

# THE CALL BOARD

A 100% **NTRAK** CLUB



Celebrating Our 12th Year!

October 2003

VOLUME XII NUMBER 10

## A Journey Towards the Dark Side

*Steve Jackson*

I have been interested in DCC for some time, but have not yet made a move in that direction for two main reasons, including the complexity of the systems, and the cost of converting my existing stable of locomotives to DCC. However, I have assumed all along that I would eventually end up with DCC. I even included provisions in the control panel for my home layout for a DCC throttle, when I finally decided to go that direction.

DCC system manufacturers seem to have discovered that several of us are intimidated by the complexity of DCC, and have started producing simpler systems. In this article, I plan to look at a couple of those new simpler systems. I may follow on later with decoder installation stories. I have mostly older locos, that will require more work than the plug-n-play installations now available for most new locos, so it could get interesting, but I plan to start with some of the easier ones first.

While I have not laid out actual hard cash for a DCC system yet, I have been researching the idea recently, and came across a few things that I thought might be of interest to others in the club, who may be in the same position.

First, let me say that I am not any kind of authority on this stuff yet, and still might have some of my facts messed up. With that out of the way, I can let you know what I have found.

I started looking at starter DCC systems over the last 3-4 months. I narrowed my research to two possible systems before I even began. I like the Atlas Commander, because it looks like any old dummy can put it together, and I have had good luck with Atlas products over the years. I like the Digitrax Zephyr, because it also looks simple (thought they did slip that 16 button keypad on there), but also, because it is Digitrax and presumably compatible with their other stuff. Mainly, I have been doing web research to see what other folks have to say about the systems that interest me most.

### Atlas Commander

I really like the simplicity of the Atlas system, and they seem to have  
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## A View From the Gap

*Cotton Bowen, President*

I hope that we all survived Hurricane Isabel without serious damage! Despite the temporary loss of power, the Fairfax Museum show was up and running as scheduled on Sunday, September 21. My thanks to Howard Beall, Matt Guey-Lee and Nick Skilas for taking time to bring out their modules and help to do our bit for the Museum. Unfortunately, our public was rather thin that day, but we were there doing what NVNTRAK does best—runniNg TrainS! As always, everything ran well. Additionally, we are making progress in having the NVX-1 and NVX-2 serviced after a gap in maintenance that was entirely too long. Thanks are due to Bobby Richesin, Dave Freshwater and Jim LaBaugh.

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# HOST CLUB OF THE 2004 NTRAK EAST CONVENTION



# RAIL EVENTS TIMETABLE

Saturday/Sunday, Oct. 4-5, 2003: Altoona Railfest, Altoona PA  
Station Mall, 9th Avenue and 17th Street, Altoona, PA 16602, (814)-  
946-3088

Coordinator: Karl Cooke (703) 426-9512

Trailer: NVX2

Set-up: Fri. 10/3 1700-1900 (?), Sat. 0700-1000 (?)

Clamp-down: Sat. 0900 (?)

Layout Type: Medium Oval

Please contact Karl for more details.

**Saturday, Oct. 4, 2003, 1000-1600, Bethesda Chevy Chase Rescue Squad Open House [in conjunction with Taste Of Bethesda 2003] B/CC Rescue Squad, 5020 Battery Lane [Old Georgetown Rd. & Battery Ln.], Bethesda, MD, (301) 652-0077**

**Coordinators: John Steitz (703) 371-5171, Mat Chibbaro (301) 570-9361**

**Trailer: NVX1**

**Set-up: Fri. 10/3/03 1900-2100, Sat. 0700-1000**

**Clamp-down: Sat. 0900**

**Unload in parking lot behind station, and use elevator to 2d Floor**

**Layout Type: Small oval, OLI(?)**

**Sunday, Oct. 5, 2003, 1200-1700, October Back Shop Fellowship Hall, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, 8403 Old Keene Mill Road Springfield, VA**

**1400: NVNTRAK Board of Directors Meeting**

**1500: Capitol Limited Convention Committee Meeting**

**Contact: John Steitz (703) 371-5171**

**Trailer: NVX1**

**Projects: Electrical testing of Alexandria Yard (all 36 feet!)**

**Testing on new Club junction modules**

**Electrical and track testing of new modules for Oct. and Nov.**

**shows**

**Use parking lot behind church complex**

Friday/Saturday/Sunday, Oct. 10-11-12, 2003: Potomac Junction 2003 [NMRA Mid-East Region Fall Convention]

Sheraton Reston Hotel, 11810 Sunrise Valley Dr., Reston, Virginia  
20191, (703) 620-9000

Coordinator: John Drye (703) 922-8131

Trailer: NVX1

Set-up: Fri. 10/10 1800-2200

Clamp-down: Fri. 10/10 2100

Layout Type: Multi-oval, 3T + 1T, DCC, Operations

Please contact John Drye for more details.

