

**Tribute to Oliver E. Callanen, my Dad,<sup>1</sup>**  
who inspired my boyhood interest in toy trains  
with a train table model railroad,

(History references on Lionel & American Flyer trains are included.)

(This document was prepared by Steve Callanen, Oliver's oldest son, primarily for family members interested in the origin of Pop-Pa Steve's life-long interest in toy trains.)

The saga of my 72-year old train table is prefixed with Oliver's previously documented<sup>2</sup> work constructing toys for me in the 1946-48 time frame.

“While living in Rochester, NY, Oliver lovingly demonstrated his creativity and resourcefulness constructing from scraps of wood, mostly scavenged from throw-away grocery store shipping crates, toys for his 5-year old son. These toys saw hundreds of hours of use for years to come by both me and my younger brother, Tom. In addition to constructing toy trucks, Oliver also built a wooden replica of the family's Tappan gas stove for my sister Shirley. The black and white replica stove possessed three hinged doors and make-believe burners and control knobs.”



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<sup>1</sup> August 4, 1910 to January 7, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> “No Man's Land to La Jolla on Henderson Motorcycles, Oliver Callanen and Harry Shank's 1936 Cross Country Adventure on 1930 Excelsior Streamline Model KJ Henderson Motorcycles plus Their Other Life-Time Achievements,” Compiled by Stephen E. Callanen, February 2018, ISBN 978-1-64255-585-1, Library of Congress Control Number: 2018901978, Page 146.

## Photos of toys Oliver made in Rochester, NY, 1946-48

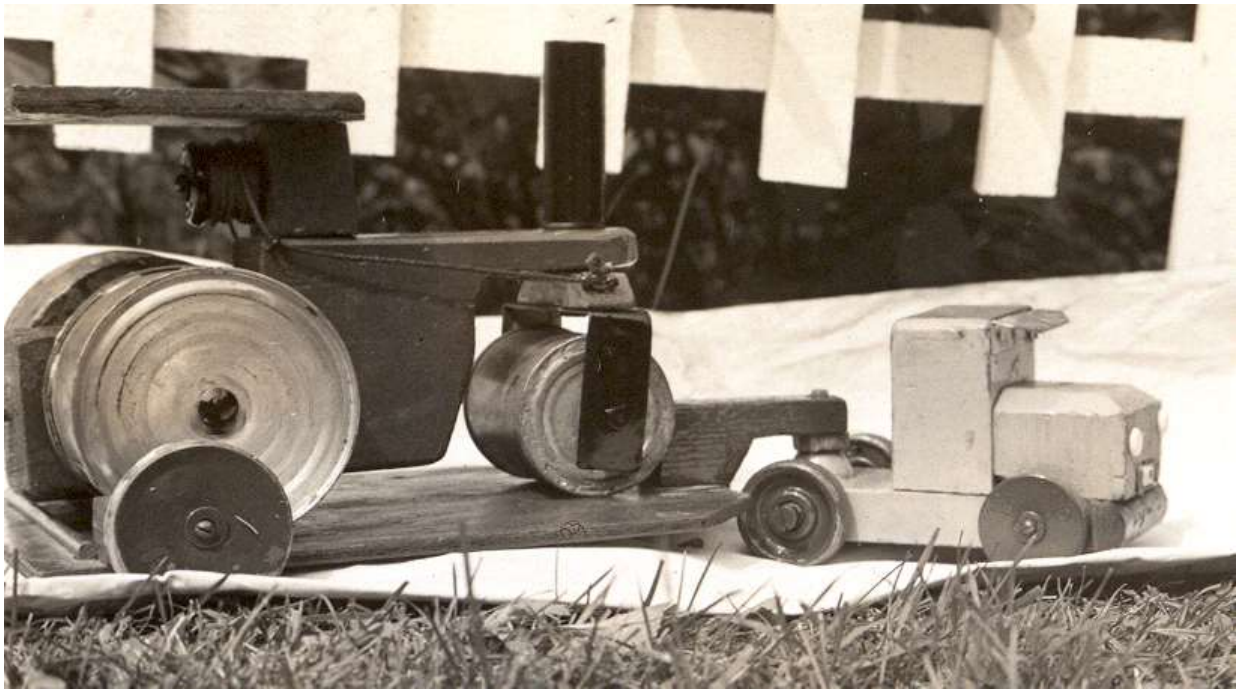
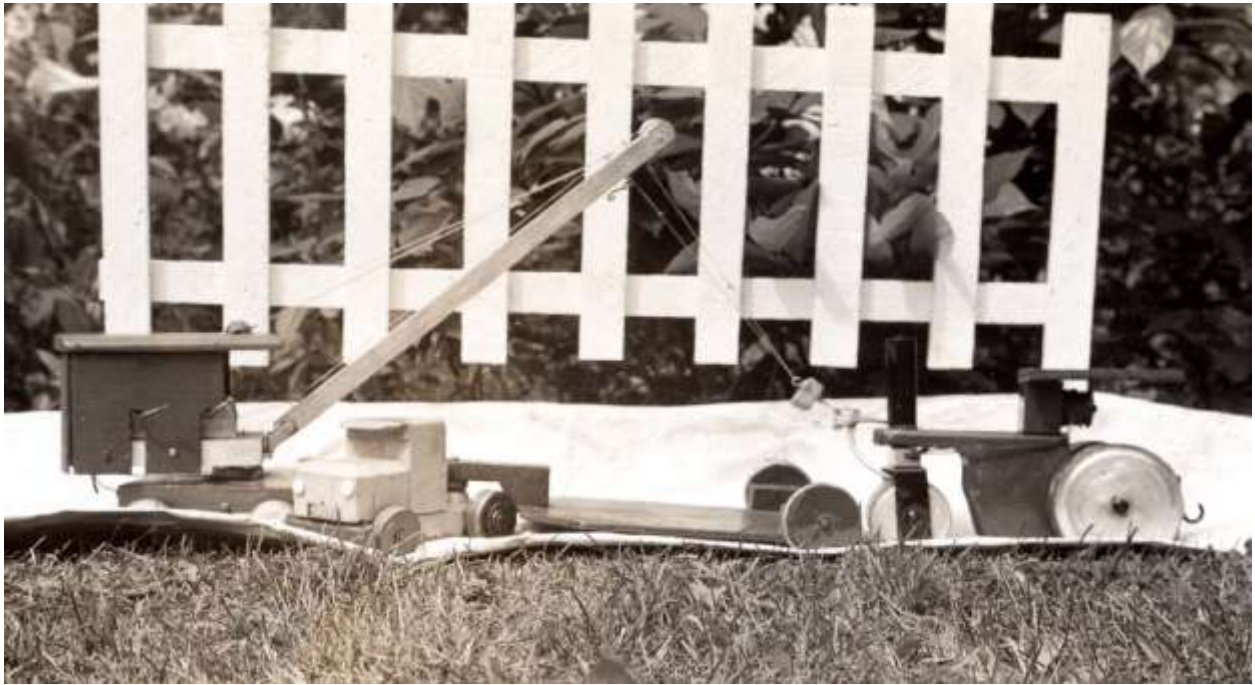
The following additional photos of Oliver's wooden toys are included as a means of better detailing his clever creativity.



