



#### ALAN SAATKAMP EARNS MMR #492

**L**ike many baby boomer model railroad hobbyists, my introduction took place during the 1950s with an American Flyer train set. When I lost interest as a teenager, a ping-pong table replaced the double-loop layout my dad had built in the basement, which provided a new pastime our family of four enjoyed.

Fast forward 30 years. After college, service in the United States Army, mar-

riage, two great children, and a career in the then Veterans Administration, my dad died, leaving a small inheritance. My wife, Jan, suggested that we use a portion to commemorate him and “buy something the children would enjoy — perhaps a model train set.” The die was cast.

Thank goodness for Jan’s dad, Don Nelson, a 40-plus-year railroad veteran and engineer on the Great Northern and Burlington Northern. Don’s advice and

carpentry skills were invaluable in building the benchwork for that first layout on a 4x8-foot sheet of plywood. The 1992 Christmas season provided my introduction to the NMRA through an open house sponsored by the local Dakota Southeastern Division. I joined DSED, and when the chief clerk position opened, I decided here was an opportunity to give back something to the hobby and use my organizational skills.

Another invaluable source of advice during those important initial years was my next door boyhood friend Jim Hastings. Though we live hundreds of miles apart, we began regular weekly phone chats, exchanging model railroading ideas and occasional visits, including getting together for Trainfest several years.

Our daughter, Megan, and son, Matt, also became involved. I still recall the winter night when we cleared the supper dishes and each began assembling shake-the-box BN grain hoppers. The children, ages nine and eight, just looked at the diagrams and finished building theirs in 20 minutes while I continued to study the instructions.

After my relocation to the Twin Cities, a new phase of the hobby evolved sparked by a community education class taught by

my soon-to-be-friend and mentor Gary Freseman. Gary sold me on operations and patiently taught me track layout design and installation, spending many hours to help create a realistic scheme based on the Wisconsin Central Valley Subdivision.

When my wife and I returned to South Dakota in late 2005, I was elected superintendent of the DSED, finding fertile ground to recruit new operators, and introduce that aspect and enjoyment of the hobby by teaching community education classes on model railroading. A few years later, coupled with my previous service as division chief clerk, I met the requirements for my first Certificate — Association Volunteer. I also decided to become active in the Thousand Lakes Region, serving as vice president and then president. When I couldn't find a replacement for MMR Gerry Leone as editor of the region newsletter, *The Fusee*, I appointed myself to the position, and then, as my last act as President, resigned from the board of directors. That time on the board helped me earn the Association Official certificate and make lots of new friends from other cities, states, and even countries (our Region also includes a couple provinces in Canada.)

I give a great deal of credit to the Achievement Program for helping me develop my skills. It does just what it says it will — helps us become better and more well rounded modelers. I especially enjoy hosting operating sessions with my friends each month. In August 2012, we celebrated the 100th session on my layouts. I greatly look forward to the next 100, beginning in 2013 with my revamped Twin Cities & Western prototype modeling theme.

The two areas where I've learned the most along the AP and MMR quest are structures and cars. Construction of a trestle was a requirement that concerned me initially. However, with advice from Gerry Leone and nearby Prairie Lakes Division friend Miles Rohan, I soon had my first trestle, a 41-foot open deck pile trestle based on a prototype in northwestern Iowa along the former Milwaukee Road route to Sioux City. I recall remarking to Gerry that it wasn't as daunting as I initially thought it would be. To which he replied, "Why don't you build more of them" or words to that effect. So I did — and all three earned Merit Awards (see "Bridging the Gap" in the October 2011 issue of *NMRA Magazine* for a feature on trestles) though later Gerry claimed he had been kidding. Two years ago

at our Regional convention in Dubuque, Iowa, I presented my first clinic to region peers — scratchbuilding trestles.

The last hurdle, the one that a couple of my MMR friends also deferred until the end, was the "structures on wheels" — alias car building. I agree with MMR Fred Headon that we learned the most from this category. His advice, along with that of MMR Lester "Les" Breuer pushed me over the hump there. The Achievement Program definitely helped (actually forced) me to improve and expand my modeling skills and horizons. I can't say enough good things about it. Yes, it takes time to document your efforts. Writing for me comes easy, so I enjoy doing it. Our Division has many fine and talented modelers whom I count as friends. It's been wonderful to get to know them and especially to see the growth in their skills as operators (and earning Dispatcher certificates) on the Wisconsin Dakota Railroad layout these past six years.

*Alan has the Golden Spike Award and following association Certificates: Association Volunteer, Association Official, Model Railroad Author, Model Railroad Engineer-Electrical, Chief Dispatcher, Master Builder-Structures, and Master Builder-Cars.*