



# Build a Halloween layout

Foam scenery makes this project frightfully easy

By Susan Vanselow | Photos by William Zuback and Jim Forbes

WHEN THE GUYS here at CLASSIC TOY TRAINS asked me to take part in building a layout – a first for me – I was thrilled! Being around all things toy train as the magazine’s editorial associate had really whetted my appetite. I couldn’t wait to expand my knowledge of this great hobby. And naturally, I wanted to share my experiences with CTT readers. So grab your supplies, pick up your track plan, and join the staff as we build a Halloween-themed layout.

## Simple benchwork

We had two goals to meet when building our layout: It had to be small and had to be portable. Practicality was the key. The layout has no permanent legs and is designed to be placed on a table, on sawhorses, or on the floor. It has removable structures and removable scenery features so the layout can be easily stored when not in use. It is, after all, a very seasonal layout.

Benchwork and wiring went to CTT’s experienced layout builders. Bob Keller built the benchwork and installed the beveled cork roadbed and O-27 tubular track. Neil Besougloff did the special wiring (see sidebar). Jim Riccioli took the lead on scenery, and Roger Carp and I helped Jim shape the

scenic foam pieces. Neil also lent a haunting hand to the spooky woodlands atop haunted hill.

The benchwork is extremely simple. Bob cut down a 4 by 8-foot sheet of 1/2-inch thick plywood to 3 by 8 feet. At just 3 feet, the portable layout fits through doorways more easily and it still accommodates our O-27 figure-8 track plan. Bob also built a frame by gluing and screwing 1 by 4-inch planks underneath the edges of the plywood and two across the center to keep the plywood from flexing when the layout is moved. Bob glued the cork roadbed to the tabletop with Liquid Nails and a caulking gun and used 3/8-inch screws to hold down the track. Once the more technical tasks were completed, it was on to scenery!

with half the layout focusing on the colorful aspects of fall and the other half focusing on Halloween. One side would have brightly colored trees, a farmhouse and a pumpkin field, while the other side would have dark, muted colors, some bare trees, and a haunted house high up on a forboding hill.

We began by stocking up on 2-inch extruded polystyrene (pink foam board) for our mountain and spooky hill, as well as some 1-inch pink foam for smaller hills. We cut the foam into smaller pieces that fit around the contours of the track and then stacked the foam to create hills. For hills taller than 2 inches, we glued pieces of foam together with Liquid Nails for Projects & Foamboard (a water-based contact adhesive that won’t attack the foam).

Once the glued layers of foam had dried sufficiently overnight, we started carving the landscape with a Stanley

◀ A haunted hill helps carry the Halloween theme on CTT’s project layout. The Lemax house drives the point home.

## Foam-based scenery

We decided on an autumn theme,

# Two-train wiring

THE CLASSIC TOY TRAINS staff decided to spice up the operation of our 3 by 8-foot Halloween layout by wiring the crossing as a stop-and-go track so that two trains (in our case, one very, very short train and one motorized unit) could run on the layout without colliding at the crossing. You can do the same on your layout and the wiring is easy.

I used two no. 241 Train Detectors from Burns Manufacturing, P.O. Box 5301, Rocky Point, NY 11778, telephone 516-821-1644, email [brunsmanu@aol.com](mailto:brunsmanu@aol.com). The detectors cost \$40 each plus shipping and come with a full set of instructions for crossing protection. The crossing uses six wires, not counting two wires to provide power to the detectors.

The color-coded detectors are wired to two blocks of track with electrically isolated center rails. One block runs east/west through the crossing and the other north/south. I placed plastic track pins in the center rails on each end of the two



The complete layout measures only 3 feet by 8 feet.

