

**Inventing a Proto-Freelanced Road:
The Great Lakes Eastern Railroad**
by Kevin Burkholder

With construction set to finally begin again on the 'new' Great Lakes Eastern Railroad in HO Scale, I've decided that the hardest part of the layout is already done.

Let me set the stage. When I was a young child growing up, my father would set up large S-scale American Flyer layouts in either the basement or attic, capturing my interest and often setting my imagination into motion. The layouts would be very simplistic with a simple plywood base with various Plasticville structures and animated industries with loaders and unloaders. I would get to operate some of these trains occasionally, however just standing and watching was enough to keep me involved and interested.

As the years passed, I entered Eastern Lebanon County Middle School, where I discovered a Model Railroad Club, hosted by Space Science teacher Greg Phillips. Time spent with 'Mr. Phillips' discussing trains and my extreme enthusiasm led to some railfan trips to various locations locally that would further stimulate my awareness of both model and prototype railroading. I was able to talk my father into 'subleasing' a portion of the second floor of our garage and I began construction of a Family Lines and Seaboard System layout. At the early age of fourteen, I began custom painting Family Lines and Seaboard System equipment, only to change my focus a couple of dozen times during my teenage years and even into my early 20s.

Then more than fifteen years ago I set out to create a layout based on my favorite roads of the time, the Burlington Northern, Canadian National, Soo Line and Chicago & North Western. Ironically after visiting the BN Hinckley Subdivision in Minnesota (between Minneapolis and Superior, WI), I discovered that all operated over the single route to access the Twin Ports of Duluth/Superior.

With that knowledge in hand, I felt confident that I could heavily research the line, area, trains and structures to adequately prototypically model the Hinckley. What I didn't realize at that time was that I was more of a perfectionist than I realized when it came to trying to portray the prototype.

I couldn't find structures that captured the feel and not a lot of plastic equipment was available for the roads I wanted to model. I have a lot of patience for kitbashing and scratchbuilding, but in the back of my mind, I had this voice telling me "people will say that's not the way it looked" or "they didn't do it that way". That's when I delved into Allen McClelland's Virginian & Ohio story and began thinking heavily about the whole freelanced approach. Tony Koester's Allegheny Midland was another inspiration that got the mental wheels in motion.

My first thoughts about a freelanced road led me to believe that the concept may be more difficult to achieve than some form of prototype, but research quickly dissolved a

lot of those misconceptions. Freelancing would allow me to establish my own route, equipment, operating practices, structures, etc. and nobody was going to be able to relate particulars. I was faced with several tribulations right off; mostly paint schemes, decals, and defining a believable route and operating scheme.

My interest in the Burlington Northern and Chicago & North Western waned a bit, however the Canadian National, Soo Line and now Canadian Pacific Railway still flourished in my thought process. With those roads fresh in my mind I put pen to paper and began devising a road that would somehow either coordinate operations with them or try to form some amalgamation to incorporate properties of all three. In the process of searching for a common theme, I realized that I had a hidden affection for two roads I was very familiar with from direct contact – Conrail and Norfolk Southern. Nothing like creating a bigger dilemma by throwing two more roads into the mix, right? Actually, this was just what I needed!

I knew Conrail's operations inside out and was familiar with Norfolk Southern's more stern approach at railroading, but how to incorporate this into a new freelance operation still remained the major question. The Conrail Buffalo Line was close to home and as the 1990s rolled on offered traffic from Canadian Pacific subsidiary Delaware & Hudson and eventually Canadian National. The route was proverbial enough that if I portrayed certain facets of it there would be some prototypically recognizable features. OK, the stage was set – the Buffalo Line would be the focal route – so who are the players?

TO FREELANCE OR NOT?

Knowing the Conrail connection to the route, history was about to be rewritten from the 1985 privatization of Conrail forward to the modern day. Norfolk Southern nearly became the owner of Conrail in a failed effort that led to the formation of the privatized Conrail Inc., but I wasn't really into modeling NS outright – and at the time the Conrail split sale to NS and CSX Transportation had yet to come to fruition, so my freelanced road was aiming at something comparable to a modern-day Conrail, sort of.

