



DON FOWLER EARNS MMR #518

I was a very fortunate kid because my dad worked for Southern Pacific, and we always had model trains. In 7th grade (1969), I became good friends with Ken Wilken, a classmate who was an avid HO scale Santa Fe modeler. He was always three steps ahead of me with his modeling skills and still is to this day. Thankfully, he still lets me peek over his shoulder and continues to raise the bar on a regular basis.

In 1987, not long after starting a career and family, I was in a local grocery store one evening, wearing a “Southern Pacific” T-shirt. A guy behind me in the checkout line made a positive comment about the shirt, and a discussion ensued. He was the first NMRA member I ever met, and he invited me to join him for a Pacific Southwest Region (PSR) convention (Silvergate in ‘88). Twenty-six years later, Jim Thacker and I are still great friends and work together on model railroad projects on a weekly basis.

While visiting our County Fair in 1998, my sons and I stopped to enjoy Short Track Club’s N Scale modular railroad on display. It was huge, well modeled, and had some great trains running. The best thing was that club members Chuck Hart, Ken Allen, John Sigurdson, and Paul Schmitt invited us inside to operate and to come back to run our own trains during the Fair. They made us feel very welcome and encouraged me to join their club and the NMRA,

which I eventually did. My only condition was that I didn’t want to get involved in the politics of the organization (please see the “Region Presidents Directory” in this magazine under “PSR”). Yeah, that worked out well.

When the Short Track Club decided to take the lead for PSR’s “Mission Possible” Convention to be held locally in 2002, I volunteered to help with the clinic coordination. I continued to meet some great people and develop my skills, thanks to their advice and input. Ben Sevier was the convention registrar and we became good friends as well. When he decided to run (or “got railroaded” as we call it) for Division Superintendent, he asked me to also run for Clerk/Paymaster. We have been involved in Division business ever since. Ben then encouraged me to run for the San Diego Director on the PSR Board, Division Superintendent, and later convinced me to run for Region President (currently in my second term).

In 2004, I hosted a Division open house for my railroad. Our local Achievement Program (AP) Chair was Ed Hatch — a crafty devil in his own right. He was very complimentary of my railroad and took a lot of photos. He asked if I was familiar with the AP and told me that I was probably already qualified for some of the certificates. He was right, and I successfully submitted the paperwork for a Golden Spike Award and Master Builder–Scenery. That got me

started and Association Volunteer followed in 2006. I must have gotten ambitious in 2008 because I received Model Railroad Engineer–Electrical, Association Official, and Model Railroad Author, all in that same year. In reality, it was just a matter of identifying the requirements and completing the paperwork.

Then I hit a rough spot. Although I had completed most of the requirements for Model Railroad Engineer–Civil, I had never hand-laid track. When I expressed my concerns to Paul Schmitt (MMR) from Short Track Club, he offered to teach me how and ensure that I met the AP requirements. Although we were friends, he was a tough critic but a great mentor, and I received that certificate in 2011.

In case you were keeping track, there was one to go: Master Builder–Motive Power. I put it off because it seemed overwhelming and quite frankly, there were other model railroading activities and projects that I preferred to work on. However, it kept haunting me: one certificate to go. I finally dug in and completed the requirements. It feels good to be finished but now I’m considering completing the other certificates down the road. I am truly fortunate to have such a supportive wife, Kim, who is also a great model railroader and our PSR Railette Chair.

In reflecting on my Achievement Program journey, I’ve drawn a few conclusions that I’d like to share with you if you’re thinking about it:

- You probably already qualify for some of the certificates.
- You will be your own worst enemy by imagining that it’s harder than it is.
- You will underestimate your model railroading abilities.
- Your friends are your greatest asset and will support you in your quest.
- Your local AP Chair and MMRs want you to succeed and will support you as well.

I learned a lot by participating in the NMRA’s Achievement Program. I have a greater appreciation for what it means to qualify as a Master Model Railroader. The program required me to move beyond my comfort zone and attempt things I never would have otherwise considered. I may never hand-lay another piece of track or scratchbuild another piece of motive power, but now I know how to do it if I choose to, and I’m much better at trouble shooting

problems with track and locomotives than I was.

Qualifying for the MMR certification is one thing but living up to that distinction is quite another. Serving as a mentor to those who ask for help and as a source of encouragement to those who are struggling is the primary responsibility of this certification. I only hope that I can live up to the standards already established by our local Division MMRs that include Bob Schimmel MMR #193, Rodger Gredvig MMR #218, Paul Schmitt MMR #342, Don Ham MMR #491, and the late but great John Sigurdson MMR #236. Please accept my public thanks to all of you for your friendship and support in this endeavor. In my opinion, the gift of friendship is the greatest benefit of NMRA membership.