



About our layouts columnist



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UP THE CREEK: Making a layout seem larger

A regular report on the construction of a 1950s-something layout

A clipping from the *South Jackson Gazette*

Quantum Theory!

The patrons at the South Jackson Tavern are in an uproar again. It seems the cause this time was the town's native son Ed Caited, recently returned from college with a head full of the latest theories of Terra Formingtm, the science of creating landscapes from nothing.

It seems the "latest theories" involve quantizing terrain into a bunch of smaller and smaller areas - a concept which had some locals concerned that their own patches of real estate were about to shrink.

As Horace Fithers put it, "I sure worked dern hard to get the stuff I got now. Lost everything a couple of times too. I ain't too all fired happy with the prospect of seeing everything shrink up or get cut into itty-bitty pieces! Them college types are getting out of hand I tell ya!"

Ed Caited tried valiantly to explain to the excited crowd that the nature of quantized scenery would make everything seem larger instead of shrinking it. By creating a series of what he called micro-vignettes (a fancy name for scenic quanta) the time spent traveling from one in-

finitesimal piece to another would actually result in any trip appearing to take much longer than before. To prove it he whipped out a slide rule and started scribbling equations on a bunch of cocktail napkins.

However, by the time he'd finished his audience had wandered off grumbling about smarty pants college graduates, leaving only the owner of Hillmovers Construction who had stopped by the S J Tavern to wet his whistle.

Said he, "Gosh, it sounds like we sort of been doing this all along - we just didn't realize it!"

This reporter certainly hopes that quantum effects don't make his train run late tonight. ☒



*post hole digger

In this month's Up the Creek column I'll be talking about ways I attempt to make my layout seem larger (without actually expanding the physical railroad).

In our all-too-small train rooms one of the most frequently faced problems is making our layouts seem bigger. Of course, one could always opt for brute force methods, but knocking out walls and expanding the size of a train room is usually impractical. A different way of making a layout seem bigger is needed.

Backdrop view blocks

A layout room will often seem much larger if filled with a serpentine peninsula with a view blocking backdrop. If they can't see the whole layout at once - you need to walk around the corner to see what's around the corner - people will feel a bit of the isolation of being out on the high iron somewhere with nothing else around.

In some cases this isn't desirable or practical. Many layout owners prefer a sweeping vista style - having view blocking backdrops doesn't work for them. Layout builders with less room, say a spare bedroom or smaller may not be able to implement such view blocking backdrops, let alone a serpentine peninsula.



FIGURE 1: Micro-vignettes on the BC&SJ. This scene is divided up by the turnout in the foreground, the road, the tracks, and the small cut the train is passing through.

Vignettes

To my mind a vignette implies a backdrop that curves out across the scenery to the aisle edge physically separating the layout into several scenic segments (see Figure 2). Track passes between vignettes by punching through the backdrops.

Although highly effective at separating scenes from each other vignette construction can require much ingenuity from a modeler when it comes to disguising the holes in the sky where inter-vignette trackage passes between scenes. In a mountainous area tunnels are an obvious answer, as are industrial canyons formed by tall buildings in a city scene. But what about modeling rural Kansas or Florida where there aren't many tall buildings and tunnels are few and far between (or filled with water and alligators)?

Micro Vignettes

I've found over the years that dividing layout scenery into small local scenes fools my brain (what's left of it anyway) into thinking that a stretch of track is longer than it is. This happens because instead of sweeping quickly down the benchwork my eyes pause to examine each scene. This is especially true when standing close to the layout, because it takes time to individually examine each scene, it feels like the space is bigger than it is.

So what's the difference between a vignette and a micro vignette? Simple. A micro vignette doesn't use a backdrop

