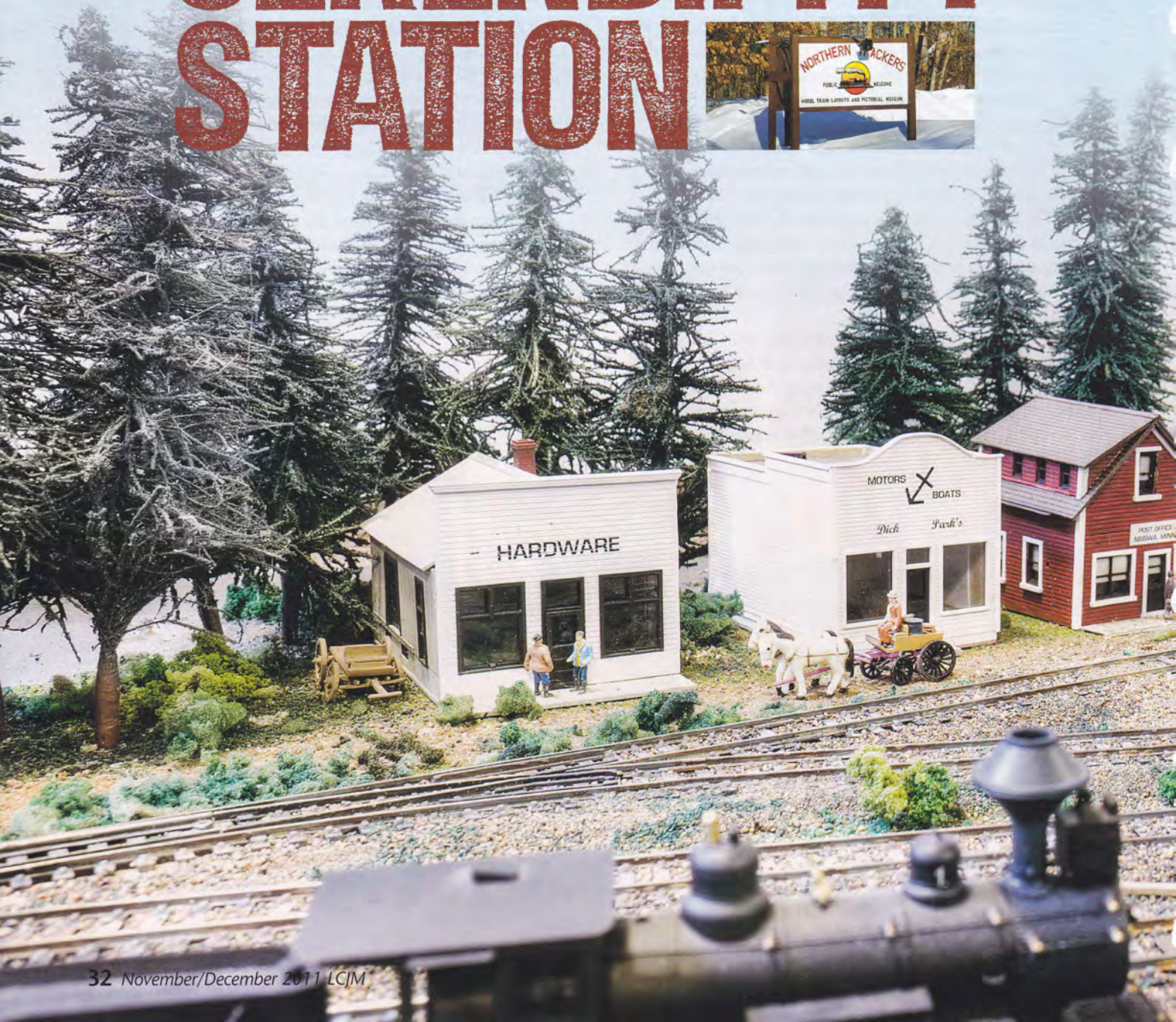




Kenton Mines

SERENDIPITY STATION



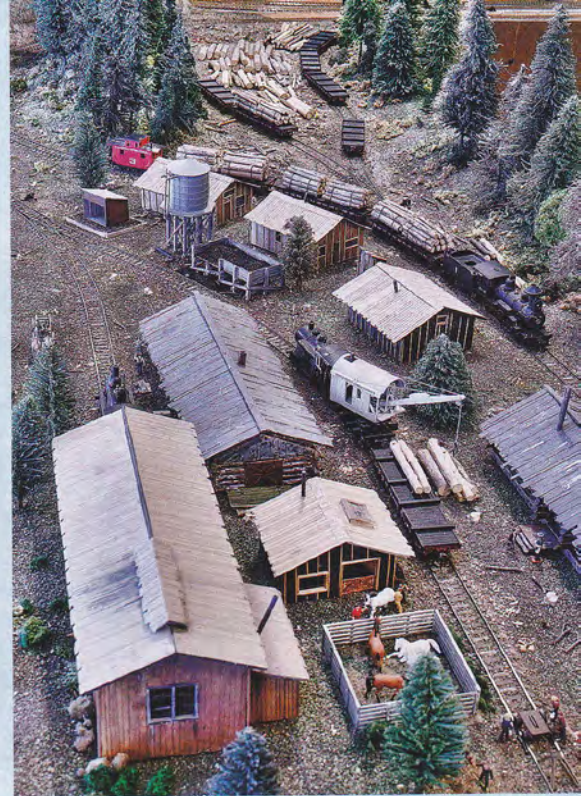
By Tenlee Lund | Photography by Rick Hammer

Just like Santa's elves, a group of men—and one remarkable woman—have created a wonderland in Crosslake. When you step through the door of the Northern Minnesota Railroad Heritage Association, “Home of the Northern Trackers,” you enter the fantastic world of model trains.

