



# Grand Scales

Q U A R T E R L Y

## Grand Scales On A Budget Getting Involved

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**W**e'd like to talk about the most economical way to get into Grand Scale railroading. Let's say you're like most of us, and have a burning desire to get your hands on the throttle of a steam engine. You need knowledge. No book in the world can teach you how to operate a steam locomotive. Indeed you could even learn to be quite proficient at running one or two engines on a particular railway, but you'll look like a novice if you have the chance to run a different engine on a "foreign" railway.

That said, it is true that the beginning of most skills should be book learning. You want to have an accurate understanding of locomotives, rolling stock, and railways in general. And if you're working with steam, an intimate knowledge of these living machines is essential. Knowing the difference between an 0-4-0 and a 4-8-4 is not enough. Can you tell by sight the difference between Stephenson valve gear and Walschaerts valve gear? Could you explain to someone else how it works? Do you know not just what an injector does, but how it does it? If that injector was working earlier and isn't now, can you think of the two most likely reasons why it isn't?

You can expect to learn a lot of these things "on the job", but it might save everyone time if you can get your hands on as many books and magazines about trains as possible. Study them diligently. To become really good, you need to approach some of this material more like a text book than an entertaining novel. Yes, these books and magazines can be expensive. But to be a Grand Scale railroader, you'd probably better get used to that feeling of the money slipping out of your bank account. [This column is Grand Scales on A Budget, we never claimed "Grand Scales for Free".]

Once you get that valuable "theory", remember that you still don't know it all. How does that saying go? The live steamers that think they know everything are really annoying to those who do! The truth, though, is that none of us know all

there is to know, and if you are new to a group the best way to demonstrate your individual level of expertise is to humbly ask sincere, articulate questions. It's no good to correct a "graybeard" on some fine point, even if you're right.

### THE NEXT STEP

You need to find an operation where you will be welcome as a volunteer or perhaps even an employee (for reasons of liability you may need to be "on the books" as an employee, even if your salary is, shall we say, meager). Even if there isn't a Grand Scale railway in your town, that shouldn't stop you. There are many people, especially retirees, who travel across half a continent to spend two or three weeks at their favorite railway.

If you aren't certain where one may be in your area, write to this magazine, and we'll see if we can get you in touch with someone. Once you've found a line you'd like to help, figure out how much time you could realistically devote to this operation. Then in your most professional demeanor, approach the owner, manager, or club president and offer your services.

Remember that others have likely been there working hard for years. Your first responsibilities will probably be wiping the grease off the engine during steam-up, then shoveling gravel and emptying the trash cans while some else runs the train. There is a tremendous amount of work in running a railway. Most of it isn't fun in the least. It's only fair that you start at the bottom.

When I began working with Frank Allen on the Orland Newville & Pacific (15", Orland, California), I wasn't used as an engineer for well over a year. Even though I already had quite a lot of steam experience, it wasn't on the ON&P, and it wasn't with that engine. Maybe I felt qualified to take the throttle right away, but I needed to prove to Frank and the other volunteers that I was willing to do the hard work as well as the fun stuff. And I was

happy to do it. I knew I was helping the railroad.

### THE CLINCHER

More than your knowledge, more than your availability, more than your willingness to do unpleasant chores, there is one factor that will make or break your career on someone else's railroad. People skills.

I will share with you wisdom I gleaned from my "day job". We ran a computer sales and service firm for most of this decade. We hired employees to work as technicians after I got too busy to do all the repair work myself. It became clear that it was much easier to teach technical skills to a nice person with common sense, than it was to take a skilled computer egghead and teach him to be personable.

I say with a bit of confession that us live steam rail buffs can be a bit odd at times. We need to go that extra distance and turn the other cheek, we need to be responsible and professional, we need to be willing to get along with the public and fellow live steamers alike. It doesn't matter if its a private layout, a commercial operation, or a club.

Around the world we all like to say that rail buffs are a "good group of fellows" (and ladies). For the vast majority, that's true. But there isn't a railway one that hasn't known grief because of the actions of one of their helpers. Let's just make sure we're park of the good majority.

There is certainly a Grand Scale railway that could use your help and would be delighted to have you aboard. So why not consider the least expensive way to become a Grand Scaler and be a volunteer. It would benefit the railway, and it would benefit you.

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