**Saturday, Oct. 11, 2003, 1000-1600: Fire Prevention Day Fairfax (Franconia) Fire Station #5, 6300 Beulah Street [Beulah & Franconia Rd.], Alexandria VA 22310 [Near Franconia Rd. and Van Dorn Street, east of Springfield Mall] (703) 971-5858**

**Coordinator: Brian Brendel (703) 815-2601**

**Trailer: NVX2 (in place)**

**Set-up: Sat. 0800-1000**

**Clamp-down: Sat. 0900**

**Layout Type: Small oval**

**Sunday, Oct. 19, 2003, 1300-1600 Museum Layout Fairfax Station Railroad Museum, 11200 Fairfax Station Road, P.O. Box 7, Fairfax Station, Virginia 22039 (703) 425-9225**

**Coordinator: John Steitz (703) 371-5171**

**Trailer: NVX2**

**Set-up: 1130 - 1300**

**Clamp-down: 1200**

**Unload in parking lot, then move vehicle across street to overflow**

lot.

**Layout Type: Small Oval**

**Saturday/Sunday, Oct. 25-26, 2003: Spotsylvania Mall Layout Spotsylvania Mall, VA Rt. 3, near I-95, Fredericksburg, VA, (540) 786-6660**

**Coordinators: Peter Pfothenauer (540) 710-1275 and John Steitz (703) 371-5171**

**Trailer: NVX1 and NVX2**

**Show Hours: Sat. 1000-2100, Sun. 1000-1800**

**Set-up: Sat. 0700-1000**

**Camp-down: 0900**

**Layout Type: Multi-oval(?), DCC, Operations, guest modules from other clubs, 1T(?), OLI(?)**

Saturday/Sunday, Nov. 1-2, 2003: Central New York Train Fair Empire Expo Center [New York State Fairgrounds], 581 State Fair Blvd. Syracuse, NY 13209 (800) 475-FAIR

Contact: John Steitz (703) 371-5171

No trailer

Layout Type: Part of large show/convention layout

Road trip to promote Capitol Limited 2004. Please contact John Steitz for more details.

**Sunday, Nov. 2, 2003, 1200-1700, November Back Shop Fellowship Hall, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, 8403 Old Keene Mill Road Springfield, VA**

**1400: NVNTRAK Board of Directors Meeting**

**1500: Capitol Limited Convention Committee Meeting**

**Contact: Cotton Bowen (703) 450-5857**

**Trailer: NVX1**

**Projects: Building Transport frames for new Club junction modules. Last chance to test new modules for Nov. shows and Greenberg Chantilly Use parking lot behind church complex**

**Saturday/Sunday Nov. 15-16, 2003: Rockville Lion's Club Train Show**

**Rockville Senior Center, 1150 Carnation Drive, Rockville, MD, (240) 314-5019**

**Coordinators: Dave Greenacre (703) 391-7447 and Edd**

**Braithwood (703) 860-2899**

**Trailer: NVX1**

**Show Hours: Sat. 1000-1700, Sun. 1000-1600**

**Set-up: Sat. 0700-1000**

**Clamp-down: Sat. 0900**

**Unload and park in rear lot, or in overflow parking on grass.**

**Layout type: Medium Oval**

**11th Anniversary of NVNTRAK's first public show!**

**Saturday, Nov. 15, 2003, 1000-1600: Damascus Railroad Day Damascus Community Library, 9701 Main Street, Damascus, MD 20872, (301) 253-5100**

**Coordinator: Dave Freshwater (301) 424-7438**

**Trailer: NVX2**

**Set-up: 0800-1000**

**Clamp-down: 0900**

**Layout Type: Small oval, OLI(?)**

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On another plane of club operations, Chris Thayer, not only rejoined the club after a gap in his membership, but has agreed to become the new club Webmaster. Thank you Chris! Along a similar, but different vein, we need a new Call Board editor in January 2004. Any volunteers??

**YOUR CALL BOARD NEEDS YOU**

Each month we have about five pages that need articles and pictures in addition to the three taken up by regular features. We really need modules of the month. Your editor's backlog of stories is zero. Please send in your articles and pictures so we can keep this newsletter interesting and informative. If you have an idea and need help in getting in down on paper, give the editor a call. We can work it out.

**Callboard Editor needed in January 2004.**

After looking at some of our corner modules, I have asked John Steitz to organize some self-help sessions at the next Backshops, to do maintenance on the club equipment. For anyone who wishes to learn some new skills, here's your chance. Although we have sold 50 "Yellow shirts," the second run of the famous "Yellow Shirts" is delayed in its progress—I need more orders. Now is the time to get your shirt! If anyone in the club who has not yet ordered their shirt(s), I recommend that you call me and place the order now.

