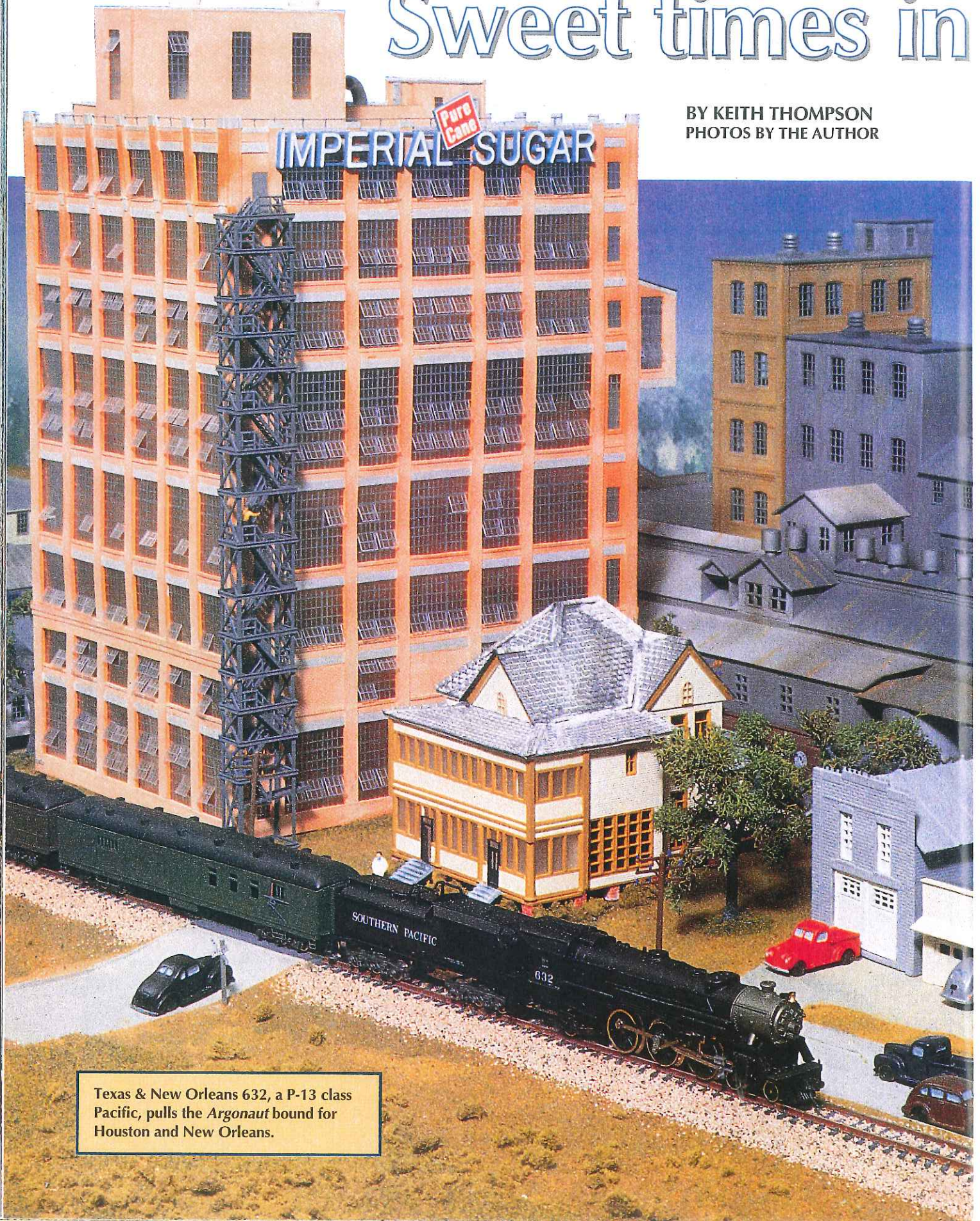


Sweet times in

BY KEITH THOMPSON
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



Texas & New Orleans 632, a P-13 class Pacific, pulls the *Argonaut* bound for Houston and New Orleans.

