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CHRISTMAS HAS MEANT TOY TRAINS

FOR A Century

LITTLE ENGINES AND
CARS HELP FAMILIES
CELEBRATE



Christmas means so much to us. Every person celebrating on December 25 has thoughts about which foods must be served, how the tree should be decorated, and when presents ought to be opened.

People can disagree in a good-natured way about whether turkey or ham is more appropriate and if a glass star or a porcelain angel should crown the fir tree (real or artificial? That's a whole other debate!). However, everybody we at *Classic Toy Trains* have spoken with insists there has to be a toy train running on a loop of track.

GRAND TRADITION

Quite a tradition – assembling a loop of track under a Christmas tree so a train can chug-chug-chug around it without interruption. It's a beloved tradition, one Americans, Canadians, and probably folks overseas have been nurturing

for more than a century. And one with great popularity even now.

The image of a train in operation beneath a decorated Christmas tree did much to inspire the editorial and art teams at *Classic Toy Trains* when we discussed the theme of our latest special-interest publication. Memories of growing up with a Lionel or American Flyer train at the foot of a tree motivated many members to recommend concentrating on a holiday subject.

Shortly after settling on *Christmas and Electric Trains* as the name and overarching motif, questions arose about the tradition. How far back did it extend? Also, what influenced its development?

No surprise to learn that people still arrange track under their tree and run a new or vintage train. Nor did it come as a shock to recall how popular that practice was during in prewar and postwar days.

But just when did families begin to associate miniature trains with the celebration of Christmas?



That question about the background of this tradition left us puzzled. So too did matters about the reasons why families celebrated with a toy train and how much time and money they might allocate to acquiring one. The search for answers was on.

SIMPLE BEGINNING

Understanding the history of toy trains and Christmas in America definitely requires us to broaden our thinking. Rather than focus on the locomotives and track under the tree, we need to investi-

gate the tradition of creating meaningful scenes there.

In the case of using objects to depict something of importance at the base of a Christmas tree, the religious meaning and symbolism of the holiday prevail. Christians believe December 25 was the day Jesus was born. If the choice of an evergreen represents the belief that Jesus lives on in ways unlike any mortal person, then why not show at its foot scenes linked to his birth and life?

Thus it happened at least as early as the middle part of

the 18th century that Protestants who had immigrated to Colonial America made miniature Nativity scenes in their homes prior to Christmas. The first group known to have done so consisted of Moravians who had been settling the Lehigh Valley in eastern Pennsylvania.

Moravian families created scenes they called by a German noun, “*putzen*” (translated as “finery,” “trappings,” or “decoration”). Other terms were “Christmas village” and “Christmas garden.”

GARDENS GROW

Decades passed, with the size and scope of the individual *putzen* continuing to

increase. The centerpiece of the Nativity scenes consisted of a manger with figures of Joseph and Mary hovering over Jesus as a newborn. Customarily surrounding them were the Magi (Three Wise Men) as well as oxen and sheep. Artisans carved them all out of wood and then delicately painted them.

Individuals enlarged and enhanced the Nativity scenes to educate their children and testify to their faith. Some builders sprinkled sawdust and fine dirt to serve as the roads leading to the manger. Others scattered stones and moss to represent caves or grottoes and arranged sticks and twigs as miniature trees.

**THE SPIRIT BEHIND MAKING MORE ELABORATE
CHRISTMAS GARDENS DROVE INDIVIDUALS
AND FAMILIES TO MOVE FULL-SPEED AHEAD.**



Christmas villages had by the first half of the 19th century spread from the floor under a tree to additional scenes on the fireplace mantel and nearby tables. Expanding to more places inspired families to think beyond Nativity scenes. They modeled other events linked to the childhood of Jesus, such as the confrontation between King Herod and the Magi.

The more families wanted to represent, the more miniature animals and people, houses and fields needed. Soon, Christmas gardens had what were contemporary scenes reflecting the environment of rural America.

PLACE FOR TRAINS

Pictures of Christmas villages and reminiscences of them attested to the fact that by the turn of the 20th century biblical elements were

sharing space with modern ones. Farms and churches were as integral as mangers.

Most often, people had made by hand the details and structures they desired. But folks lacking a sense of creativity could turn to commercial sources. They depended on painted wood and metal toys representing horse-drawn wagons, fences, humans and animals, and barns.