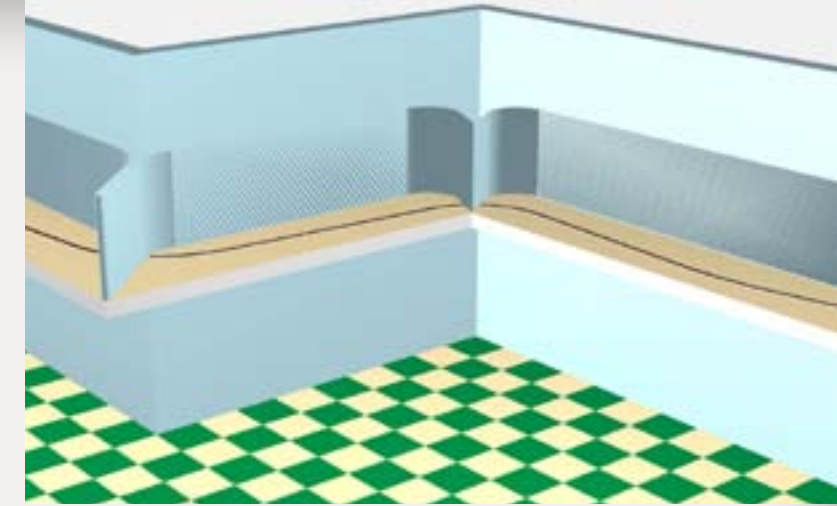


FIGURE 2: Vignettes created by backdrop extensions

curving out to the aisle to demarcate boundaries.

Instead of being separated from their neighbors by a tunnel or an urban industrial canyon, they're delineated by landscape features. I've used as simple a separator as a couple of trees or a creek. Other things I've used include:

- Track passing through a tunnel or a cut in a hill.
- Track passing over a canyon, valley, or river on a bridge
- A change in track gradient
- A row of trees
- A junction
- A building
- A grade crossing

The effectiveness of micro-vignettes at catching and holding your eye depends on details. George Selios is a master of this on his Franklin & South Manchester with its incredible level of detail. It's also true that a micro-vignette may contain other micro-vignettes.

The accompanying photos show some of the micro-vignettes on my Bear Creek & South Jackson Railroad.



FIGURE 4: How many micro vignettes in this photo? What about nested ones like the bridge scene? Are each of the rock faces a micro vignette too?



FIGURE 5: The scene dividers here are the tree and warehouse on the right and the end of the quarry and the grade crossing on the left.



FIGURE 5a (left): A close up of the tree and warehouse in the photo above. When a train passes behind these scenic elements my brain tells me it's a new micro vignette on the other side. This scene is at 63", eye level, which enhances this effect.



FIGURE 6: The foreground grade crossing is a major divider here as is the cut the track passes through in the distance. The tracks are also scenic dividers here, splitting the foreground from the log loading area in the background. What micro-vignettes do you see?



FIGURE 7: The same scene (as fig 6) but from a different angle. The details on the foreground dirt road really attract attention from the viewer's eyes. This scene is also 63" above the floor.



FIGURE 8: I count 5 micro vignettes here, not including the foreground grass and bushes. From left to right, the Bear Creek Salvage Co., the big tree scene, the Mill Bend Rescue Mission, the Cold Storage parking lot, and the reefer loading doors on the Cold Storage Co.



FIGURE 9: From left to right there are a canyon, a tunnel, a rock face, a high mountain valley, followed by another tunnel. Four major micro-vignettes plus some minor ones once the scenery is completed.



FIGURE 10 (left): Micro vignettes need not be oriented left to right. In this different view of figure 11 (top right) you can see different micro vignettes progressing from the aisle (right) to the backdrop (left).

