

# *Black Jack's Bar Outside Wolf Creek MT*

By Paul A. Wussow



*"Sometimes, but seldom, called a tavern." "Black Jack's Bar was a freight car taken off its wheels and set on gravel at the other end of the bridge crossing the Little Prickly Pear Creek."* Norman Maclean from "A River Runs Through It"

This article is about a prototype structure, based on a fictional prototype. The building does not exist however; Norman Maclean gave a description of the area and its location and the building in his story A River Runs Through It. The description helped me design and build the model structure and a photo module. Upon completion of the module I showed it to Richard Jacky, whose father was a classmate of Norman's brother Paul at Mazola, Montana High School and he declared "That's up by Lolo Pass, we were not allowed to go up there as kids." He indicated that the model and the setting were like something out of his and his father's Montana childhood. I have tutored freshmen college students on Maclean's book and also used it as background for men's retreat at church. The Big Black Foot River is not part of my modeling area but a bar built out of a

boxcar back in the woods seemed like the perfect piece from literature to build and place on my railroad.

For a number of years Black Jack's provided Midwest Region members a small module to photograph after my clinics on model photography. To explain the model, I created my own story that complements both Maclean's original story and my model as constructed.

### **Black Jack's Bar the Story**

A derailment along the Wolf Creek branch of the Great Northern Railroad left a boxcar on the side of the tracks, the trucks, couplers and braking gear were salvaged by the railroad. The remaining boxcar skeleton was determined to be too old and damaged for repair and was abandoned along the branch line. A local character from up in the woods outside of town, known as "Black Jack" took a liking to the old car and thought he could put it to use. After splitting and planning a large diameter log to serve as a bar he proceeded to gather a few grocery crates as stools. Soon Black Jack opened the boxcar doors and he was in business selling his own local moonshine. Some of his patrons, with ax and saw, helped cut windows into the sides of the car. Later, as the bugs were getting healthy, Jack cut a hole for a 36" wooden screen door into the side of the car facing the road and closed the old boxcar doors. This action was good for the patrons and also for the bugs, many of which have been seen in drunken flight after a visit, and taking a bite out of one of the patrons of, the old boxcar. The rear boxcar door, when opened, still provided a convenient location to dispose of trash.

As the chill of fall turned the leaves to gold and then brown, the local bar flies started to complain about the cold drafts, not from the keg, but from the front door each time it was opened. After a few weeks of these gripes, and lots of 3-7-77 bar whiskey, Jack persuaded the regulars to construct an entryway from parts

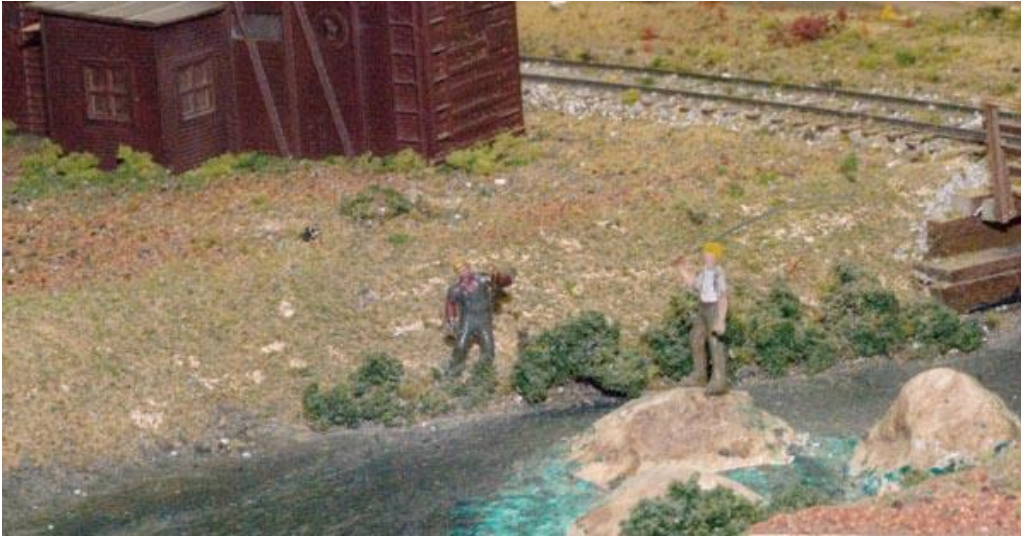
of an old house that was being ripped down back in the town of Wolf Creek. Saws, hammers and bottles in hand, they constructed the current entryway.

This watering hole has received very little maintenance, although, the sporting element of Great Falls does grease the bar regularly. Jack continues to supply their needs with his 3-7-77 from somewhere up Sheep Gulch and each year more fishermen gather to tell their fish stories.