Sugar Land, Texas

This N scale town is actually three Ntrak modules in disguise

Mention Ntrak to most model railroaders and they'll envision 4-foot-long modules with three parallel main lines running along the front edge. This makes for exciting, crowd-pleasing display running, but unless you're modeling an Eastern railroad or a yard scene, the "three-track main" looks out of place for most other U. S. locations.

By combining three 4-foot long modules and picking a local prototype spot to model, Russell Straw and Danny Dodson have created a scene that breaks the modular mold. They've reproduced Sugar Land, Tex., as it looked in 1951 while maintaining Ntrak standards so the town will join with other modules built to the same standards.

A MODULAR PRIMER

If you've been to a model railroad show within the last 10 years you've probably seen modular layouts, especially in N scale. These displays consist of modules belonging to individuals and brought together to form large layouts, sometimes running trains several hundred cars long.

Each module is built to specific mechanical and electrical standards so it can be joined with others.

Ntrak is the standard used by most N scale modular model railroaders. It requires that two main lines and a branch line run along the front of each module. They can curve a little, but have to end up at the same place on the end of each module so they'll interface with their neighbors.

The only exception is when adjoining modules belong to the same person or group. Then the adjoining units can be thought of as one super module that will mate with others only at the outside ends. That allowed Russell and Danny the freedom to model Sugar Land with very few compromises. Their display transcends the limitations of modular railroading and pulls you into a fascinating chapter of rail history.

SUGAR LAND HISTORY

The real town of Sugar Land was built on what its name implies, specifically the pure cane sugar refined and marketed by the Imperial Sugar Co. Planted strategically



between Houston and San Antonio on the Southern Pacific's Sunset Route and at the end of a Missouri Pacific branch line, the town seemed like a natural for a joined group of Ntrak modules.

Russell usually models the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe in HO scale, but Danny talked him into building Sugar Land in N after they both had some prodding from mutual friend John Knox. John also helped some on the construction.

Danny and John are members of the Houston N'Crowd club that popularized Ntrak layouts in the area.

Living near Sugar Land also helped Russell with his decision to take on scratch-building the landmark Imperial Sugar Co. charcoal filter house and its entourage of support structures.

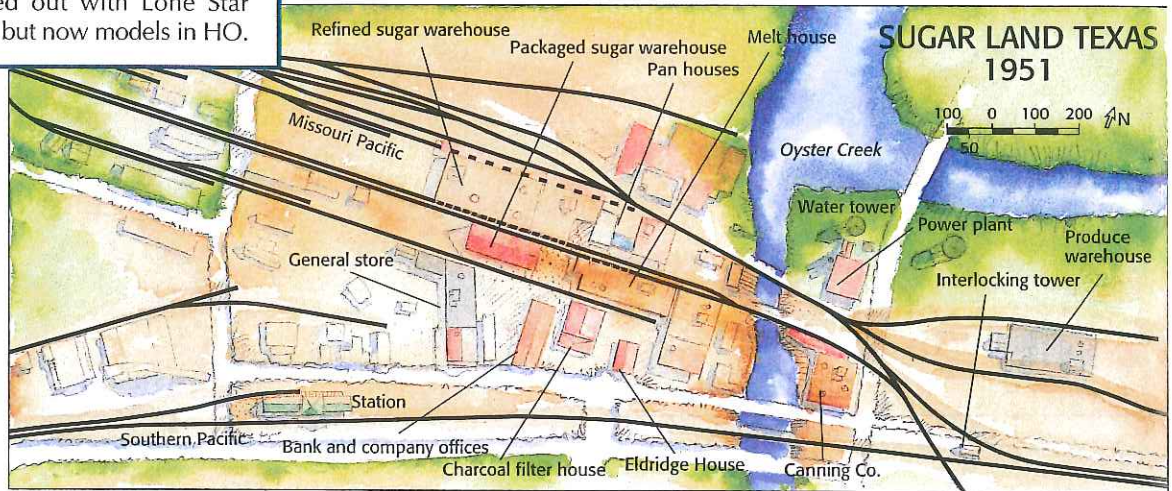
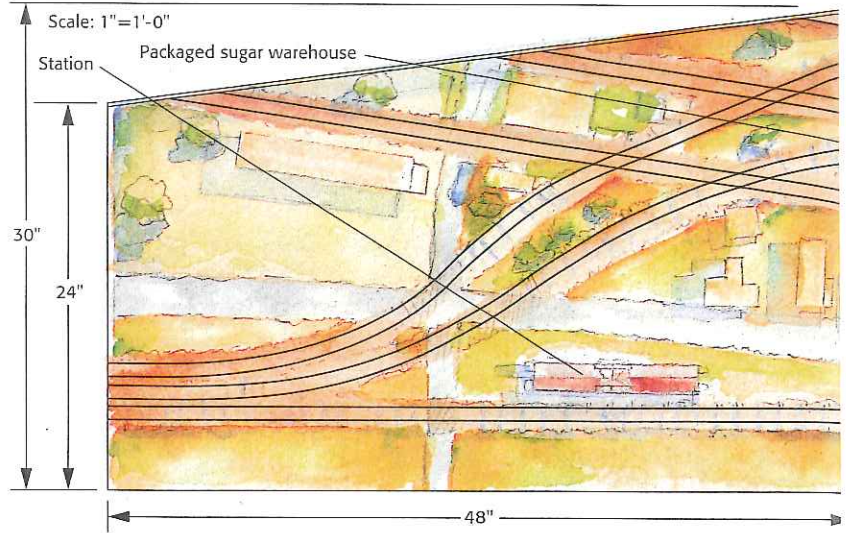
LAYING TRACKS