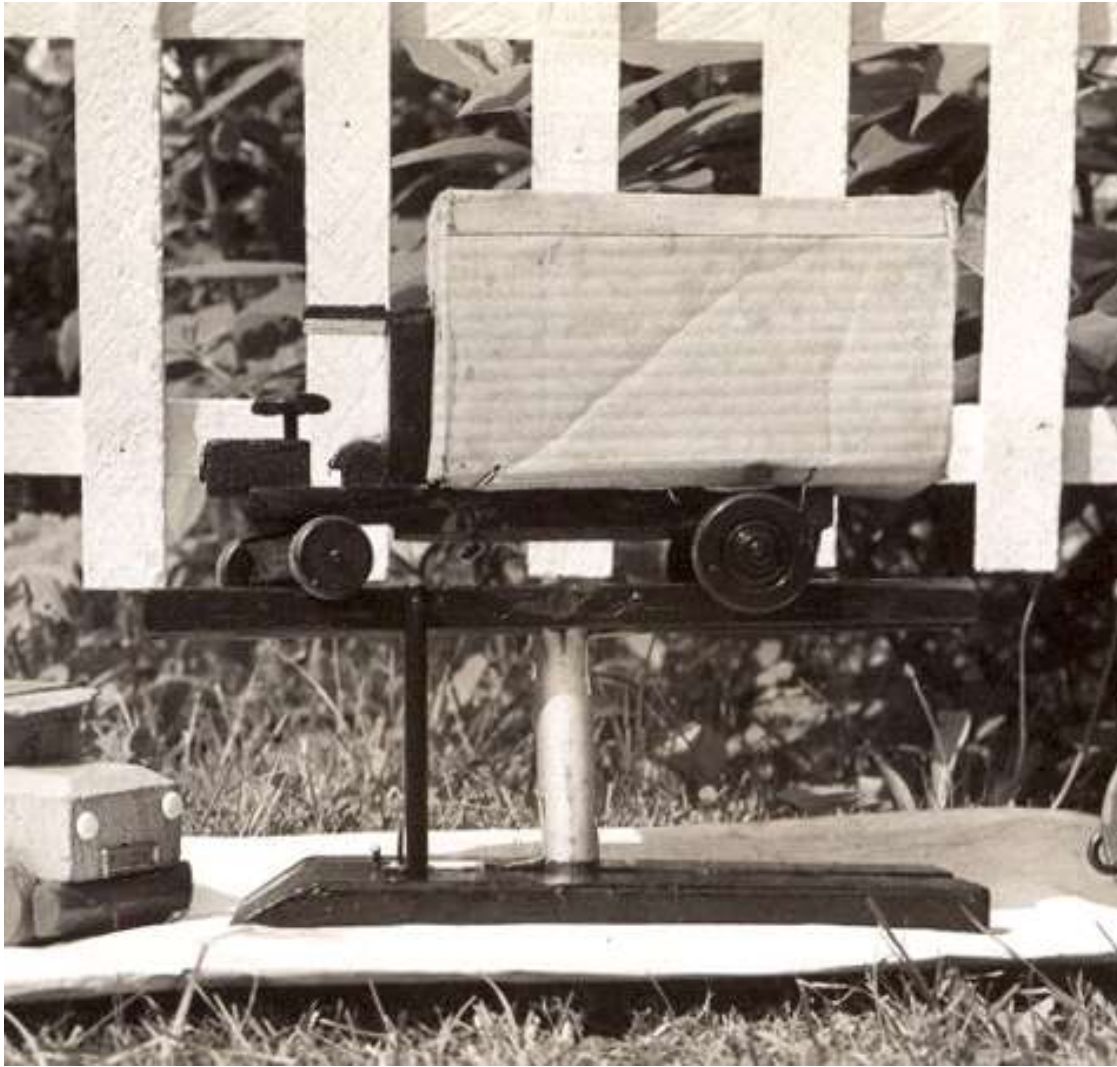
Roller skate wheels were used on the cab.







