

The Weir and Pittsburg Coal Field

Model Rail Radio Layout Planning Contest

January 2019

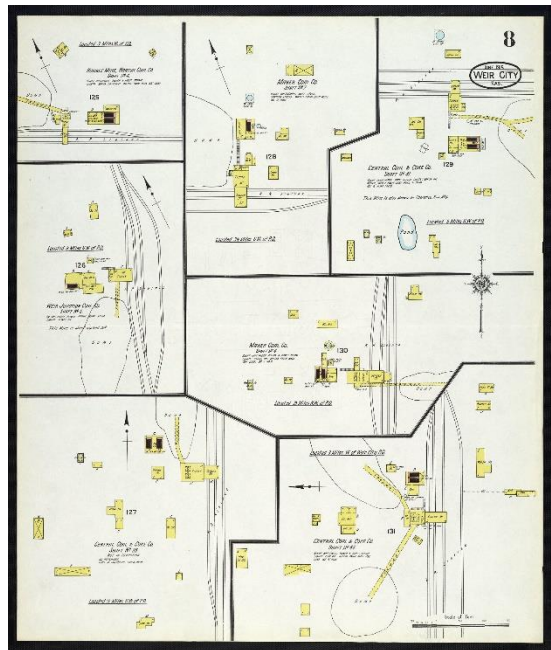
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Inspiration

In the early 1900's and through the mid 1970's, the regions of Southeast Kansas were turned inside-out by coal, lead, and zinc mining. This region, known as the "Weir and Pittsburg Coal Field" was crisscrossed by rail lines that originated from the frantic competition to build from Kansas City to the Oklahoma border, with the promise of exclusive rights into "Indian Territory" and through to Texas. Around 1870, the area had been opened for sale, having been part of the lands awarded to settlers under a treaty with the Cherokee Indians signed July 19, 1866. (See "The Border Tier Road" by Robert Collins, and "The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier", by V.V. Masterson).

A survey of the Sanborn insurance maps from 1900-1930 show various small mining operations for coal and zinc mines, sometimes only a few hundred yards out of town. These appear and disappear over the years, and often changed names. They were located along the lines of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT), Saint Louis and San Francisco (Frisco), the Missouri Pacific, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, and the Kansas City Southern. All of these lines crossed the region, with lines running out to small enterprises with two or three short sidings for the facility. Towns and mining camps grew to several thousand residents, and for a time enjoyed connections by interurban railways.

The Kansas Historical Society (KansasMemory.org) and the University of Kansas online library contain outstanding resources for the history buff, as well as inspiration for the model railroader. Photos showing steam power, coal-laden wood gondolas, trolleys, and the depots of the area are fading memories of what was a boom town.



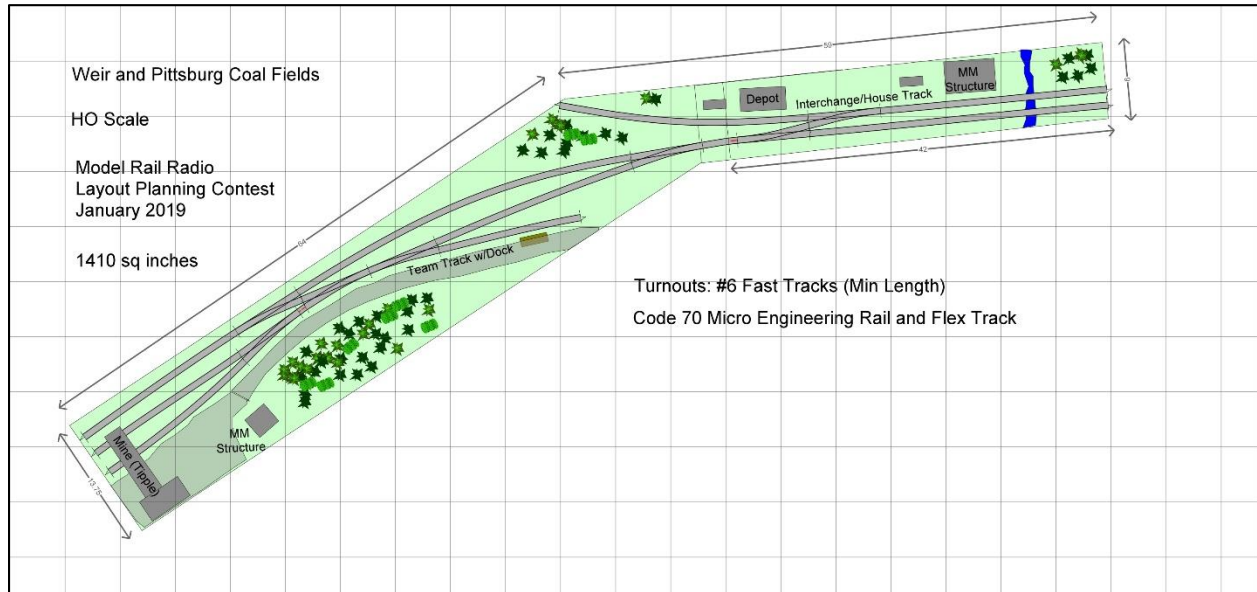
Sanborn maps of industries near Weir, KS in 1915.

The Layout Plan

This submission is titled "The Weir and Pittsburg Coal Field," and is inspired by the history of this region. While small – the contest rules limit our small layout to 1,440 square inches, it is a realistic depiction of a small mining operation near one of the small towns in the region (Weir, Scammon, Cherokee, West

Mineral, etc.) The original vision was to set the layout and structures at about 1900-1930, but could be adapted for more modern equipment.

