



MT Penn Tower on the SV Main. A Reading Geep, with hack in tow, deadheads back to Carbon County & Northern Junction (CC&N) This is a Reading reroute move on the SV through Mount Penn, PA.

Pennsylvania's regional Schuylkill (pronounced "School-Kill") Valley Railroad (SV) offers something unique and exciting among club environments for serious modelers in HO scale. Tucked away in the Philadelphia suburb of Phoenixville, SV's 660' mainline represents a high-density, single-track, freight-dominant trunk line linking the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia and Reading. In true prototype fashion, the club's layout is strictly point-to-point. Long and short passing sidings, numerous on-line industries and minor railroad interchanges provide frequent operating challenges. There are large, fully operational yards and engine terminals at each end. Additional high-volume interchanges with major connecting railroads are simulated by three even-larger hidden staging yards.

Locomotives from early steam types to the newest diesels can be found on the line. Although this rewrites history the way many of the members wish it had occurred, this convenient "time warp" seems to please members and visitors alike. Many engines and cars display SV's own steam-era freight and passenger schemes, as well as first-, second- and third-generation diesel paint schemes. Traditional connecting railroads (LV, L&NE, PRR, B&O and Reading) are

also well represented in on-line traffic. There is an ever-changing variety of "track-age rights," "run-throughs" and "emergency reroutes" from such interline partners as B&O/CSX, D&H/Guilford/CPR, NYC/CR plus a number of fictional railroads and car lines drawn from members' private layouts

and collections.

Also interchanging with the SV is the independent, shipper-owned Carbon County & Northern Railroad (CC&N), which connects with the SV at Carbon County (CC) Junction at the sleepy little town of Gibraltar and extends to Allentown.



Tunnel Hill Grade Crossing, Phoenixville, PA. A film crew films a run-by of an SV steam excursion. This excursion is powered by SV's 4-8-2 #4820.

Model Railroad Club Schuylkill Valley

by Ron Natale & Gary Walton

Photos by Gary Walton

The original idea of the club's founders was a "what if" scenario; that the SV would fictionally predate and preempt the Reading and the Pennsy along the Schuylkill corridor. However, this soon changed in that the layout would operate as if all three of these railroads coexisted with the SV. In any event, this scenario enables the club to have a much broader scope for prototype modeling of different railroads and operations on the SV.

The "What If" Scenario

Throughout the Civil War and the following three decades, the Industrial Revolution gained momentum and swept through urban America. The canal era was declining as railroad building was expanding. In southeastern Pennsylvania, the scenic Schuylkill River Valley community leaders welcomed the blossoming commerce but soon harbored concerns. Utmost were their growing fears that their interests might become pawns to the bitter struggles between capitalists controlling the rival Philadelphia & Reading and Pennsylvania railroads. By the late 1870s, some of these fears became reality.

Goaded by the specter of financial ruin, but at the same time buoyed by their conviction, a small cadre of prominent Valleyites met in secrecy to launch a bold stroke. At the right moment, to be determined and based on careful plans and thorough preparations, they would construct their own "locally controlled" railroad. It would anchor the rich farmlands and mineral deposits between the busy port of Philadelphia on the east and the state's capital, Harrisburg, on the west. It would be taking its main freight-interchange point to the base of the daunting Allegheny Mountains, stronghold of the monolithic Pennsylvania Railroad. With immense determination, the Valleyites quietly laid the groundwork for their objective.

In early 1880, they began pushing their surveys and buying up rights-of-way under a host of clever disguises, from purported plank roads or rural canals to proposed horse-car lines in cities and towns. They solicited needed capital well beyond their own fortunes — always doing it quietly and

selectively among wealthy friends and associates known to be both discreet and antagonistic to "outside" interests.

During the initial business hours on Monday, January 5, 1885 (purposely in the aftermath of a long, extended weekend of New Year's celebrations), with surgical precision the developers legally merged all their real estate holdings, had a charter for their Schuylkill Valley Railroad rushed through state legislature, and began moving raw earth. Tightly coordinated by cleverly coded telegraph signals, construction began at precisely 11:00 AM at five points along the 112-mile route and moved swiftly in both directions from each nucleus. By the next day SV's active construction sites had quadrupled. Enthusiastic locals added their volunteer labor and political support. The opposition tried in vain to block progress. Wheels began to polish rail by mid-March and some segments of purely on-line traffic were in acceptable service around mid-April. By the first frost in late October, SV traffic was daily moving end-to-end on published schedules and without delays. A railroad was born.

By 1890, the SV found itself nearly over-

extended. Much debate among the directors resulted in maintenance and schedule cut-backs, new branchline plans were halted, and the SV began to forge stronger relationships with on-line and off-line shippers and traffic sources. Through serendipity, or dumb luck, much redundant rail and equipment was stockpiled rather than sold.