The tin can wheels on the steam roller were filled with Plaster of Paris to provide weight.



“By the time our family moved to Falls Church, VA, in 1956, my younger brother Tom and I had out-grown playing with the toy trucks. Oliver, wanting to have his creations used and enjoyed, drove into the Fairfax County country-side one day and generously gave all these wonderful toys to a poor family he spotted that had young boys playing in the yard.”



Oliver & Steve, 1953, Cream Street, Hyde Park, NY.

In the early 1950s the Callanen family lived in an old farm house on Cream Street in Hyde Park, NY. My mechanical engineer father, Oliver E. Callanen, constructed a 4-ft. by 8-ft. train table, covered with green roofing paper, on which a simple O-27 layout was configured using two pairs of Lionel switches. The table was located in a small room on the back side of the house adjacent to the family dining room. Not surprising, my smart Mom soon identified a much better use for this valuable first floor area. Therefore, Dad moved the train table into the basement and extended it with an old door at the end of the original table, as shown in the following photo of 13-year old me running trains in 1954.



The above photo shows the control panel box that Dad constructed, which featured toggle switches for controlling power to different “block” sections of track. A train can be seen coming down the ramp on the far side of the table from the elevated upper loop of track. On the side of the ramp can be faintly seen my hand-painted simulated gray block wall, which still exists.



In addition to constructing the train table and control box, in the early 1950s Dad fabricated a 45-degree O-27-crossover track and two electro-magnet uncoupler tracks. These tracks were used on the layout for many years, before similar good quality items became commercially available at a reasonable price.