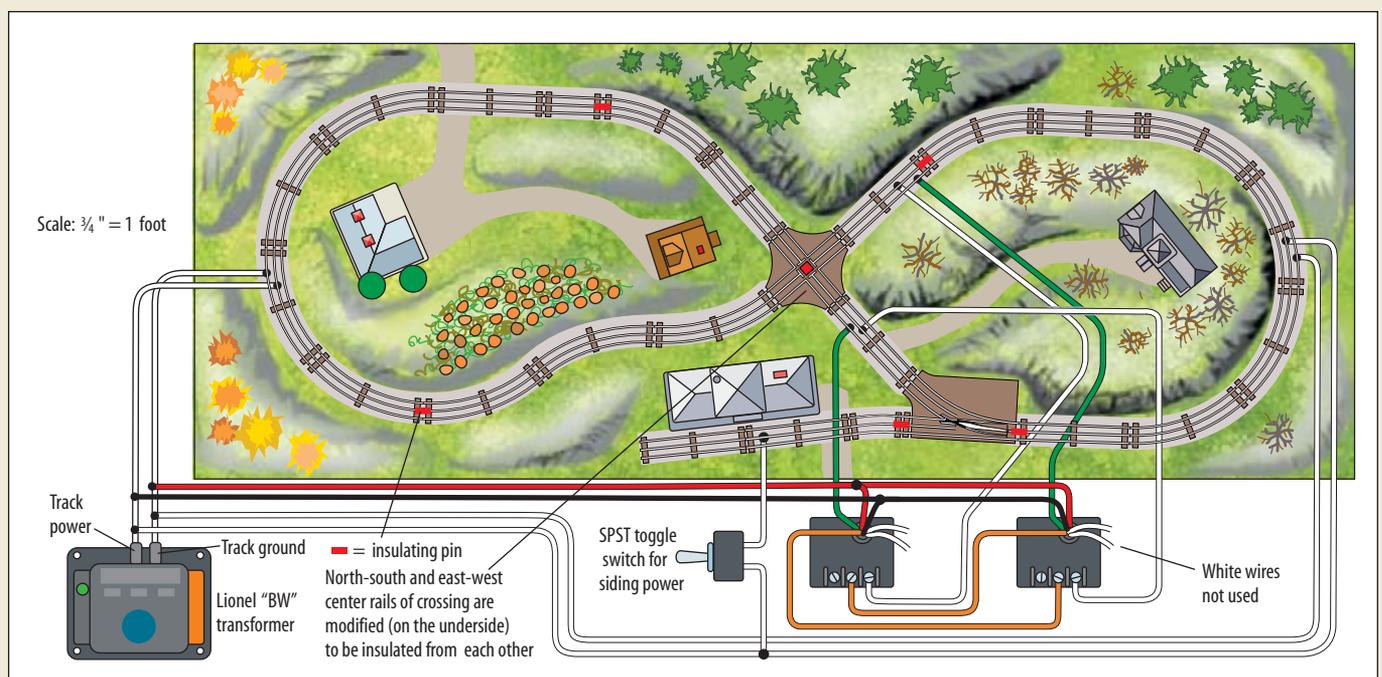
blocks. Each block begins several sections of track before the crossing and extends several sections of track beyond the crossing. When Train A is moving through the crossing on the east/west block, one of the detectors cuts the power to the north/south track block. When Train B is moving through the crossing on the north/south block, the second detector cuts the power to the east/west track block. Only after the caboose clears a track block is power restored to the

opposing line.

All of the center rails – north/south and east/west – on our Lionel O-27 crossing section are electrically connected by a piece of sheet metal on the underside of the track section. For our stop-and-go wiring scheme to work properly, it can only have the north/south and east/west center rails electrically connected. The outside rails don't matter. I turned the crossing over and used tin snips to cut through all of the sheet metal that electri-

cally bridges the four center rails. Then I soldered a piece of wire to electrically reconnect the north and south center rails to each other. I solder a second piece of wire to reconnect the east and west center rails. If you use another style of track, you'll need to separate the north/south and east/west center rails of your crossing as I did, although your methods may vary depending on how the crossing was manufactured.

