

# When I'm old and gray

Michael L. Cougill



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The April 1, 2011 episode of *The Model Railway Show* podcast featured a segment with Peter Cunningham, editor of the *British Railway Modelers of North America Journal*, whose excellent editorial on promoting the hobby to adults instead of younger people touches once again the ongoing debate of what to do in response to the aging population of the hobby.

It seems that every few years it seems we work ourselves into a dither about this subject, fretting mightily over the fact that the current practitioners are all getting older and wondering where is the new crop of younger modelers going to come from who will carry on the grand traditions in our stead?

The assumption in this debate is that without a massive influx of new, freshly scrubbed recruits, the hobby as we know it will be gone from the face of the earth in no time and so, we have the barrage of handwringing editorials and all manner of hysteria that flood the pages of the press and now the Internet too.

Here's my three cents worth: Let's just skip the discussion entirely. Seriously, let's not focus on it at all, because an aging hobby populace isn't the real problem.

It's an inescapable fact that we're all getting older. That makes it what author Daniel Burrus in his book *Flash Foresight* calls a hard trend - something that is going to happen with certainty. The basic assumption that this hard trend of aging modelers spells doom for the hobby as a whole is, in my view, a wrong conclusion, one that has already been proven false by the past. As defined by Burrus, it's a soft trend: something that may happen perhaps is even likely to happen, but the outcome can be influenced and therefore the end results could be different from what we initially assumed. Let's consider the simple fact that model railroaders have been getting older since the very beginning of the hobby. Yet today, after several generations of aging modelers have come and gone, we enjoy a greater selection of items and choices of how to pursue model railroading than ever before in the history of the hobby. To obsess over

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an aging populace is focusing on the wrong problem, same with the mania about how to attract young people into the hobby. How about this: instead of focusing on attracting people to the hobby, what if we looked at redefining,

reinventing or transforming the hobby in ways that make it more relevant in terms of today?

### **Anyone seen a train lately?**

I had a short conversation with the hygienist at my last dental cleaning. Knowing that I edit a model railroad magazine, she asked me whether trains were still important or even still around? I assured her they were and that railroading was a critical component of the American economy with regard to the volume and types of everyday items that are shipped by rail. While we might smugly find her ignorance of railroads amusing, it isn't that unusual among people in the general population. (What do you really know about your teeth? Not as much as she does, I'll wager.)

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When you consider that today you can go for a long time without seeing or hearing a train and that many communities haven't had active rail service for decades, is it that surprising that people wonder whether railroading is dead? I don't think so. Furthermore, look at how railroaders and railroads are often portrayed in movies and on TV. The only time a train makes the evening news is when something bad has happened like a derailment or a crossing accident. The recent movie *Unstoppable*, which depicts the May 2001 true story of a runaway train, sensationalized the circumstances in typical Hollywood style, with the runaway train itself acting as the villain of the story. Wow, evil trains, hell-bent on destroying life and limb. Sounds like fun doesn't it?

The problem as I see it is this: Given the nearly invisible nature of railroads in the minds of people today, how might we expose them to model railroading in a positive, productive way that demonstrates the relevance of the hobby and railroading to their lives?

### **I don't know what you know.**

We assume that what we find fascinating about the hobby is what others will find equally as fascinating. We approach it from a love of trains, with model railroading being a means to express that love in a host of different ways. We developed our love of trains because real trains were a much larger part of our daily lives than they are for people today. Trains were accessible, trains were visible and trains

were cool. Kids used to grow up wanting to be railroad engineers. Not anymore.

What if instead of presenting it as a recreational pastime based, on something they know little or nothing about, we presented it as an immersive, interactive learning tool? Sound far-fetched? Not really.

### **Help me learn.**

Have you been to a model train show lately? What if you knew nothing about the hobby? What would your experience be like? If it's anything like the shows I routinely attend, it won't be very positive. Many of the vendors seem to be more interested in talking among themselves than to potential customers. To be certain, there are many wonderful people in the hobby who are committed to helping newcomers learn but they are too often the exception rather than the rule. Many of the layouts typically on display at most shows are little more than disjointed, modular mish-mashes in appearance and quality with no coherent theme. What does this communicate to the public? Operations almost always consist of trains mindlessly chasing their tails around gigantic ovals. You say: "That's all the public wants. They're simply not interested in anything else." Why do we assume that?