The Whiskey label "3-7-77" was the number that Vigilantes pinned on the road agents they hanged. It is said to indicate the dimensions of a grave, three feet wide, seven feet long, and seventy seven inches deep. However, the only hole in the area around Black Jack's is from his outhouse that has been dumped over many times by rowdy groups of sportsmen, often with a friend inside.

The year is 1937 as we find an old local called Long Bow, known for "pulling the Long bow" (telling farfetched hunting and fishing stories) seated, with Jack tending bar, and Old Rawhide one or two seats down the bar from Long Bow, waiting for itinerant fisherman to stop in and buy the drinks. Old Rawhide was once in a local beauty contest riding bareback down the streets of Wolf Creek where "her skirts flew high and she won the contest". She now gets along "entertaining" locals in the winter and visiting sportsmen in season. As the summer gets warmer we will see Paul and Norman Maclean fly fishing the creek while Norman's brother-in-law, Neil, tells tall tales to impress Old Rawhide, or at least impress himself.

The branch line still gets a little use during the spring and fall for cattle movements but passenger service is limited to riding in the caboose on the weekly "mixed" train.



The Creek runs swift and cold down the mountain side and is filled with trout for any crafty fly-fisherman to attract to his flies. The flies were most likely not “counter flies” but flies tied by a local railroad engineer named George Croonenberghs. George, the youngest of four brothers, learned to tie flies and to fish from the Reverend John Maclean. But it was George who became famous for his fly fishing insight and served, with his wife, as a consultant to Robert Redford when he directed the movie A River Runs Through It.



As the sun sets into the Bitterroots we find the brothers fishing the creek in “hopes that fish will rise”.

## Building Black Jack's Bar in HO Scale

I created Black Jack's Bar by kitbashing a Roundhouse 50' Outside Braced Double Steel Door Boxcar kit shown here in Western Pacific livery. (Figure 1)



Figure 1

I cut the kit down in length by the size of one door and reassembled. (Figure 2)



Figure 2

Because the Roundhouse car is a one piece casting I had to cut between the boxcar doors on each side which are not directly across from each other. I carefully cut between the doors on the entry way side of the car and across the roof. I then had to cut along the roof line to meet the vertical cut along the door line on the other side. (Figure 3)

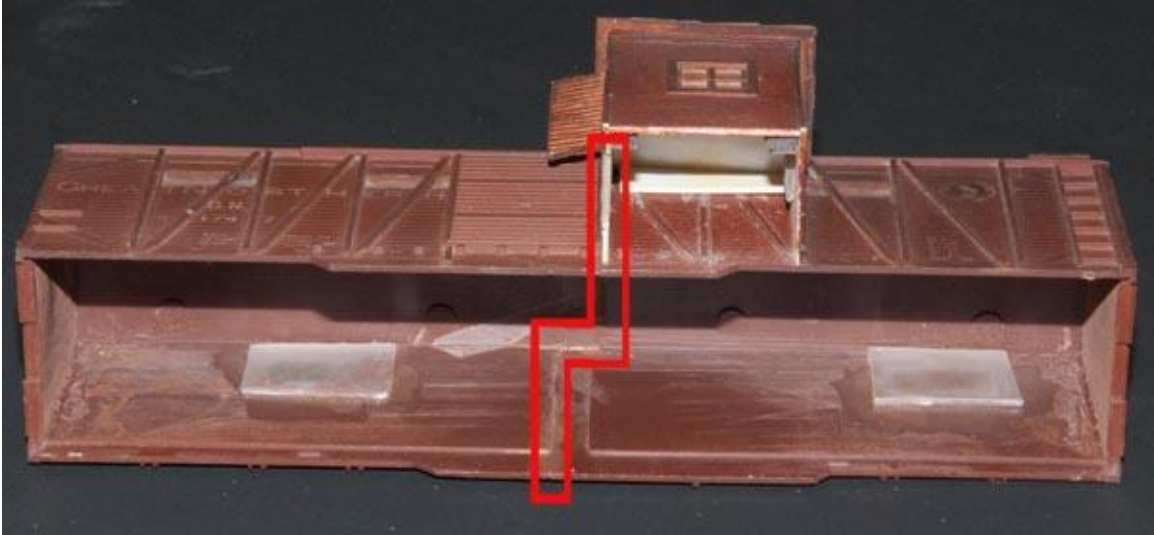


Figure 3

I cut the roof line and the roof walk along the ribs. The cuts are to the right of the red lines. (Figure 4)