Since I expended a lot of printed space in the Special Edition, I am keeping this latest edition of "A View from the Gap" short. But before closing, I must emphasize that October is a big month for us, and we need your participation in this month's activities, even more than ever. I hope to see some new old faces in the crowd when we ruN traiNs.



**View from Zoo Tower**  
*John Steitz, Acting Superintendent*



"Zoo" is a real place, of course, not just a comment on chaos and confusion. ☺

It's a wye along the Pennsylvania Railroad in my home town of Philadelphia, controlling several interlockings and flyover junctions, between the PRR North-South Corridor, and \*The\* Main Line to points west. Throw in about a hundred yard tracks (many inside the wye itself), with bi-level 30th Street Station to the South, and 52nd Street Yard due West, and it is clear why this tower retained most of its control functions through the Penn Central, Conrail and Amtrak eras, and well into the 90's. Today, is it \*still\* staffed 24/7.

It is an apt analogy for NVNTRAK's October schedule, which has six public shows and a Back Shop. Principal among these are the MER Potomac Junction Convention in Reston, Oct. 10-11-12, and our show at Spotsylvania Mall, Oct. 25-26. If you haven't already signed up for one of these, please call the set-up coordinator(s) and volunteer your module soon.

The details on these two shows, and all the other events, are contained in the revised "Rail Events Timetable" on page 2. Having been a member of NVNTRAK for nine years now, it bothers me no end, when information about set-ups is nowhere to be found when I need it. If the Call Board is still the official communication medium of NVNTRAK, it should contain everything I need to know when I'm bringing a module out to a set-up: Where am I going? When do I have to be there? If something happens, whom do I call? Hopefully, the revised timetable gives this same info to you.

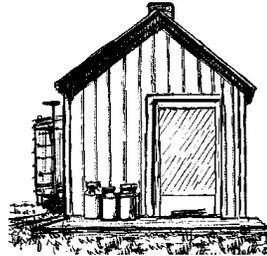
Of critical importance is the Clamp Down Time, and for the benefit of newer members, I'll review what this is. At "Clamp-Down," all modules to go into the layout should be present, on their feet, and, literally, ready to be clamped to another module. There are exceptions, of course, but the idea is to fix the general shape of the layout at least one hour before the show starts. The remaining hour is for putting in connecting track, connecting wiring, configuring power supplies, and setting up skirting, ropes and stanchions, signage, and anything else needed to make the layout ready for prime time. If you're bringing a module to a layout, please try to arrive before the "Clamp Down" time.

For now, the Timetable lists only the home phones of the coordinators, but in the future (and with the permission of the coordinators), I would like to list cell phones, our "com" on the front lines. There was some confusion earlier about coordinators for all the shows, but the table now lists names and other information to the best of my knowledge as of

*Continued on Page 10*

'04 CONVENTION STATUS - The registration forms are being distributed, and individual registrations are now coming in. We are fine tuning the forms and just added the question "Are you bringing DCC engines?" This is so we can issue decoder addresses and maintain more control. We will also be asking around about other clubs that want to be in the GB show during our convention, so we can coordinate DCC codes and Aristo frequencies and eliminate interference.

LAYOUT PLANNING – Our focus has to be on reliability, as we are going into the unknown, the dark side (and not just with DCC) with 500 modules with over 80 miles of Red Line Routes. Also, we want a design that has easy access between the DCC and the Aristo people, and out to the dealer areas. I am trying to avoid any thoughts of social or physical division between DCC and analog. We are eliminating barriers between the two sides of the layout, so everyone can run trains everywhere and mingle.



LAYOUT COORDINATION - In the next several months, we will be working with other clubs on how many modules they plan to set up together, and the shape of their loops or sections. There is a convention in Danville, VA, September 27 – 28 and we will be face to face with the clubs and coordinators from Richmond, N. Raleigh, French Creek and Lynchburg. N. Raleigh and John Wallis are conducting tests during all their shows on different variations in DCC control wiring and power distribution.

DIFFERENT STANDARDS - We are getting questions on using JANTRAK from Japan, Bend Track and stand alone catenary (trolley wires) modules. We will try to get everyone in that has modules that are relatively easy to adapt to Ntrak or oNeTRAK or that can be pushed against the walls and not take up extra space. Lee's T-Trak Division and the Nn3 boys will be featured in separate layouts. The KSONS of Louisville, KY, have said they are bringing more than 75 Ntrak modules in their school bus. Our 160 x 250 layout space could fit about 8 school buses full of modules and NTRAKers. The boys in Houston are also talking of everyone coming on the bus too.

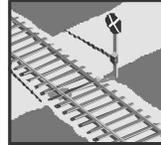
FANCY MODULES - See Steve Jackson's Mann's Cliff with the flyover up to green on page 18 in Jim Fitzgerald's October newsletter. NVNtrak club members have 2 or 3 sets of these, and both NJS and N. Raleigh clubs also have the flyovers with grades and diverging routes. At this point we are wide open for your layout ideas, and we have enough time to build and test any ideas. We are lucky to have so many clubs in the east like New Jersey Southern, Rantrak, Bantrak, North Raleigh and LI Ntrak, to name a few that all share the passion and work involved in running a large railroad system.

