Chapter Five

Adding Scenery to Your Layout

S o how do you turn your track-on-plywood toy train layout into something more realistic? It's simple. All it takes is some basic scenery supplies, some imagination, and some small helping hands—oh yes, and some "quality time."

Railroad layouts range from toy train, which is pretty much what we accomplished in Chapters 3 and 4, to hi-rail —"model-railroad-speak" for everything in scale except for the center rail. True hi-rail layouts are gorgeous, but they are the exception; the vast majority of us land somewhere between toy train and hi-rail. What is important is that you enjoy what you are doing and that you have created an atmosphere for you and your children to have fun and to exercise your imaginations.

everal companies sell scenery materials, and they are all pretty good. To simulate grass, dirt, and other types of ground coverings, you can buy bags or boxes of multi-colored materials. To simulate brush, plants, and bushes, you can buy different color foliage matting. You can buy ready-made trees of different sizes, shapes, and types, or you can buy tree kits and make your own. To vary the flat landscape of a train board, you can make elevations in the landscape by piling small amounts of fine sand and then covering it with the speckled colored covering. To make hills and mountains you can use newspaper, wire screening, tape, paper towels, and plaster, or plaster cloth. For coloring the mountains and painting streets, visit your local hardware store and have them mix various colors of brown for mountains, medium gray for streets, and dark green for the undercoating.

Streets

As a first step, use a black marker to outline where you want the streets, and then use lengths of masking tape to protect the track where streets cross them. For our layout, they're at the crossing gates. Next, mix the street paint. To simulate the rough appearance of paved streets, pour some medium gray paint into a small plastic bucket and start mixing small amounts of fine play sand into the paint. When the

mixture looks gravely, it's time to start painting. Use a small flat brush to run the paint along the black marker outlines, and then start painting the areas in between. Lift up the streetlights, the structures, and other accessories to paint under them. Now you know why I recommended that you have slack in the wiring of all your accessories! To keep the sand in suspension in the paint, you will need to stir the paint frequently.

Once you have covered the entire area, go back over it a second time, being sure to spread the sand-paint mixture evenly across the surface. Discard the remaining paint mixture, let the paint dry, and if necessary give it a second coat using a fresh sand-paint mixture.

Base coat

Once the gray street paint has dried, it's time to give the dark green train board a coat of earth color. You can use any brown ranging from tan to dark brown. The point is that when you add the ground cover you may miss some tiny spots. The brown undercoating color will help hide these. Besides, under any layer of grass there is brown dirt, and it shows through in places. Here again, to protect the track use masking tape to cover the sides. The taping will take you an hour or two, but it's well worth the effort, as children and paintbrushes do not equal neatness. Be sure to mask around any

street lamps that you may have screwed down, and also be sure to mask around the infrared sensors—especially red sensor faces!

Once you have completed the masking, paint the areas around the masking tape first to outline and box in the areas to be painted. Be careful when running the paintbrush next to the gray painted roads. Using the side of the brush with a moderate amount of paint will pretty much give you a nice even line between the gray road paint and the brown color.

Once you have boxed in the areas, paint the entire surface, let the paint dry, and then give it a second coat. After the paint has dried, remove the masking tape. The addition of two paint colors will make a dramatic change in the appearance of the train board.

Trees

Next let's add some trees. The tree trunks on ready-made trees are gray or brown plastic, but they are also shiny. To tone down the shine, apply a hobby paint clear dull coat. These clear dull coats can be either enamel-based or water-based. The water-based paints are safer.

Once the tree trunks and lower branches are painted with the dull coat, apply white glue to the bases of the trees and position them on the train board. Since trees grow just about anywhere, location is a matter of choice. Just don't get them too close to the right-of-way. My children painted the clear dull coat on the tree trunks and then positioned and glued the trees in place.

Ground cover

Now comes the really fun and messy part—spreading out the ground cover. You can find a variety of materials and products for this. I used a Woodland Scenics sifter, two bottles of their scenic cement, their scenic cement sprayer, and a small

flat paintbrush. Decide what color ground foam you want to spread out, and then pour some into the scenic sifter. Next pour some of the scenic cement into a cup and apply the cement to small areas at a time with your trusty paintbrush. I like to work in 1-foot squares or less because the cement dries quickly.

Using the sifter, spread out the ground cover. You will get the hang of this very quickly, and so will your children. The sifter will help you keep the ground cover concentrated in the area you painted with the cement.

Start out by applying the ground cover around the houses, being careful to have a good clean demarcation line between the ground cover and the gray street paint. Here again, lifting the accessories is a must, or the ground cover will get all over them. Using a dry paintbrush, remove excess ground cover from unwanted areas and from the tracks.

