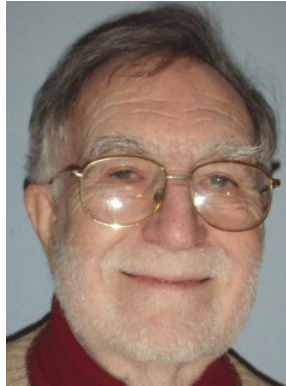




Ancient Modeler

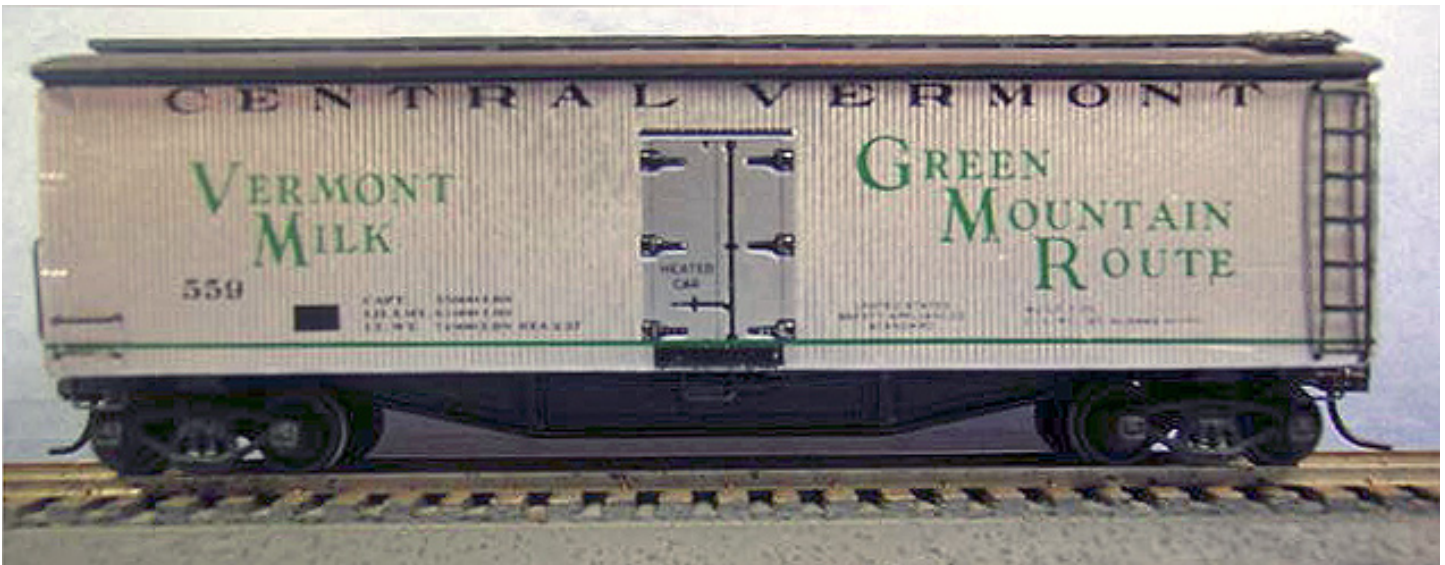
by Bob Rosenberg

Back in the 19th century, the English author and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a poem called The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. I studied it in tenth grade English and while I don't remember all of the details, it's basically the story of a sailor who whacks an albatross and not long afterwards regrets it immensely. In any event, I decided to slightly modify (or plagiarize) the title of the poem for use in this new column. Coleridge has been dead for almost 200 years and most likely won't care, and I am currently celebrating over 65 years in HO model railroading (and over 75 years on the planet), so while any references to me as a "modeler" might be subject to challenge, there's no question about the "ancient" part. I'd like to initiate this by going back to the early years of HO scale locomotives and cars; it may seem almost like mythology now, when locomotives come out of the box laser painted, lettered, and with DCC and sound units already installed, but it didn't used