Under the disguise of a seemingly independent railroad, the SV attempted to extend into the northeastern Pennsylvania anthracite regions via the Allentown Gateway. The SV secretly backed the fledgling Carbon County & Northern Railroad (CC&N). This relationship was leaked to the press, with scandalous overtones. Swiftly, the powerfully entrenched anthracite roads, mainly the Jersey Central, Lehigh Valley, Pennsy and Reading, completely blocked the CC&N's hope of extending beyond Allentown. Never forgetting the coup that the SV pulled off, the opposition saw it as "payback time." For nearly a decade, until the Interstate Commerce Commission could solidify enough solid political and judicial support to enforce full compliance, the CC&N-SV route was covertly embargoed by its rivals and whatever shippers they



West End of Reading, PA, Coalfield Yard. An SV MOW train crawls westbound towards Harrisburg, PA. This is one of several paint schemes the club uses on SV power.



Lorane Water Tank on the SV Main. A thirsty C&O H6 takes on water before proceeding westbound to Perkiomen on SV track.



VA trio of pristine "Chessie" F units rumble past the Kobb Farm pumpkin patch with a long drag of Pennsylvania black diamonds. C&O power frequently polishes the SV rails.

could coerce. This embargo was not lifted until shortly after the turn of the century. As a result, the CC&N, lacking its urgently needed traffic base, was soon demoted from secondary main to branchline status. SV was forced to search elsewhere for ways to fill the unexpected gap; success would be very slow in coming.

For the early part of the 20th century, the SV grew at a snail's pace and posted only marginal profits. Utilizing the concept of deferred maintenance and running the equity out of the infrastructure, they maintained their balance sheet. Sooner or later though, something would give.

It wasn't until WWI and the resulting industrial boom that the SV began to rebound. Leading up to 1914, the SV adopted a "tortoise strategy" and methodically, but cautiously, began developing a rapport with every possible on-line

shipper/consignee, along with every possible bridge-traffic originator/terminator. Every possible source of traffic was considered. Slowly, and with the giants repeatedly wounding each other, the SV was emerging as a darling among disgruntled traffic managers. By the time the war officially came to America in 1917, the major trunks promptly bogged down for hundreds of miles inland from every East Coast port. The SV and CC&N link became a route-of-choice for non-export traffic seeking to bypass coastal congestion. For the second time, the SV managed to put together a plan that outfoxed the big boys. Thanks in part to past stockpiling, their over-engineered and under-utilized infrastructure, and quickly addressing deferred maintenance, the SV responded to opportunity. SV's coffers flowed with the influx of hard cash and thereafter, continued to do so until the 1930s. Government

wartime material restrictions prevented the SV from double-tracking its main lines. (Although an obvious setback, this event became a backhanded windfall to the SV, it's salvation during the coming Great Depression). It was during these times that the SV developed a goldmine of trackage rights. The first reported arrangement of this type was with the Jamestown and Jackson City Central, an obscure line in southeastern Pennsylvania now believed to have been a B&O affiliate. No records remain of these transactions although some Jamestown and Jackson City Central equipment continues to be seen from time to time moving in normal interchange service on SV's lines. The SV developed a north-south link when David Lowry's fast-growing Piedmont Railway System (reputed to be linked to both Harriman and Vanderbilt interests and Southern Railways primary competitor), negotiated an unprecedented set of trackage rights. For a large but undisclosed amount of cash, Lowry acquired unrestricted rights to operate over "all present and future" SV and CC&N main and secondary lines from Harrisburg to both Allentown and Philadelphia for a period of 199 years. This daring arrangement completed Piedmont's access to its secretly owned connections with the B&A, D&H and the NYC at Albany, NY. For SV, the resulting monthly lease payments became a strong and predictable source of profitable income.

The decade of the Twenties was boom time for the SV. The post-War recession and readjustment were of short duration and were followed almost immediately by the beginnings of an exciting upward spiral. Shortly after release from government control in January 1920, the SV began to purchase large numbers of new locomotives and cars of USRA design. Massive upgrades were performed on all equipment; addition of telephone communications and other current state of the art advances. By 1928, SV's lean plant of main tracks and yards had been completely rebuilt to the highest standards of the day, comparable to those of its giant rivals.

SV was on the fast track to becoming a "rich" railroad. Skillful application of healthy dividends brought the attention of Wall Street. This enabled the SV to attract public and professional equity capital in quantities and at prices that enabled it to retire debt. By doing so, they reduced leverage and carrying charges to levels that successfully deflected the hordes of margin-mad manipulators that were soon to ruin so many other companies. The only fundamental weakness in SV's armor was its excessive preoccupation with its own lines to the initially benign but later chronic neglect of the former CC&N branch to Allentown. During World War II, that oversight was to become SV's "Achilles' heel."