Sitting down with several railroad maps I decided to try and name the system that 'was' Conrail. I trialed names such as Chicago Eastern; Atlantic Western; Chicago & Atlantic; and many others that just did not have the feel of a real railroad. Trying to find something adamant that would lend itself to a name, I kept coming across the Great Lakes that the Conrail system mildly intertwined. OK, this might work – Great Lakes & Atlantic or maybe Great Lakes & New England – still not getting the feel I wanted. Incongruously I had a conversation with friend George Fletcher who made a statement that would finish this name game puzzle I had been playing. Talking about something totally unrelated, he said the best method for recognition is by keeping it simple.

Simple...well if the railroad was going to run from Chicago to the East Coast as Conrail did, why not just plain old Great Lakes Eastern? I said the name aloud and was instantly impressed with its potential. I started writing it out in various forms and found that I liked the way Great Lakes Eastern Railroad Company flowed. It was settled then; the Great Lakes Eastern Railroad was born.

To this point in the whole scheme of development, several months had already passed and though I had a name, I was nowhere beginning to roll out equipment, as I had not yet devised a logo, paint scheme, or even a roster of equipment. Again using the keep it simple philosophy, I sat down and began putting logo ideas on graph paper. I had spelled out the name and decided pretty quickly that unless I was running a lot of 89' equipment, spelling out the name was impractical, despite the fact that I could have easily used alphabet-lettering sets to avoid the cost of having custom decals printed.

I found myself trackside railfanning Conrail action when a Grand Trunk Western-painted boxcar rolled by. I had seen GT equipment for years, but the thought of the similarity in letters to the GLE didn't strike me until that very moment. On the back of a box of Kodachrome slides, I sketched a GL and two extra prongs in the L to form an E. Joining the G and L also gave the logo some realistic blend with the fictitious name. The next mission was to find a font that worked for the logo. This was accomplished on about the twentieth try and with a font called simply 'Earth'.



The chosen font really looked modern and would set the stage to keep the Great Lakes Eastern in a current-day theme and thus a page from Eric Brooman's Utah Belt was about to be replicated. The decision to keep it modern was made and thoughts of a roster started crossing through my mind. Conrail's roster was pretty diverse and offered a little bit of everything, yet left me enough leeway to make some changes that would better reflect my interests in motive power and equipment. It would also provide opportunity to acquire new equipment as it was constructed, keeping with the practices of today's Class 1 railroads.

There has often been debate between hard-core prototype modelers and those like myself, who still want a prototype, just not one that has been created. Call me a Proto-Freelancer, but my main interest is in constructing a prototype operation and using prototype equipment with realistic color schemes to portray the believability that it really could exist.

EMD VS. GE: DEVISING A ROSTER

In an Excel spreadsheet I began listing motive power that was possibilities for the GLE and then initiated a process of eliminating units that didn't make sense or that weren't readily available in HO scale plastic. What unfolded was a nice blend of power that would ideally typify the roster and lend a great deal of believability to the freelanced railroad.

With thoughts heading towards coming up with a rolling stock roster, it struck me like a rock on the head, that I had not devised a paint scheme after coming up with the stylized logo. The natural correlation to the Great Lakes Eastern name would be to use some shade of blue, but which one? Conrail blue had actually become slightly annoying

to me from seeing it everyday, so I figured that I would avoid that shade for now. I tinkered with the idea of using a pseudo-Canadian National scheme that replaced the orange with dark blue – nah, not original enough. Back on the drawing board several photos were placed together representing various schemes that I thought were sporty. I liked Burlington Northern's white face look that was becoming prevalent at the time, Conrail's solid blue scheme quantified the railroad's stance on cheap and easy paint jobs, CP Rail System's slanted numbers gave some character to equipment and Norfolk Southern's dashed frame striping was just plain eye-catching.