The spirit behind making more elaborate Christmas garden drove individuals and families to move full-speed ahead. Which motivated them to add trains into their three-dimensional visions of life in the countryside. Cast-iron renderings of steam engines, boxcars, and passenger coaches soon entered.

THE RIGHT ADDITION

Integrating miniature windup and electric trains into Christmas *putzen* made sense for two basic reasons.

First, railroads had, by the early 1900s, become key players in American life. They carried every kind of raw and

finished good across short and vast distances, along with people from different classes. Relatives could travel a long way to join in the Christmas festivities, thanks to the growing rail networks.

Second, toy versions of locomotives and rolling stock appealed to the youngsters waiting for their holiday gifts. It was fair to say that by the first half of the 20th century, an electric train had risen to become the most desirable and sophisticated plaything a child, really a young man, might dream of owning.

Of course, even before electric toy trains came to dominate the domestic market, kids were pulling or pushing wood or metal engines and cars across a floor. So those non-animated little trains appeared in Christmas gardens first.



TOY TRAIN Memories

FIRST TRAIN, SANTA CLAUS, & FAMILY

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Lionel Trains make a Boy feel like a Man
and a Man feel like a Boy

Everybody gets into the act, when it's Lionel Trains for Christmas.

Sonny dreams of himself in a snappy engineer's cap, hand at the throttle of a 500-ton mainliner... blundering ahead, real whistle a-blowin', real smoke a-puffin' in'. Yes, Sonny is thrilled with power and responsibility. He is a man among men, a man to be envied—a Lionel engineer.

And say, Dad; who got these trains for Christmas? You're acting like a boy. You'll show him how to run these trains, eh! You had Lionel Trains when you were a kid. Well, it's great to feel like a kid again. Dad, and it's good for you. For proof, just look at the gleam in Mom's eyes.

And remember, only Lionel Trains match a boy's Christmas dream, and Dad's too. The world's finest trains for over 50 years, they are unequalled for scale—de-tailed railroad realism, for steel wheeled solidly... for remote control precision... for the thrill, speed, power, climb and control that only Magna-Traction* gives you. See catalogue at your dealer's or send coupon for special offer.

*Available in '60" gauge sets and in most "027" sets.

See all the Lionel Trains and accessories in this new 36-page, full-color catalogue. **Free!** Lionel Trains in this double-faced 5 1/2" R.R. sound effects record. Send coupon now for special offer.

LIONEL

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____

1. The new 36-page full-color Lionel catalogue;
2. The new 5 1/2" double-faced record* of whistles, bells, rattles, sound effects and Diesel horns;
3. 10 full-color miniature billboards.

*Place on all 78 RPM phonograph's except some fixed speeds or automatic changers.

Many of the hobbyists sharing their memories of receiving their first train can remember paging through the full-color consumer catalogs put out each year by the principal American manufacturers of electric toy trains. They may also recall the eye-catching advertisements put in mass-circulation magazines and Sunday newspapers.

During the late prewar and postwar eras, executives at the A.C. Gilbert Co. and the Lionel Corp. considered the annual holiday season to open in the early autumn. They released approximately one million copies of catalogs aimed at loyal and potential customers. In the pages of those wish books, youngsters and adults saw the new sets as well as the locomotives, rolling stock and accessories being offered for the year.

Picking up a free copy of the catalog led to many hours of perusing the latest additions. Studying what was available always inspired dreams. Kids spent their leisure hours debating what to request for Christmas. Like the baby boomers reminiscing here, they weighed the merits of various engines and cars, signals and freight loaders, tunnels and transformers. Then they told every grown-up what they wanted most.

To spark excitement even more, leading toy train companies arranged for vivid advertisements to go into popular magazines and metropolitan newspapers, usually in November. The purpose was to push children to beg for that first set or something more for their budding rail empires. And as the different individuals looking back in these pages can attest, the catalogs and ads performed that task beautifully.

YOUNGSTERS AND THEIR PARENTS BENEFITED, although in different ways, when a family invested in an electric train. Lionel promoted that idea in the advertisements it placed in magazines so adults, fathers above all, would consider a new set indispensable.

TRACKS AROUND THE *Christmas*

Call it the “December Dilemma”:

How to create an entertaining S or O gauge layout at the base of your Christmas tree? There seldom is a great deal of real estate beneath the decorated tree. Besides, with people (and often pets) walking in the area adjacent to the decorated tree, a sprawling track plan only means problems.

