

Go for the Golden Spike!

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As those who receive Scale Rails know, 2008 has been designated ‘The Year of the MMR’, and the magazine will feature articles each month that focus on one of the eleven certificates that are available in the MMR program. The December 2007 issue of Scale Rails contained a ‘History of the NMRA Achievement Program (1961-2007) by C. J. Riley. In that article, I learned that the Golden Spike Award was instituted by the NMRA in 1987. So, in celebration of its 20th Anniversary, let’s take a closer look at the Golden Spike Award.

The Golden Spike Award, although not one of the eleven awards that can be applied to the MMR, is often mentioned as a great way to enter the program. That is exactly the way I viewed it as I decided to put my toe in the waters of the Achievement Program.

The Golden Spike does not require the level of expertise in the various areas of the hobby that the Master Modeler Awards require, but it does require the modeler to demonstrate basic modeling skills in several areas: Rolling Stock (Motive Power & Cars); Model Railroad Setting (Structures & Scenery); and Engineering (Civil & Electrical). Since I just went through the process of getting ready for the Golden Spike, I thought I would show you quickly how straightforward it is. Let’s look at each of the three areas in sequence.

Rolling Stock:

The requirement here is to display six (6) units of rolling stock. (You can display these units at a Division meeting or just on your layout/module when the team comes to see your work. They do not have to be judged in a contest!) To qualify, the rolling stock can be scratchbuilt, built from craftsman kits, or be detailed commercial kits. (A ‘shake the box’ kit by itself, will not qualify.) To give you some ideas, here are some things I did.



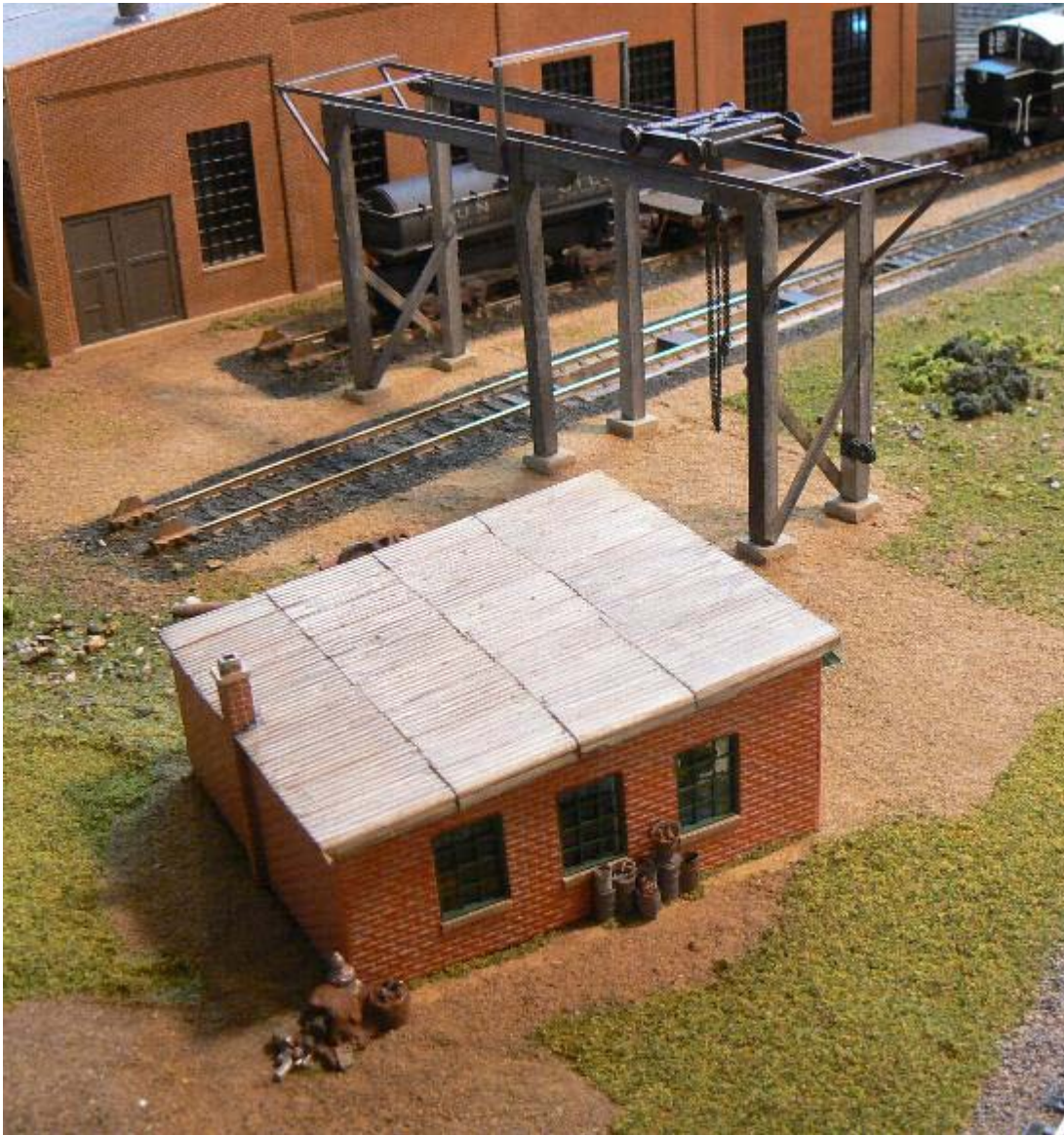
An Athearn gondola got wire grabs, a scratchbuilt load, and some weathering; another Athearn kit (a flat car) got a weathered deck and a scratchbuilt lumber load; I built a boxcar from a wood craftsman kit (Main Line Models) and added some brake rigging; I stripped the lettering from an Athearn work caboose, re-painted and decaled it for the Susquehanna, added a wood deck and wood sides, and details like wire grabs and non-working marker lights; I scratchbuilt a wood-sided gondola on an MDC frame; and I added homemade decals to an undecorated refrigerator car.



