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*All Aboard
Skip Natoli's
Polar Express Layout*

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*Jim Barrett
Adds a Bridge
to His Trestle*

*Patrick Jean's
Door-Size
Switching Layout*

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A layout belonging to one of Santa's most devoted elves



Take a Christmas Eve journey on the Polar Express.

At Home with the Polar Express

Article and Photos by Skip Natoli

Everyone who knows me knows how much I love Christmas and Lionel trains. I have long been of the opinion that these trains are as much a part of Christmas as the Christmas tree itself. I have long been a fan of Christmas movies, too, and when a new Christmas movie, the animated musical fantasy *The Polar Express*, was released just before the holidays in November 2004, it instantly became one of my favorites.

That movie, as many or most reading this may know, is about a young boy who is at the age where he is questioning the existence of Santa Claus. On Christmas Eve his heart is telling him to believe, but his head is full of doubts. He falls asleep and experiences what appears to be an almost eerie dream.

The Polar Express, a passenger train headed by a huge steam locomotive, arrives on tracks running down the middle of his street. He is told by the conductor, whose voice role is played by Tom Hanks, his belief in Santa is going to depend on him getting on board. Reluctantly he climbs aboard for what turns out to be a magical and sometimes hair-raising trip to the North Pole.

The train, loaded with kids, travels over bridges, up and down steep roller-coaster-like hills, into tunnels, across frozen lakes, and finally across a maze of viaducts to reach its North Pole destination.

The Polar Express really captures the active imagination of this young boy's struggle with believing. The haunting adventure that he and two of the other children he befriends encounter at the North Pole is not your classic sugar-and-spice Santa Claus experience. It comes across as even being a little on the dark side, but it accurately reflects what is taking place in the boy's subconscious mind. The dream was so real that when the boy wakes up in the morning, startled by reality, he finds under the tree a bell from Santa's sleigh that he was given and then lost in the dream. He then knows he will believe forever.

The movie has since become a Christmas classic and was nominated for three Academy Awards, including Best Original Song for "Believe."



The conductor explains the importance of this special run.



This train negotiates terrain that stimulates the imagination and emotions.



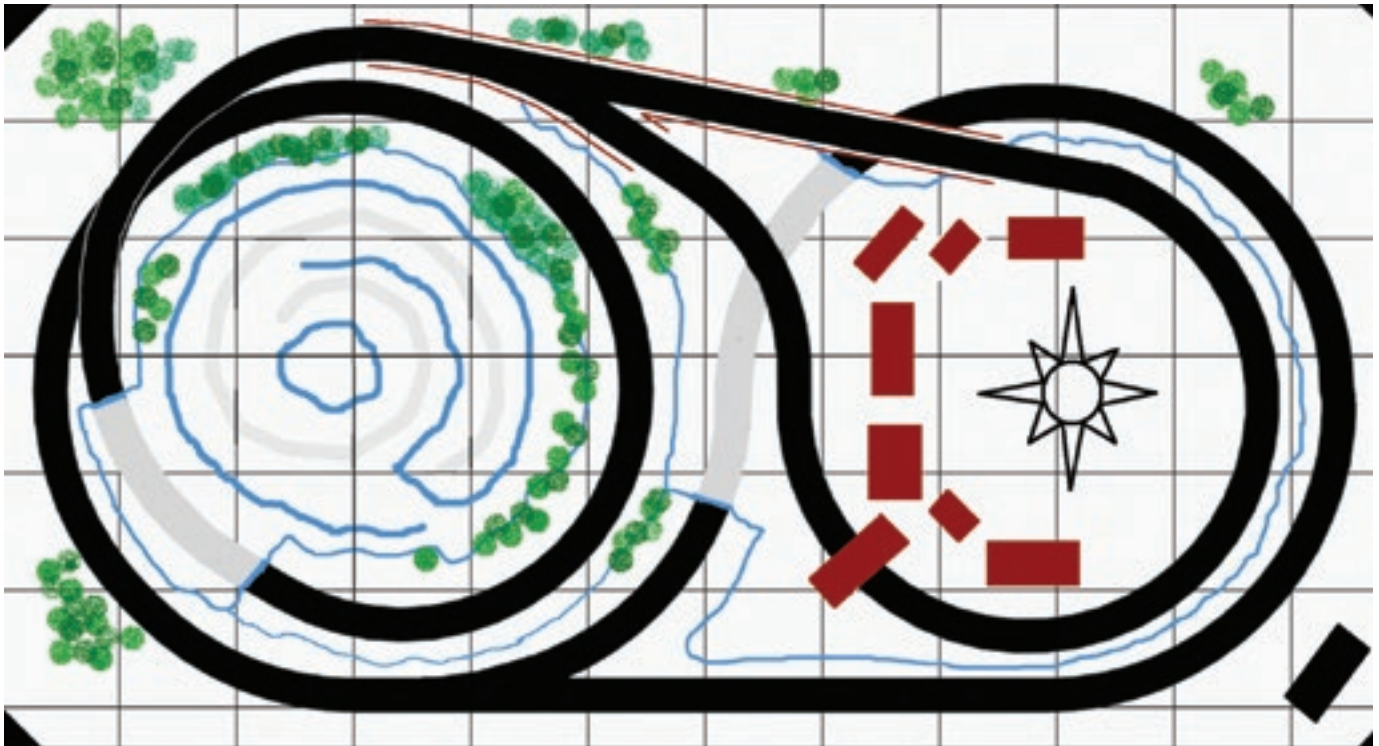
The entire journey takes place through a snow-covered landscape.