To seal the ground cover, spray the scenic cement with the sprayer. The ground cover color will appear dark because it's wet, but it will lighten up again once it dries. To protect the track, use a small length of cardboard to deflect the spray away from the track. Use a damp tissue to wipe away any excess ground cover that may have moved as a result of spraying. To keep things a little less messy, start from the inside areas and work towards the outside. As soon as you have finished with the sprayer, clean it with hot water to remove excess glue from the nozzle.

I used green-colored ground cover for the area around the houses and brown and dirt colors for the areas around the train station, the switch tower, and near the track. To provide some depth to the colors, I lightly sprinkled two shades of green over the brown. Then to offset the solid green grass color, I sprinkled on a lighter shade of green and some brown. Since trees usually have slightly elevated areas around the bases of their trunks, I simulated this by piling the ground cover at the bases of the trees. This also hid the round bases of the trees.

Hills

As I worked my way around the outer part of the track, I decided to add two small hills to the end that had the double oval track. A simple way to make elevations is to wad up newspapers and bunch them in the location where you want the hill. Secure the paper to the layout

board with masking tape. Next cut strips of plaster cloth (available at hobby shops), soak them for just about 10 seconds in a pan of warm water, and then lay them across the newspaper. Plaster cloth is very easy and fun to use, and in about 10 minutes you will have a hill. To cover up the small holes of the plaster cloth just work the plaster with your finger tips. The plaster will set in about 20 minutes or so.

Next, I mixed some plaster and applied it to the hills with a flat paintbrush to cover any remaining holes and to provide some shape to the surfaces of the hills. Once the second coat of plaster was dry, I painted the hills with medium tan paint and highlighted it with a slightly darker color.

I next sprinkled some earth-colored ground cover on the surfaces of the hills followed by some green. The ground cover settled on the horizontal surfaces and in the crevices of the hills. Then I sprayed some scenic cement to secure the ground cover. I also applied ground cover to the base of the hills to blend them into the surface of the train board.

As a last step, to simulate brush I cut strips of Woodland Scenics foliage, stretched out the foliage matting per the instructions, and then bunched up the matting. I then applied white glue to the underside of the foliage and positioned it in locations on the hills, at their bases, and in small amounts all over the train board.

As a last touch I visited local toy stores in search of 1/43 scale die-cast automobiles, which I positioned around the layout. While 1/43 scale is slightly larger than 1/48 (O) scale, the difference is unnoticeable, and these die-cast cars appear right at home on the layout.

So that's it; you're officially a model railroader—the toy train variety. But realize that this is only the beginning. Keep checking the hobby shop for new cars, locomotives, and accessories. Read books and magazines to learn about new products and modeling techniques that will improve your skills and results. Start doodling track plans—perhaps you can add on to this layout. I plan to! Attend hobby shows and swap meets. Join clubs and go to conventions. There's a whole world of model railroading fun out there.

Happy railroading to you and your children.

Scenery Products

Woodland Scenics sells several different colors of easy-to-use material that simulates brush and scrub.

Life-Like Products sells ready-made trees of different shapes, sizes, and varieties. These trees look pretty realistic when added to the overall landscape of your layout.

If you prefer to make your own trees, Woodland Scenics sells tree kits that are easy and fun to make.

For ground cover Life-Like products and Woodland Scenics sell ground cover material in various textures and colors.

To properly lay ground cover you will need a sifter (center). You will also need a dilute glue (right) to attach the ground cover to the train board, as well as a sprayer (left) to seal the ground cover with the same glue. Woodland Scenics sells all three of these necessary products.

For painting hills and simulating paved streets, visit your local hardware or paint store and get some sample color sheets. They can mix any shade of water-based paint you want.

Quart-size cans provide all the paint you'll need for this or any other small layout. For the paved streets I selected a medium gray, and for the track layout undercoating and hills I chose a medium tan.