For many modelers, a simple circle or an elongated oval of

two- or three-rail ends up occupying whatever open space exists around the tree. After laying and wiring the basic main line, they arrange the wrapped gifts on the periphery.

Face it, though – a single train chasing its tail over a one-track loop gets mighty boring mighty fast. Santa Claus does not like boring. Neither do we at *Classic Toy Trains*. So we’re offering four compact track plans with operating variety.





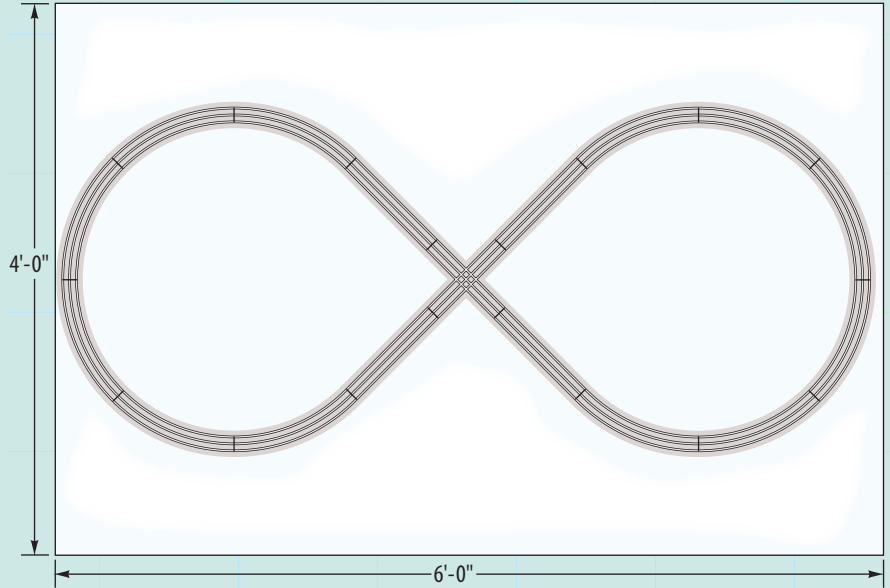
tree

FOUR COOL PLANS FOR THE PERFECT HOLIDAY DISPLAY

Illustrations by Kellie Jaeger



Three generations of Ed Werner's family helped build the O gauge Polar Mountain & Warren RR display. They laid the MTH track and used a "snow blanket" purchased from a local crafts store to decorate the different heights. By installing block-style electrical wiring, any of them can operate two of their Pennsylvania RR trains at the same time.



TRADITIONAL FIGURE-EIGHT LAYOUT LIONEL SECTIONAL TRACK COMPONENTS

Quantity	Description
4	full straight, 10-inch
12	0-31 curve, 45-degree
1	90-degree crossing

↑ ONE SPECIAL TRACK section is all that's needed to design an elementary yet enjoyable layout in any scale that resembles an eight. Commercial 90-degree crossings have long been staples in the hobby. This track plan occupies a 4 x 6-foot area.

Probably the easiest and most obvious method for expanding beyond the basic circle of track beneath a Christmas tree is to use a 90-degree crossing to transform a layout resembling a zero into a figure-8.

Kids can join in the fun as you connect the four straight sections adjacent to the 90-degree crossing filling the center of the O gauge layout. Then come the 12 curves. The system illustrated in the accompanying plan fills a 4 x 6-foot area.

The open spaces above and below the crossing are equal in size. This may make locating your Christmas tree inside one of them easy. It can, however, also cause a headache because the tree does not become the centerpiece of your display.

If you don't mind having the festive fir at one end, then the operating train will dominate the scene. Make the freight or passenger train sufficiently long to generate excitement from viewers. They'll get a kick out of watching the speedy locomotive barrel