## Members

need a new module tag?

Has your club name badge faded with use, or been run over by a SD80 MAC on the red line as you leaned over the layout during a set up?

Contact the Treasurer for that new tag, or a replacement tag or name badge .



## This Side of the Tracks

Dave Davies, editor

Crunch time is almost here. Within days of when you get this, we will have a "triple" (Oct 4/5), followed by a double (Oct 11/12) ... then it will really get busy in November, which is model railroading month.

I have heard a couple people say that the CB has too much "railfanning" and not enough "modeling" ... I can only print what I am given. ☹ It seems that since Gil's articles, about the only modeling that I have printed is the detailed descriptions of the Module of the Month (A couple of which got pretty long, and contained a lot of good information from a couple of our master)

Below is an idea for modeling (something for Gil to consider).



VRE V21 is southbound at Burke Center on September 29 with three of the newly painted gallery cars.

VRE is now starting to use their rebuilt and repainted Chicago area gallery cars. (Gil, you can use your engine and cab control car). Although the cars have been on the property for a couple months, they saw extensive testing, and only recently we introduced in revenue service.

I guess I will have to follow Steve's Dark Side article with a more detailed look at the Digitrax system that the club owns. I would like to see a line added on page two that would show what systems are going to be in use (DC only, DCC only, DCC always on a single line, or DCC available for anyone who wants to put it on their line during their hour (works real well when you get three or four people to sign-up back to back and everyone runs for three or four hours. ☺

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## Capitol Limited 2004 Update

John Drye

We are continuing to pick up steam for 2004. The Army of Northern Virginia has been carrying the news all across the Mid Atlantic Region. Matt, Brian, Mitch and others celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the "Wreck of the Old '97" at Danville in September. They managed to try out some of the ideas we'll use in '04 on the 20 x 40 layout, along with our friends from clubs in Virginia and the Carolinas. Matt ought to have a great report next month.

We are mapping out a strategy to cover most of the larger train shows, pretty much everywhere east of the Mississippi (well, almost) over the next 11 months. October will see that campaign kick off with a bang, with a bunch of DC area setups, and a trip to the Altoona Railfest. See Karl Cooke if you have plans to go to any show. We will set you up with a publicity package, even if we don't set up any modules.

The "Convention Car Committee" has come up with a great design for 2004 (see picture) and we're about to send the drawing to Micro Trains. We plan to offer two different numbers, and we expect our NSC friends will also have a few surprises.

We're starting to pick up quite a few registrants, both for the convention and for the hotel. If you plan to stay at the Convention Hotel (the Chantilly Holiday Inn Select) don't wait too long to make a reservation. The link from the 2004 website is now working, if you prefer to make an online reservation.

You can also now register for 2004 on line ([www.ntrak2004.org](http://www.ntrak2004.org)). Of course, you can also register in person at any club setup. *Please register as soon as you can.* We are continuing to expend funds for publicity materials, various deposits and other costs. The more early registrants we get, the easier it is for the convention to continue to stay in the black. This helps keep our treasurer (Fresh) much happier.

We are still looking for volunteers, both to carry the flag to train shows all across the east coast, as well as to help out with other convention support. We will need the help of all of the Northern Virginia NTRAK "gorillas," so please pick an area where you would like to help

Cotton is putting together a second order of 2004 Yellow Shirts, if you missed out on the first one. Please see Cotton to order a shirt.



## MER Convention NTRAK Layout

John Drye

The MER Convention will offer NTRAKers a chance for 24-hour operations at the Reston Sheraton Hotel. We'll have a 40 x 40 layout in the convention area. Setup is FRIDAY evening, Oct 10th and Saturday morning the 11th. *Please note the change in times.* The convention hotel managed to double-book our space. *Does that sound familiar?*

The layout will stay up until Sunday, afternoon the 12th, providing more than 48 hours of continuous running. The plan is for a two-loop layout, with a DCC Red Line Route over 3TRAK and oNeTRAK modules. Participants will also be able to take advantage of other convention activities, including great layout and prototype tours, plus clinics and a chance to listen to John Armstrong, one of the hobby's most celebrated speakers. You do not want to miss the chance to hear John's presentation. There is still room to sign up. Please contact setup coordinator John Drye (703 922 8131) or [director.2004@nvntrak.org](mailto:director.2004@nvntrak.org) if you want to bring a module.