Multiple locomotive type drawings were downloaded and placed into a graphic editing program, where I tried many variations and combinations of the afore mentioned likes. In the end, a CSX dark blue was used for locomotives with the white cab face and dashed frame striping. Slanted numbers rounded out the scheme that was soon to become the standard modern scheme. While toying with various ideas, I decided that there would be some 'leftover' motive power that hadn't been painted in



the dashed frame stripe and white cab face scheme. While the Federal Railroad Administration wouldn't be happy about it, some of the older power would sport only white nose logos and a solid white frame stripe, ala Conrail. Two other variations were formulated, one scheme reminiscent of Conrail's two-tone color application to distinguish alternating current motive power from direct current power and the other, CSXT's orange coloring for



maintenance of way-assigned locomotives and equipment. Again a page from Conrail's whim book would be used in that they too had dipped their C32-8 fleet in gray paint and lettered them for 'Ballast Express' and assigned them specifically to system ballast trains. While not gray, the orange units on the GLE would hold down maintenance and ballast-hauling assignments and would likewise be General Electric products. A final scheme was created for a small fleet of covered wagons that would be used exclusively for the GLE office car train.

Rolling stock was next up on the agenda and I liked a lot of standardized schemes out there, but in reality I determined that many variations upon variations existed for each railroad, so I wasn't so hasty to settle on certain paint schemes. I opted to make oxide red the standard color for equipment, however that wasn't going to preclude other colors from being used, such as gray for hoppers and blue for certain boxcar types or intermodal well cars.

As the decision to move towards realizing equipment in GLE colors, I contacted Rail Graphics Decals and had my first version of decals printed – mainly creating just the logos and roadname text. Other standard decal sets from Microscale would be used to round out lettering, including numbers from the CP Rail System Dual Flag set, frame striping from the Conrail and Norfolk Southern sets, various data sheets and several other minor touches from a variety of sets I had on hand.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

During the final phases of design and many years after starting to plan this freelanced venture, I began painting equipment into the GLE scheme and purchased a home in Central Pennsylvania with an amply sized basement. Simultaneously with the equipment painting I designed a linear layout that would comprise much of the space in the square basement. Construction began with the aid of other dedicated model railroaders, Greg Phillips, Jim Cassatt Jr., John Snyder, Eric Augatis and a few others. The group met regularly and weekly to construct benchwork and lay track until a nearly devastating blow was dealt to the GLE.

As work progressed on the layout I found less time to sit and paint or detail equipment. That's when I had an idea to see if LBF Company, the only company producing Johnstown Coalporters at the time, would produce en masse Great Lakes Eastern coalporters. Much to my surprise I learned that two other roads were



being considered already for a Privatization program under the LBF banner – the GLE would be the third in the series. A total of 96 road numbers were produced on GLE coalporters – 48 unique numbers for myself and another 48 that would go on sale to the general public. This made life a bit easier as I now quickly accumulated rolling stock for the GLE without spending countless hours in the paint booth.

GO WEST YOUNG MAN...OR NOT!

My now ex-wife and I had decided that we wanted a change in scenery and wanted a bit less of the fast lane lifestyle we were enduring in Central Pennsylvania, so we began a job search away from the area. Three prospective opportunities presented – all in the northern portion of the US, as we were both cool-weather folks and had no desire to move anywhere hot. With positions in Tacoma, Washington, Helena, Montana and Bangor, Maine all presenting themselves within a month, some long thought processes churned about. Concurrently I began thinking about realistically moving all of my GLE equipment across the country, as our original focus was on the two western cities.

On a whim, I began selling off equipment accumulated for the GLE and set new sights on backdating to the prototype Great Northern in Montana. I had decided that I would

not begin accumulating new equipment until we had arrived at a new home. In the end and after all of the GLE equipment had been sold off, we opted to move to Maine, where, I would take a position as a flight paramedic with LifeFlight of Maine in Bangor. The Great Northern was still as intriguing as it had been during the novelty phase of research, though it was again crossing my mind that there would be those who would criticize various components of modeling the prototype GN. Coincidentally I was being pressured by various folks to return to the GLE concept, as it had formed a following through a website I created at <http://greatlakeeastern.com>