The track plan of the three Sugar Land modules shows the sheer size of the mill and how it makes the prairie town around it look small by comparison. Towering above its surroundings, the mill is a landmark in the flatlands of south Texas, making the modules a hit at local shows with model railroaders and the general public alike.

It's 8:20 AM and Southern Pacific's train no. 2, the *Sunset Limited*, is passing through town on its way into Houston. Meanwhile the Missouri Pacific switcher cools its heels waiting to get across the diamond.



MEET DANNY AND RUSSELL: Danny Dodson (left) is 41 and works as a computer systems analyst. He's been a model railroader for over 30 years and in N scale since 1972. Russell Straw, age 42, has been a model railroader since the 1960s. He started out with Lone Star OOO scale trains but now models in HO.



To get the two Ntrak main lines and the single branch line through the modules, Russell and Danny had to do some careful realigning of the tracks on both ends of town. Compare the prototype track layout with the model and you'll see the small compromises they made. However, other than bringing some new tracks to the edge of town, the track plan is close to the prototype.

While the real mill building still stands, the track arrangement in Sugar Land has changed over the years, and our modelers spent a lot of time on research at the town's library. There they found a book of photos of the sugar plant and surrounding town that helped a lot. A 1940 Sanborn fire insurance map also proved indispensable.

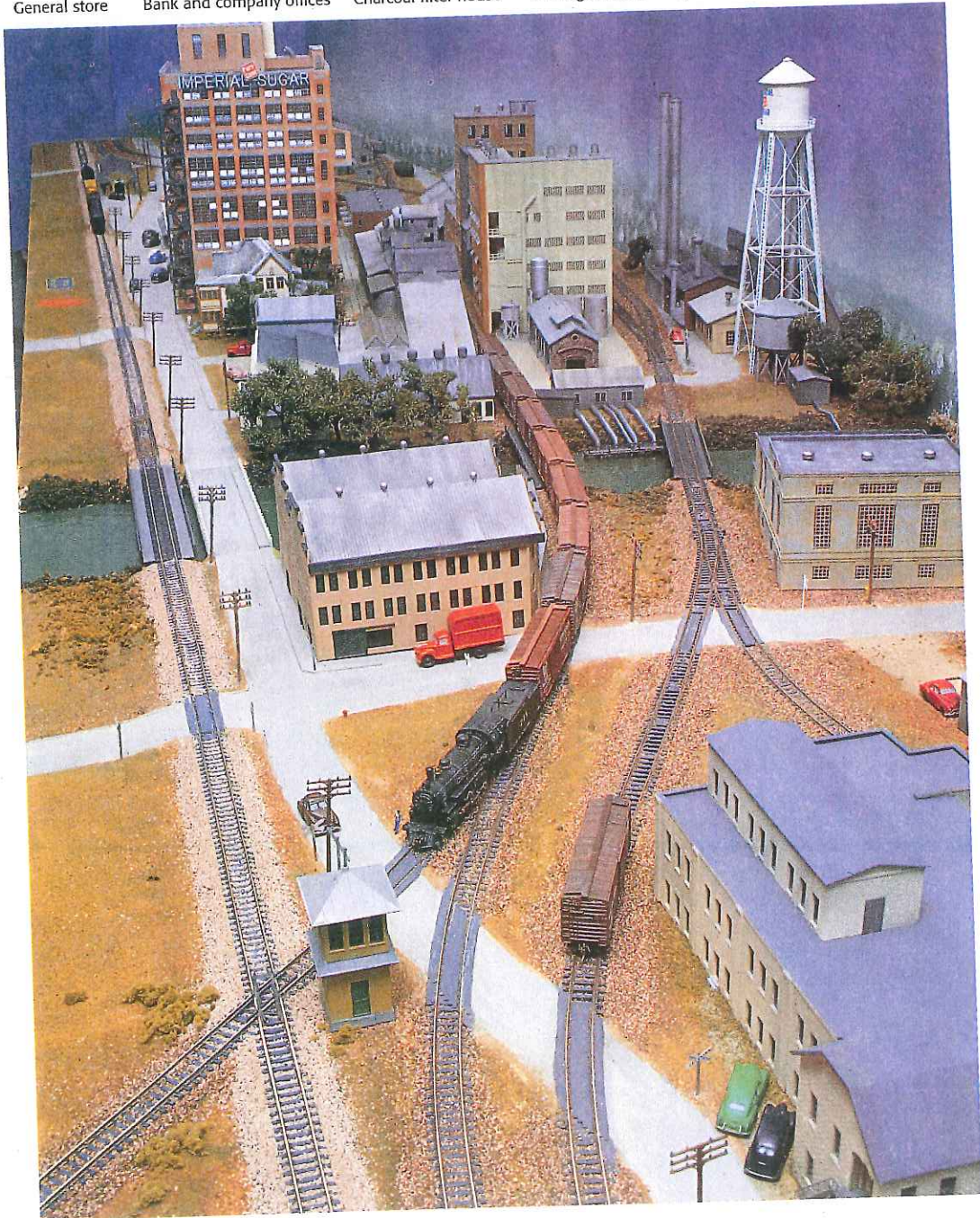
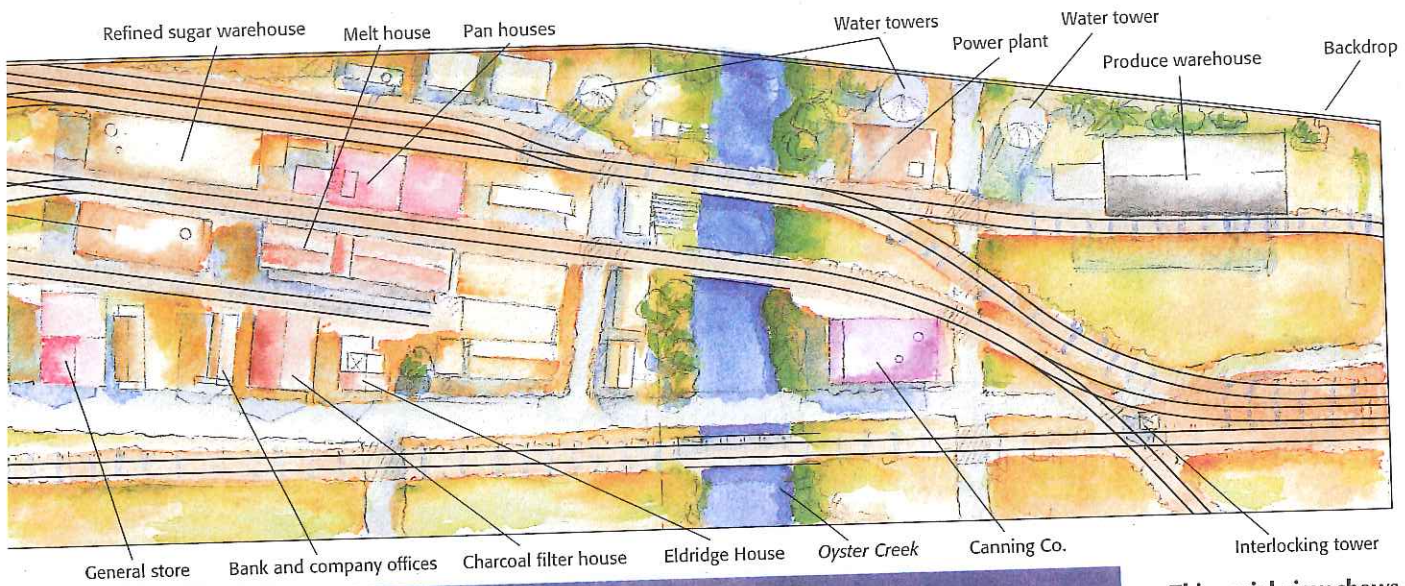
Originally they planned to represent the town with two 48" modules, but before long Russell and Danny realized another "4-footer" would be needed to do the scene justice and adhere to the Ntrak curve standards.