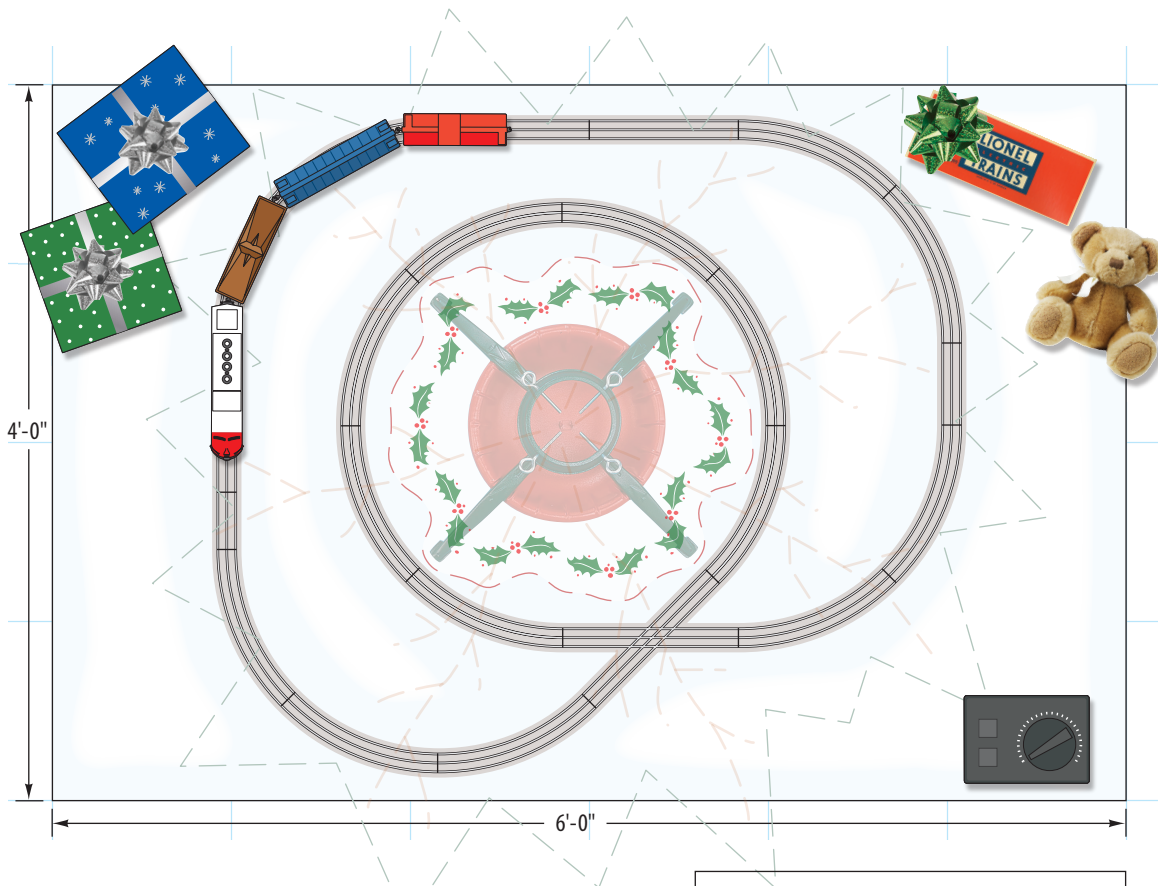
toward the crossing as the final car barely squeezes through.

A fun variation on the traditional figure-8 fashioned out of tubular track involves substituting sections from the old SuperStreets system for operating vehicles. These days, modelers go with a similar product from Williams by Bachmann: E-Z Streets. It's available online and sold in many hobby shops and train stores.

What was especially neat about the plan Kent Johnson wrote about in the December 2011 CTT was that the loops of the figure-8 were not equal in size. By using SuperStreets curves slightly different in diameter (16 and 21 inches), he was able to create two ovals, one of which was a bit larger overall than its neighbor.

At the end of the layout with the more expansive open area, Kent and his family put their Christmas tree. Gifts and a few model structures found homes in the middle, on either side of the SuperStreets intersection (90-degree crossing).

2 TIGHTER PLAN WITH MORE TRACK



↑ TRYING A COMMERCIAL 45-DEGREE crossing in place of a 90-degree piece helped model railroader Chris Ritchie create an O gauge layout in 24 square feet that promised to make the Christmas tree the principal feature. The arrangement also yielded a much longer running line. Chris and his family really liked that fact, saying it greatly enhanced their enjoyment.

MODIFIED FIGURE-EIGHT LAYOUT LIONEL SECTIONAL TRACK COMPONENTS

Quantity	Description
16	O-31 curve, 45-degree
1	custom-cut half-straight, 3½-inch
1	half-straight, 5-inch
3	full straight, 10-inch
1	45-degree crossing

Remember how, a few paragraphs earlier, several of the inherent shortcomings of a figure-8 were mentioned? Its symmetrical shape can relegate a majestic tree loaded down with decorations to a mere supporting role on Christmas morning. Additionally, its sprawling arrangement may rob your house of walking room.