“We were in the right place at the right time,” explains Dennis Olson, president, of the group's evolution. It began in 2006 when Darlene Blazina wanted to start a railroad club. She posted notices in hobby shops and other locations around Crosslake. Her inspiration triggered a series of serendipitous events, including windfall donations. Those donations, coupled with months and years of work, have created a world sure to bring out the child in all of us.

It's a museum, a learning center, a studio, and, most of all, a place for fun. This is a playland for all ages. The group has hosted children's birthday parties, seniors' tour buses, and everything in between. They've become a destination for Kinship Partners and a workshop for scouts working on merit badges.

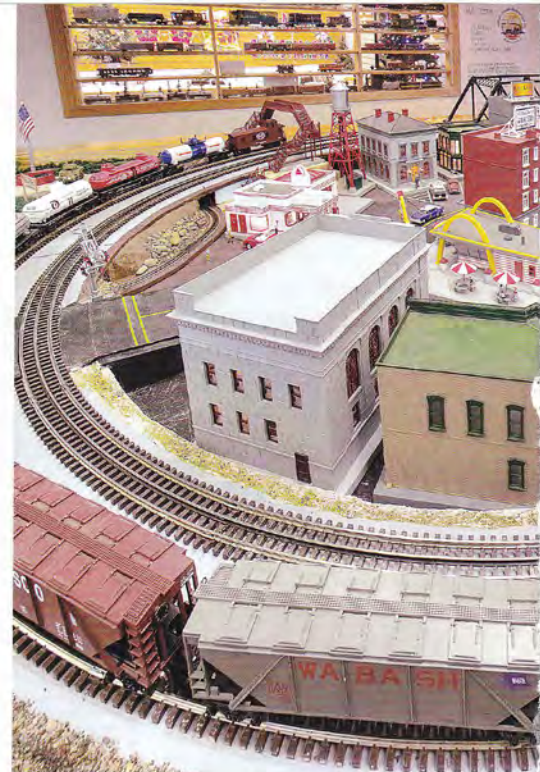
Olson laughs when he says, “We've got mothers who tell their children on the drive up from the Twin Cities, ‘If you don't behave in the back seat we're not going to stop at the train museum.’ And it works. They are little angels all the way up here.”



Nary Logging Company



Downtown Nisswa



Realistic details abound.

This place is a labor of love and the ultimate hobby room for its members. They've invested countless hours constructing the layouts, which are still deemed works-in-progress. But the goal always involves fun. "Our members bring in their trains and run them on the layouts," says Joe Hampl. "That's part of the fun of being a member."

The children's room has a layout specially designed to keep the trains from going


off the table. Here children can run the trains round and round to their hearts' content. There is also a display comparing the train scales side-by-side, so you can actually see the difference between trains scaled as N, O, HO, G, and Z.


The O scale room across the hall houses a layout built and wired by Don Bennett, and designed to replicate the 1940s and '50s, which Bennett describes as "the sweet spot in


the history of railroads because we had both steam engines and diesel engines on the tracks at the same time." Here visitors can push specially wired buttons to make things happen on the layout—like fueling a 1957 Chevy or activating a witch and ghost in a *Psycho*-styled house. This room is also louder than the others, as trains chug, horns toot, bells ring—and visitors pull the cord on the train whistle on the wall.


But the association's crown jewel greets visitors when they first come through the building's front door. An incredible HO layout fills the room, recreating the region between Brainerd and Walker around 1910, the era of logging and mining camps. With precise attention to detail, guided by photographs from area historical societies that adorn the walls, association members created a realistic landscape that includes the Wigwam Hotel, forerunner of the Train Bell Resort in Merrifield, and pickle barrels in Pequot Lakes. Water and coal towers are strategically placed along the tracks, since locomotives back then needed to refuel every fifty miles or so, and there's a working turntable (instead of a roundhouse) in Brainerd. Bridges over the tracks are blackened, as they would have been, by the smoke of locomotives passing underneath them.


The layout was designed with strict attention to detail and an effort to make it as authentic as possible. The rocks and dirt lin-

Z Scale
 3/4 inch in height

N Scale
 1 inch in height

HO Scale
 2 inches in height

O Scale
 4 inches in height

G Scale
 8 inches in height

MODEL TRAIN SCALE COMPARISON CHART



Replication of the 1940s and '50s.

ing the Ironton mine pit actually came from there. The tiny railroad ties are tinted gray because, according to Bennett, in 1910, prior to the use of creosote, ties weathered gray. And the members diligently test all the switches and sidings to ensure the entire layout functions as a railroad.

A visit to “Northern Trackers” will take you back to a pivotal time in the development of Lake Country. It will also introduce you to a group of men—and one remarkable

woman—who would delight in introducing you to their world of model trains. Stop by and see what you can discover. 📍

Editor’s Note: The November/ December 1997 issue of LCJ highlighted Darlene Blazina’s equestrian talents.

Web Extras ▶

Become a Master Model Railroader. Visit LakeCountryJournal.com



For more information, or to plan your visit:

Admission: Free, although a goodwill offering is requested

Location: 35170 County Road 3, Crosslake, MN 56442

Winter Hours: Saturdays, 10 a.m.–2 p.m., Nov.–March; for groups, call for appointments.

Phone: 218.692.1900

Website: www.nmrha.net

For membership information, check the website or talk with any of the current members.

The Northern Minnesota Railroad Heritage Association is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.