Streets and Parking Lots

The first step in adding scenery is to outline where you want to have your streets, parking lots, driveways, and walkways. I used a black marker with a medium point to draw these outlines.
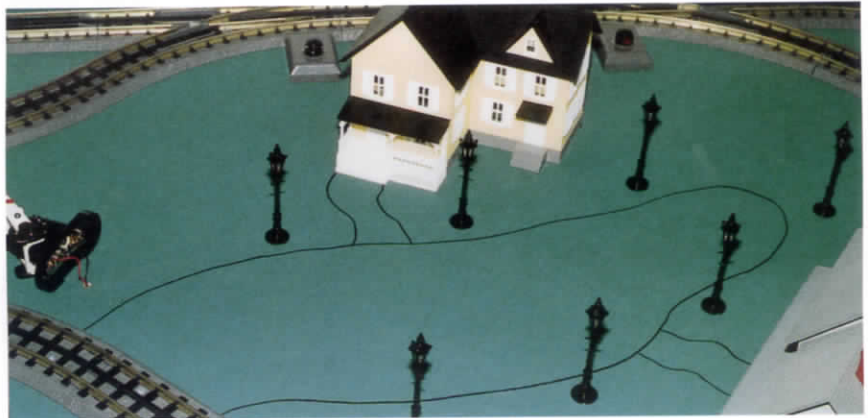
Mixing the paint after the can is opened is important so the pigments of the paint are distributed properly for a consistent color.

To simulate the rough surface of pavement, mix in some fine-grain play sand, available at most hardware stores.

Pour small quantities of sand into the paint bucket while you mix it.

You will know that you have enough sand in the paint when the paint looks grainy.

Before painting, protect the track by covering it with masking tape.
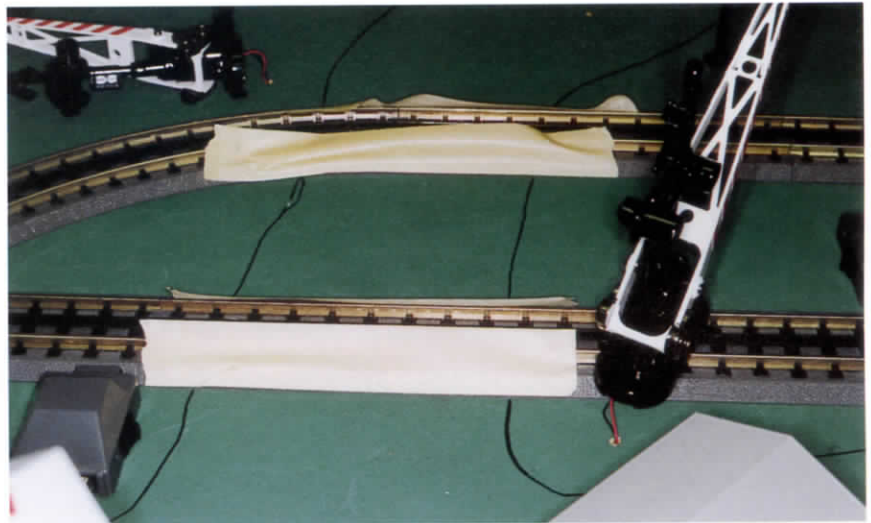
Using a flat brush, paint along the inner edge of the pavement outline.

To paint under accessories, simply lift them off the train board. This is why I recommended that you leave some slack in the wiring of the accessory.
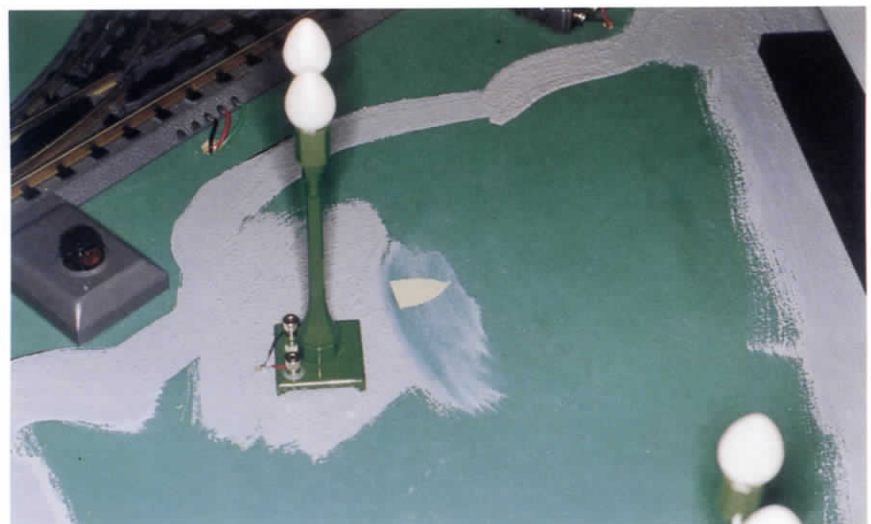
The train station parking lot has been outlined, and now it's time to paint between the lines. Be sure to mix the sand-paint mixture frequently, as the sand will constantly settle to the bottom of the bucket.

Before I painted between the lines on the station parking lot, I also painted the street and sidewalks where the houses are located.

Children love to paint, so I turned the paintbrush and bucket over to Thomas and let him finish the job.

