



# Esperanza in "G" *Model railroading in Cuba*





Above: Lazaro Eduardo Garcia explains details of the layouts to a group of students.

Left: As a train lead by an LGB 2-6-0 passes by, drovers guide oxen pulling carts loaded with cane to the railhead.



BY ISRAEL WILFREDO "WILDY" DIAZ GOMEZ  
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

In October, 1995 a work exhibited at the Museo de la Ciudad in Havana, Cuba, was a bit different from usual museum exhibits. Yet it ranked as high as any other piece in the halls of such a prestigious institution — it was a model of a sugar mill, built from the research conducted by Havana Historian Eusebio Leal. The model included not only the mill, but its surrounding community and railroad, thus paying homage to the workers of the country's main industry.

The 16' x 26' layout was built in 1:22.5, or "G" scale. The pike's sugar mill represents a plant built in the 1920s, with a capacity of 1.5 million pounds per year. Included on the layout are three in-line mills, a shredder and cane hoist. The town includes several houses, a park, church, hotel, spare parts warehouse, sugar pan warehouse and a carpentry workshop. Moreover, the factory has evaporators, storage and cooling facilities. Not to be neglected, the "model" citizens have a small station where they can "board" the train, as well as receive LCL shipments.

# "I think there are many people in Cuba who might have an interest in making models, they just don't know how to begin" — Lazaro Eduardo Garcia

Railroad facilities include a two-stall enginehouse. It is home to two 2-6-0 steam locomotives used to haul both cane cage-cars and pull tank, freight and passenger cars, when operated for public viewing, the trains can operate on a continuous loop, crossing over two bridges and through a tunnel — or they may make a detour to carry out some work at the sugar mill, the field or the station. To my knowledge, nothing similar has ever been built in post-1959 Cuba, when US-made model trains disappeared from the shop windows and specialty stores

To Lazaro Eduardo Garcia, being asked to construct a miniature sugar mill was an exceptional opportunity. He would have material resources available with which he could display his skills, wits and creativity as a modelmaker. He led the creative team, which was organized two years ago. The group's first task was to prepare the project with research on sugar mill operations. In addition to the research, the group visited the "Hershey" sugar mill (currently "Camilo Cienfuegos"). None in the group had worked on a similar

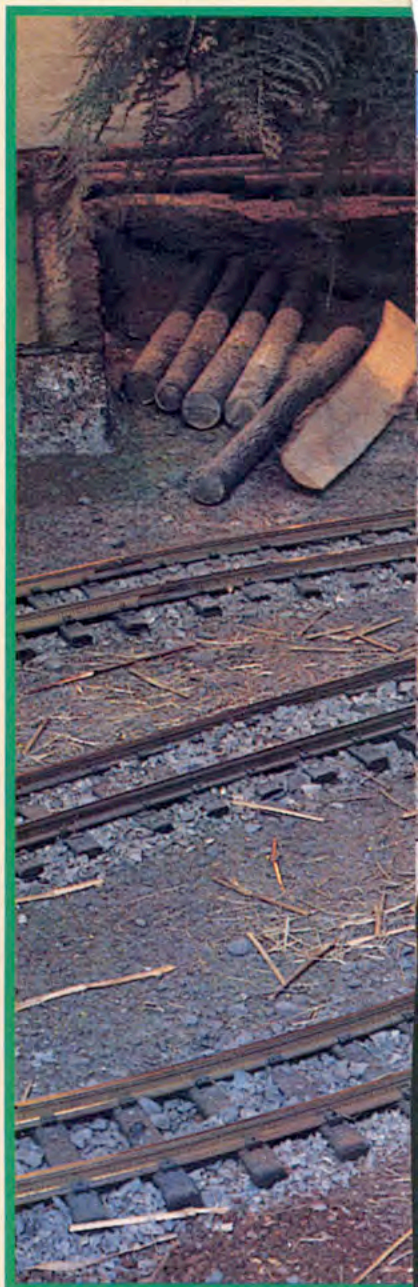
project before, and they weren't able to count on expert model railroaders when they had doubts about how to proceed. The team relied upon catalogs and magazines for information about the hobby, and made purchases abroad by mail order.

Virtually all the locomotives, tracks, cars and figures were from LGB. Those that weren't were found or made in Cuba. Lazaro was in charge of prototypes and the system of molds and dies to reproduce parts such as windows, handrails, roofs, etc. Upon the assembly of these pieces, the project began to take shape.

One of the hurdles the modelmakers had to clear was finding figures to represent the Cuban field hands — commercially available figures weren't right for the workers. The modelmaking team modified many imported figures. Among these were two "sheriffs" which were reworked to represent the Guardia Rural (countryside police force) with their customary yellow uniforms, machetes and "seven-quarter" horses. Uniforms for the train employees and field workers were reformed and painted to match the prototype. Ox carts were scratchbuilt — the prototype having been constructed in Milliput to haul sugar cane. Almost every animal was scratchbuilt by the modelmaking team.