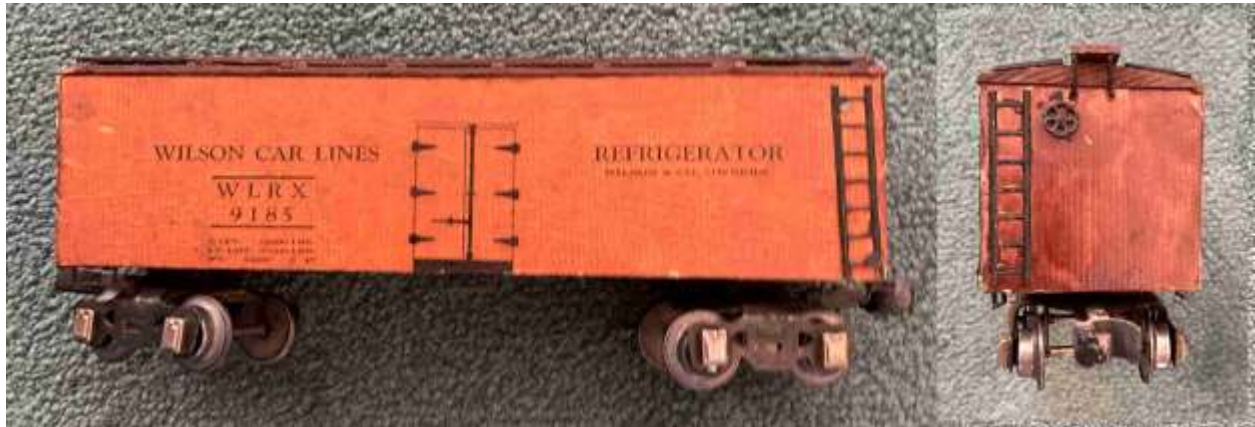


The following photos are of simple balsa wood kits, which Dad purchased for me to assemble in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. He installed the trucks to which he attached white-metal dummy couplers. Dad found the trucks on Canal Street in New York City during a business trip. This hopper car is identical in size to Lionel's 8.5-inch long series of Postwar hopper cars.



Steve proudly displaying Hopper Car in 1953  
(Photo by Grandmother Helen Mary Eveland-Callanen)





On the above refrigerator car, Dad installed American Flyer O-gauge trucks, which have noticeably smaller diameter wheels than the Lionel trucks on the above hopper car & the coke cars below.

In 1955, using a simple design featured in a model railroad magazine, I constructed the following two pictured coke cars. One of Dad's most clever designs is the knuckle couplers he fashioned from ribbons of flat steel (approx. 0.05-inch thick). His couplers perfectly connected to all the standard commercial Lionel knuckle couplers.



After constructing the coke cars, I decided to make my old, 1936-39, 259E Lionel steam locomotive look more like a switch engine by painting it black & fabricating the pictured switch-engine style tender from a block of wood, which was mounted on the base of the original tender. Vermiculite was used to simulate coal. Dad attached the Lionel knuckle coupler. This engine was a 1950's gift from my Mother's 1929 Freeport, NY, high school football star classmate Raymond (Dubey) Hansen.





Below is the last train car that I built. It was constructed in 1958, during my junior year of high school. It is a scratch built car identical to Lionel's Post War, heavy-weight "Madison" coach cars, which were produced between 1946 & 1950 with the Pennsylvania Railroad tuscan red color. Detailed plans with dimensions were obtained from the popular *Model Railroader* magazine. I always loved these realistic looking, unaffordable at the time, coaches.





Following is one of two street lamps, which Dad fabricated utilizing malleable small diameter lead tubing as posts.



Not shown here is the clever extremely simple means Dad devised for enabling Lionel's, No. 1121, O-27 remote control swithes to be manually operated without impeding their full automatic capability.

Dad recognized that my Lionel steam locomotive (1666) would slow down when the whistle in the tender was activated. He solved this problem by removing the whistle from the tender and suspending it with a piece of rubber under the table, where it was powered by a dedicated circuit with a voltage that produced the best sound. The whistle then could be blown during any steam engine operation without influencing the speed of the train. Children's ears are unable to identify the location of the whistle.

In September 1956 Dad had to make a job change to a company (Melpar) located in the Washington, DC, suburb of Falls Church, VA. Unfortunately, our ranch style 298 Riley Street, house lacked a basement for locating my treasured Lionel train table. My creative mechanical engineer Dad solved the problem by building a rigid, strong & relatively light-weight frame from boards, (measuring 7 1/2 inches x 3/4 inch, turned vertically on their edges), which rested on two saw horses & supported the original train table. The resulting table, the approximate length and width of a full size automobile, measured 14-ft. 4-in. x 4-ft., & could be hoisted, when not in use, up under the garage rafters - high enough to clear the luggage rack on top of the family's '56 Plymouth station wagon, by means of two hand-crafted block and tackle assemblies. The heavy control panel box, which contained the transformers, was unplugged from the table whenever it was raised.