Bob Rosenberg

"Little Joe," a die cast model of the 0-4-0 B&O saddle tank switcher that worked the Baltimore harbor area, a 4-6-0 and a 2-8-0 that shared the same boiler and cab, and an F-3 diesel in two versions. The more expensive one had both trucks powered, but my personal economics at the time limited me to the version with one truck powered. Their ads appeared on the back cover of MR for many years until PFM took over that space, and they used John Allen's G&D as the setting for them. Mantua Metal Products (later Tyco) also had that sharing feature for their brass and die cast Mogul and "Belle of the Eighties," a 4-4-0 frame and wheel arrangement under the Mogul superstructure, a 0-4-0 saddle tank switcher, and some all metal unpainted cars. The Penn Line (later Bowser) series of mostly PRR steam locomotive kits were all available, and the best bargains at the time (around \$20) were the John English die cast USRA Pacific and Mikado types that again shared the same



An early example of a wood and cardstock side Laconia kit

to be that way. Gordon Varney was one of the initial manufacturers of HO equipment in a wide range of prices. Their more expensive offerings were six and eight wheeled generic steam type locomotives of no particular prototype. But they also had their famous

boiler and cab. Globe made a GM F unit plastic shell; I never saw one with their original mechanisms but Athearn took over the dies and sold them with their legendary rubber band drive. They were economical to produce and ran very quietly (and fast). They were



the “stealth” diesels of their day. The top of the line for motive power was Hobbytown of Boston; they had a retail hobby shop in Boston under the same name where they sold theirs and others’ products. Their drive units were the state of the art for quality and performance and held that position for many years until the Asian manufacturers finally got into the plastic market. Die casting with metal was very widespread back

the EPA would probably not allow today. Plain models were the norm but not everything lacked detail; Varney, Athearn, Globe, and Roundhouse (Model Die Casting) all made painted wood and/or metal freight and passenger cars with silk screen lettered sides (the early ones had wooden or cast floors), as did Blue Line and American Beauty. They were state of the art at the time and were beautifully done; I have some of them and they still look good today. A company named “jc” (lower case letters) made metal



Another early example of a wood and cardstock side Laconia kit

then. ZAMAC, an acronym for a zinc- based alloy, was the one most frequently used, but it had a tendency break down over time if contaminated. Others used type metal, a lead/antimony alloy that

(Silver Side) cars with wooden floor and roofs that to be sanded or spoke shaved to the proper curvature. Walthers also made wood car bodies with stamped metal sides, some of which came pre-painted. Their roofs also had to be shaped as well but they



The Ambroid wood snowplow as originally built from the kit



later came out with plastic pre-shaped roofs – a big improvement. Ambroid, the model cement people, also sold old time wooden passenger cars of B&M prototype, m.o.w. equipment (I still have one of their 1950's B&M snow plows), and some one-of-a-kind items, all of them wood kits. Later on, they were