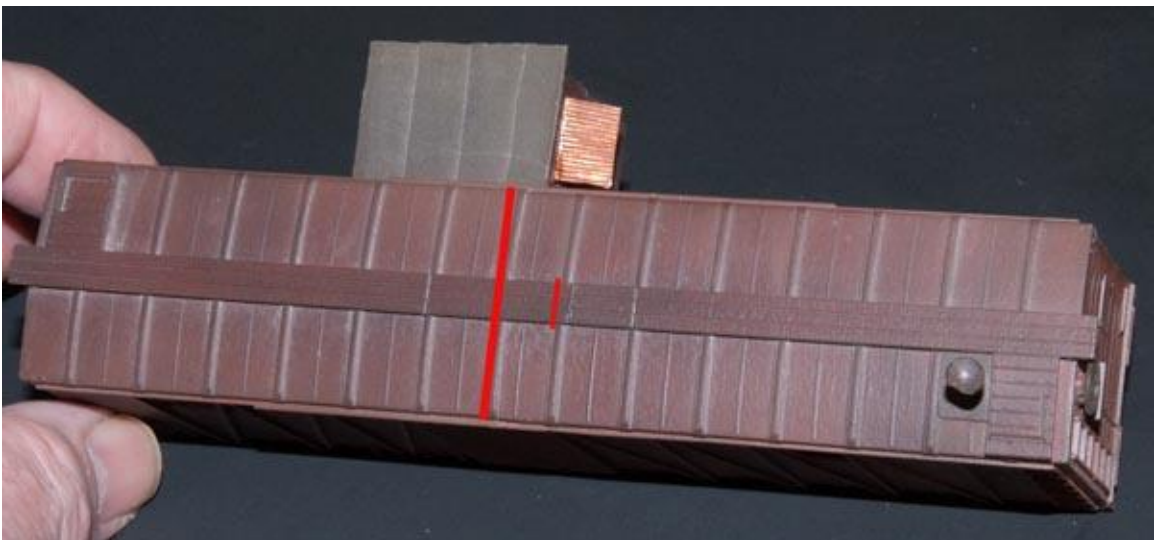


Figure 4

I added the windows by drilling holes for a saw blade and then cutting them out with a fine scroll saw blade. After cutting the window holes I used a jeweler's file to make them square. (Figure 5)

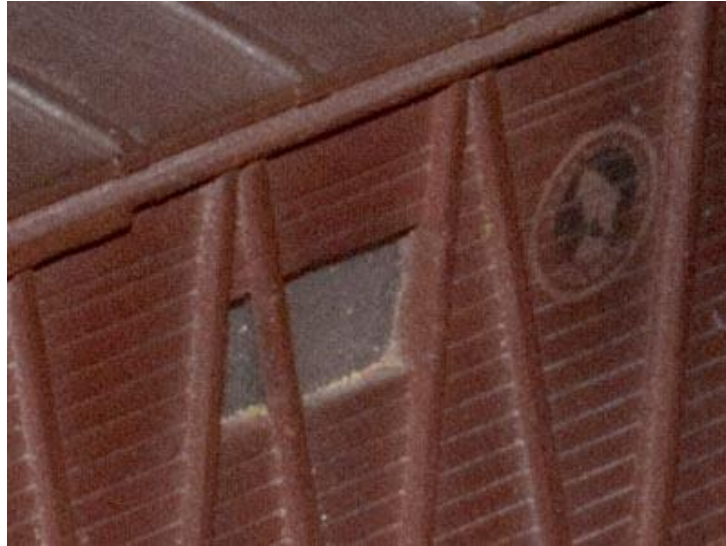


Figure 5

To add glazing I fitted the windows with sheet styrene that had been frosted by sanding the inside and dusted with Dulcoat to look as if they were never washed. (Figure 6)



Figure 6

For the entry area, I scratch built a vestibule out of sheet styrene, Model Die Casting/Roundhouse window casting, paper stock and Campbell corrugate as roof material. (Figure 7, 8 and 9)



Figure 7

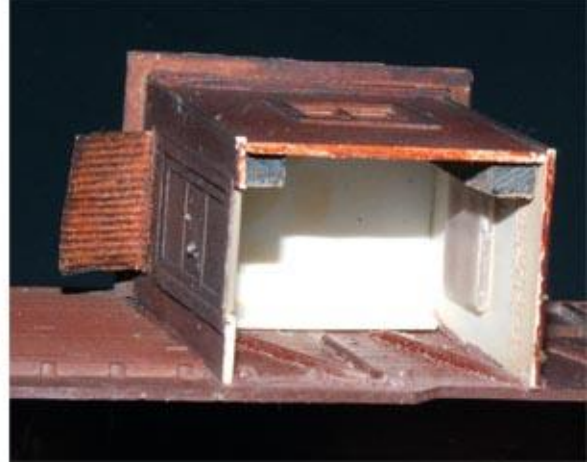


Figure 8



Figure 9

I braced the inside of the entry way with wood braces to keep it square and add support. The iron outside bracing of the car was cut away to fit the entry way against the boxcar. I painted the model and weathered it during and after construction. I lit the building with dim Nano LEDs wired under the structure and the color of the light in the entry is different from the lights in the bar area. Detail parts came from many leftovers that I found in my junk box.