## Railroad Day at Lorton Station School

John Cook

Northern Virginia NTRAK has been asked to help with a Railroad Day at the new Lorton Station School. The brand new school is on the east side of the tracks, directly opposite the Auto Train station in Lorton. Jim McLain, the Security Coordinator of the Office of Safety and Security for the Fairfax County Public Schools, contacted Steve Eilert, the Virginia State Coordinator for Operation Lifesaver, about setting up an OLI program for the K-6<sup>th</sup> graders at the new school. Steve knows about our success with the scouts, the Manassas RailFest and the Manassas Museum's Railroad camp, and he suggested Jim contact Dave Freshwater and John Cook for help. We have been talking with Susan Granger, the school principal, during the summer about what we can do. She would like to have a full day of railroad activities sometime during the month of October (during the school day, but no date has been set yet.) She and the teachers have been very busy getting a new school into operation. They will teach railroad history that day, and sing railroad songs in music class and generally focus all activities on trains. She would like us to provide a layout and Operation Lifesaver presentations with an emphasis pedestrian and bicycle safety along the right of way. It will be similar to the Boy Scout Train Show we do at Saunders School in Prince William County.

Any one who can help with the layout or OLI presentations should contact John or Dave so they can keep you posted on the time and place.

## Northern Virginia NTRAK

*BOD Meeting  
September 7, 2003*

The BOD meeting convened at 2:15 pm with all members present, except Paul Diley and Steve Jackson. John Cook delivered new NVNTRAK flyers to Cotton Bowen at the BOD meeting. Chris Thayer will take over as the NVNTRAK Webmaster, replacing Bill Rutherford effective January 2004. Bill has done an outstanding job keeping the membership up to date on the happenings of the club. Thanks Bill!

The club received an invite to participate in the Arlington County Burn Camp, scheduled for September 27<sup>th</sup> this year. This, along with many other upcoming events over the next couple of months, has already been covered in the Special Edition of the Call Board. It was brought to the BOD's attention that there was no trailer for one of the recent setups. This can be mitigated by having a primary and alternate driver lined up to tow the trailers to each setup. The Superintendent will be responsible for this in the future.

Speaking of Superintendents, Paul Diley's current work schedule is nor allowing him to properly focus on the superintendent duties and he has stated that he would like to be replaced in January. To help alleviate this situation, the BOD appointed John Steitz as the Acting Superintendent, at least until January. John will submit information to the Call Board when appropriate. Paul has done a truly remarkable job over the past three years, in one of the most demanding duties of the club. A big thank you to Paul, and we hope his schedule lets him participate more in the future.

By the time you read this, you have already seen the Special Edition to the Call Board. This is to highlight upcoming events and seek volunteers to help/participate at those events in our immediate future.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00pm

Respectfully submitted,

Marc Sisk  
NVNTRAK Secretary

## Railfest 2003

*Karl Cooke*

Dear President, Former president, Board members and assorted, certified PENNSY Freaks, (The above applies to some of you, twice---you know who you are)

I have got great news, the folks from Railfest, the director Mr. Andy Muholland, emailed a few days and asked if we want to come to Railfest 2003. It will be held Oct 4-5, 2003 in Altoona PA

The director offered us free admission to RailFest, and a setup space 20' by 36' inside the station mall, next to the train show vendors. There will be a train show running concurrently with Railfest this year again, although it looks as if the venue will be closer to the Museum. Actual Setup TBD (although NLT Sat 4 OCT AM ---still working the details if we can get inside the mall for partial setup Fri afternoon)

It looks like there will be plenty of activities for railfanning, the E8s are coming to pull the excursion train (*Ed—and will pull a train to/from Pittsburgh Sat night, Sun morning*) and they are even hosting some 1.5 in scale live steam locomotives, with a 1000ft of track, to pull passengers around the museum yard.

Sounds like a potential for a great weekend---we all had a great time in 2000 and 2002, and this will be a great advertisement for 2004.

The hotel of choice will be the *Days Inn* in Altoona. My email at home is KarlCNP@aol.com Does anyone have Edd Braithwood's (Edd maybe anti computer???), Leonard White's or dale Rinker's email.

Karl Cooke  
home ph (703)426-9512  
cell (703) 362-7008

### DO YOU KNOW WHO TO CALL???

**SCENARIO:** You are railfanning (safely, of course) and observe a hazardous situation that can endanger life and property on the railroad right of way. **WHO DO YOU CALL???**

**ANSWER:** *CSX Emergency Response*  
**1-800-232-0144**  
*NS Emergency Line*  
**1-800-453-2530**

Clip this coupon and carry it with you. You never know when it will be useful.

Continued from Page 1

done that before anyone else. The command station-mounted throttle comes with the base system, while a hand throttle is also available from Atlas for the system. The system is very simple to look at, and the reports seem to indicate that it is simple to use. However, because the system is relatively new on the market, it does not yet offer all of the add-on features that are available for other systems.