To ensure that the sand-paint mixture is spread evenly across the surface, use a stippling motion (up and down) with the paintbrush if you apply a second coat.
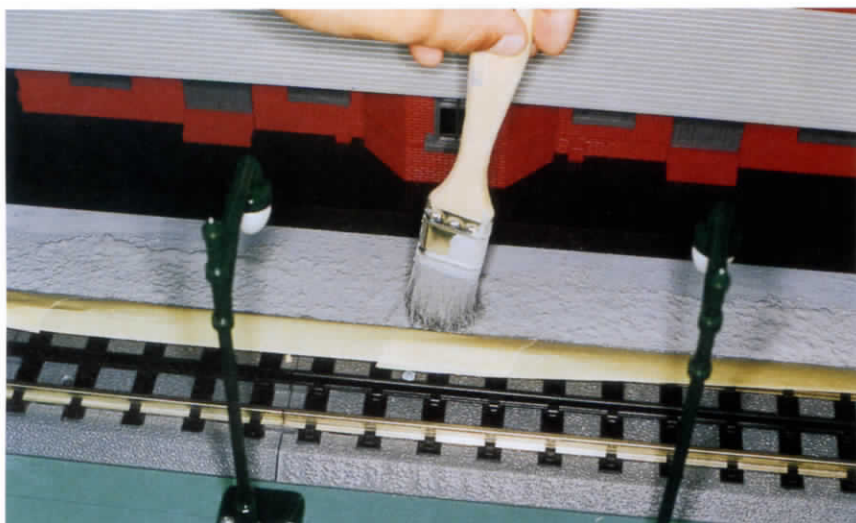
Masking

The train station parking lot and the street and sidewalks are done.
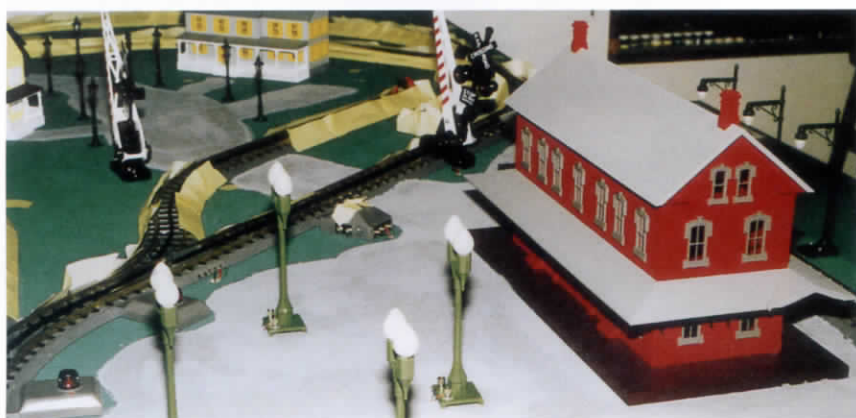
Now it's time to start masking the track around the train board so that you can apply the scenery undercoating.

The addition of the gray sand-paint mixture to the train board looks pretty strange at this point, but after we apply the tan paint undercoating to the rest of the surface, it will look a lot better.
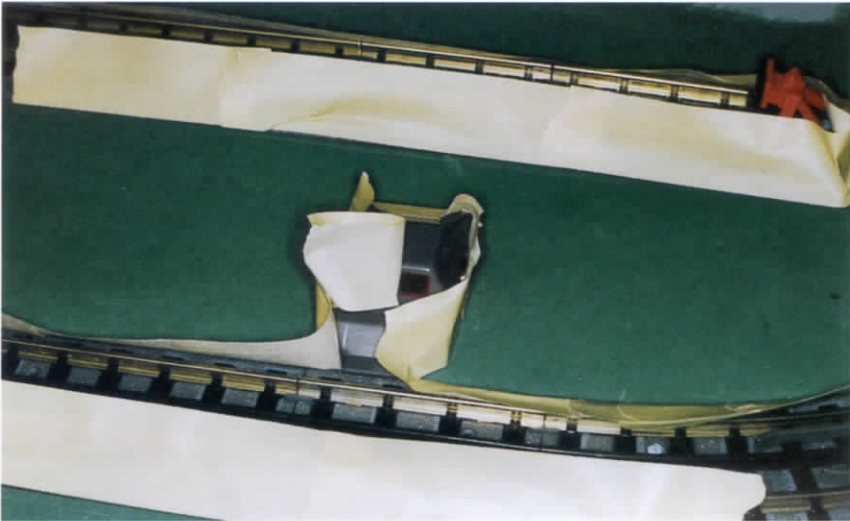
When masking the infrared sensors, be sure to cover the clear red sensor plate so there is no chance that paint will mar the surface.