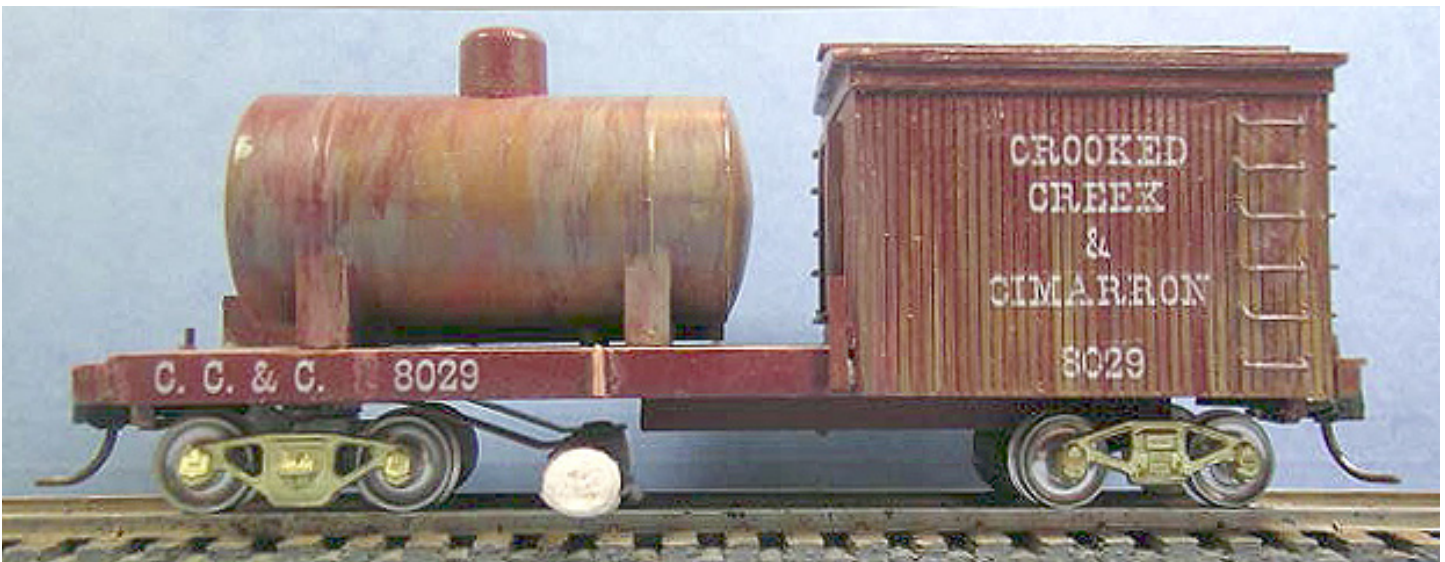
couplers. Mantua provided one that would uncouple automatically reasonably well with a special ramp (something like the old NMRA horn-hook type ramp) but they had large brass loops which left a lot to be desired esthetically. Roundhouse made a more realistic looking coupler but it didn't work well at all, which is why, even then, Kadee's were so popular.



The Ambroid wood snowplow kit after painting and lettering

marketed by Northeastern Models. Many of the early cars were metal or wood kits with pre-printed paper, wood, or card stock sides. Examples of these would be Silver Streak, Northeastern, and Laconia. We think of them as craftsman type kits today; if you built them right, they made a very nice looking model, although mine never seemed to turn out quite that well. Additionally, most of them came with dummy

Not that it really mattered; operating sessions were non-existent back then; we were still learning about Frank Ellison's theories on the staging of trains. All of these wonderful things had to have tracks on which to run, and the most popular material at the time was brass (they also had steel track—I had a few sections myself—but it had serious rust issues). The problem with brass



An Ulrich track cleaning car that used solvents in the tank that are now banned



track was that if you didn't operate it frequently it would form an oxide on the surface that wouldn't conduct electricity, making getting power to your