Fortunately, the system shares many components with the Lenz system, and I understand that you can use Lenz components with the Atlas system. While even Lenz does not offer a wireless DCC throttle, another manufacturer, CVP, does. CVP is a new DCC supplier out of Richardson, TX, that has a nice line of DCC gear under the name Easy DCC. I understand that this system is based, in part, on a system that some German hobbyists have developed over the past few years for their own use. CVP has taken some of these designs and enhanced them and provided a way for people, who don't want to build this stuff, to get it. Note: I did not consider the CVP system because they only sell directly, and I am new enough at this that I prefer to buy from somewhere local, so I can go complain if I can't make it work.

For the size layout that I have (will total 7 NTRAK modules), and the amount of traffic that I plan on having (3-5 trains), the Atlas seems to be a very good option for me.

### **Digitrax Zephyr**

I have not been interested in DCC because of the complexity, and Digitrax is the folks who make those systems that hurt my head. I just like to run trains and hate to have to think about things too hard; it makes me feel like I am at work. However, when they came out with the Zephyr, I figured that they had finally listened to people like me, and that they deserved my consideration. This system comes with one throttle mounted on the command station/booster, but supports the entire line of Digitrax throttles as add ons to the system, including everything from the simple UT1 utility throttle to the mind-numbing 400 series throttles, that look like they could run the space shuttle. All reports are that the Zephyr can be upgraded, using other Digitrax components, as your needs increase, to give you more power and more throttles.

One really interesting feature of the Zephyr is that it supports the use of 'jump' throttles. These jump throttles are standard DC throttles that can be plugged into the Zephyr and have locomotives assigned to them. You use the on-board Zephyr throttle to select a locomotive and set the functions the way you want, and then pass it to the jump throttle. The jump throttle can then control the speed and direction of the locomotive/address. The thing I really like about this concept is that I can use my existing Aristo throttles to control DCC locomotives wirelessly. I can't control the functions from the

wireless throttles, but I don't know if that will be a problem for me. If it is, I can always buy a Digitrax throttle to upgrade the system.

The Digitrax Zephyr is much simpler than their other, more powerful, systems, however, it is still not as simple as the Atlas Commander from what I have seen from users. However, the upgradeability (if that is even a word) is a really nice feature.

### **Feature comparison**

Both of these systems have features that I feel will meet the needs of my modest home layout. The Zephyr offers the ability to control 10 cabs instead of the 5 offered by Atlas, but I can't imagine more than 5 operators on my home layout, so this isn't much of a factor. Also, the Atlas system only supports 2 digit addresses, but again, this is not too big of a deal for me at home. Both systems have a 2.5 amp limit that will probably preclude the Zephyr from controlling more than 5 locomotives anyway, assuming that no additional booster is added to the system. One final, and very important, feature of any DCC system is the cost. The Zephyr retails for \$199, while the Atlas system retails for \$179. At this price, both systems provide you with everything that you need to use the one on-board throttle to get your DCC-equipped locomotives rolling. You can get both of these systems from local purveyors for less than the MSRP, if you watch for ads, visit them at train shows, or catch them in the right mood.

The real deciding factor for me will probably be the jump throttle feature provided by the Zephyr. I really like the idea of being able to use my Aristo throttles as DC or DCC throttles. I am very partial to the radio throttles, and this is a great way to maintain that capability without the additional cost of the Digitrax or CVP wireless DCC throttles.

As for now, I will be adding decoders to a couple of locomotives and trying them out at club setups. The nice thing about this club is that it allows us to try out things first, before we make any big investments on our own. I still want to learn more about DCC before I select a system, but I have really enjoyed researching the features of these two systems, and I am very impressed with the features that they both bring to the table.



**OCTOBER PHOTO ALBUM**

Silver Spring — Nick Sklias



## NVNTRAK at Silver Spring

or

### Trailer? We don't need no stinking trailer!

*Jeff Peck*

On September 6th, the Army...err...a division...err... would you believe a really small group of NVNTRAK'ers, showed up at the B & O Railroad station in Silver Spring, MD, and *Semper Gumby* got a work out. It's pretty rough when there's almost more members of the *Pipsqueak Division* there than adults - thank goodness the Hyland brothers showed up, so the big folks had the upper hand! Due to some miscommunication and a cancellation, we had plenty of POFF's, but no trailer with all the goodies to make them in to a layout. Now most clubs would have went home with their tails between their legs, but not NVNTRAK.

With the beautiful weather outside, and a lack of logistical support to assemble a layout inside, we decided to set up a point-to-point layout on the platform outdoors, about 6 feet from the tracks (don't worry, my fellow *OLI*'ers, there was a fence separating us). We used Nick Sklias' *Manata Gap* and *Nicksville*, Brian Chibbaro's *Crusin' Weekend*, and my *Thea*, *WV* modules in the layout. Luckily, Nick had a power pack and an alligator clipped set of leads, and we were able to power the red line for back -N- forth operation on the Red line. We also discovered the one thing duct tape won't stick to - driveway emulsion - and we ended up standing on the power cord a lot to keep the layout from walking off with the visitors. Even with only one track in operation, we ran everything from local-sized freights to strings of passenger equipment, to European equipment to EM-1's - no worries about minimum radius or what line to have DCC on here!