# why do we assume the public doesn't care?

Maybe it's because they don't know anything about what they're watching and no one cares enough to explain it to them in terms that will help them understand. People today are very media and marketing savvy and know when someone genuinely cares about what they are doing and who is just passing time away until closing. We are squandering a golden opportunity by continuing to treat the public and the hobby like it was still 1950-whatever. Again, there are the rare exceptions of layouts that are exquisitely crafted and cohesive in appearance with well thought out graphics and support info.

How do we engage with novices? Are their beginner oriented questions answered with interest and enthusiasm or an air of contempt? I've experienced both, haven't you? Which do you prefer? Are there intelligently designed and free promotional materials available that present the hobby as a worthy pursuit for grownups? There's a lot we could learn in terms of marketing the hobby. Will we learn? I have grave doubts we will.

### **Let's go deep.**

Suppose, in addition to providing the usual functions of sound and speed control, a DCC decoder contained a program that taught you how to run a model steam engine like it was a real one? I'll wager the technology and programming capabilities are already present in existing decoders like the Tsunami.

The program would start with the basics of the locomotive controls and operational steps such as water levels, maintaining steam pressure, and advance you to greater skill levels as each previous step is mastered.

# Think of the skill set a modeler acquires over a lifetime in the hobby.

Eventually you would be working and monitoring the same aspects on the model as you would if you were running a full sized locomotive. A diesel decoder could do the same for diesel locomotives. Interactive programs like this already exist in many disciplines. Too much fuss and bother you say? You just want to turn a knob and make something go without having to think? Then you could select whatever level of immersion in the experience you wanted, or simply turn this program function off and have operation just as

you're currently used to. Simple.

### **Is there an app for that?**

What if you could do this using your smart phone as a controller instead of the typical DCC hand unit? Sound crazy? Wireless technology makes it possible for the decoder and phone to communicate, so why couldn't an iPhone or Android phone act as a throttle, engine brake, train brake, water gauge and steam pressure gauge, stoker, whistle and bell cords, reverse lever and so on?

It's already here: called the \*"WiThrottle" and includes a choice of user interfaces. Some are more suited to

switching while others are designed for left-handed people and so on. It connects through JMRI (DecoderPro) so it'll work with any DCC system. Plus it's easy to register an iPhone with any layout owner's system, which means people can bring their own throttle to any suitably equipped layout.

What if somebody created an app that mimicked a boiler backhead or diesel controller stand instead of the NMRA based functions DCC systems display now? What about

train dispatching or car forwarding apps? To quote Daniel Burrus again: “If something can be done, it will be done - and if you don’t do it, someone else will.”

I’d be willing to wager that younger people who are used to the immersive multi-functional digital world experience of video games and other media would find these tools and processes more interesting than simply running the thing endlessly around the basement listening to the sound of the choo-choo blowing its whistle every five seconds.

### **Model Railroading: Skills for a Lifetime**

For middle-aged adults, what if the hobby was presented as a means of learning and exploring new skills that bettered one’s life - maybe even prolonging it by giving a sense of purpose or reason to stay engaged with life? Many of us already understand this aspect but do a poor job of communicating the benefits beyond the hobby itself.

Stop and think of the skill set a typical modeler acquires in the course of pursuing the hobby. One does historical research about industrial archeology and community history, transportation theory, learns artistic skills with regard to color and form, electronics, handcraft and building skills and the list goes on. We talk much about what the individual brings to the hobby in terms of interest and commitment, but what of the benefits to the individual? What about the blessings of accomplishment: “I did something I never thought I could do, and it feels great,” of the sense of focus, of the knowledge gained to say nothing

of the greater confidence in life overall? We’ve become so insular in our focus on the specifics of the activity itself; we forget the benefits it can bring to the rest of our lives. It need not be this way.

We live in a time when digital technology is bringing tremendous change to all aspects of our lives. It isn’t the 1950s anymore (except in our basements) and the ways we’ve promoted the hobby in the past are, or already have, losing much of their relevance to people of today. We’re embracing the technological changes to the hobby; now it’s time to bring our thinking about it into the twenty-first century too.

\*My thanks to Trevor Marshall for bringing the WiThrottle to my attention.

WiThrottle on the web: <http://withrottle.com/WiThrottle/Home.html>

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