I enjoyed modifying & enhancing the train layout; however, the garage was unheated, which diminished the fun of working on the table during winter months. In high school my attention became focused on running on the school's track team and dating a special someone. I discussed with very few classmates my interest in toy trains. I didn't think mature high school kids would have an interest in a subject, which I figured was intended to be a childhood fascination. Beteen 1959 & 1963, most of my spare time was spent polishing & maintaining my \$125.00 '49 Plymouth.

When I reached my high school senior year in 1959, the train table was raised, hooked to its four corner chains, which extended down from the rafters, and not lowered again for 11-years while I attended college, got married to my dear life-long soul mate, Sallie, was blessed with two

beautiful daughters, Eve & Wendy, lived in two Maryland apartment complexes and in 1970 purchased a house in Vienna, VA.

We had only been in our house a couple of months, when Dad called to say he was going to deliver the train table. He accomplished this feat by borrowing a boat trailer from a friend, backing it into his garage, lowering the train table onto the trailer, securing it with ropes & then pulling it to our 125 Casmar Street house in Vienna – a distance of approximately 5-miles. The table was turned on its side (all the tracks were securely screwed down), carried into the basement, and placed on the original two saw horses, where it remained for 27-years.

A few years after our son, Mark, was born in 1971 a major track upgrade was undertaken. All the O-27 curves were replaced with compatible O-34 curves, which had been manufactured by MARX in the early 1950s. It took several years of visiting local hobby shops to find the needed 23 pieces of old O-34 curved track. Also, two manual MARX O-34 switches & three GARGRAVES track sidings were added, which run the length of the table. These additions required increasing the table's length to 15-feet 4.5-inches & its width to 4-feet 11.5- inches.

In 1997, after I retired from the U.S. Navy's *David Taylor Model Basin* ship research & development facility in Carderock, MD, the table was moved intact in a moving van trailer to our current home in Ocean View, DE. The mover said it was "*the first time he had moved a railroad.*"

Over the years in Vienna & in Ocean View, I never had an interest in showing visitors the train table. It was not constructed with that purpose in mind & I always considered it to be a work in progress that didn't look very good. I ran trains when our grandsons came to visit, & I mistakenly assumed that they naturally would develop an interest in the trains. To my dismay, only one of my four grandsons seemed to exhibit an interest in running the trains. In retrospect, I regret not having spent time teaching my four granddaughters how to operate the trains when they were young.

I have sadly come to realize that trains are no longer a favorite toy of young boys. The colorful Lionel catalogues, which I drooled over each Christmas, are no longer widely distributed.

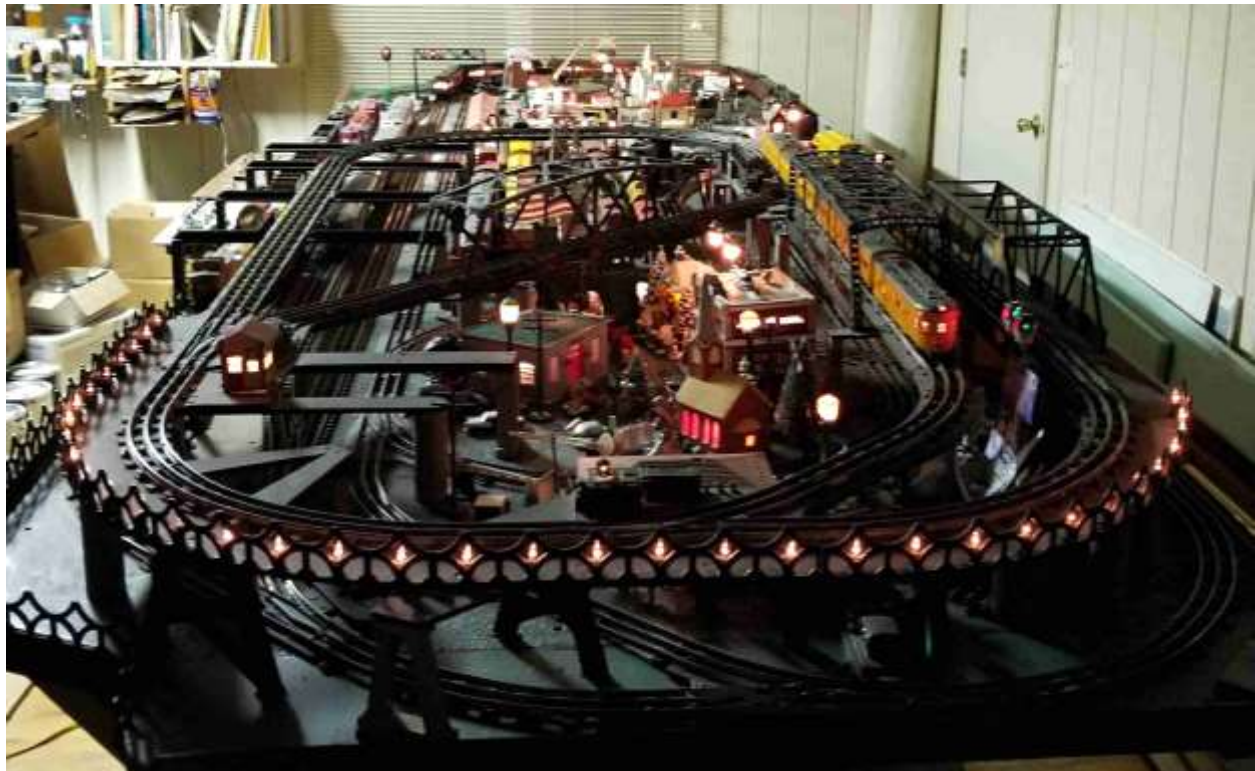
Since we moved to Delaware, seemingly never ending home maintenance chores, yard work, becoming an active Inland Bays environmentalist, serving time as a Sierra Club leader & attending to a