These train station lights were screwed into the train board. It was easier to mask around them than to take out the screws.

To apply the tan color, use the outline technique and then let the children finish the job. To get a fine edge where the tan meets the gray or along the edges of the track, use the flat side of the brush.

Things are progressing nicely, and the boys did well. They even got more paint on the train board than they did on themselves!
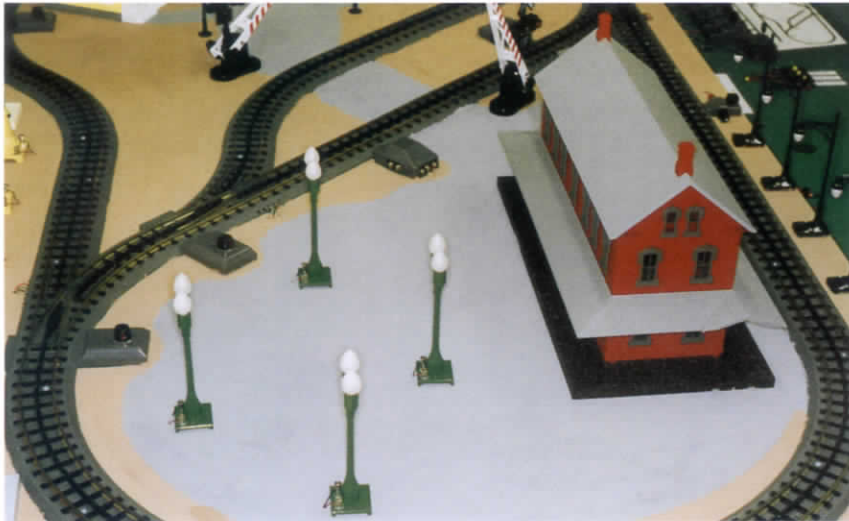

The surface of the board is now completely covered, and the layout is starting to shape up. The gray paint doesn't seem to stand out as much as it did against the green.

Now that the masking tape has been removed, you can see the difference that the gray sand-paint mixture and the tan paint have made.

You can also see how the gray paint seeped under the masking tape at the gate crossing area! Either I applied too much paint, or the masking tape lifted off the track side.

The streets and sidewalks have good demarcation lines separating the colors, thanks to a small flat brush. Don't forget to paint in driveways for the cars!

The overall appearance of the train board has been improved greatly with the addition of these two paint colors. While you could add a few trees and some foliage and call it quits, a little extra work, some patience, and ground cover will dramatically change the appearance of the layout.

Trees

The first step in adding trees to the layout is to hide the shiny appearance of the plastic tree trunks and branches by giving them a coat of Testors Dullcote. While Dullcote is an enamel-based product, other manufacturers make comparable water-based products.

Apply Elmer's glue to the perimeter of the tree bases to attach them to the train board.

Don't worry about the glue squeezing out from under the tree bases. The ground cover will hide both the excess glue and the round bases. Give the glue about an hour to dry before starting to apply the ground cover.

Gregory liked positioning and gluing the trees in place around the surface of the train board. Since trees grow just about anywhere, picking locations is not critical.

Having said that, be sure to place trees around the houses, as it's rare to find a house without a least one tree nearby.

Now that all the trees have been glued to the layout, it's time to start applying the ground cover.

Ground Cover

I transferred the ground cover from the manufacturer's packages to resealable bags for easy storage. Working with ground cover can get kind of messy, so I recommend that *you* fill the sifters and let the kids do the sifting.

Use a brush to apply Woodland Scenics dilute glue mixture to small areas. Be sure to wipe off any excess that may get on the track, accessories, or sensors.

Next, sprinkle the ground cover onto the wet areas with your trusty sifter. You want to apply enough ground cover to hide most of the tan paint. After all, every lawn has brown patches here and there!


