1. A truck from Wesley's Creamery has arrived at Blacklog Depot to drop off empty milk cans to send back to the farmers. In the background stands the Beers & Green woodworking shop, makers of wood pins, spokes, and barrel staves. Cut timber arrives via flatcar, while finished products are carted to the freight depot for shipment.

TEN YEARS on THE TUSCARORA

A fictitious railroad based in reality

by Kevin Strong | Centennial, Colorado | PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

THE YEAR WAS 1905 *and the people of Fulton County, Pennsylvania, were feeling isolated. Theirs was the only county in all of Pennsylvania without so much as a mile of railroad laid into it. There had been lofty proposals, surveys, and even lines graded but none ever seemed to bear fruit until a lumber company saw potential in the vast timber resources that Fulton County offered. The company wanted to tap those resources and realized that half their work had already been done for them by those earlier efforts.*

Of particular interest to the lumbermen were the efforts of two railroads: the Tuscarora Valley and the neighboring East Broad Top (EBT). Both had surveyed and graded lines through the Tuscarora valley in the 1890s, but work inexplicably stopped before rails were laid. The East Broad Top's Shade Gap branch ran east from their iron furnaces in Rockhill Furnace to Shade Gap but the rails ended there. Their grade continued southeast from Shade Gap to Neelyton, then turned south to Burnt Cabins, where it was to join the stillborn South Penn Railroad. The Tuscarora Valley Railroad formed a subsidiary, the Tuscarora Railroad, which graded a line from Blair's Mills south to Neelyton, then paralleled the EBT's grade to Burnt Cabins.

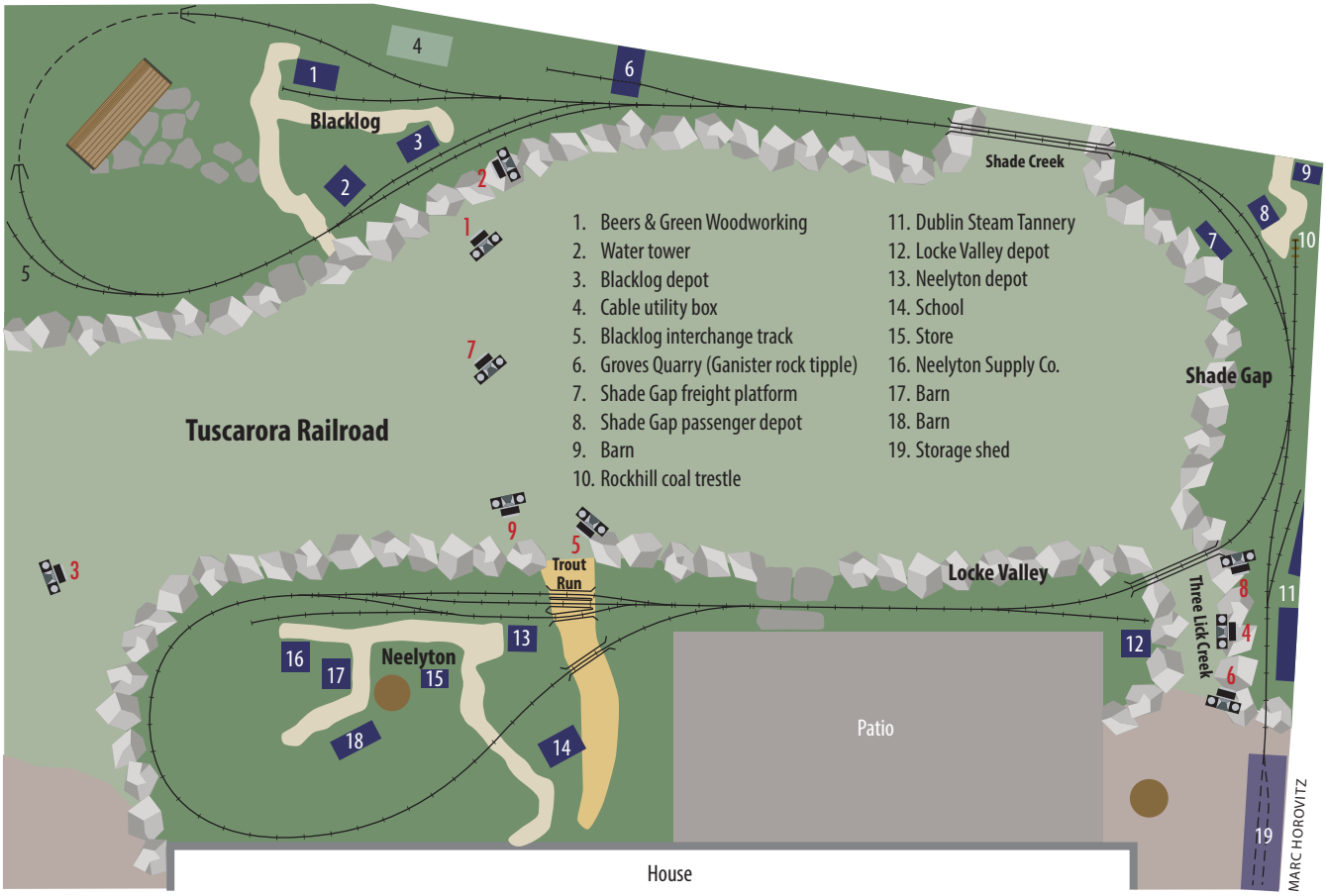
The lumbermen negotiated with both the EBT and TVRR to purchase their unused grades. They took the name of the Tuscarora Valley's southern extension, "Tuscarora Railroad," and by 1907 the people of Fulton County finally had their connection to the outside world.

