlas code 100 flextrack as well. This is a small layout, so the mainline curve radius is 18", but I splurged and gave the fiddle yard lead a generous 30"-radius curve. The tracks run at angles to the benchwork edges for a better visual effect, a technique I also applied to the roads and even to the backdrop.

The scenery should suggest gently rolling farmland dotted with clumps of white poplar and evergreens, so that groups of these trees can disguise the openings that let tracks through the backdrop. I'd try using the fake-fur method of modeling tall prairie grass that Eric Bronsky described in the March 1985 issue of MR. For an illusion of greater depth on each side of the backdrop, the fur's texture and coloring could be evened out slightly towards the rear of each scene.

Structures on the NEAR should be small so as not to detract from the look of open prairie terrain, and simple frame buildings should predominate. I've suggested some buildings which are all, except for the Campbell elevator and grain

bin, readily available plastic kits and mostly used straight from the box.

Detail makes any layout look better, and one advantage of a small layout is that you can go all out on detail with a lot less work than on a larger system. Mann Lake and Royalite should look as though they've been around awhile, with realistic clutter, litter, and advertising signs. Plant flowers in the ditches and tall weeds wherever appropriate, and load the roads and parking lots with as many vehicles for your chosen era as you can lay your hands on. Firsthand observation of the real world will give you more ideas than you'll be able to use.

Earlier I mentioned the fiddle yard. Without it, operation on the NEAR would be hampered by the lack of a runaround at Royalite and by the lack of someplace for a train to go other than around the oval. The fiddle yard helps solve both problems.

The fiddle yard is simply a 6" x 36" shelf attached drop-leaf style to the end of the layout, with a length of track to connect to the spur from the Royalite junction. It represents the interchange with the Canadian National, the connection with the outside world "beyond the layout."

You'd begin a typical day's operation on the NEAR by assembling a train in the fiddle yard by hand, with the locomotive pointed towards the layout. Then you'd run the train through the junction and onto the main.

After running a fixed number of laps around the oval at scale speeds, you'd

stop the train at Mann Lake, having reached the modeled "end of the line." You'd switch the two industries here and run the engine around by way of the short passing track. If there are more than just a few cars in the train, it could take a couple of trips through the siding to get the locomotive and caboose on opposite ends of the consist and ready to go back where they came from. If you're sharp you'll remember to keep any cars bound for Royalite blocked next to the engine for the trip back.
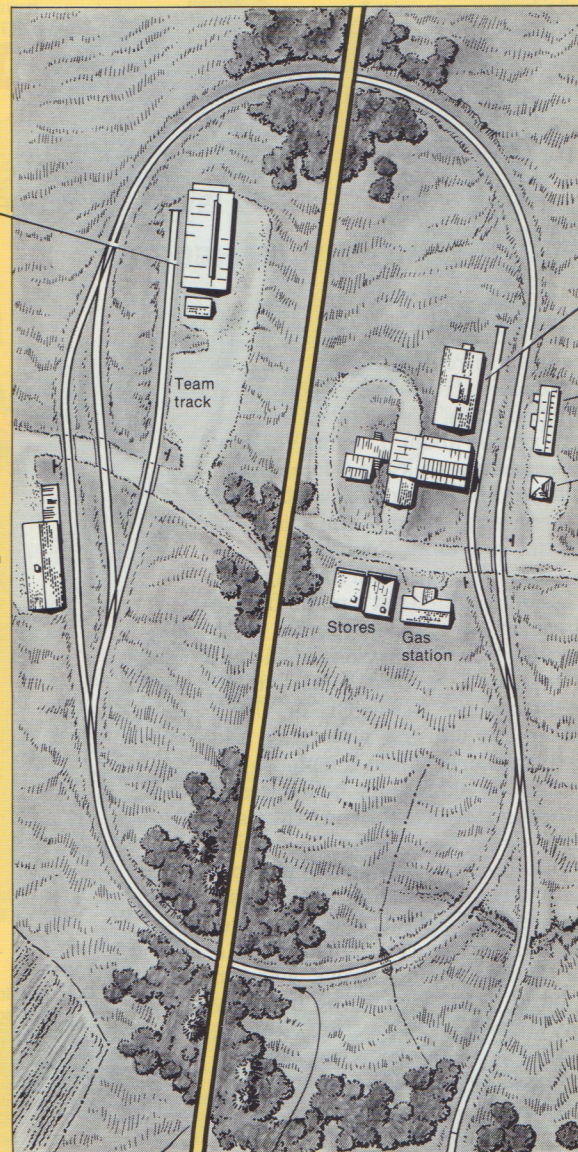
When ready to return you'd start the train out and run half the number of laps around the oval that you used to reach Mann Lake; the train could then arrive in Royalite. After you switch the elevators, you'd take the train out again for a similar number of laps before taking the junction turnout and ending the run back in the fiddle yard.