Only the staff's tiny layout, deciding where to begin and end the electrically isolated blocks was a real challenge, since I needed to get the train that had stopped for the crossing started again quickly before it was rear-ended as the first train rounded the bend. Also, train speed and coasting distance came into play. Through two afternoons of trial and error I came up with the right locations for the pins. You'll need to experiment to determine what works best on your layout. – Neil Besouglhoff



Surform Pocket Plane (a surface forming hand tool). By simply rubbing the tool back and forth against the foam like a cheese grater, we ground off the square edges of the foam board, often leaving a rough texture much like a dirt road. In fact, that's exactly what we created going up to the haunted house, and a smaller road going to the farm. To achieve a smoother texture for rock areas we used a foam wire cutter. The cutter plugs into a wall outlet and it heats a wire mounted in a frame that cuts through foam like a cheese cutter through a brick of cheddar.

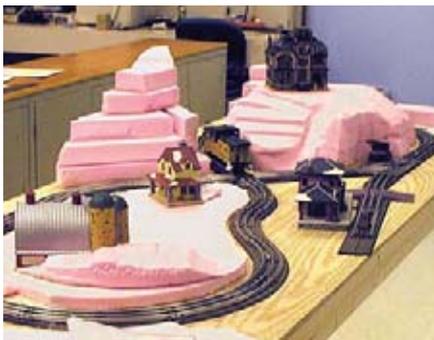
We decided to lay 1-inch foam as a base for the farm, and we also added odd bits and pieces of foam on the corners of the layout for added realism. As a practical touch, we tacked down smaller pieces of foam to help keep the removable Lemax brand ceramic structures in place and hide the holes where the buildings' light cords are meant to be inserted. Optionally, the cords can be run through the plywood so that you can light any of the buildings. Foam pieces also served as "bookends" for the tallest hill, which is removable for storage. To add a final touch of character, we left a flat vertical surface on the tallest hill so that we could later carve out an ominous rock face.

While working with pink sheets of foam we also experimented with Dow Great Stuff Minimal Expansion Foam on the tallest hill. You may have used a spray can of Great Stuff, an expanding polyurethane foam that comes in different expansion rates, to fill cracks around your home. With the spray can we filled in the "steps" created by each pink layer to keep our hill from looking like a stack of pancakes. The Great Stuff foam loses its tackiness in 20 minutes and cures in eight hours. Then we attacked it with our trusty Surform, leaving some spots smooth and rounded. Later we added Sculptamold, a pasty model-railroad scenery material, to parts of the carved foam for a finishing touch of craggy realism.

### Adding ground color

Next we painted the entire layout with tan latex flat paint. We used custom-mixed Dutch Boy interior latex paint called "Dirt Roads."

Once the paint was dry, we added some more texture and covered seams using Sculptamold. We made a paste according to instructions, but added some "Dirt Roads" paint and another darker color called "Rocky Mountain" to the mix. Using a putty knife, we gave the hills a rough, rocky texture and also



This pile of pink in the CLASSIC TOY TRAINS' workshop is the essence of all the hilly contours of our Halloween project layout.



What started out as a six-inch high stack of pink foam is whittled down to create a hilltop for our haunted house and woods. The tool of choice here is a Stanley Surform Pocket Plane.



Dow Great Stuff's minimally expanding foam still covered virtually all of this removable hill by the time it had cured. We used the Surform to give the springy foam a more realistic shape.

filled in any gaps in the layers of pink foam. When the Sculptamold had set for a full day, we went about "dressing" the layout, adding color with ground foams made by Woodland Scenics.

First, working in a one-foot-square section at a time, we gave the layout a second, thicker coat of tan paint. While the paint was still wet, we sprinkled on our ground cover of choice, Woodland Scenics "Earth Blends" Blended Turf. In some spots where we wanted darker ground, like the haunted house hill and the pumpkin patch, we used Woodland Scenics "Soil" color instead, and throughout the layout we added an



Jim calls his mix of Sculptamold, water, and latex paint "Sculptapaste," a slow-setting colored mixture that hides seams and creates texture.