To seal the ground cover onto the surface, spray it with the Woodland Scenics dilute glue mixture. When you have finished using the sprayer, be sure to clean the nozzle with hot water to remove any excess glue. The glue will clog the nozzle unless it is cleaned thoroughly.
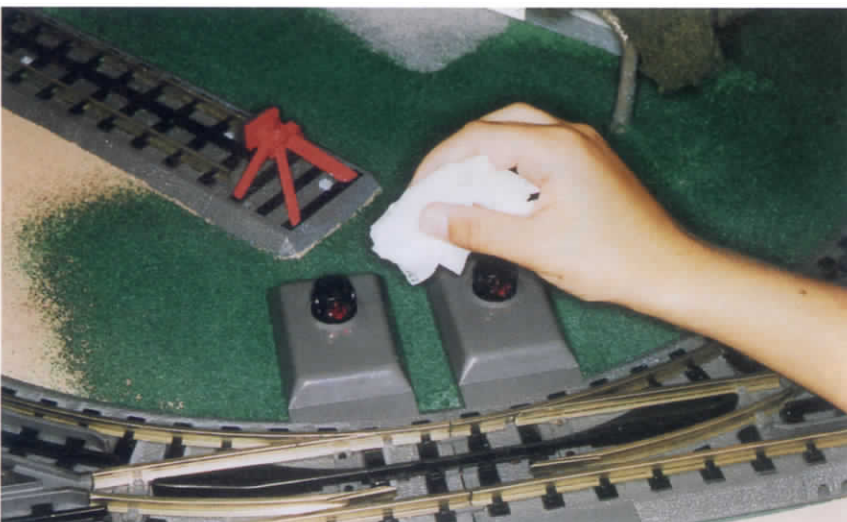
Use a damp tissue to wipe off excess glue and ground cover.

The ground cover and street edge does not have to be perfect. To help shape the edging, use a dry paintbrush to sweep away excess ground cover while it's still wet.
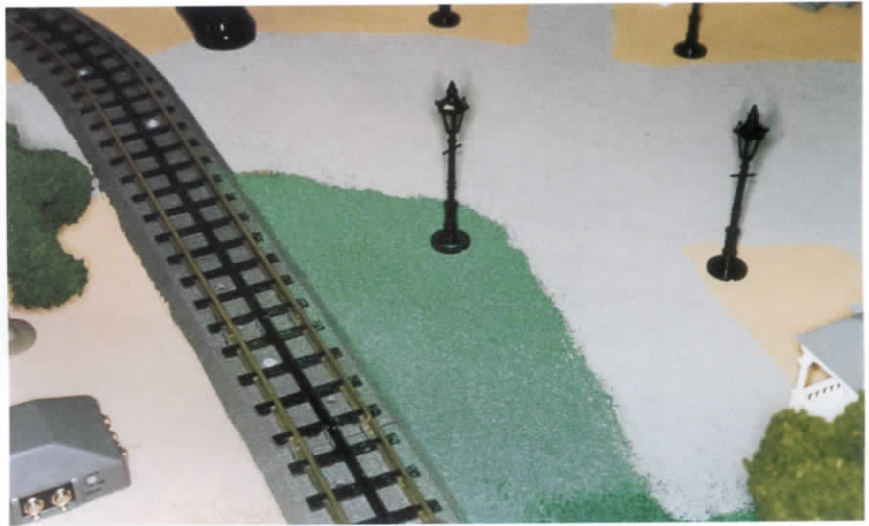
I used the greener ground cover around the houses and then sprinkled light dustings of brown in places where the simulated grass might logically be worn down.

To apply the ground cover, start in the center of the train board where it is harder to reach and work towards the outside.
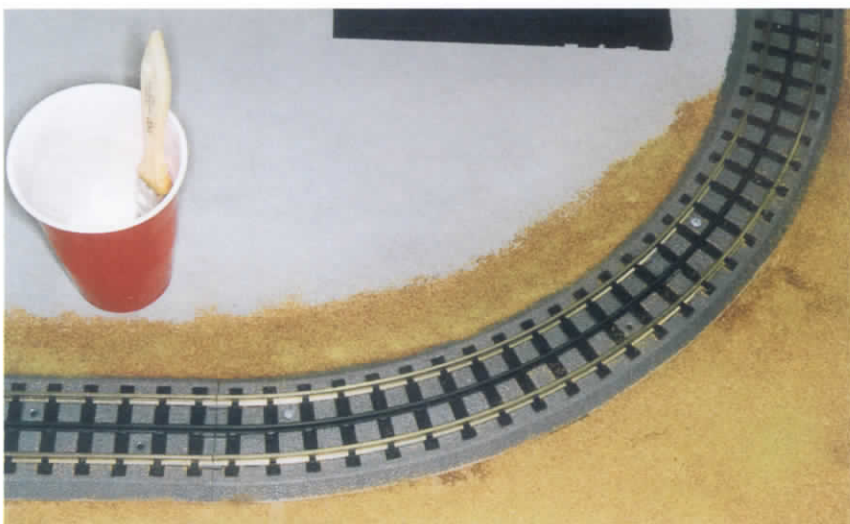
Here brown ground cover has been added to outline the parking lot. Note how the tan undercoating blends into the ground cover.

Now that the inner areas of the layout are just about done, it's time to work our way around the outside. Use masking tape to protect accessories from getting coated with the ground cover.