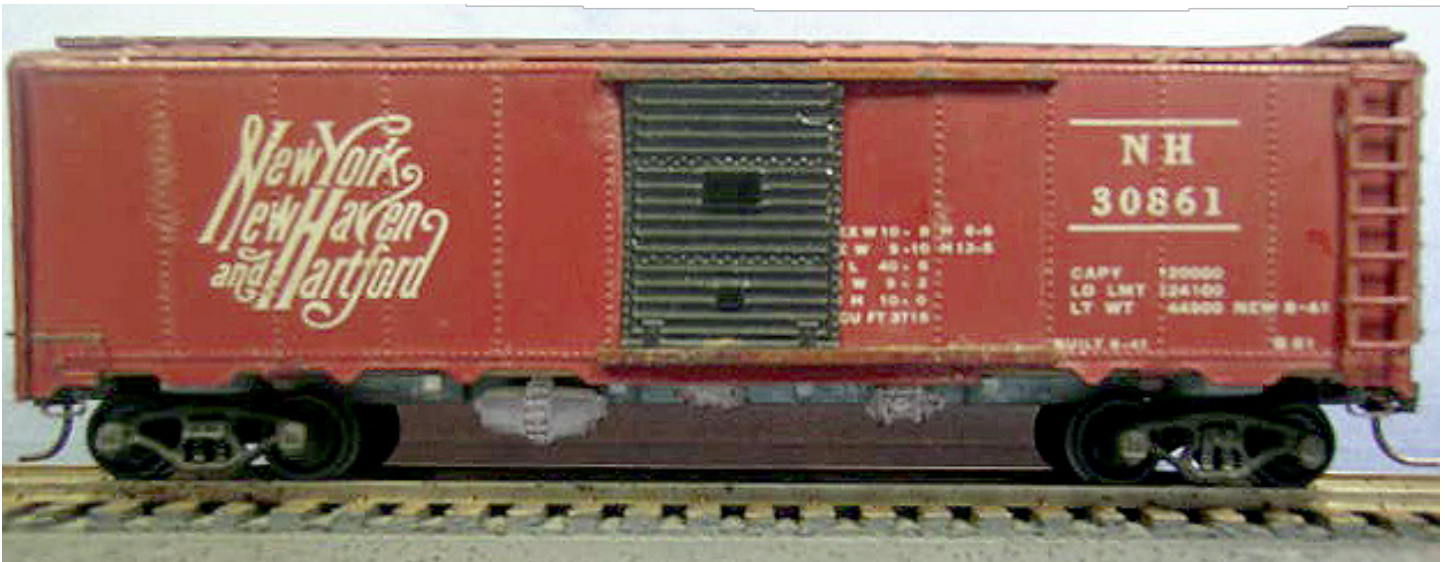
needed if the track becomes extremely dirty and, since I've allowed that to happen on occasion, those wet/dry fine sandpaper sponges you can get at paint stores work quite well in getting the big stuff off; they



Varney car 1— example of early Varney metal side, silk screen printed cars built from kits

locomotives difficult to say the least. The alternative was even more frequent cleaning with some sort of mild abrasive like a Bright Boy; an ink eraser would also do it. These inconveniences eventually lead to the development of our current nickel-silver track.

will also work on removing paint from track in the event that you "over-weather" it. As an interesting aside, I spend a lot of time (probably too much time) shopping for and pricing trains on e-bay; I have recently noticed that a lot of people are selling old



Varney car 2

Nickel silver, sometimes considered a subset of brass, is a copper alloy with nickel and often zinc. The usual formulation is 60% copper, 20% nickel and 20% zinc. It too forms a surface oxide but the oxide will conduct electricity, so abrasives are only
Website: <http://potomac-nmra.org/>

brass track – 3 foot flex track sections, straight and curved snap track, uncoupler and re-railer sections, turnouts, crossovers, anything that isn't nailed down (no pun intended). Most of it is Atlas and there definitely appears to be a market out there for it;



the only rationale I can come up with is that either the current high prices of N/S track has made the used brass track prices attractive or the buyers are new to the hobby and aren't aware of the downside;

building kits and Plasticville eventually produced some HO scale copies of their larger buildings; they didn't look that all that great but they were cheap and they snapped together, pretty much idiot proof to assemble and better than nothing.



Varney car 4

whatever the reasons, they seem to be selling briskly. There were also a number of ways to power turnouts, from various methods of hand- throwing them using piano wire, levers, and choke cables for those that were in remote areas of the layout, to the ever popular twin solenoid machines made by Tenshodo, Lambert, and others. I even saw an idea once for using compressed air. More realistically operating machines, such as the Tortoise, had not yet arrived on the scene. Structures were something else entirely. There were no DPM's or Walthers kits in those days like we have now; it was almost "you scratch built it or it didn't exist," but there were a few around; Suydam had their corrugated metal

This represents some (maybe all) of my early personal recollections of the hobby. I think I could sum it up by saying that we did the best that we could with what we had. I would also welcome suggestions of things to include in future columns from your recollections as well, and if I've really piqued your interest in this era, you'll probably find many of these items that I've mentioned available on e-bay.

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Bob Rosenberg's current railroad, the Berkshire Air Line Railroad Company, is a fictional bridge/short line set in western Massachusetts in the 1950's that uses New Haven, B&M, and NYC equipment.