Train traffic (1:1 size) was exceptionally light, for most of the morning and when we saw a CSX MOW crew installing a new derailment detection/Metro power kill system, we figured out why. Once they cleared off, the floodgates opened and we had a train about every 20 minutes.

The NVNTRAK crew spent most of the afternoon concocting plans to ensure that we could have a layout on this side of the Potomac, even without the presence of a trailer. There was talk, the stuff high treason is made of - secession! Printing our own money! Changing our hats to Union caps! No idea was left undiscussed.

The time came for us to disband, and 20 minutes later, we were ready to leave - try that at Chantilly! Despite the snafus, were we able to run some trains and surprisingly, not many - if any - visitors commented about the lack of continuously running trains. The level of detail on the modules, and the occasional train on the Red line whetted their appetites, I suppose. I appreciate the support and dedication of Mat Chibbaro, Nick Skilas and the Hyland

brothers, they really helped pull this off. And to you Southerners, you *can* come to Maryland, we removed all the mines from the bridges.

Don't look for Gumby anytime soon, he's still at the chiropractor.

## Over-The-Top on the West Slope or How Jake and I Found "The Inn of Railroad Nirvana"

*Brian Brendel*

Well, my friends, the search is now officially OVER. Just drop what you're doing, get in your car, and make haste for the land of the S.P.F.! ("Slobbering Pennsy Freak", See: John Drye or Fresh.) This land is also otherwise known as "Pennsylvania". Go now, for you are missing a most entertaining lodging experience!

What do you say about a place where the rockin' chairs are lined-up on the porch, facing the tracks less than a hundred-fifty feet away? A place where they give you a discount on your room if the train traffic is 'less-than-average', and where that average is over two or three trains an hour, 24 hours a day? Where the waterin' hole is in the basement—but they'll give you ice no matter where you bought your beer? Where seldom is heard, the discouraging 'silence of the scanners'? And where you can *whistle back at the trains that whistle at you!*?

It is near. Forthwith, get ye to **The Station Inn**, in Cresson, PA.

For the uNconveNtion back in '99 and '02, we all thought that the search for the perfect railroad bunkhouse had come to an end at the wonderful **Henry Clay Inn** in Ashland, Virginia. That place is great, but ask Jake: We now officially know better!

The mountains around Altoona have always been a hotbed of railroad activity. Most of us 'non-Pennsy enthusiasts' have generally put up with all the slobbering of our fellow club mates, since the area pretty much boasts the most railroad activity in the East. I have visited a few times before, but have never done a solo visit with just 'us'—me and Jake. We are now officially indoctrinated—especially now, since NS took over 'up thar'!

I was able to make a reservation toll-free by calling the number on the website ([www.stationinnpa.com](http://www.stationinnpa.com)). The owner, Tom Davis, put us up at the last minute in his 'family room' at the back of the hotel, but the 'normal rooms' overlook the

*Continued on Page 10*

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**Sunday, Nov. 16, 2003, 1300-1600 Museum Layout**  
Fairfax Station Railroad  
Museum, 11200 Fairfax Station  
Road, P.O. Box 7, Fairfax  
Station, Virginia 22039 (703)  
425-9225  
Coordinator: Cotton Bowen  
(703) 450-5857  
Trailer: NVX2  
Set-up: 1130 - 1300  
Clamp-down: 1200  
Unload in parking lot, then  
move vehicle across street to  
overflow lot.  
Layout Type: Small Oval

**Saturday/Sunday, Dec. 6-7, 2003: Holiday Model Train Show**  
Fairfax Station Railroad  
Museum, 11200 Fairfax Station  
Road, P.O. Box 7, Fairfax  
Station, Virginia 22039 (703)  
425-9225  
Show Hours: Sat. 1000-1700,  
Sun. 1200-1600  
No NTRAK Layout - operate

**Caboose layout only**  
Contact: John Steitz (703)  
371-5171  
No Trailer  
Park on street, or in overflow  
lot across street from station.

**Sunday, Dec. 14, 2003:**  
NVNTRAK Holiday Party  
Details T.B.D.

**Saturday/Sunday, Dec. 27-28, 2003: Greenberg Train Show**  
Dulles Expo Center, 4368  
Chantilly Center, Chantilly, VA  
20153, (703) 378-0910  
Coordinator: Paul Diley (703)  
585-8583  
Trailer: NVX1 and NVX2  
Show Hours: Sat. and Sun.:  
1000 - 1600  
Set-up: Fri. 12/26 1500-1930,  
Sat. 12/27 0730-1000  
Clamp-down: Sat. 0900  
Unload inside building, then  
park in vendor/exhibitor lot  
behind building.  
Layout Type: Multi-oval; DCC:  
Mountain Div.; 1T(?), OLI(?)