Rhodes-18 sail boat (which was sold last year), distracted me from devoting much time to upgrading the train table's operation & scenery.

Several years ago my son, Mark, suggested that my grandsons might have more interest in the trains if I enhanced the layout's appearance. With that in mind & to "have some fun," about 3-years ago I again started working on the train table with emphasis on creating two villages, putting lights in all the buildings, adding numerous people figures & automobiles, which had been squirmed away in boxes since the move from Vienna.

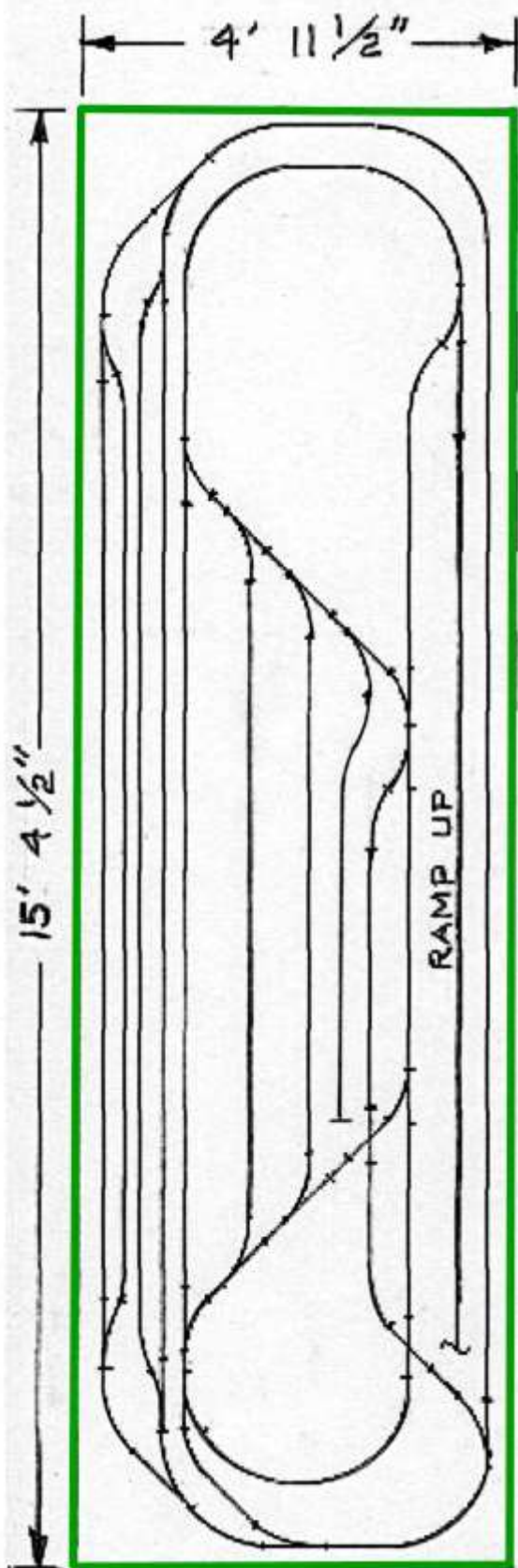
According to a 2021 article in the *Washington Post Magazine*,<sup>3</sup> the passion for collecting is a "kind of an unnatural gene defect," which if medically accurate explains my years of toy train collecting.