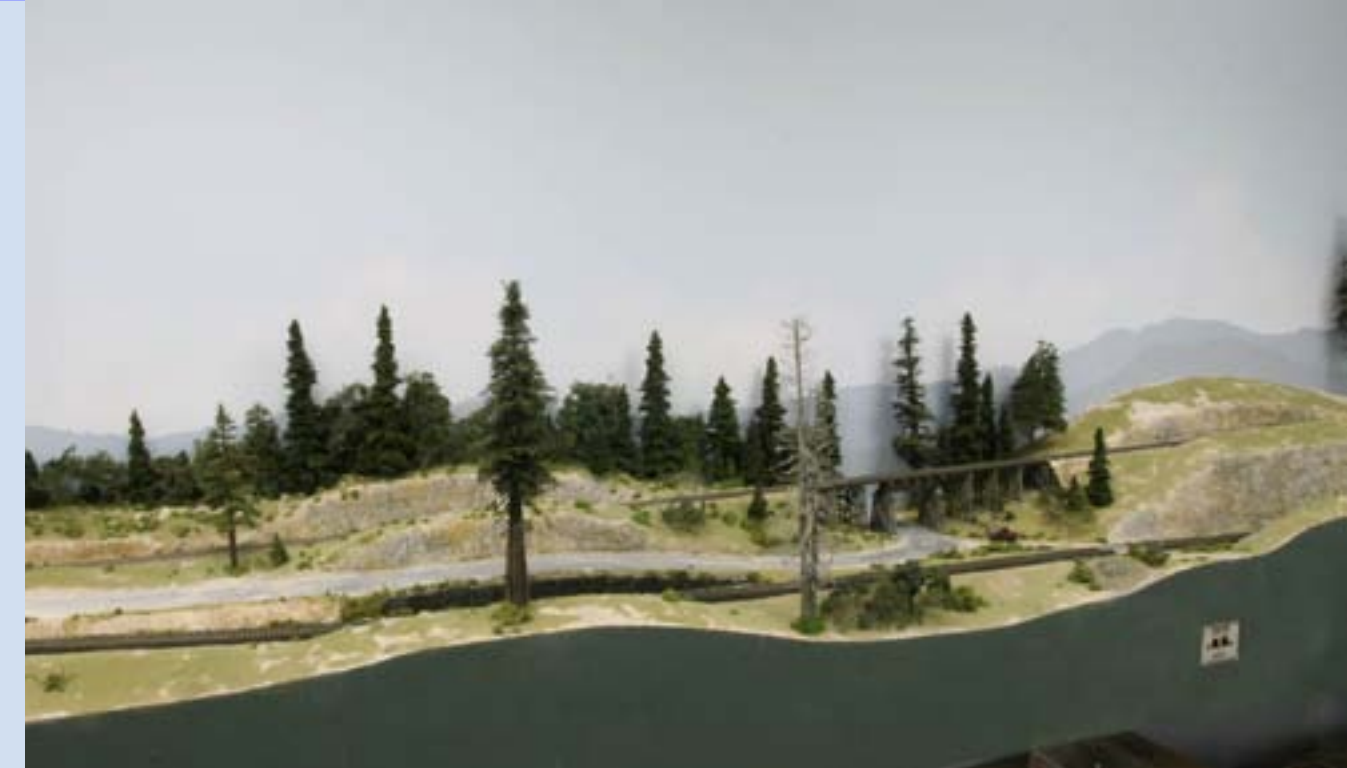


FIGURE 11: The tall cedar and the snag in the foreground, plus the wood trestle in the background, are the major dividers here. But the cuts in which the main and branch line tracks run are also dividers.