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main line! Breakfast is included, but let me quote a little from the website:

*"The Inn is unlike most B&B's. It is close to a busy railroad. The Inn is not air-conditioned; it has no in-room television, or telephones. No hot tubs or whirlpools. There are no farm animals in the back yard. The Inn has no antiques, no Early American furnishings, no homemade bread or jam. The Inn may not meet the needs of typical B&B travelers."*

What it does have, is trains. In short, it is a railroad bunkhouse for "the boys," along the lines of Matt Schaefer's infamous Huntington Bunkhouse, from back in the nineties. (Jeez, does *that* sound like a long time ago, or what?) Two or three single beds to a room. There's a sign over the door which states: "A little housework probably won't kill you...but I'd rather not take the chance." Enough said!

It was certainly a very entertaining stay. There was a houseful of foaming railfans, a ton of trains, a bushel of beer, pizza on the porch, crackling scanners...and THE WHISTLE.

Yes, Tom has a train horn. Two, actually: one very "Conrail-ish", the other very "Amtrak-ish". He will disavow any official knowledge of this device, because his neighbors "think it's coming from the trains." So let's just say the compressor-powered phantom device is available for use at Tom's say-so, whenever one of his engineer friends rolls by in one of the myriad of trains that pass his establishment daily. It's just beyond cool!

All the great train watchin' sites are there in the area: Gallitzin, Cassandra, the Curve, Route 53 Bridge. Tom will give you a map.

Continued from Page 3

Sept. 25, 2003. I take full blame for any errors, of course, but please bring them to my attention.

As Cotton mentioned in his column 1/2 month ago (although perhaps not with a Navy analogy <g>), we need all hands on deck for the month of October. If you have a show-ready module, please bring it out to at least one show this month, preferably the two that I mentioned earlier.

Also, please call the set-up coordinator (or, in my own case, email is fine), in advance, if you are bringing out a module. "Semper Gumby" remains our club motto. But while we can stretch Gumby, we don't want him mangled. If you just show up with a module unannounced, not only is life more difficult, but there may not be space for it in the layout!

If you don't (yet) have a show-ready module, please consider helping with set-up and tear down at a show, especially if you want to run trains. There's plenty to do in setting up a layout, and an extra pair of hands is always appreciated.

The Back Shop on Oct. 5th should be an interesting affair. In addition to the Board and Convention Committee meetings, we will be testing and working not only on the new club junction modules, but also, on all 36 feet of Matthew and Ann Prentice' Alexandria Yard, formerly owned by Steve Triggs. That's the first time the \*whole\* yard has been out in several years! Also, it's a really good time to test track and wiring for any new modules that you want to set up in shows in the remainder of 2003.

I'll have sign-up sheets for shows in the next three months at the Back Shop, as well as maps. If you need directions, or any other information about upcoming shows, please see me there. Or call me at (202) 687-2509 or (703) 371-5171.

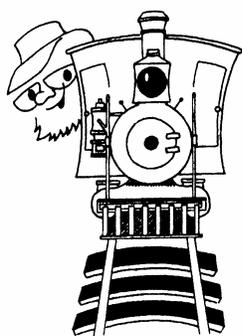
Zoo Tower is giving you a clear track down the main line. Please notch up the throttle and help us pull the load this month.

Not that you'll have any fun or anything.....

Semper Gumby!



All the comforts of home, and then some, as there's even a "Hoss's" Steakhouse in nearby Altoona. I passed out yellow '04 passes like they were goin' outta style, and the foamers all say they're coming! Tom and I exchanged stacks of brochures, and he says he can't wait to talk up next summer's shindig with his guests in the coming year. In all, it was great fun! We need to arrange a club trip there soon! Tom says we 'need to have the club up for a weekend'. Jake and I couldn't agree more! (Ed: We need another "recon in force," to analyze the changes wrought by NS)



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## *Northern Virginia NTRAK, Inc.*

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<http://www.nvntrak.org/>

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[dbdavies@cox.net](mailto:dbdavies@cox.net)

All submissions must contain clear text identification of the author to be accepted for publication.

Articles and other submissions for the November 2003 issue must be received by **October 25, 2003.**

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*Ed: On page 9, Brian discovers The Station Inn in Cresson, PA, ... I only go up there the day before a blizzard, since the roads up there are clear the next day so you can move around. ☺ Picture is at Cassandra Bridge, about 4 miles west of Cresson, (discovered during a NVNtrak "recon in force" during the last couple weeks of Conrail operation), after spending the night at the Station Inn during a snow storm.*