Chris Ritchie devised a very clever solution, which he outlined in the December 2010 CTT. He swapped a 45-degree crossing for a 90-degree to create a more compact plan that still gave a train greater running room over his 4 x 6-foot layout. His decorated fir

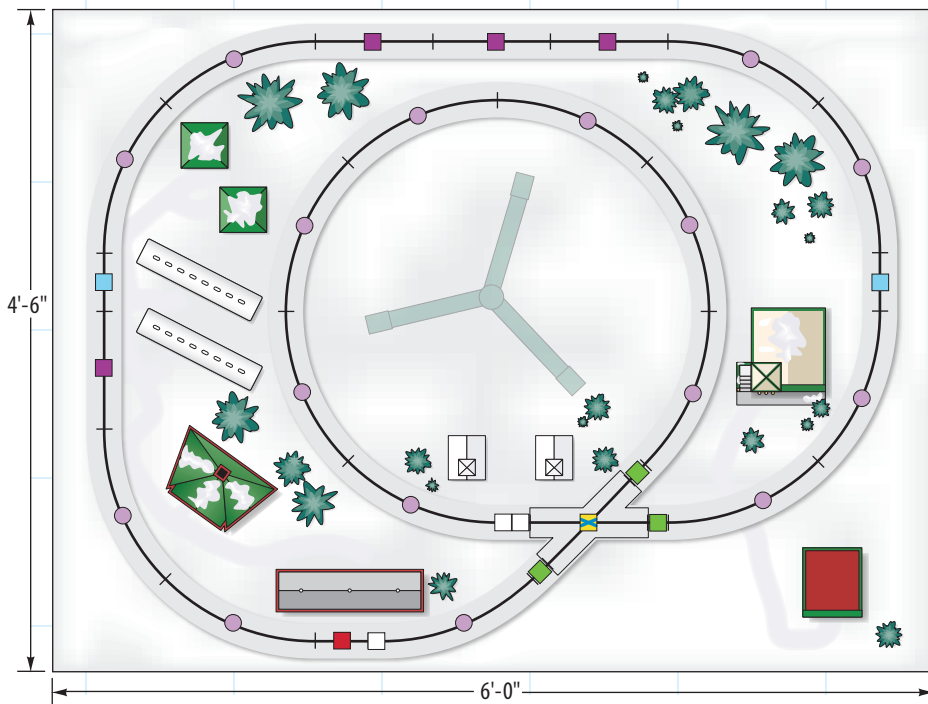
tree maintains its traditional spot right in the middle, with a sprawling network of O gauge track surrounding it.

The project begins with putting down 16 curved sections of tubular track. You can also use O-31 items from the Real-Trax system developed by MTH Electric Trains and still fit in the 4 x 6-foot area.

Please be aware that if you opt for the modified figure-8 plan, you will need more than just standard straights and curves plus the requisite 45-degree crossing. Chris also made use of two 5-inch half-straight pieces. He finished by cutting down one of those special sections to 3.5 inches to fit.

Another *Classic Toy Trains* reader made further changes to the figure-8 by substituting Lionel FasTrack for those traditional tubular sections. Modeler James Lowell Fry explained in the December 2012 issue how using the brand developed with plastic roadbed altered the look of the layout. As James pointed out, FasTrack is wider than old-fashioned O gauge because its curves have a diameter of 36 inches and not 31.

Consequently, the holiday three-rail layout James had finished for his family required a space under their Christmas tree measuring 4.5 x 6 feet. No one, he wrote, complained at all!



← **THE FIGURE-8** characterized by a 45-degree crossing in place of a 90-degree section appealed to many readers of *Classic Toy Trains*. Several requested guidance on making it with Fastrack, and one contributor shared what he had done with the wider brand.

