Moonlight Madness

Or Why and How I Built a Light Valence

by Charles Fisher

I guess you could blame Sacramento. Until the NMRA conference in the state capital I had never given much thought to a moonlit landscape but the clever planners responsible for the convention must have known I would be "easy pickens" and had arranged some clinics devoted to the topic. And if that wasn't enough the California State Railroad Museum even had a working model railroad with lighting that transitioned from full daylight to full moon.

"What does this have to do with running trains?" you ask. Well, nothing really but it simply looks terrific and visitors love the show as buildings, signs and streetlamps come to life all over your layout. Bye the way, once you start adding lights there is no going back, it sort of becomes addicting but it is so much fun.

As soon as I returned from Sacramento I started planning how to add moonlight to my HO railroad. Unlike our east coast and Midwest brethren my situation is typical southern California, ain't no basement so the layout had to be in the garage. My wife who strongly supports the hobby was not keen about giving up a room in the house for a model railroad and we all know that "a happy wife = a happy life" so the garage it was.

Fortunately, we have a three car garage so the third stall became my railroad space. Because the garage had built in cabinets on both sides that we sorely needed to keep I built an island type table top layout 5'2" wide and 11'5" long. It has a removable module that is 4'6" long by 12"wide that attaches at one corner and adds about 18' of additional yard tracks and makes a huge difference when operating multiple trains.

The ceiling section above the third stall in the garage is vaulted and the layout is lit by two standard 48" shoplight fixtures that hang one behind the other about 2 feet apart or ten feet end to end. I have found that the four bulbs provided adequate lighting. My valence design framed in the two hanging shoplights and on the inside of the valence I strung two blue rope lights that look great and simulate a bright moonlit night.

Obviously, the design of your layout will determine the type of valence you create but here's how I did mine and you can modify to suit your particular need. I purchased three pieces of wood 1. 3/8" X4'X8' plywood finished on both sides. 2. 1"X2"X48" and 3. 1/8" X4'X8' white coated hardboard.

My friend who lives three blocks away has a table saw AND nail guns (what a difference a nail gun makes) so he and I ripped the plywood. We cut 2 4" X 8' and 2 4" X 40" strips to make the 11' 4" side frames. 2 4"X 30" strips for the end plates. Three spacers 30 3/4" X 4". Two splice plates for the side frames 6"X4". Four

gussets for the top corners that are 5" long on each side. We cut all the wood before assembly, which was amazingly quick using the small nail gun. Use the 1"X2" for corner bracing and under the spacers for additional strength. I found 4" sections were adequate. The 30 ¾ spacers were placed evenly across the length of the valence and again three were entirely adequate.

The interior of the frame was painted bright gloss white and the exterior the same color as my fascia sort of a Santa Fe olive drab. The frame was hung with the shop lights in place squarely in the framework. This took careful measurement so take your time. You want the hardboard to lay just barely above the shoplights so you may have to adjust the height by a link or two to get this right as you proceed.

I then carefully measured each section where the hardboard would fit and made the cuts with my sabre saw. The end sections were the easiest, just cut the corners for the gussets and drill a hole to accommodate the chain holding the shop light. The center sections re- quired using a hole cutter so I could pull the shoplight plug through to the outlet above the entire assembly. I used a handheld staple gun to attach the whiteboard and as long as you had it lined up correctly there was no problem with staples sticking out. I camouflaged the circular holes I had cut by using small square sections of the white hardboard. Start by drilling a hole in the middle large enough to accommodate the cord (not the plug) and then using your saw just cut a narrow slot to the hole and place this white side down over the circular hole and no one will notice.

The last step was to attach two strands of blue rope lights to the inside of this valence run the cord through the top up to the outlet and now I have a wonderful moonlit setting.

Oh, I also had to light up my buildings, streets and installed some Miller animated roof signs.