The effects from the market crash of 1929 had little effect on the SV. With the capital they acquired in the prior decade and



West end of CC&N Junction. A CC&N local is en route to interchange with The Reading Railroad. For some unknown reason the CC&N crews have a chronic habit of altering the intended use of Reading equipment.

very conservative financing, SV weathered the initial upheaval and began an orderly process of fiscal management and responsibility. Effects of the Depression itself were more pervasive. Traffic plummeted, revenues were down and no immediate relief was on the horizon. Train-offs and layoffs became endemic. Bad-order and redundant equipment was stored wherever unused track was available or could be arranged on-line or at shutdown industrial spurs. In spite of strong protests from Piedmont's management as well as its own on-line customers, SV's upkeep of the CC&N Allentown line evaporated. The apathy of the times invaded the management of the SV and a new era of chronic neglect became the order of the day.

By 1937-'38, New Deal recovery efforts were showing signs of success. A year later, mounting war clouds over Europe and China stirred a rising tide of economic activity worldwide, including isolationist America. In September 1940, Hitler struck. The ensuing fall of France and the Battle of Britain brought America to unofficial war even before Pearl Harbor shattered all remains of neutrality. These events created a wave that boosted SV's on-line and overhead traffic; total war opened the floodgates. By mid-1942, every ounce of capacity had vanished and efficiency was being pushed beyond limits. Military and war-plant labor and material demands had preempted the workers and supplies needed by the SV to overcome the results of deferred maintenance. Only through the genius and dedica-



Company Houses at Perkiomen. These scratchbuilt models are based on actual prototypes photographed in the town of Cass, WV.

tion of its people and the patience of its loyal customers was the SV able to deal with the situation. However, its Allentown line would require more than that.

Early in 1943, the long neglected and heavily overburdened Allentown line suffered a series of disastrous wrecks with heavy fatalities and huge destruction of war materials. By Executive Order, the federal government seized the line and, de facto, its

SV parent as well. The US Army was now in control of all operations. With battlefield precision and White House authority the Transportation Corps rebuilt the Allentown line, and many key portions of the SV, to prime 1940s' standards. By war's end and the return to private control, both the SV and the CC&N were arguably among the finest rail properties in North America.

From mid-1945 to the beginning of



Saturday morning in the business district of Lorane, PA. A lone Reading SW crosses Fender Avenue after completing a setout at Lorane Steel. Finely detailed Brouse's Drugstore is the prominent structure in this scene.

1948, the SV became, almost literally, a new railroad. The post-war recession and reconstruction were quickly overtaken by economic boom, but changing technology was rewriting the railroad formula. Passenger traffic began to shift to the highways and airways, and time sensitive freight soon followed. In the early 1950s modern signaling and CTC operations were put into effect. The SV took delivery of new streamlined and air-conditioned passenger cars in 1948.

The SV began transition to diesel-electrics in 1949. Replacement of mainline power proved to be an enormous saving by eliminating the need for facilities to fuel and maintain steam. The last mainline steam operated in June of 1959 with the last steam switchers being gone by 1962. The SV still held onto some of its steam; some board members believed that the diesel wouldn't last. This conservative thinking, if not apprehension, would prove in later years, to be a boon for public relations and for just maybe a few railfans.

The "Real" Scenario

The organization that is today incorporated as the Schuylkill Valley Model Railroad Club began as a round-robin hobby group meeting informally at individual homes and personal layouts. The original founding of the club is attributed to Jerry Powell and Bill Civitello. Jerry ran an ad in the local newspaper, and in October 1968, the first "official" meeting took place in his living room. From 1969 thru 1972, the founders plus several newcomers made plans and started the construction of a layout in the basement of a real estate/insurance

company. For a variety of reasons, that location did not work out as expected. Therefore, in 1972, the club moved to its present location at 400 South Main St. in Phoenixville, PA.

