

An Interview *with* Nancy Workman

Continued from the On30 Annual 2008 pg. 80

Q: How did Blackstone Models come about?

A: It really is a reflection of Steve Dominguez. Even while we were both working for the marine electronics company in Massachusetts, he would say, "I'd really like to live in Colorado." I think I'd previously mentioned his interest in HOn3 early on, and when we started the business, we did move it out here (Colorado). After being out here for a short time, and continuing to attend the National Narrow Gauge Conventions around the country, both he and I thought, "I'd love to be in narrow gauge, but..." The thing that was stopping us was the same thing that was hindering everyone in HOn3, and that was equipment. Your only choice for motive power was imported brass, and in addition to being quite expensive, they usually didn't run very well. HOn3 had a pretty well-earned reputation for being a tricky scale to work in. You usually had to be a good craftsman to get your motive power to work reliably, and that was also true of the rolling stock to a lesser extent.

As Soutraxx's decoder business grew, we spent more and more time installing and testing our products in various locomotives and this experience showed us why engines don't run as well as they should. Usually, the models had a poor pickup design, so they weren't electronically reliable. We also discovered all the common areas when mechanisms bind, and which mechanism styles worked better than others. Over the years, we had come to know most of the overseas manufacturers, so when we made the decision to form Blackstone Models and get into the locomotive and rolling stock business, we really had an advantage.

Starting from the ground up, we knew the features we would want to see as HOn3 modelers, and we were able to design those in the product with our manufacturer. We knew we needed all-wheel pickup on the locomotive. That single element was the weakest link on previous models. We also designed a drawbar connector that both hides the wires between tender and locomotive and has a positive mechanical connection, while separating easily for packing and storing the locomotive. Our driving criteria was "will it run well?". If we weren't able to answer that question with an affirmative, no one would have ever heard of Blackstone Models, as we never would have formed the company.

Once we had assured ourselves that we could offer a product that met our high standards, we started from ground zero with research. Being in Durango, it is a short hop over to Antonito where K-27 No. 463 is stored to measure and verify every part. We found many areas where "conventional wisdom" in drawings and previous models was just wrong. We also did the same with K-27 No. 464 (the other surviving K-27) in Michigan. Armed with these measurements, the photos we shot and every photo of K-27s in service we could lay our hands on, we knew we would produce the most accurate model possible. We also committed early on to offer several of the different versions of the locomotive and tender styles, including the rebuilt Rio Grande Southern No. 455.

(The No. 455 was severely damaged in a runaway in 1943. It finally returned to service in 1947 sporting a cab from a scrapped standard gauge 0-6-0 and sans the insulation and jacketing on the cylinders. This gave No. 455 a distinctive, one-off appearance. For a complete history of K-27s go to: www.on30annual.com/images/PDFs/reviews/MMF%20K-27.pdf - Editor)

I should mention that when we committed to offering all the different locomotives, that meant we committed to producing them. We didn't make the announcement as a trial balloon to see if we could get enough reservations, we were going to make each locomotive announced regardless. Obviously, some numbers sold quicker than others, but we have been rewarded for our commitment as every version has proved to be popular. At the same time, we committed to doing the 3000 series D&RGW boxcars and 5500 series stock cars and we are on our third run of those.

In the interim, we also announced the 6000 series flat car, which will be delivered in August of 2008, a D&RGW long caboose, high-side gondola, drop bottom gon, and we are working on our next locomotive, which we aren't ready to announce yet. Rather than throwing a few products out there and see how they do, we really committed to the scale of HOn3 long-term.

We had the same sort of design process with the rolling stock. We started with the trucks and made sure that they rolled well, and made them available as a separate sale item. Finally, we committed to keeping the costs of the Blackstone line as reasonable as possible. By doing that, we addressed every issue Steve and I faced as long time HOn3 modelers. We saw an opportunity to grow the scale, so we went for it!

Q: Any chance of you doing the same sort of thing in On30?

A: Again (as Nancy explained in the interview printed in the Annual) we have no plans to do anything at this time, our friends at Bachmann seem to have that market pretty well in hand. However, we certainly noticed the success they were having, and that was a factor in our decision to develop the HOn3 market. Like On30, we think it is an area who's time has come, and we plan to be in it for the long haul. —A