Exposed rock areas are given a stonier appearance with a wash of liquid pigments, thinned with water and used as a stain. Raw Umber was the color chosen for this section of rock.



After the ballast is sprayed with water mixed with dish detergent, add glue using a large dropper. A second application later helps thoroughly secure the lightweight ground-rubber ballast.

oversprinkling of green shades. Be generous with the ground foam and experiment by layering different colors and texture sizes on top of one another. Nature is not a uniform color. Whatever foam doesn't stick to the paint once dry can be scooped up with a soft-bristle brush and used elsewhere.

An overspray of Woodland Scenics cement made sure everything stayed in place when we were satisfied with the mix of colors.

### Rocks, trees, and ballast

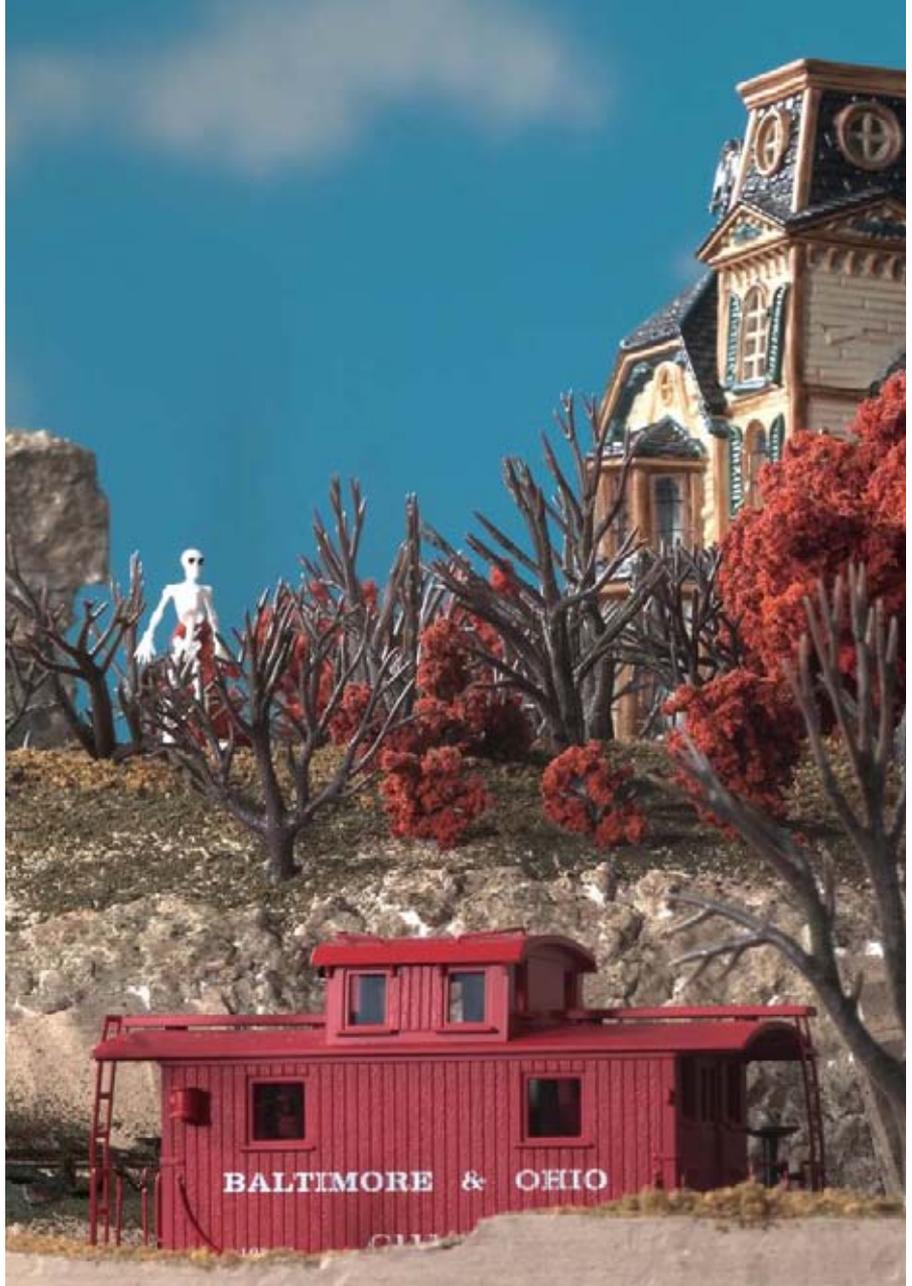
Once the different colors and textures of ground foam were applied, we