You get the idea. All you need to do is add some weathering, details, decals, or loads to a 'shake the box' kit, and it will qualify. It is also a great way to get started in this aspect of the hobby!

Model Railroad Setting:

The Golden Spike requires you to build eight (8) square feet of layout (or an 8 square foot module) and construct five (5) structures. Here you want to display some basic skills in building structures and adding scenery. As with the rolling stock, the structures have to be a bit more than a styrene kit built straight from the box. Once again, they can be scratchbuilt, built from craftsman kits, or simply be commercial kits to which you have added weathering and details. However, scratchbuilding is not required and neither is building a huge craftsman kit. You can meet this aspect of the Golden Spike by painting, weathering, and adding details, just as you did with the rolling stock. Remember, bridges are considered structures, too. Now building structures is probably my favorite aspect of the hobby, so I had a lot to choose from. By the way, the yard area of my layout was the first to receive ballast and scenery, so this was the focal area for the Golden Spike. I did have some scratchbuilt structures to choose from, but my Walther's roundhouse (weathered, detailed, interior lighting), my Walther's Coaling Tower (painted/weathered); an IHC sanding facility to which I had added a wood sand bin, would all have qualified. I also included an overhead crane (Campbell Kit) and some small scratchbuilt structures as part of the five required.



This picture shows a small scratchbuilt brick structure, the Campbell Traveling Crane, the side of my roundhouse, and some simple scenery to hold it all together.

Engineering (Civil & Electrical):

There are really three sub-categories to the Engineering requirement.

First, you must show three types of trackage, all properly installed and ballasted – all can be commercial trackage. By ‘types of trackage’, the NMRA suggests turnouts, crossings, grade elevations, etc. To make things even easier, there is no requirement that you display three different types of trackage. Three turnouts would meet the requirement. In my case, I had many turnouts (since I was using my yard area for the Golden Spike). I also had a double crossover near the entrance to the yard, and the track leading up to the coal dump for the coaling tower was a ‘grade change’.

Second, you must have your track wired so that two trains can be operated simultaneously. You could do this with DCC, or with block control in DC. You can also do it simply as having a passing siding where you can 'park' one train while operating a second train – then park that one and run the first again. I met this requirement by having two blocks and two cabs. I also had sidings where I could park a train and cut the power.

Finally, you have to provide one additional electrical feature such as powered turnouts, signaling, lighted buildings, etc. This can be as simple as adding some lights in your buildings. Again, because I used my yard area, I had powered turnouts as well as some dwarf signals and lights in some buildings.

The Visit:

Once I thought I had met all the requirements for the Golden Spike Award, I wrote up a simple description of the rolling stock, the structures, and the engineering features that I thought met the requirements, and included some photos showing them as well. Then I contacted Norman Frowley to set up a time for Norman and his team to visit my layout to evaluate it for the Golden Spike. Norman serves as the Chairman of the Achievement Program for our Garden State Division. Norman also encouraged me to think about any other aspects of the layout that I might want his team to evaluate.

Because I had completed about forty (40) square feet of scenery in the yard area, I also completed the paperwork for the Master Builder: Scenery Award and decided to have the team evaluate some of my structures as well.

The Sunday in early December 2007 that we had chosen for the visit dawned with an accumulating snow falling. That didn't stop Norman and his team (Tom Wortman and Tom Casey) for heading 'up north' to West Milford. The team spent over four hours in the basement by the layout! (Okay, there was a coffee break and a lunch break, but these guys were 'on task' for a considerable amount of time.) In the end, I had earned my Golden Spike Award – my original goal. I also qualified for the Master Builder – Scenery Certificate and four of my structures earned Merit Awards. Wow, what a day!

I really had fun preparing my rolling stock and my layout for the Golden Spike evaluation. It gave me the motivation I needed to head downstairs and work in a focused way. If you have a layout, or a module with track, I encourage you to consider the Golden Spike Award as well. Who knows, you might already qualify for that and more! More information about the Golden Spike Award can be found on the NMRA website at this address: <http://www.nmra.org/achievement/gold.html> .