The royal palm is a typical tree in the Cuban landscape. Three of these were modeled with wood trunks covered with fabric and paint and dusted with industrial talc. Several freight cars were shaped into "cane cages," key equipment for Cuban sugar railroads, although exact copies of models presently used in the country were not made, those on the layout are a fair representation. Likewise, the "Esperanza" sugar mill is not an identical replica of a specific factory, but it does incorporate general features of the mills.

Working with Lazaro were molding master Felipe Sanchez Rodriguez and sculptor Octavio Aruca Vazquez. Boris Luis Rodriguez was in charge of the electrical installation and cabinetmaker Roberto Sabido Fleitas, a cabinet maker, built the traveling crane and other elements. When the assembly started in October 1994 the group welcomed Natacha Vazquez and Eldis Roque Rodriguez. Lead, tin and antimony were used to cast the streets in order to make them look as if they were made of cobblestone. Real



Above: Cane is transferred from the team, while the figures were modified. Left: Two "Sheriffs" from LGB were senger run.





Ox-carts to rail cars via an overhead crane, known in Cuba as a "Romana." The Oxen were handcrafted by the modelmaking and modified to represent the Guadria Rural, or countryside police. These two, on horseback, are awaiting the arrival of the local pas-

water was used for the cooling facility and the river. In some cases foam rubber was used for ground cover and land forms. Structures were largely built from plastic, using molds and a vacuum forming machine.

Thirty-year-old Roberto Sabido says: "I joined this work almost eight months after it had started. I did many different things, but I could mention the creation of the thermal-molding machine. We took the basic idea from a magazine.

"Lazaro had already told me about the need (to build our own). For the vacuum pump we used a vacuum

cleaner, and I made the watertight wooden box and the electrical work.

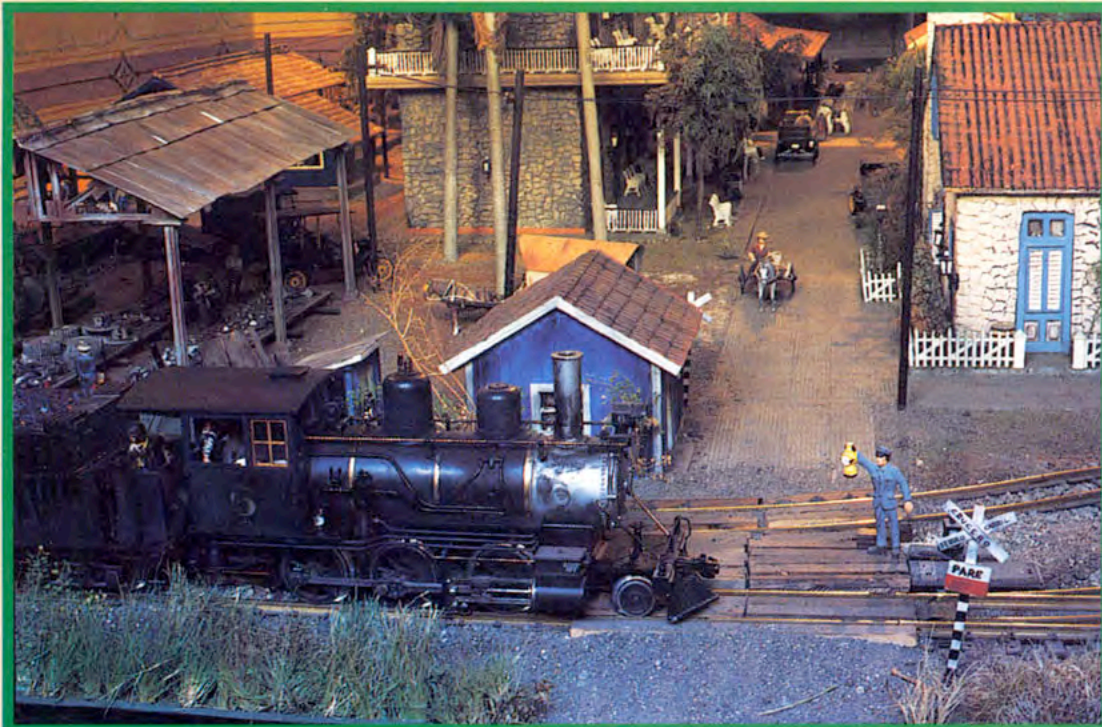
"We used 1 mm plastic sheets and molded out the shapes we wanted, something especially useful for the roofs, tiles, zinc plates

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**"My paramount satisfaction was to see the model come to (life) out of the blue — how it started to take shape, size and proportion from the prototypes."**

**— Boris Luis Rodriguez**

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The locomotives and rolling stock were purchased by mail order from overseas. Most everything else on the layout was crafted in Cuba.