All of the train related items in this document were kindly photographed by my daughter, Eve, & my wife, Sallie. I'm appreciative of their efforts & happy to give them credit.

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<sup>3</sup> "His (Jorge Flores) collection of miniatures from around the world fills 16 rooms. And he's not done yet," By Eddie Dean, *Washington Post Magazine*, October 18, 2021.



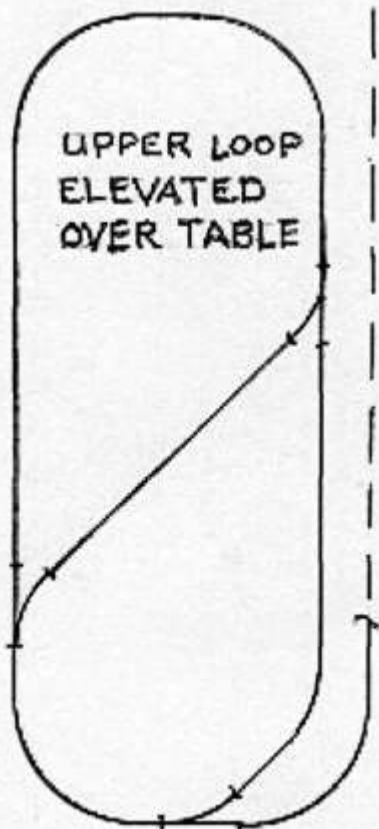
↑ SOUTH

CALLANEN-LIONEL  
TRAIN LAYOUT  
(NOT TO SCALE)

3- TRAINS  
CAN RUN  
SIMULTANEOUSLY.  
BACKING NOT  
REQUIRED TO  
REVERSE  
DIRECTION.

17 MAY '06

RAMP UP





















A skating pond in the snow.



The train is crossing a bridge constructed from my childhood Erector Set.











The Lionel 259E stamped metal locomotive with an automatic reversing E-unit is an excellent running engine with wide rim wheels, which earned it the Callanen nickname “Old Faithful.” The headlight lamp illuminates the front green marker lights & creates the red glow in the smoke stack. These features are distinctive, especially when running at night. It is acknowledged that the 259E has a certain “toy train look charm,” which later steamers, modeled after real prototypes, do not possess. “*A Collector’s Guide & History to Lionel Trains, Volume I: Prewar O Gauge*,” by Tom McComas & James Tuohy, states that “these early steamers were strictly products of the designers’ imagination.”



What has made my recent efforts especially satisfying is the rather unique opportunity to improve upon the same railroad Dad had initiated in the 1950s. I continue to feel his supportive presence & still enjoy the creative aspect of modifying & improving my imaginary train table world. After reaching my 81<sup>st</sup> birthday, I must admit, even if it sounds kooky, that playing with my trains somehow magically transports me back in time to my 1950's boyhood, which is a good mechanism for helping to escape current world realities.



Joining the local *Delaware SeaSide Railroad Club* has provided motivation by introducing me to friendly geezers with similar life-long toy train layout building interests and by enabling me to help Club members run trains for young children at the Georgetown, Delaware, Library's annual Christmas season open house.



Yes, the soda cars are from my collection.

Photos by *SeaSide Railroad Club* member David A. Lawrence, MD, December 16, 2021.



<http://www.delawareseasiderailroadclub.com/>



Visits to Craig's *SeaSide Hobbies* store in nearby Ocean View, where he says "*every day is like Christmas*," has stimulated my interests & provided opportunities for purchases.

<http://www.seasidehobbies.com/>

Insights into the toy train hobby are provided in the following historic Lionel & American Flyer video clips. (Hit the "Skip Ads" buttons.) I never aspired to acquire operating accessories, like the one's shown in the videos. I didn't believe that many of them were realistic & 1950s costs were a factor in any possible train related acquisitions.