Two of the film's leading characters, Hero Boy and Hero Girl, are on the observation car platform.



Hero Boy meets Hobo atop the fast-moving train.



Polar Express layout track diagram



The engine crew has to replace a burned-out headlight lamp without losing time on the long run to the North Pole.



The big Berk winds its way into the magical world of Santa's North Pole industrial complex.

The Polar Express film was released in November, and that December a Polar Express train set was released by Lionel. Quantities were limited and demand was high for this set that Christmas season. Dealers had waiting lists, and many retailers and their customers were disappointed not to have received their sets that Christmas. The Lionel Polar Express train set has since become one of the best-selling train sets ever produced by Lionel.

The locomotive portrayed in the movie is an animated version of a real locomotive that still exists today and which just happened to have been numbered 1225 (25th day of the 12th month—Christmas Day). Pere Marquette 2-8-4 Berkshire No. 1225 was the prototype. The movie does a great job capturing the power of this magnificent machine by using recordings made of the actual locomotive under steam.

From all of this came the idea for a train layout: one that would combine some beautifully frigid scenery; the splendor of Santa's North Pole; and the

dark, haunting, mysterious adventures in between. I knew I wanted a Polar Express layout, and my plan was to build one for my living room picture window for the 2017 holiday season. I constructed three 3' x 5' tables that would form a 5' x 9' layout and started to plan my own Polar Express layout.

My good friend Roger Farkash of TW Trainworx developed a plan for this Polar Express theme layout that follows the story line from the young boy's home in Northern Michigan, through the arctic woods, spiraling over mountains, dipping into caribou-populated valleys, and on to the ultimate destination at the North Pole where the elves are readying Santa's sleigh for his Christmas Eve journey.

I contacted Roger and discussed the idea of taking his Polar Express track plan, which he had previously incorporated into larger layouts, and making it into a freestanding layout. I had room in my picture window to fit the 5' x 9' layout I envisioned and asked if he could come up

with a plan to fit those dimensions. He came back to me with a proposal for an approximately 6' x 12' layout that would not only accommodate the traditional Lionel Polar Express set but would also accommodate the full 1:48 O scale version of the Lionel Polar Express locomotive and cars first cataloged by Lionel in 2008. I had bought one of these scale Pere Marquette Berkshires with the Polar Express tender along with the scale passenger cars that same year. Although I have long been an avid fan of the traditional-size Polar Express set, I realized that the Lionel Legacy O scale Berkshires are the only way to truly capture the awesome power of the Berkshire locomotive in the movie. Their sound is incredible! So I abandoned the idea of a Polar Express layout in the living room window and looked to the basement for space to accommodate a somewhat larger and grander layout.

At the end of this past February, I gave Roger the go-ahead to build my Polar Express layout.



Caribou crossing the track have moved to the side so the train can proceed.



The train at the top of the mountain is an HO scale model, effectively making the large formation look even more imposing.



The Polar Express arrives at its destination as elves prepare Santa's sleigh for its long trip.



Other holiday theme trains also operate on the layout.



Here's another example of other theme-appropriate trains that see running time on the layout.



All-in-all, it's a magical journey to a magical destination aboard a magical train.

I hoped the layout might be done in time for the 2017 holiday season. My layout was on the work floor in April, and by early May I was given a tentative delivery date of June 26.

No one creates mountains like Roger and his crew. His renditions of the Polar Express Mountain with train tracks spiraling to the top are absolutely jaw dropping. Just to add more interest, he even installed a static display HO Polar Express set that appears to be climbing the mountain. Icicles hanging from the tunnel portals and giant evergreens below the tree line will make you believe you're in the movie.

The buildings on the layout closely resemble the North Pole buildings in the movie. I learned that those buildings were fashioned after the Pullman factory buildings in Chicago. We added Lionel street lamps to match the warm glow of those on the narrow streets. In order to try and capture the mystery and darkness of the journey, I installed blue flood lights over the mountain area to provide a convincing moonlight effect.


Roger, Mike Reagan also of Trainworx, and I spent the next two days assembling the layout and touching up the scenery at the seams. We had a truly enjoyable time working, talking, and dining.