I struggled with the notion of reacquiring equipment and redesigning the Buffalo Subdivision. The Maine Central bug then bit me and I became interested in trying to portray the Bangor-to-Waterville, Maine line in the early 1980s during the inception of Guilford. I failed to mention that we had been renting a 100-year-old Victorian home that had an adequate basement with remnants of an O-scale layout holding down one corner. The option existed for us to



purchase the house, but after just a few short months we quickly realized that more work was required than we'd have the time to complete, so a search was on again for a home to purchase. That search culminated with the showing of a nice log home atop of a mountain about an hour from Bangor. The absolute selling point for me was the fact that in addition to the home's two-car attached garage, a separate stand-alone two-story garage could be all mine! With the size of the building at 25.5 x 35.5 I could readily model the MEC in a very detailed manner between Bangor and Waterville. Then the thought crossed my mind again – surely somebody nearby would provide undesired feedback about my efforts. Sure I know about modeler's license, but I still just didn't think I was capable of fully accomplishing the prototype feel based on the availability of equipment and structures for the area. That aside, I liked certain equipment and industries that weren't part of the real MEC route, so back to the GLE drawing board.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

I probably would not have gone head-over-heals back into the GLE planning if it weren't for another model railroader, Mark Howard, whom had purchased the bulk of the Great Lakes Eastern equipment when I auctioned it off at Ebay. Mark contacted me after seeing that I was going back to the GLE and asked if I'd like to reacquire the equipment I had sold him. What an opportunity, as he had gotten all but a handful of the coal hoppers uniquely numbered and some other interesting motive power – including two SD80MACs. As I forged ahead to begin re-establishing a roster and other equipment, it

struck me that I hadn't really decided on what type of equipment to purchase, as I hadn't committed to redoing the Buffalo Subdivision.



About the same time I was perusing the Microscale Decals website and discovered their ad to do custom decals. Looking at their requirements and my love of graphic arts, I set out to do some designing and get a quote. The returned quote was expensive, but in the end would supply all the decals I'd probably ever need for the GLE in multiple colors and on full decal sheets. Though expensive initially, the long-term savings would be realized when I didn't need to purchase multiple sets to finish one locomotive or car. Those decals would arrive just a few weeks after being designed and provided a huge stimulus to dive into a new layout plan.

Remember that Maine Central bug, well I made another interesting discovery while perusing the western mountains of Maine in the summer of 2004. Maine's unique 2-foot narrow gauge railroads once plied some very scenic territory that nearly ran north south from Rumford, Maine to Lac-Megantic, Quebec. But wait, my Conrail system map didn't include

trackage in Maine, so what to do? It didn't take long to realize that the Great Lakes Eastern needed to purchase Guilford Rail System to better service the northeast and open up better shipping lanes for certain traffic.

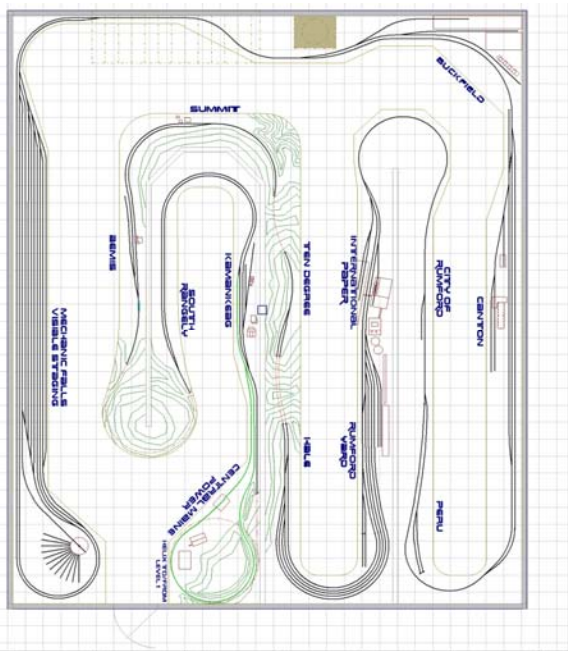
With that sale accomplished rather quickly, GLE eyed the Portland, Maine to Quebec City, Quebec route as one with great potential. Guilford prototypically operates a route that encompasses only several miles of what was envisioned as the new Moosehead Subdivision – Quebec Gateway. An old Maine Central map was viewed and interestingly enough the old Sandy River & Rangely Lakes narrow gauge, acquired by the Maine Central in 1911, went north towards Lac-Megantic – and with only a couple dozen miles needing to be filled in, would reach the Quebec town under the fictitious Maine Central history that would need to be rewritten. The story would go that Maine Central wanted to reach the Canadian Pacific Railway at Lac-Megantic and set out to conquer the rough terrain that makes up the Appalachian Mountains in western Maine. In doing so, the railroad would traverse some treacherous terrain and punch holes through solid rock to make the desired connection. The GLE would consider this route key to promoting northeast freight and intermodal connections with the CN.