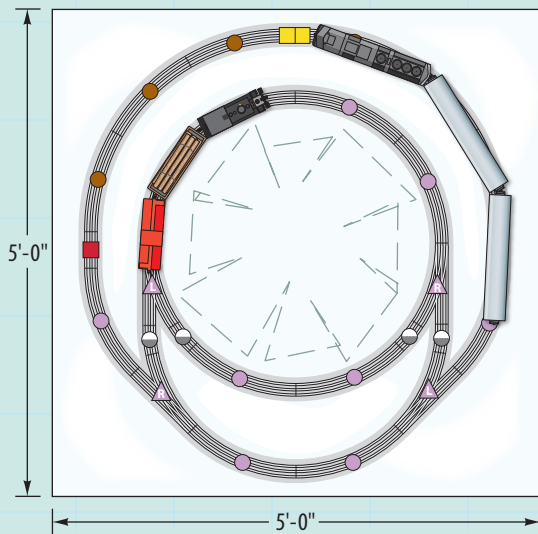
LIONEL FASTRACK COMPONENTS

Quantity	Description/Number
3	□ 1.375 fitter
3	■ 1.75-inch straight
1	■ 4.5-inch straight
2	■ 5-inch straight
4	■ 10-inch straight
16	● 0-36 curve
1	■ 45-degree crossing

↓ **THE MODIFIED FIGURE-8** plan can easily be adapted to accommodate contemporary Fastrack sections from Lionel in place of traditional tubular track. James Lowell Fry explained how he made the switch to build this wonderful Christmas display.



3 SWITCHING TIME UNDER THE TREE



↑ AMAZING HOW MUCH operating action can take place under a Christmas tree laden with decorations simply by adding pairs of right- and left-hand switches! Guests of all ages will have a blast on December 25 when you let them direct the traffic.

LIONEL FASTRACK COMPONENTS

Quantity	Description/Number
2	1.375-inch straight (12073)
2	4.5-inch straight (12025)
10	0-36 curve, 45-degree (12015)
4	0-36 curve, 11.25-degree (12023)
6	0-48 curve, 30-degree (12043)
2	0-36 left-hand track switch, manual (12017)
2	0-36 right-hand track switch, manual (12018)

Looking back several years to when Kent Johnson wrote his article for CTT, I seem to recall the reason for his sketching different plans for a compact O gauge layout around the tree was his bringing home a brand-new artificial tree for the entire household to enjoy.

The new purchase, Kent continued, was a “slim profile artificial tree,” which is a tree whose boughs extended about half as far as was typical.

The advantages of such a Christmas tree for a family intending to develop a layout at the base? There was plenty of room for ornaments to hang from the branches yet they wouldn’t hide from the view of visitors the train operating over the tracks.

Of course, Kent envisioned a more elaborate display than the figure-8s discussed previously. Buying two pairs of manual switches made it possible.

In an area measuring 5 feet x 5 feet, Kent planned to erect around the tree a couple of loops of Lionel’s popular FasTrack connected by four switches. His goal was lots of activity; having two trains run in and out of the loops did that.

The list of track components shows how Kent capitalized on the variety of pieces Lionel has added to its FasTrack lineup. Two kinds of O-36 curves serve as the foundation, along with wider O-48 curves and the switches.

The number of straight sections turned out to be quite small. Kent needed only four. Two spanned only 1.375 inches. The others were 4.5 inches.

Kent shared hints about upgrading operation of the Christmas display. First, he mentioned running a long train on the wider (outer) loop and a motorized unit in the opposite direction on the tighter (inner) loop.

Second, Kent told how, by substituting remote-controlled turnouts for the manual switches, he changed the layout to hands-free operation. So he could relax with his wife, son, and friends who dropped by to share the holiday.

4 TRIPLE-TIMER PLAN

Our fourth recommendation for how to display your toy trains around a Christmas tree hearkens way back to a design created by Neil Besougloff for the December 2006 issue. He had a sizable footprint in his living room – a 6.5 x 6.5-foot open space. All Neil’s wife and sons asked was that he let their tall tree remain the focal point.

The result of hours spent doodling and experimenting with new sections of tubular track was a plan enabling a freight or passenger train to travel around the tree three times before returning to its starting point. While on the journey, it was going to climb to an elevated line, cruise above the floor, and then dip back down.

If an operator were inclined, he or she was invited to skip the main route by diverting the train to a curved siding terminating with an illuminated bumper. The manually operated right-hand switch made changing the direction of the train a breeze.