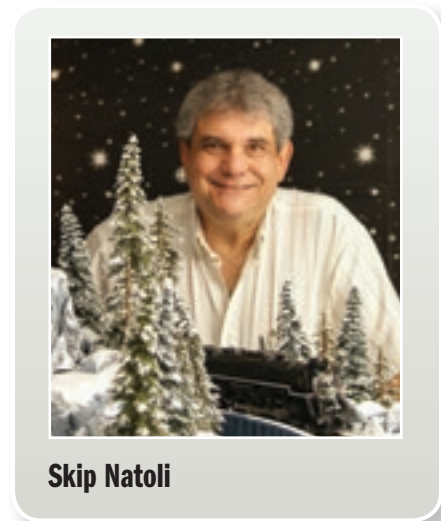
As seen in the track diagram, the layout is a single run of Lionel FastTrack with reversing loops at both ends of the journey. The train disappears from view and reappears where you may not expect it. This is all part of the mysterious journey. The train travels to the North Pole and back as it passes over the same track and through the same vignettes in opposite directions.

We incorporated the Lionel Legacy control system powered by a 180-watt brick along with a CW-80 transformer to control accessory lights. With the Legacy controller I can run my Legacy-equipped locomotives and also run conventional and LionChief locomotives.

Over the years since the film's release, many hobbyists have created their own versions of a Polar Express layout. They all are wonderful because they were all inspired by fellow hobbyists who themselves believe in

the magical theme of the movie's story line. I enjoy seeing photos and watching videos of them all. As you can see in the photos presented here, this is more than just a train layout. It is truly a work of art.

I hope you have enjoyed this visual tour of my Polar Express layout and I will just leave you with one word: BELIEVE! 



Skip Natoli



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THE NEW POLAR EXPRESS SET: The Magical Journey Continues

Article by Ed Boyle and Dave Siburn Photos by Richard Melvin



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The enduring magic of *The Polar Express* movie comes alive and renews itself with new and repeat audiences every Christmas season. The Lionel Polar Express O gauge train set, now in its thirteenth season, has been given a refreshed look on the outside for 2017 and technological improvements on the inside that make it more fun to run and more attractive to watch on seasonal layouts for its legion of fans (Photo 1).

The Polar Express Cars: Creating a New Look

For the past dozen years, the Polar Express cars with black roofs and the “Polar Express” words centered above the windows in gold looked like what is seen in Photo 2. The signature blue-

gray sides and ends with a red band framing the car windows evoked the look of the Polar Express for most people, but that did not satisfy Meegan Untereker, a fan of the movie who had just been appointed project manager for a new Polar Express set.

With the backing of Ryan Kunkle, director of production at Lionel, Meegan developed versions of the Polar Express cars that looked more like those the audiences had seen in the movie.

Photos 3 and 4 are comparison images that illustrate the differences between the new cars and the older models. The gold Polar Express signage on the cars has been moved below the window line, and the snow-covered roof now features the footprints of two of the characters appearing in the film. The window inserts have been attractively upgraded by adding light brown blinds across the window openings and using color for the figures in the windows (Photos 5 and 6). The overall effect gives depth and warmth to the inside of the cars. Since the Lionel Polar Express set is produced as part of a licensing agreement with Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., a notice is printed on the chassis of Polar Express passenger cars (Photo 7).

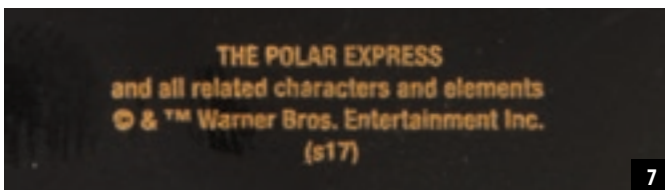
The Bell and the Locomotive

Two major elements of the new Polar Express set look the same: the iconic Polar Express Christmas Bell and the #1225 Polar Express 2-8-4 Berkshire (Photos 8 and 9).

The Polar Express Berk has the same die-cast heft and smooth performance as its immediate predecessor, and the sounds and announcements have not changed. But the latest #1225 Polar Express Berkshire has a new control



option that can greatly increase the fun quotient in operating the Polar Express set. In addition to using the LionChief Polar Express controller that comes with the set, Lionel has included a Bluetooth LionChief App (Photo 10). The new capability built into the locomotive is prominently featured on the Polar Express set packaging (Photo 11). The App lets the buyer use an iPhone or iPad to control the train. As can be seen in Photo 12, the complete Polar Express set box is printed in both English and French allowing one package to work in two different markets, giving the set and its magic a true international flavor.



Dave reports that based on his preliminary experience using the Polar Express App, and in seeing it used by both young and adult hobbyists, this is an easy-to-use and fun addition to the



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Polar Express operating experience. We will have more on the Bluetooth App in a future issue. In the meantime, we have posed the four action figures that come with the set on the snow-covered roof of the observation car to welcome you into the recently enhanced world of fun and adventure aboard the Polar Express (Photo 13).



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