To mount Black Jack's Bar on the module I had to cut a foundation space into the foam. (Figure 10)



Figure 10

After inserting the building I added dirt, earth and gravel to fill in the space around the foundation cutout. I finished the mounting of the building with some foliage of different colors and added more dirt on top to dull the colors. (Figures 11 and 12)



Figure 11



Figure 12

I found it interesting that in Maclean's book he refers to "the sign of the Great Northern Railroad, a mountain goat gazing through a white beard on a world painted red." As I was planning this scene, I learned that the Great Northern may not have adopted the goat for these cars until well after 1937. I would guess the reference comes from seeing the goat sign on Great Northern Freight cars during Maclean's yearly trip from the University of Chicago to their summer home at Seeley Lake, Montana. This goat works for the story, *A River Runs Through It*, the same way the sign with the Oculists' glasses known as The Eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg worked for F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*. Did the Great Northern Goat watch and pass judgment on the frequent customers of Black Jack's Bar? Only the goat knows for sure.

So, this building, built from a kitbashed railroad car, is true to a fictional prototype of a watering hole in the back woods of Montana along the Prickly Pear Creek which out there is pronounced Crick.



What you see here is a small module that was created for teaching Model Railroad Photography. This photo shows the module without much foliage as the foliage is normally not cemented down so it can be changed for different photo opportunities. For a number of years I traveled to National Model Railroad Association meetings throughout the Midwest Region to give clinics, teaching people how to photograph their models. I needed an example of a model to photograph, by building this module I was able to transport a little piece of a layout around the area in my car. The size of the module also allowed the clinic participants to move it so that they could see different angles from which to take their photos.

This module is constructed out of construction foam that is light in weight and yet strong enough to be self-supporting. The foam is stacked and glued together with Liquid Nails for Projects, which does not melt the foam. By doing this I was able to provide hills that rise out of a river valley without adding weight of plaster. The foam is then cut with a paring knife to the approximate shape of the land it is

to represent. I covered the foam with Sculptamold Modeling Compound, a wood fiber and plaster mix. I carved this to take the shape of rocks or dirt covered fields. A coat of water based paint sealed the plaster and allowed me to add layers of ground foam from Woodland Scenics products that look like dirt, grass and weeds. Holes are drilled or pressed into the surface to allow the “planting” of trees. Acrylic paints and gloss medium create a river on top of the base material to which rocks and grasses, as well as fishermen were added.

The roadbed for the railroad is construction foam with ditches carved on each side. Ties are glued to the roadbed and later rails are hand spiked to the ties. The bridge was built by Keith McMillen as a scratch built Sn3 bridge, but it worked out fine for this module. When the entire track was in place ballast was poured onto the track and brushed to the correct location. I secured all of the materials to the module with diluted white glue.

The automobile road is made in the same way as the railroad roadbed but does not have ties and rails. However, the railroad crossing does have planks set between and on each side of the rails to allow the automobiles to cross the tracks without having to bump over the rails or cause them to go out of gauge.

The creek was cut out of the land and sculpted with a knife down one layer of foam. The lowest layer of foam provided a flat creek bed. Acrylic paints and gloss medium create a river to which rocks and grasses, as well as fishermen were added. Rocks and foliage were added along the banks and into the creek to provide for fishing locations and pools for the fish. The final surface of the creek was gloss medium to give the creek a wet look.

I added the brothers fly fishing and have had groups of picnickers gather under the trees across the river from the bar. One time we even had a Hobo camp there with a campfire. [www.tlmrc.org/Layouts.html](http://www.tlmrc.org/Layouts.html)

**The Book by Norman Maclean (1902-1990)**

***A River Runs Through It***

***And Other Stories***

Copyright 1976 by the University of Chicago Press.

A number of editions of this book are available at your local bookstore.

The book is also available on audio cassette from Audio Press read by Ivan Doing.

---

**The film by Robert Redford**

***A River Runs Through It* [PG]**

The movie starring, Craig Sheffer, Brad Pitt, Tom Skerritt, Brenda Blethyn and Emily Lloyd is based on the book by Norman Maclean, screenplay by Richard Friedenberg. Released by Columbia Pictures, this film is available on video by Columbia Tristar Home Video.

---

**Maclean's Second Book**

***Young Men and Fire***

This book was published posthumously by the University of Chicago Press in 1992. It is also available on audio cassette from NorthWord Press Inc. read by Norman's son, John Maclean, at the Maclean family summer home on Seeley Lake, in Montana.

---