Locomotives and cars on the NEAR should be representative of a prairie branch line. For the steam era, a few 40-foot boxcars, mostly lettered for the CN, would be the backbone of the freight roster, with an assortment of miscellaneous tank, flat, and perhaps refrigerator cars for variety. A small Mogul or Ten-Wheeler could provide the power.

For a present-day NEAR you'd want a small fleet of government-owned cylindrical grain cars. Tips for converting these from Model Power hoppers were featured in the December 1982 Paint Shop. An Athearn EMD switcher, maybe modified with Juneco parts to resemble a GM Diesel (of Canada) SW1200RS, would do nicely to stretch the slack.

The NEAR's sharp curves put it in the freight-only category for most modelers, but for the steam era a short combine at the end of the train might offer mail, express, and passenger service. Then the switching at Mann Lake could be made more interesting by the need to leave the combine spotted at the station for an appropriate loading/unloading interval, thus limiting use of the main for run-around moves.
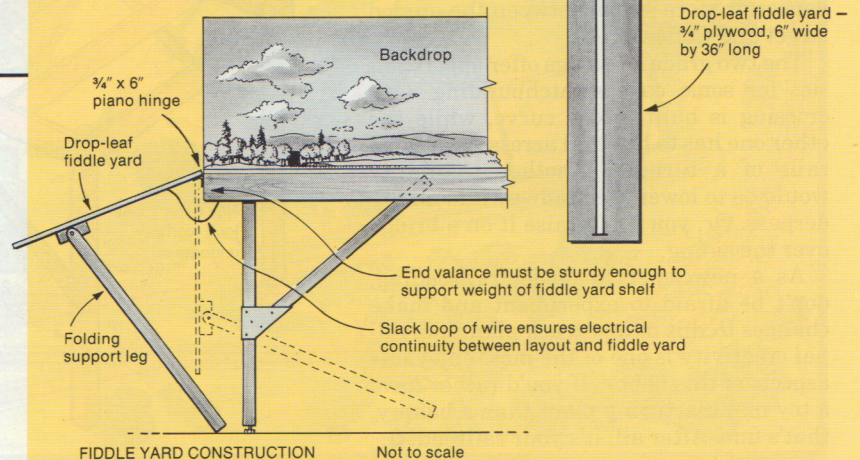
It's simple and small, but the Northeastern Alberta Rys. has a lot of potential for success. What you can do on a layout this size is limited, but within those limits you can enjoy doing everything to as high a standard as you'd like. Even a small layout can offer many ways to have fun. ✿

Suggested building kits

Mann Lake
Lumber Co., Atlas no. 750
Station, Tyco no. 7761

Royalite
Gas station, IHC no. 4108
Passenger shelter, Atlas no. 701 (use without elevated tower supports)
Storage shed, Heljan no. 9033
Stores, Heljan no. 810
United Grain Growers elevators, Campbell no. 384 with no. 449 annex

MANN LAKE

Globe Lumber

Team track

Station

Stores

Gas station

United Grain Growers elevator and annex

Storage shed (old boxcar)

Passenger shelter

ROYALITE

Double-faced center backdrop

Trees hide track passing through backdrop

Removable track section to bridge hinge line

NORTHEASTERN ALBERTA RYS

Scale of plan: ¾" = 1'-0"
18"-minimum radius curves
Atlas Custom-Line no. 4 turnouts

Drop-leaf fiddle yard — ¾" plywood, 6" wide by 36" long

Backdrop

¾" x 6" piano hinge

Drop-leaf fiddle yard

Folding support leg

End valance must be sturdy enough to support weight of fiddle yard shelf

Slack loop of wire ensures electrical continuity between layout and fiddle yard

FIDDLE YARD CONSTRUCTION   Not to scale