Brown ground cover has been applied as the base color and then a light sprinkling of light green was added to break up the consistent brown color.

Since I had two shades of green, I sprinkled on a light dusting of the darker green color to offset the brown. Having a variation in color helps add realism to your layout, as you would seldom see dirt without at least a hint of something green growing in it.

To cover the bases of trees, pile some ground cover next to them.
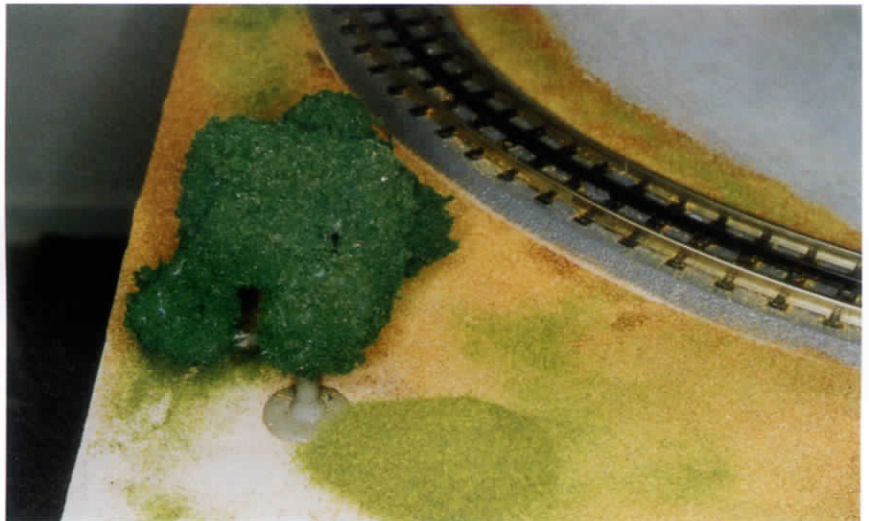
Carefully spread the ground cover around the base of the tree with a small brush and your finger. Note that I applied some fine-grain sand to a small area to simulate a sand pile.

The ground cover is slowly being worked around the outer areas of the layout. Note how the overall appearance is starting to change.

The ground cover has now been completely applied to almost the entire surface of the layout. Before we apply the ground cover to the remaining areas, let's add some hills.

Hills

This pile of crumpled-up paper held in place with masking tape is all you need to form a small hill.

Next, cut strips of Woodland Scenics plaster cloth, dip them in a pan of warm water, and then lay them over the paper pile. To fill in the holes in the plaster cloth, simply run your fingers across the surface. Thomas was the plaster-cloth-hole-filler, as he always loves to get his hands messy.

You have to set the plaster cloth in warm water for only about 5 to 8 seconds before it's ready to be applied. Gregory was our resident expert plaster-cloth-applicator specialist.

Here you can see that the first hill is just about finished. It doesn't look like much now, but just wait until we paint it!

Sometimes the shape of the plaster cloth looks a little odd, especially if there are some wrinkles. To help smooth out these areas, mix some plaster and use a flat brush to apply a coat over the plaster cloth.


Both hills are now complete and ready to be painted. Also note the sand pile. I liberally soaked it with Woodland Scenics white glue to hold it firmly in place. This small pile will add some height to an otherwise flat area.

The hills have been painted with the same tan paint as the layout. Two coats were necessary to get into all the nooks and crannies.

The next step was to lightly dust brown and light green ground cover over the hills. The ground cover settled onto the horizontal surfaces, resulting in a very realistic effect. To seal the ground cover I sprayed it with Woodland Scenics glue.
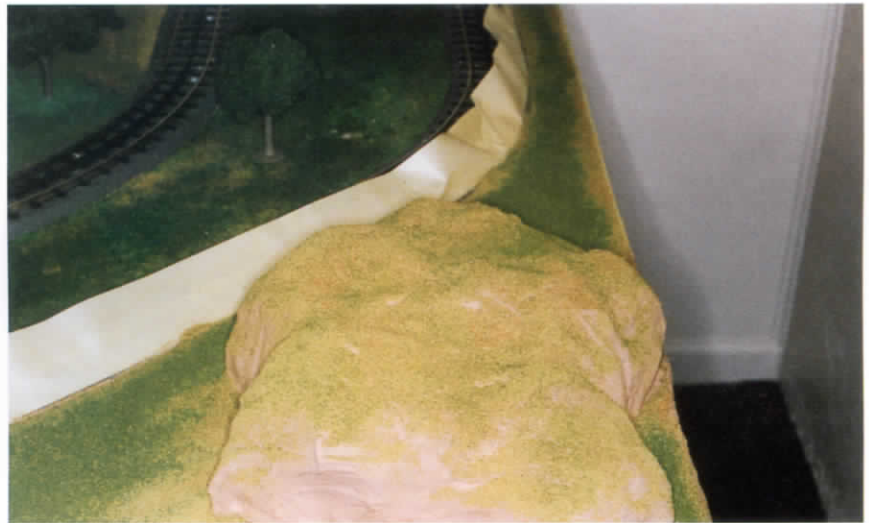
Shrubs and Brush

The first step in using Woodland Scenics foliage is to cut a small piece and then stretch it out.