One problem with the proposition was that the GLE would only gain trackage to Lac-Megantic, with the truly desired terminus being Quebec City. History would again be altered in that the realistic shortline Quebec Central would also be gobbled up in the

pursuit of Quebec City, as the QC made it to Charny, just southeast of Quebec City ending at CN Rail's Montmagny Subdivision.

Sitting down to lay out a new trackplan, I formulated a list of wants and ranked them in order of importance. That list would grow to include multiple industries that I regularly see in Maine, including a paper mill, wood chip loading facility, lumber mill, propane distributor, heating oil distributor, salt transload facility and other industries that would produce a model economic upturn for the state. Topping the list would be the paper mill and this would be the primary traffic generator for the Moosehead Sub. I also wanted to put a coal-fired power plant on the layout to run unit coal trains to and from, though none are located in the state currently. Using lots of modeler's license, I constructed my list and then printed out a floorplan of the building, using Cadrail 8.0.

With pencils in hand drawings started flying to try and create a trackplan that would encompass everything I was seeking and yet allow fluent operations and potential open house opportunities. Early on I set my aisle width at 36-inches and committed to it for the entire layout. Initially I contemplated some type of lounge in the main room, but realized I had the entire second floor to tool with, opening up more floor space previously unavailable in early drawings. In the end, I was able to draw out most of my desires and eliminated some marginal possibilities.



The new GLE trackplan evolved slowly and took more than a year. Several posts to the Layout Design Special Interest Group, Protofreelance Special Interest Group, Trainorders.com and Atlas Railroad Forums yielded many great ideas and suggestions. Cadrail was used to design a two-level layout with a third (lower) level acting as staging from Canadian points around Quebec. Pleased with the final results of the plan I began refining various facets and working in the old 2-foot right-of-way in spots. I opted to use a lot of recognizable industries, locations, and names despite the fact that many exist on other rail lines across Maine.

But alas, yet another setback would strike, as my wife and I separated and ultimately divorced by early 2008, leaving me without the house and space I had thought I had obtained for my layout. During the 2008 year and early into 2009, it would be a struggle to stay afloat, while being literally alone in Maine, as she and the kids had moved to Massachusetts and the remainder of my family was still back in Pennsylvania. Any desire or hopes of a model railroad at that point all seemed unrealistic.

I remained in contact with Mark Howard and several times we had nearly reached a shipping and payment methodology for the GLE equipment, but each time something else came up requiring redirection of the funds I had laid out for the reacquisition of the GLE equipment.

By early 2009, it was becoming increasingly more difficult to see my children with any type of regularity due to their being some 6 hours away in western Massachusetts. I had previously entertained but never acted on a possible move to the Lebanon, New Hampshire region and a switch from LifeFlight of Maine to the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Advanced Response Team (DHART) air medical service. I finally pounded out the keystrokes to update my resume and apply for an open position. That action would result in my hiring in Lebanon and a move out of Maine.

Oh yeah – I gave Guilford back to Timothy Mellon and he turned it into Pan Am Railways...

ANOTHER MOVE PROVIDES ANOTHER STIMULUS

My move to work at DHART also yielded another surprise on my horizon...a wonderful woman who I quickly discovered was my soul mate – so much so, that we were married in July of 2009, just a few months after arriving at Lebanon. That marriage moved my new home base to Sharon, Vermont, ironically on the former Central Vermont Railway, now New England Central Railroad subsidiary of RailAmerica.

