

The Shelf Layout Company, Inc.

By Roger L. Cason, MMR
Photographs by Lance Mindheim

**MADE IN
THE MER**

NO TIME TO BUILD your own layout? No problem!! Lance Mindheim (owner of “The Shelf Layouts Company”) is ready to give you a hand. Lance’s full time business is building layouts for other people.

A civil engineering graduate from Purdue, Lance worked for four years in the heavy construction industry. He then sold insurance for about seventeen years. From there, he moved part time into the not-so-heavy construction business of building model railroads for other people. Five years ago, after several years of both building models and selling insurance, he moved full time into model building. His work has been featured in more than eight articles in the model railroad press.

Like most people in the model railroad business, Lance is an avid modeler. He has not one, but two layouts—an N scale layout depicting the Monon in Bloomington, Indiana in 1955, and an HO switching layout that depicts the CSX in the Miami, Florida area.

Lance works with customers—one on one—to supply what the customer chooses not to do, or is unable to build. Moving up in complexity, he builds many layouts that are mechanically complete and fully operational, but which have no scenery or structures. (This has been the most popular option.) He can also supply a layout that is complete in every detail and built to customer specifications.

Size may be as small as a switching layout, or as large as the proverbial “basement empire”. His largest-ever layout was a 35’ x 12’ N scale “empire” that took a year to build, and cost in the low six figures. Many of his customers are skilled model builders


who cannot build a complete layout because of time pressure from their profession or business. Many of them have specific prototypes in mind, and will contact Lance having done the

necessary prototype research. Most customers are individuals rather than businesses. Lance is most comfortable working in Z, N, HO or S scales—i.e. little O scale, and no 3-rail or G gauge. Roughly 80 percent of his business is in HO scale.

Within reason, Lance will build almost anything the customer wants, whether it’s a “shelf layout” or not. The business title simply refers to the current tendency to build layouts long and narrow (up to maybe 24” wide), rather than creating a table top spaghetti bowl of track work.

Like many of us, he notes that the hobby is changing. Rolling stock and scenery materials are clearly superior to what was available some years ago. To a degree, it has become a hobby of “accumulators” rather than scratch builders. Lance also notes several business realities. His business volume tends to be cyclical, moving up and down with the stock market. And, like any business, marketing is a constant concern (“building stuff is the easy part”).

Lance exhibits at Timonium and occasionally at other shows. The quickest way to see his work is his website: www.shelflayouts.com. Or you can contact him at 3204 Verona Drive, Silver Spring, MD 20906. He is also available by phone: (301) 404-8164 and email: lmindheim@shelflayouts.com.

ROGER CASON, MMR lives in the Philadelphia Division 3 and is very active both locally and nationally. His accomplishments are many—including reporting on “Made in the MER”. 



A section of a complete fully scened layout, including two scratch-built trestles.



A mechanically complete layout, ready for owner-installed scenery and structures.