Once you have stretched it out, crumple it by folding the outer edges underneath its center. Now the foliage is ready to be added to the layout.

Small amounts of foliage look natural at the base of the hill and at the top.


This small clump of foliage looks just like a bush or a shrub—using a little imagination, of course.

This foliage has been stretched out lengthwise to simulate a long clump of hedges. The foliage has been attached to the ground cover with some white glue applied to the underside of the foliage.

The overall appearance of the layout has now changed drastically with the addition of some basic scenery.
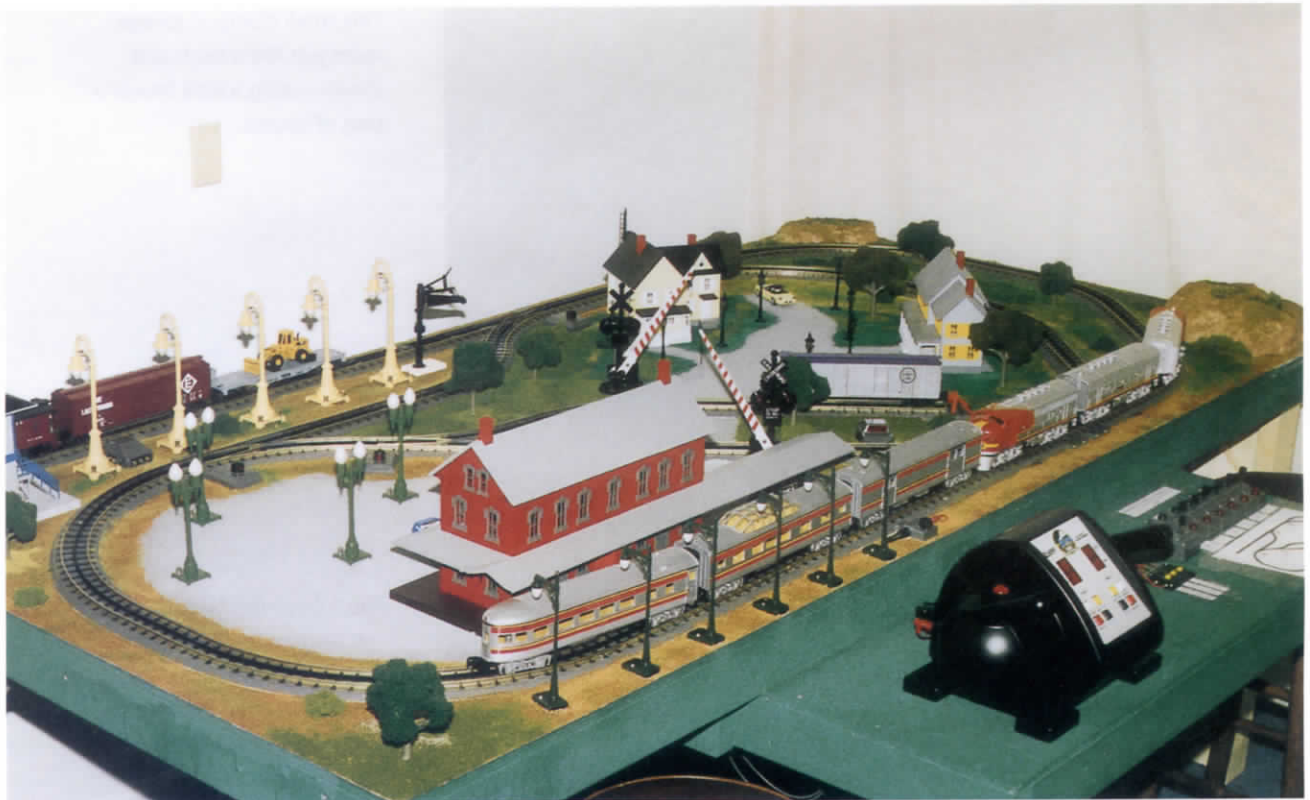
Now that the scenery is finally completed, it's time to run some trains!

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