The two-stall, stone enginehouse in this photo was scratchbuilt using molds and a vacuum forming machine.

and so on. We could reproduce two parts in five minutes; the mold-and-die system would have taken a lot longer.

“One of the greatest joys I had was to see how an idea had become the finished model, as well as the unity and brotherhood we attained through teamwork. If it were (up) to me I would always keep making models.”

Boris Luis said, “My role was the construction of electric and electronic systems — everything that moves, like fans, water, etc.

“My paramount satisfaction was to see the model come to (life) out of the blue — how it started to take shape, size and proportion from the prototypes.”

Said Lazaro, “I think there are many people in Cuba who might have an interest in making models, they just don’t know how to begin.

“There are no shops, there is no train hobby in Cuba. But, should the means and the modelmaking shops be available, they would be

pleased to get what they need to make their own models at home. I don’t think we are the only Cubans capable of doing what we did.” Lazaro said.

“I believe the main thing is to love what you do — and I love what am doing.”•

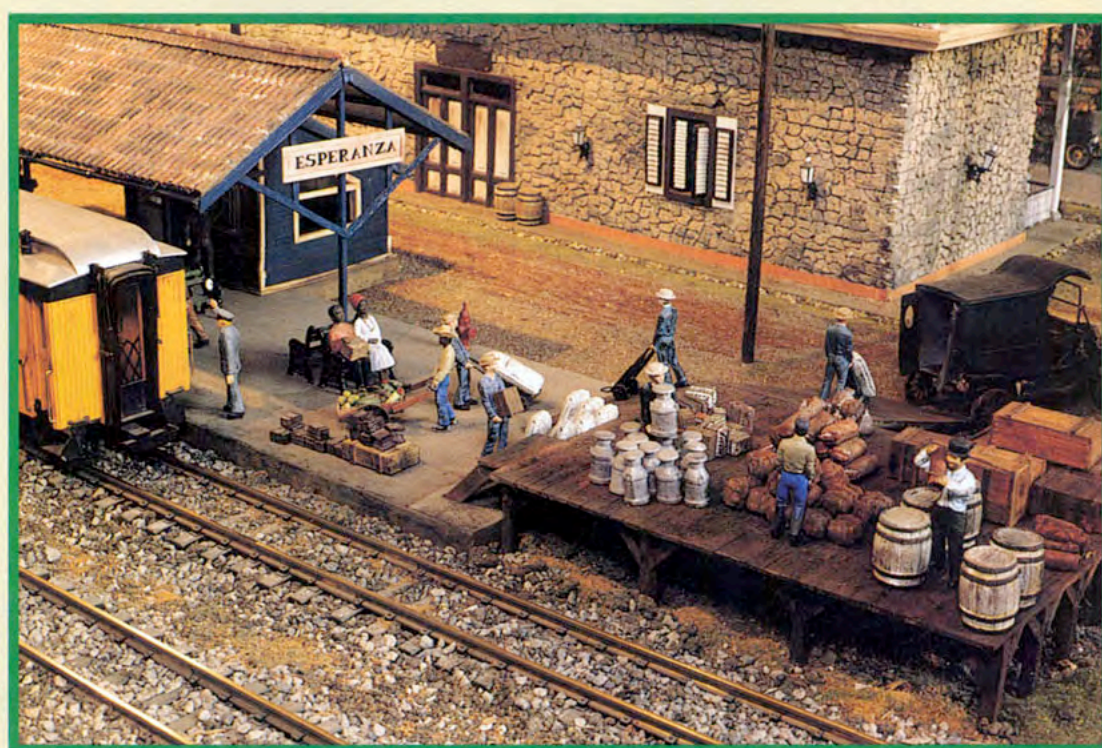
*Editor’s Note: In Spanish, “Esperanza” means “hope.”*

*To learn more about railroads in Cuba you may wish to see the July-August issue of Narrow Gauge & Short Line Gazette, in which an article on seven different Cuban steam railroads is featured.*

*Editor Bob Brown said the September-October issue will carry articles on two different 27-1/2” gauge cuban railroads. Brown said one interesting facet of the two railroads (the Central Obdulio Morales and the Central Simon Bolivar) is that they have the only protected crossing in the world where two roads of this unusual gauge cross one another.*



These figures were customized from commercial models to represent Cuban workers. Many of the detail castings around this scene were made using a vacuum form machine.



At Esperanza station commodities that have arrived by rail await pickup for delivery to their final destination. The tail end of the local passenger train can be seen at the platform as the conductor signals the engineer.