▲ Tucker's Farm readies for a hefty pumpkin harvest on the "colorful" side of the 3 by 8-foot figure-8 layout. A ghoulish atmosphere adds to the haunted house side of the layout.

◀ Thanks to some fancy (but easily installed) electronics, the handcar and a train can operate in tandem on the figure-8 layout without a collision at the crossing.

moved onto the next part of the project: staining the Sculptamold rock faces. For this we used a combination of Woodland Scenics Earth Color Stone Gray and Raw Umber liquid pigments, thinned with water. To prepare the rock face, we used a pump sprayer to wet the rock with a light coating of water mixed with several drops of kitchen dish soap. The dish soap helps the stain flow onto the surface instead of beading. We then brushed on the Stone Gray stain. It went on dark, but



soon lightened as it spread and mixed with the pre-moistened surface. After this had set for a day, we added brownish-red highlights with the Raw Umber stain so the rock would have an interesting, non-uniform appearance.

To complete our autumn theme, we added fall-foliage trees, pumpkins, and a few skeleton bones and other mysterious items embedded in the mountain. We bought the pumpkins from a vendor at a craft show. Small bits of lichen stained with Raw Umber served as our pumpkin “vines.”

For the farm scene, we planted orange, red, and bright yellow trees from Woodlands Scenics. Planting was a snap – simply add a drop of white glue to the base of the tree and stick it into the foam. We continued the same process on the late autumn side, planting some tall evergreens, as well as some barren trees. A few were anchored at

odd angles, giving the appearance of age and neglect, just the right type of ambience for a spooky house on the hill!

Our final step was to ballast the O-27 tubular track. We used Ballast King ground rubber ballast (coarse, dark gray), Woodland Scenic’s cement, a large medicine dropper, and a spray bottle full of water again mixed with a few drops of dish soap to help the liquid cement flow. We first spread the ballast along the track, then sprayed water onto the ballast, and then using the dropper applied the watery glue. If some drops of glue or water stray (and they usually do), simply wipe off the rail tops with a soft cloth while they are still wet. Be very generous with the glue or your ballast won’t hold. For a more natural effect, we drizzled some fine ground foam along outer edges of the ballasted areas to help them blend with the surrounding terrain.

▲ Lemax-brand ceramic buildings, Woodland Scenics ground foams and trees, and pink foam insulation form the basis of this Halloween-themed layout, built by CTT staff members.

### Now I’m hooked

A quick look-over, some finishing touches here and there, and voila, we were done! My first layout completed, and what a beauty she is. One side is bright and colorful, and the other side is spooky enough to make any ghoul run for cover. Of course, the trains look great running on either side! Thanks, guys, for all your help. You’ve expanded my knowledge of the hobby and gave me some great tips on layout building. And safe to say, a great time was had by all. I had such a fun time, in fact, that it’s going to be hard putting away all those tools. If I could only think of a way....Hey, this might be the start of a whole new career! **CTT**

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