Trains practically were running through the backyard and I began setting out to explore the New England Central's operations and routes, as well as finding a new favorite road in the Vermont Rail System's subsidiaries. As I explored a variety of areas, what I discovered was that this was truly a goldmine or railroading and genuinely what I was looking for my Great Lakes Eastern to truly portray. The NECR had a good customer base online to provide enough work for a few locals and keep a road train busy in each direction.

Interchange was a key component of what I also looked to achieve and this area had plenty. The NECR offered a unique arrangement through White River Junction, where four railroads total would actually interchange. The NECR, Vermont Rail's Washington County Railroad, the Claremont Concord Railroad and Pan Am Railways all played in town and provided a few different operating scenarios. This got me thinking again. Would the portion from Brattleboro, Vermont – where prototypically the NECR and PAR shared trackage – to White River Junction, Vermont, offer what I was seeking in a model railroad? Was there enough business and industry online to stimulate a purchase of the NECR assets by Great Lakes Eastern?

I set out to explore the old Great Lakes Eastern system map and what I discovered was that Palmer, Massachusetts was a perfect location to connect to the GLE's Boston Line operations, thus setting the stage for a bid by the GLE to acquire the NECR from Fortress, LLC and RailAmerica.

Examining the route in its entirety, the part that lent the most interesting operating opportunity for me was from Brattleboro to White River Jct., VT, however I liked the mountainous and picturesque scenery between White River and Montpelier Jct., VT; not to mention the 1.38% ruling westbound grade through Roxbury that, given modern day equipment and operations, would likely result in a helper district as well. This was all coming together. The GLE would replace the NECR completely and the Pan Am Railway would still operate as they have prototypically. Interchange would be established with the Vermont Rail System at Bellows Falls, White River Junction and Montpelier Junction, VT.

At the same time I sat down to start conceptualizing the new GLE, real life events were unfolding that further enhanced my opportunities for modeling this portion. Canadian National began marketing a yet-to-be developed intermodal route between Montreal and New London, Connecticut's port. Then a few weeks later came the announcement that Vermont Rail System had secured new business that would route 20-40-car unit granite stone trains out of Montpelier with run-through power set to take the trains south to Palmer, Massachusetts for delivery to (in real life) CSXT.

My stage was now set. I began jotting down notes and shooting pictures of buildings and towns between Brattleboro and Montpelier, deciding that a multi-deck layout could and will achieve exactly what I am looking for – a moderate amount of trains on a single track route with plenty of online industry and just enough interchange to keep it quite interesting. My motive power will still be predominately GLE, however I now have the option to throw in Vermont Rail System, Pan Am Railway/Guilford, and even the Alcos of the Claremont Concord Railroad.



The final selling point for me was that this route also plays host to a daily Amtrak passenger train – the Vermonter – running between St. Albans, VT and Washington, DC. I see great potential in this in the modeling world, as VIA Rail and Amtrak are going to team up and re-establish service through to Montreal with combined equipment.

All of this was even more so stimulated by the fact that our current home has a roomy basement that is begging for the development of the newest version of the Great Lakes

Eastern. I was mildly enthused into early November, then the first package arrived – the box of Great Lakes Eastern locomotives that I had sold and now reacquired were back in my possession. Talk about a stimulus! I opened the SD80MAC boxes and instantly knew that this was the way I was going, I just needed to head back to the drawing board and devise a whole new plan.

The latest plan is still taking shape, however maps and trains are already being figured out and an overall operating concept and scheme is falling into place. This will all progress as I have time to sit down and dive into planning and painting and planning some more. At one point the thought of backdating a bit had been toyed with, however at present, the plan is to model the current day operations of the GLE in real time.

Progress on the entire GLE 'saga' can be followed at the <http://greatlakeeastern.com> website or by signing up to receive email updates at the GLE website.

I believe that my protofreelanced system offers a great deal of practicality and a great deal of operations. The Great Lakes Eastern is to many a "real railroad". I've shown the models and website to many folks with whom I work or visit and they often comment on "where does that railroad really run" or "I think I've seen that railroad somewhere". It is with that final comment that I know I've achieved what I set out to do – create a realistic name and depiction of a non-existent prototype.