BUILDINGS AND SCENERY

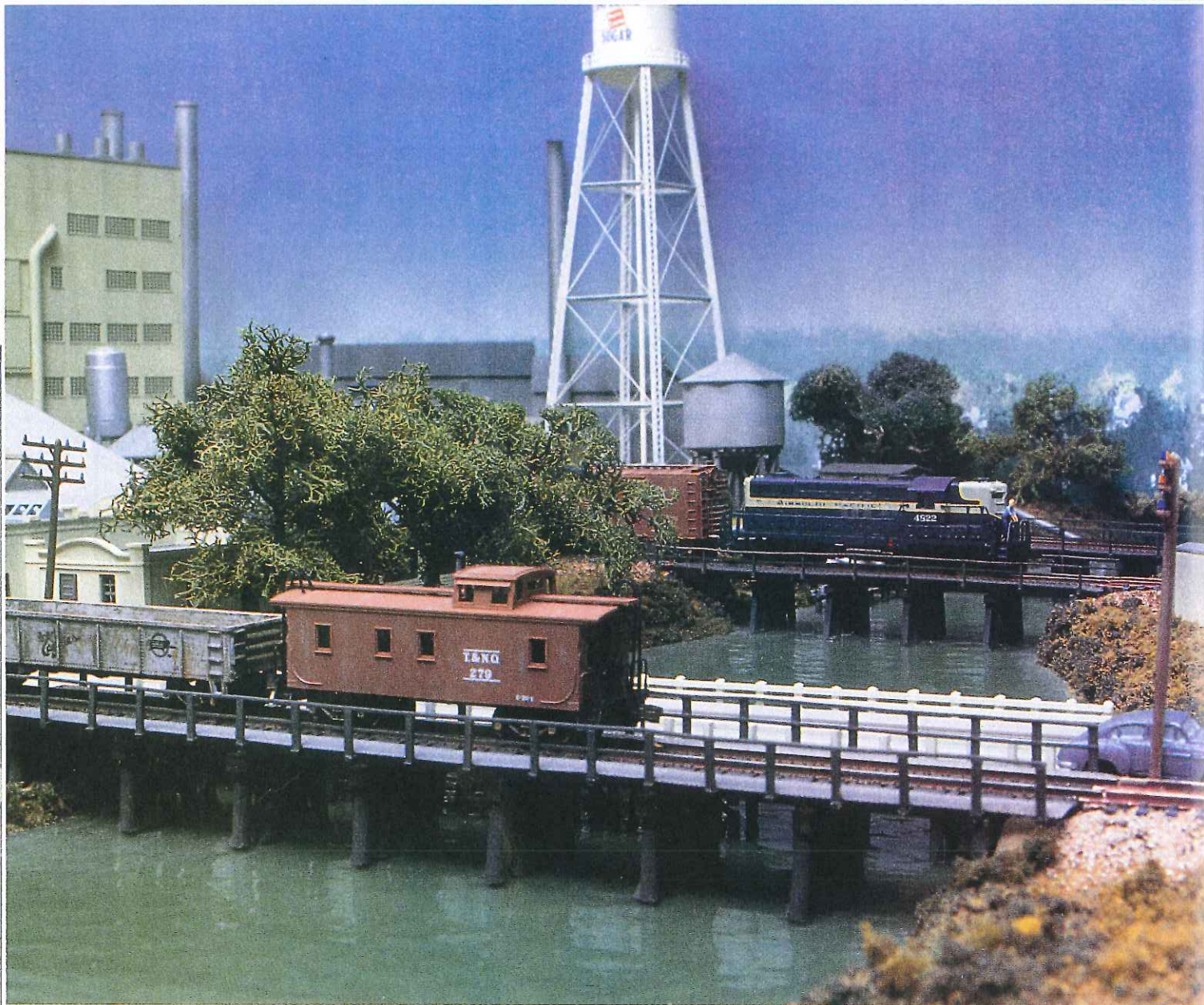
Perhaps the most impressive fact about the Sugar Land modules is the number of

