

Changing the Layout

I began my current layout in 1997, basing it on the Surf Line at San Diego. The choice of San Diego was a good one, as it allowed me to build an interesting switching-based layout, something uncommon. I could have freight and passenger switching/operations and lots of interesting industries. I chose this location after looking at Oceanside and Escondido and felt it would better fit my desires at the time. I could also build the layout without expensive and complex signaling.

In 2005, I decided to rebuild the layout, install DCC and sound. In doing so, I would change my era from 1940-41 to 1952. This required me to divest my large collection of steam locomotives and convert to Diesels. I also took the opportunity to “fix” several areas of track and locations and improve the benchwork and staging. Operating the 1952 version has been quite fun and I’ve been able to install scenery in a few areas and build some interesting structures. I have been vexed by the notion of having to build many more structures for San Diego, some of them quite large. I began to think about whether I might have selected a project “too large.”

With these thoughts and some other ideas floating around, I became intrigued with the possibility of building a urban-themed shelf layout upstairs in my study. In 2008, I built “The Patch,” based on the industrial switching around Los Angeles’ First Street yard. This layout was also a test bed for several aesthetic-based ideas, such as cantilevered construction, clean fascia, track lighting and simplification of track, controls and operation. The completion of this layout (save for buildings and scenery) has allowed me to consider other options for the basement layout.

With my urban wishes fulfilled, I arrived at the conclusion that I’d like to build a citrus grove-themed layout. While I’ve enjoyed building and operating my San Diego centered layout—and rebuilding it as well—I want to do something that has more running, has a higher scenery-to-track and structure ratio, as well as being more representative of the Santa Fe in California. The citrus theme was one I started with long ago and one I’ve been associated with for most of my model railroading “career.”

I completed several studies of what would fit in my basement. I looked at both the Second District, centered on the Upland-Claremont area and the Fourth District, centered on Santa Ana-Orange. I settled on the latter as I could then use all of the freight and passenger equipment I presently had and was familiar with the operations—knowing they would provide an interesting framework.

Before this area became heavily developed in the late 1960s, it was largely rural, given over to citrus groves, field crops and open areas. To the north and east were several small mountain ranges which would provide natural backdrop subjects. Santa Ana, Orange and Anaheim were relatively small towns, centered on citrus packing and related industry,

with the usual bulk oil, machinery, agricultural implements and some military-related items.

The design takes advantage of the current basement structure, though it requires the construction of outer walls (not present) and the changing of the inner walls. The benchwork along the walls will be rebuilt to incorporate a maximum two-foot wide shelf, most will be either 18 or 12 inches. The relocated lounge space will remain roughly the same in terms of available area. Lighting is yet to be determined, but I may look into fluorescent tubes, using Chroma 50s for the correct daylight effect. Currently I use compact fluorescent bulbs and am satisfied with them.

The layout will be fully signaled with Centralize Traffic Control. There will be a small, closet-sized dispatcher's office, with a replica US&S CTC machine. Signals will be the same as on the prototype, whether dwarf, mast or cantilevered. The key to making this happen is getting the CTC panel built and wired. Jay Miller, who has done this already, has offered to make that happen. The number of signals required is less than two dozen, half of those are dwarfs. Turnouts, other than those at OS control points, will be hand-thrown with ones that are electrically locked operated in a prototypical manner. The goal is simplify switch controls and use. Signals will use three-color surface-mounted LEDs to provide a prototypically correct color and brightness.

The circa 1952 operation is virtually the same as the current one, with eight San Diegans, four RDCs, two local mail trains, four SB-SD freights (two through and two locals), two LA-SD freights (locals), a Santa Ana local switcher serving Orange, Anaheim, Venta and Fruit Pick-ups in season. The trade-off from modeling the north end of the Surf Line versus the south is the lack of passenger switching, but gaining other locals and extras.

The design centers on approximately six miles of track around Santa Ana and Orange, with the Venta Spur. This layout has the two towns on the opposite outer walls, putting the Venta Spur on the center wall peninsula, which it shares with LA/SD staging. The mainline run for this design is approximately 130 feet. Running timetable eastward, the main appears at the Santa Ana River bridge near Orange. Tracks to/from San Bernardino, which is represented by separate staging in an alcove behind the wall, appear at the north end of Orange. The wye there is simulated. At Orange there are several citrus packing houses, plus Anaconda Wire, Western Cordage and a walnut house. Leaving Orange the tracks cross Santiago Creek on three through-girder bridges. The run between Orange and Santa Ana is on a narrow shelf, bordered by Lincoln Avenue which paralleled the main and orange groves on the other.

The next station is Santa Ana, where double track mainline begins. There are packing houses, county facilities, bulk oil, lumber, frozen juice, rock, food and furniture distribution warehouses. All trains stop here, and freights pick-up and set-out. A switcher is based at Santa Ana, with the attendant fuel and water facilities. Interchange with the SP occurs here, too. Double track continues timetable east of Santa Ana through Venta. At

this point, the Venta Spur leaves the main. The Venta Spur comes off the main under the stairs. On the spur are citrus packing houses and team tracks. There are no run-arounds, requiring the local to shove up the spur. The scenery is all citrus groves.

Los Angeles/San Diego staging is of a traverser-type, eliminating throat tracks. Departure signals above the tracks indicate when to leave and in what direction. There is a continuous-running connection under the stairs as well. This area also houses a workbench and storage cabinets. The separate San Bernardino staging can be viewed through an opening in the fascia beneath Orange to help determine when a train is properly stored and/or moving. This should eliminate the need for electronic detection.

Benchwork construction will be entirely with AB grade 7-layer plywood, cut and ripped for structural members. Design is of the box-grid type, with areas lowered as required for watercourses. Aesthetically, the layout will appear to “float” off the wall, being cantilevered with no visible knee-bracing. Brackets tied to the wall studs will prevent twisting and provide rigidity of the benchwork. The dark-colored fascia will be narrower than usual, about nine inches, and devoid of any clutter from boxes, labels, controls or shelving. Only town and place names, on small, discreet plaques and eight switch control plates will adorn the fascia. A small “waycar (caboose) desk” will be constructed in an alcove opposite the dispatcher. As all en-route paperwork will be done here (sorting waybills and writing switchlists), it will eliminate shelves and work-areas around the layout. This will also impart a greater “feel” for the work on a train. A hand-painted backdrop will be done, evoking a romantic view of Southern California. The walls underneath the layout will be a neutral warm gray color and the basement fully carpeted.

Work on the basement and the new layout will begin in May, following final operating sessions with visitors and regulars. The current layout will be totally dismantled and removed. The outer walls will then be constructed, wired, insulated and drywalled. Painting of the walls will follow, along with the backdrop and new lighting installed. Benchwork will then be constructed, tying together the previously-installed brackets. Trackwork will then begin, followed by wiring, controls and signals. Operations, sans scenery, is expected to begin sometime in 2010.