### **Inside Lionel's train factory, Part 1**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxHz5PfA\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxHz5PfA_s)

### **Inside Lionel's train factory, Part 2**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thofUr3ifKg>

### **Lionel's New York City Showroom Layout, Part 1**

Lionel used this large layout prior to Christmas to demonstrate & market all its new products.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMAu9aPJNaI>

### **Lionel's New York City Showroom Layout, Part 2**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH\\_ouR0nZBQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iH_ouR0nZBQ)

### **The Lionel Corporation's comprehensive history** - from Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel\\_Corporation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel_Corporation)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel,\\_LLC](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lionel,_LLC)

### **Joshua Lionel Cowen** - from Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua\\_Lionel\\_Cowen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_Lionel_Cowen)

### **The Story of The A. C. Gilbert Company**

A few years ago I stumbled upon the following historic YouTube video. What makes it exceptional is not only the accurate telling of Alfred Carlton Gilbert's amazing life, but the fact that it provides a comprehensive look into the world of toys that young boys, my age, experienced growing up after WWII. I submit that A. C. Gilbert Company toys influenced many boys who decided to pursue careers in engineering or science. Assembling "Erector Set" designs developed not only creativity, but the manual skills required to assemble metal parts with small bolts & nuts. A. C. Gilbert's "American Flyer" electric train products aggressively competed with

Lionel. That stiff competition undoubtedly was responsible for many of the novel high-quality train related items each company produced, which still operate today and bring pleasure to old geezers, such as me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryokI-gS9mM>

To let my children & grandchildren know that I am not alone in my love for toy trains, I have included the following April 17, 2020, e-mail message from John Hodges, President of the *Delaware SeaSide Railroad Club*, & avid collector of American Flyer trains.

***“When I Run My Trains”***

***When I run my trains, I can smell that unique aroma that comes from smoke oil and carbon which mixes and intoxicates my brain. It is the same smell that I witnessed as a six year old, watching our Marx steamer run around the Christmas Tree in 1952.***

***When I run my Trains, I can recall the clickety-clack of the metal wheels on the locomotive and cars running over the joints in the track that my Mom and Dad could not quite get connected completely. I remember my Dad saying that real trains make the same noise!***

***When I run my Trains, I recall the excitement of Christmas or even birthdays when I was likely to get another piece of rolling stock or even an accessory for my American Flyer trains that I received in 1954.***

***When I run my Trains, I can now look back and realize how huge a Christmas gift a \$28.00 Train Set would be in 1954, even if they did buy it on a Lay-Away plan. What a lucky kid I was.***

***When I run my Trains, and I now have many, many Trains to run, I wonder if today’s kids experience the same joy, the same connection to have a toy/hobby that spans a childhood into their teens, and then re-ignites some 50 years later into something approaching...Yes, obsession.***

***John Hodges  
Delaware SeaSide Railroad Club***

## **Family toy train interest history**

My Dad's older brother, Gardner Aloysius Callanen, Jr.,<sup>4</sup> is pictured working on a scale O-Gauge locomotive. He worked with scale O-gauge enthusiasts to construct a layout in the Utica New York Train Station. He and his son have gifted me with several rolling stock items, which I proudly statically display. Scale O-gauge equipment can not be operated with Lionel O-27 track & couplers.



1950's Photo

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<sup>4</sup> February 11, 1907 to February 4, 1994.



In the early 1990s I was surprised to learn that my Mother's 80-year old cousin, Rudolph (Tod) Frederick Schaefer, Jr.,<sup>5</sup> had an interest in old toy trains. On the occasion of one of Tod's visits with my parents in Falls Church, I rode with him to one of the big national *Train Collectors Association* (TCA) train shows in York, PA. He told me that as an adult he had done nothing with his trains. He related how, after retiring as a naval architect from one of the big oil companies, he was walking down a street in the Connecticut town where he lived & passed a hobby shop with old Standard-Gauge toy trains in the window. He recognized them as identical to his boyhood pre World War II trains, which he thought might still be in his attic. He went home & found what was left of his train set. He then set out to find & purchase the missing rolling stock. He told me that at that time he felt self-conscious inquiring about toy trains, until he went to one of the York train shows - attended by thousands of train enthusiasts. Relating to that experience, I'll never forget Tod saying, "I felt like I had come out of the closet."

I frequently enjoyed phone conversations with Tod about his trains during the final years of his life.

Now that this April 21, 2022, toy train history document has been completed, I can now focus on jobs that, not surprisingly, are considered much more important by Sallie.

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<sup>5</sup> October 22, 1912 to November 14, 2000.