The layout would be constructed as two sections, using simple wood frame benchwork. The angled design allows for a free-standing layout that is more stable, should one wish to make simple removable legs, or just place on a few sawhorses. The layout sections could be stored on shelves out of the way in a garage. Optionally, the larger section could be a more permanent shelf, with the smaller section installed during operations. A sky or photo backdrop could be placed on either side for photography.



The plan's two main features are a small mine and a town. The mine is represented by a tippie and a few small structures. The smaller structure from Mine Mount Models would be used as an office or store house. A tippie would be scratch built, or adapted from portions of an existing model. There are two loading spots under the tippie, providing some switching of coal or ore loads. This area includes a small team track with a wooden loading dock, allowing for other traffic in the form of box cars and flat cars with supplies for the site. The run-around track provides for the ability to switch either location.



A representative mining operation from the Weir and Pittsburg Coal Fields. (Historic Postcard).



Weir City depot provides inspiration for the small town scene. At times, there were mines less than three city blocks from this site. (Historic Postcard)

The town is represented by a depot, a few small structures such as a coal bin, loading dock, and the equipment shed from Mine Mount Models. A short “house track” is running behind the depot here, serving as an interchange point for cars and a siding for local industries. Due to space limitations, the depot is placed facing away from this track, the main line being off-stage. In this orientation, cars could be parked at the depot for loading and unloading of freight.

Rolling stock would consist of short coal hoppers or gondolas, depending on the date selected. Steel hoppers appeared just before 1930, and are available from Accurail (or eBay if out of stock). Wood gondolas are a bit trickier, but kits are available from Westerfield. Short, 36-ft boxcars are now available from both vendors, as well as Roundhouse (Athearn). A few 40-ft flat cars would round out the collection, and are not hard to find.



Short, 36-ft boxcars and steel hoppers from Accurail and Roundhouse are options for manageable rolling stock. (Photo from the Author).

The layout’s operation is centered around moving cars to and from the town to the industries. The scene is staged with cars at the interchange/house track and a locomotive (or inbound train) with caboose on the one parallel. Cars are selected, two or three at a time, and directed to the mine, being traded for cars there, a return train built on the runaround track. Extra switching is provided on the return trip, placing cars along the industries, and empties staged out of the way of industries beyond the depot. The track lengths will limit cars switched to one or two at a time.



Wood gondola from Westerfield Models. Photo and model courtesy of Jim James and his Zalma Branch layout.

The layout diagram drawing is from a recent version of AnyRail, and the original file can be supplied to anyone that is interested in modifying the plan by contacting the author. The drawing is an approximation, but does work out to about 1400 square inches.

Potential Modifications. Although constrained by the contest rules, a slightly longer siding for the town would be reasonable to improve operational options. With a town section that is only a few inches wider, the main line in front of the depot could be depicted, providing an excellent diorama for photographing models. Those that favor an extruded foam base can include a small stream and culvert (as shown near the Mine Mount equipment shed) in order to provide an additional scenic feature.



Layout under construction. The mine section is a remnant of an old layout that was slated for repurposing.

As of the New Year, construction is underway. The mine section is actually a salvaged piece of my old “Crawford and Cherokee” layout, which was based on a plan by Iain Rice. Sections of version 2.0 of the layout is in the background and will include the mine section in some form at a later date. The photo shows the contest layout under construction, with notional locations of structures. It also demonstrates that the Mine Mount kits would fit reasonably well (brown rectangle in foreground and small shed at the far end). The depot cut out (further brown rectangle) is from an actual scale floor plan from the Weir depot pictured above. The plan is to make this a temporary switching layout and maybe take it to a local show. Hopefully, this provides a feel for the size and scale of the project for the reader.

The Region Today

Southeast Kansas has now returned to agriculture and a few small towns. Much of the mined land has become a fish and wildlife preserve with more than 10,000 acres (including more than 600 acres of water – a result of the old strip mining). Those interested in the history of the region can visit the site of Big Brutus, a gigantic electric coal shovel (and museum) near West Mineral Kansas, and the Miners Memorial and museum in nearby Pittsburg, Kansas. For the railroad enthusiast, the nearby Heart of the Heartlands museum includes preserved Missouri Pacific Depots and rail equipment (check schedule).



Big Brutus, preserved as part of a mining museum in S.E. Kansas. Yes, you can climb inside! (Photo from Wikipedia)

Further Reading

1. Kansas Historical Society, Kansas Memory web site (www.kansasmemory.org).
2. *The Border Tier Road, Reflection of an Industry*, Robert Collins, South Platte Press (2003).
3. *The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier*, V.V. Masterson, University of Oklahoma Press (1978).
4. *University of Kansas Libraries Digitized Sanborn Maps* (<https://lib.ku.edu/sanborn-maps>).
5. Southeastern Kansas Coal Mining Towns, Pittcraft Printing (Depicts many structures).
6. Big Brutus Official Web Site (<http://www.bigbrutus.org/>)
7. Miners Memorial in Pittsburg Kansas (<http://minersmemorialpittks.org/>)
8. Southeast Kansas Mined Land Wildlife Area (<https://ksoutdoors.com/KDWPT-Info/Locations/Wildlife-Areas/Southeast/Mined-Land>)