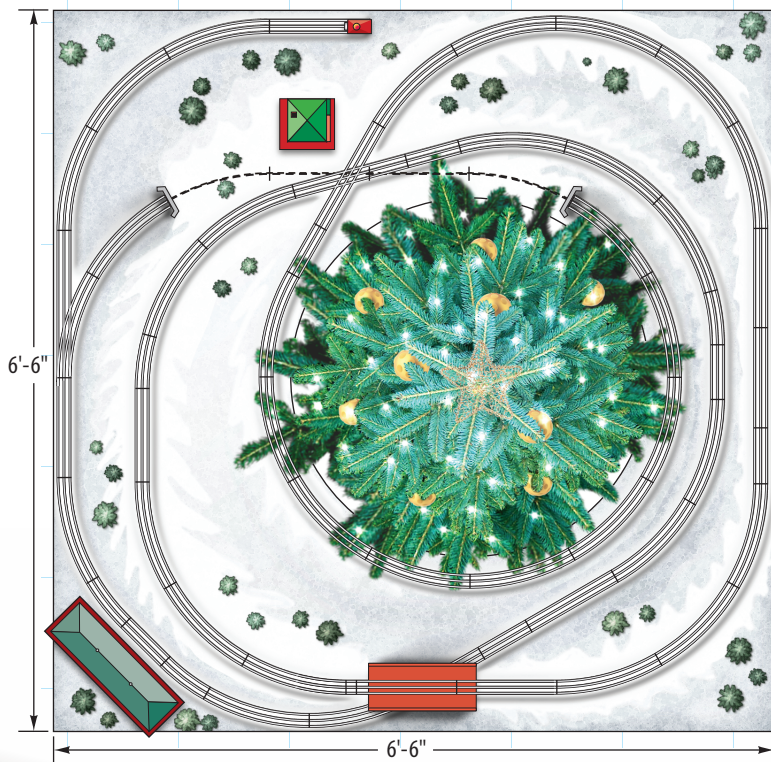
The rather elaborate plan called for patience and precision when it came time to lay the track. Besides the stack of 42-inch-diameter curves and standard single and half straight sections, a few pieces had to be cut down in length. Other than the manual turnout, the only kind of specialized track item needed was a 45-degree crossing.

In the years since the triple-timer plan made its debut, a few readers have let us know they used it for an entertaining Christmas display. They offered some clues about how to elevate the lines. Commercial sets of graduated trestles proved to be favorites, although other modelers described using hunks of wood and foam.

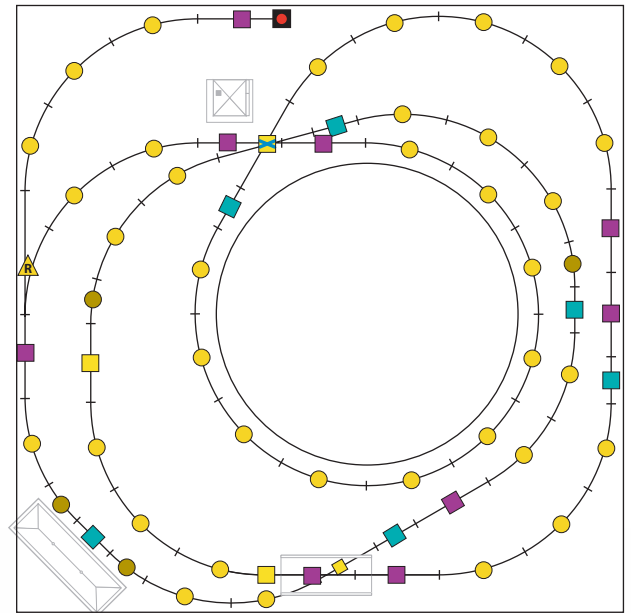
Good luck with whichever one of these four track plans you choose for the layout constructed around your Christmas tree. Once you have finished and have a train running, please send photos of your display to *Classic Toy Trains*.

Better yet, if you develop a different track plan for the area, please share it with us. You may be creating something in the square footage available to you that will in turn benefit other modelers struggling to find the ideal arrangement. •

CLIMBS UP AND DIPS DOWN



↑ **MODEL RAILROADERS WITH MORE TIME** and experience, not to mention a lot of room around their Christmas tree, have tackled the project introduced by *Classic Toy Trains* in 2006. This plan underlay construction of a “three times around the tree” layout in O gauge.



LIONEL O GAUGE TUBULAR TRACK COMPONENTS

Quantity	Description/Number
6	half-straight (65505)
9	single straight (65500)
3	custom-cut straight
36	O-42 curve (12925)
4	O-42 custom-cut curve
1	▲ K-Line O-42 right-hand track switch (K0374)
1	■ 45-degree crossing (65545)
1	■ track bumper (260)

↓ **ED AND MICHAEL WERNER**, inspired by the plan for a “three times around a tree” layout, built a modified version. They relied on wider O-45 RealTrax pieces from MTH.