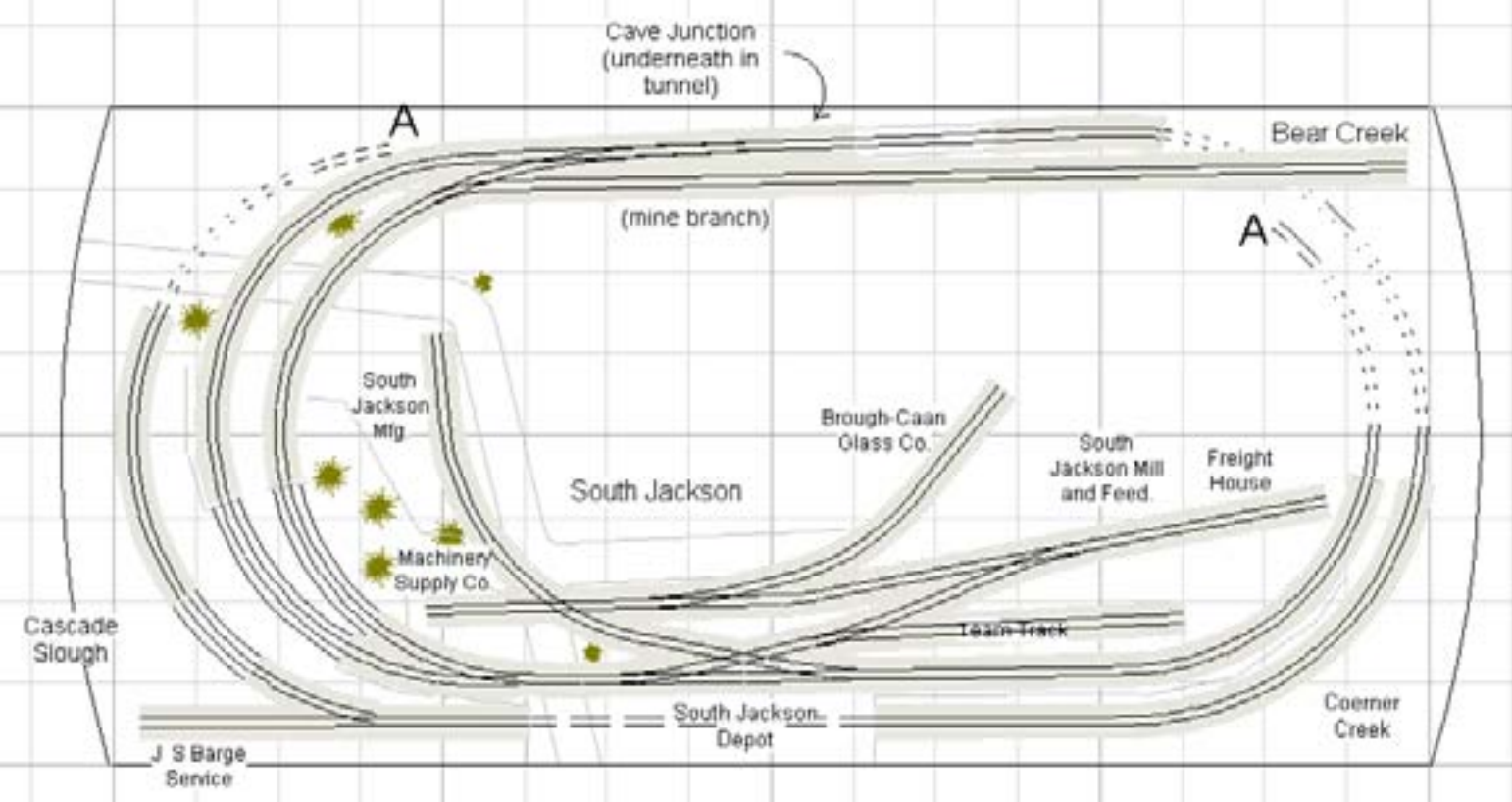


FIGURE 12: The bridge (from fig 11) is the main attraction here but the foreground dirt road divides the big cut (on the branch line) from the more grassy areas on the left.

FIGURE 13: The grade crossing is the major scene divider here. But the brick warehouse, junction track, tower, billboard, and background vegetation all have their own micro vignettes.



FIGURE 14: I spent some time detailing the Sixth St. Warehouse to provide more stuff for eyeballs and brains to dwell upon before resuming their march across the layout.



Smaller layouts

Micro-vignettes work well to keep the old eye balls looking on my current railroad. But it's large layout. How well does this concept work with a smaller layout?

I stumbled on the micro-scene concept on my 1st version of the BC&SJ, a 4x8 twice around design. I read about mini-scenes in magazines and scenery how-to books so I'm not going to claim I invented it.

I built the layout with L-girders and included some elevation change going around its two laps. I won't claim that I did it on purpose (I didn't) but it did eventually have quite a number of micro-vignettes on it. Here's a partial list:

- Track on a mountain side with a bridge over a steep, rocky creek

FIGURE 15 (above): The 4x8 (well almost) track plan of my first BC&SJ. When I designed it I had no idea what a micro vignette was! As it turned out the layout was full of them!



How many micro vignettes can fit in a 4x8 layout? Lots of em!

The photos on this and the next page are of my first Bear Creek and South Jackson Railroad (see figure 15). It turned out that a twice around track plan with mountain scenery was good combination for maximizing micro-vignettes...





- A branch line to Bear Creek (which later became a mine, then the Jallen branch)
- Two main-line grade crossings in South Jackson (the main town)
- The South Jackson depot (and 5 other industries) plus a row of shops/offices
- Three tunnels
- A deck girder bridge over Cascade Slough
- A long masonry retaining wall.

That's quite a few scenes for a 4x8 layout and they made it seem bigger both when running trains and in photographs.

Summary

Adding detailed micro vignettes won't actually make your layout bigger or your runs longer (as measured in feet). But it will feel bigger because your eyes will want to stop at each scene and linger there instead of rushing onward to take in the whole layout all at once. ✓



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More micro vignette photos from my first, 4x8 layout.

Roads, creeks, buildings, mountains, and track all work as scene dividers...