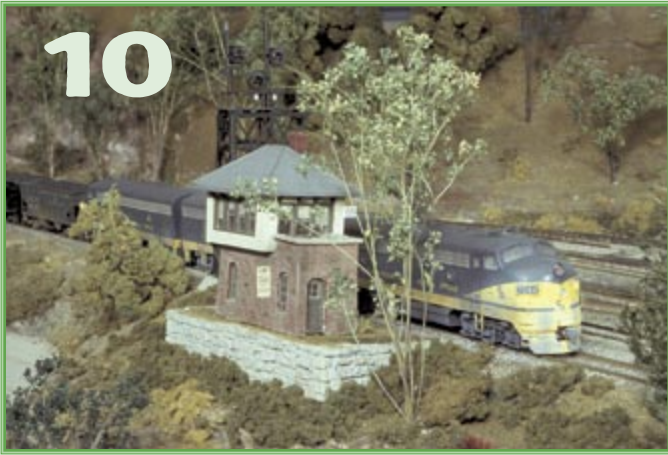
The original concept was to model the steam-to-diesel transition era, roughly the mid to late '50s. This was, and currently is, the layout's period. The concept behind the layout is to simulate (with liberties forced by scale, technology and available space) the facilities and operations of three mutually interdependent railroads within a hun-

dred-mile radius.

From its humble beginnings, the club has successfully grown over the past 33 years. Membership fluctuates between 15 and 30 members, averaging around 21 for the past ten years. The club has been described as a "working man's" club comprised of individuals from almost every walk of life. It is this diversity that has enabled the organization to build the club with the modeling result visitors observe. When one first enters the clubroom, they are greeted with the urban yards of both Philadelphia and Reading. As they



An SV 4-8-2 Mountain makes its way past the hobo camp near the Lehigh & New England crossover.



10

Gibraltar Tower occupies the foreground as a passing C&O F unit in run 8, claws at the rails to coax 6,000 tons of coal.



11

The industrial town of Perkiomen hosts B&O units on point of an SV priority manifest. The roar of the train can barely be heard over the whine of Anthracite Coal Company's "breaker."



12

Numerous SV hoppers are staged for loading at Anthracite Coal Company's breaker facility. Frackville Quarry can be seen looming in the background.



13

Perkiomen Siding. An SV 2-8-2 Mike powers a priority perishables train en route to a milk delivery in Reading, PA.



14

East End of Perkiomen Junction. SV tracks are in the foreground, and CC&N tracks are just above them. CC&N bridge crews apply a coat of paint in an effort to catch up on years of deferred maintenance. The truss bridge is the handiwork of the late Paul Jenson. Built in the '60s, the bridge is scratchbuilt entirely from strips of heavy paper. The top section lifts off for easier access to the trackwork.



15 Overlook Station on the CC&N Main. Overlook Station is another fine example of numerous scratchbuilt structures featured on the layout. A feast for the eyes, these structures were built during an era when the numerous kits we have available today did not exist. Club members constantly labor to preserve all of these priceless gems.



16 Jerry's Rod Shop is a favorite hangout for Lorane Motorheads, Greasers and Debs. The 1927 Ford Model T hotrod was built from a Jordan kit. A DPM kit was the starting point for the garage. To the right is the highly detailed storefront and interior of Theresa's Fashions.



17 A Reading Baldwin Switcher makes it's way over the Reifton Trestle in Reifton, PA. This structure was entirely scratchbuilt in 1968.

proceed, they view the cityscapes of Mt. Penn and Conshohocken. The tenement housing, warehouses, street scenes, parks, road construction and even a carnival greet the visitor's gaze with detail and a close approximation of city life. As the visitor continues, the landscape slowly blends into suburbia. The railroad passes by stations, businesses, highway crossings and tributaries flowing into the tranquil Schuylkill River. Eventually, the visitor winds their way to the mountains of Pennsylvania. The rural characteristics are well represented as a "time warp" slowly encompasses the visitor into a bygone display of mountain railroading.

The club welcomes visitors and new members openly, provided it is on Tuesday nights. Since 1988, the club was organized as a 501c7 non-profit corporation. Special tours have been held for local organizations, historic groups, Boy and Cub Scouts and others. The club tries to promote the hobby and the interests in railroads to any group or individual upon request.

Every third Sunday of the month is operations. Operations are done via a card system and utilize a central dispatcher, in a separate room, to yardmasters and operators, all done through radio headsets or by a telephone system. One operating session can last the afternoon and sometimes carries over to the next month.

The Schuylkill Valley holds their annual public open house on the weekend after Thanksgiving, the first weekend in December and the first three weekends in January. Many of the visitors are regulars and rarely leave without seeing something new. The club can be contacted at (610) 935-1126 or kim_c58@netzero.net. Thanks to all the club members who made this possible. **I**

I would like to thank Dave Paden for his concept of the fictional history of the SV. Dave is no longer with us, and I incorporate his ideas as a tribute to his childlike enthusiasm, imagination and his love of trains. You are missed.
Ron Natale



18

Lorane Steel & Fabrication Company. Lorane Steel is a major lineside industry serviced by the SV. The entire town of Lorane was built during 2004, making it ready for viewing during the club's holiday open house event.