THE LAYOUT AT A GLANCE

- Name:** Sugar Land, Tex.
- Scale:** N (1:160)
- Size:** 2'-6" x 12'-0"
- Prototype:** Southern Pacific and Missouri Pacific
- Period/era:** 1951
- Layout style:** Ntrak modules
- Layout height:** 42"
- Benchwork:** 1 x 4 frame
- Roadbed:** cork on 1/2" plywood
- Track:** Peco code 80 (main lines) and code 55
- Turnouts:** Peco medium and long-radius
- Curve radii:** minimum 36" main line, 18" branch line
- Grade:** 2 percent maximum
- Scenery:** spackling compound on plywood
- Backdrop:** removable plywood panels
- Control:** plug-compatible with any Ntrak control system



This aerial view shows International & Great Northern (I-GN) Ten-Wheeler no. 245 waiting for the diamond of the Southern Pacific crossing as it heads up the "MoP" local. The I-GN was a Missouri Pacific subsidiary that operated in this part of Texas.



A new "Geep" diesel is spotting cars at the melt house where bags of sugar are unloaded. Even though the GP18 shown here didn't arrive on the scene until 1959, we're going to use some modeler's license and let it go about its duties in 1951.

scratchbuilt buildings they contain, 27 at this writing. "More are coming," says Russell. The most impressive building has to be the dominating red-brick and glass charcoal filter house. Russell used clear acetate and Holgate and Reynolds brick material on a styrene frame for the walls. He then drew on the window mullions using a technical-drawing pen loaded with silver ink.

About 14 of the structures started life as commercial kits. They've either been kit-bashed or carefully painted and weathered to help hide their identities.

Another scenic highlight of Sugar Land is Oyster Creek with three railroad bridges over it. The surface of the stream is Plexiglas with spackling putty used for the creek banks.

OPERATION

Besides its interesting track arrangement, Russell liked Sugar Land for its vast variety of trains in the early 1950s. These varied

from mixed locals and long freights to crack streamlined passenger trains on the Southern Pacific. The SP was also host to Santa Fe passenger trains that used trackage rights over the line for a shorter route between Richmond and Houston.

The Missouri Pacific was the lesser of the two roads in town but it still offered an interesting range of motive power and cars in the early '50s. One day the "MoP" would assign a 2-8-0 to its train, and the next it might use a shiny blue-and-gray diesel like a GP7 or an RS-3.

THE FUTURE

It took Russell and Danny one year to build Sugar Land in N scale. That's pretty fast for a project this big, but with all that sugar in the air it's easy to get a little hyper. As for what they'll do next, Russell and Danny are looking at other suitable Texas towns to sink their collective sweet teeth into. *GMR*



A mixed local out of Houston, affectionately called "the Dinky" by town folks, slows for a stop at the Sugar Land depot. Passengers from Houston and beyond detrain and shoppers going to Richmond for the day get on.



Above: The workday is winding down as the MP crew does some switching. The Spanish-style SP station in the foreground is ready for its next passenger train.



Left: Santa Fe F7 A-B-B set no. 304 pulls the Texas Chief, train no. 15, on its way to Houston and Galveston from Chicago. Trackage rights over the SP shortened the train's running time to Houston.