The Tuscarora Railroad (TRR) ran from Blair's Mills south, through Neelyton to Burnt Cabins, with a westward branch from Neelyton to Blacklog, where it joined the East Broad Top. The TRR operated a stable of its own locomotives, but leased its freight and passenger equipment from the East Broad Top. In the early years, locomotives from the EBT would also be used when the TRR's engines were in for repairs. The TRR would operate until the mid 1940s, when competition from the automobile, combined with declining timber revenues, finally overwhelmed the small agricultural line.

2. TRR 2-8-0 Nº 3 pauses for water on the east end of Blacklog. The water tower at Blacklog gets its water from the adjacent creek. Crews installed this water stand at the east end of the yard, fed by the water tower. It's more convenient for watering locomotives.

The above history is much abbreviated from what I've written about the Tuscarora Railroad but, at the same time, is much longer than what I would have envisioned writing about the railroad when I first began building my garden railway 10 years ago. My original goal was to model the East Broad Top's Shade Gap branch. However, I didn't have any EBT locomotives. Without locomotives it's hard to run trains, so the notion of a freelance railroad that ran along the same tracks was born. I planned to use commercially available locomotives to pull my trains until such time that I could build a fleet of East Broad Top engines, then sell the TRR locomotives and concentrate on the EBT.

As the John Lennon song goes, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans." I built my EBT locomotives but ended up building more TRR locomotives as well. Along the way, the mythos surrounding the TRR began to take on a



life of its own. What started as a convenient excuse for a railroad based on two real, proposed railroads has evolved into a narrative into which is woven the actual history of the region. I studied the economies of that part of Pennsylvania, learning what natural resources really did exist, and how such a railroad, if built, would have been able to survive on them. The railroad has taken on a history covering its beginning, glory days, and—as happened to almost all narrow-gauge lines—its ultimate demise. Whenever I build a new piece of equipment for the railroad, it finds a place within that history, and the story of the Tuscarora Railroad gets richer with each new piece.

That's the story of why the TRR came to be. *How* it came to be is a little more traditional. My wife Allison and I had recently moved to Colorado and bought a house. I built a small, temporary loop of track in a rock garden but the itch to build my "real" railroad was getting stronger. I decided that 2005 was the year I was going to start. I figured it would be a fairly long process, as I wanted to hand-lay my track, build all my switches, and I had a long grocery list of structures I wanted to custom build. Building a garden railroad, though, isn't a race to be run but a journey to be enjoyed, right?

"Honey, I'm pregnant."

Sometimes that journey gets kicked into high gear real fast! Those three words put construction in a whole new light. I knew if I didn't get landscaping in and rails laid by fall, progress would then become painfully slow, as railroad construction would take a back seat to the newborn. My dreams of handlaid track and switches succumbed to the expedience of commercial flex track and switches. The first dirt arrived in June of 2005 and the golden spike was driven a mere two months later. The railroad wasn't much to look at in terms of landscaping but at least trains were running before the baby came, which was the goal.

It's been 10 years since that golden spike was driven. Plants have grown in, rails have weathered, and buildings have been built (and fallen apart and been rebuilt). Along the way there have been many lessons learned but, more importantly, the railroad has really come to fulfill my goals for what I wanted in a railroad.

My primary goal was that of realism. I didn't want my railroad to be an abstract representation of what 1910s rural Pennsylvania looked like; I want it to *be* 1910s rural Pennsylvania. I wanted the railroad to transport me back in time. I wanted to look at a scene through a camera's

The railway at a glance

Name: Tuscarora Railroad
Scale: 1:20.3
Era: 1910s
Age: 10 years
Minimum radius: 5'
Total track length: approximately 300', double reverse loop with sidings
Track material: code-250 brass (AMS w/ Sunset Valley switches)
Power: Battery R/C and live steam
Maximum grade: 2.5%
Area: 30' x 65'
Website: *http://tuscararailroad.blogspot.com*

3. The Tuscarora Railroad was designed specifically to leave the middle of the author's yard open so that his kids and dogs would be able to play and not endanger the railroad. East Broad Top Nº 7 has just arrived in Blacklog (upper left) and is preparing to switch out the interchange track, where it will leave cars for the TRR crews to pick up.

4. Crews prepare to unload a Dolly Varden car full of hemlock bark at the Dublin Steam Tannery under a bower of boxwood trees. Hemlock bark is rich in tannins, necessary to process animal hides into leather. Why these open-sided cars were called Dolly Varden cars is lost to history.

5. If the presence of the superintendent's Model T in the parking lot of the Neelyton Depot is any indication, there are big doins' in town. Nº 5, an 1881 Baldwin 2-8-0, came to the railroad secondhand.

viewfinder and not be able to tell that it wasn't a picture of the prototype. I've spent a lot of time working with scale plants and buildings, creating a miniature landscape. My line is built to 1:20.3 scale, so everything on it—plants, buildings, details—has to play into that. That doesn't mean there aren't non-scale elements (especially plants, like raspberry bushes and ivy along the back fence), but I make a point to use them as background elements, not focal points. You see them, but your eyes are drawn to the scale elements in such a way that they kind of disappear.

The plants

I'd love to give you the impression that I had a distinct plan for what plants would go where, when beginning construction of the railroad. I had a vague idea but plants tend to have minds of their own regarding where they're going to thrive and where they're going to fail. The garden has been the epitome of an evolution, one that changes year to year, as some plants decide they've had enough of my nonsense. Every spring means replacing

6. TRR 2-8-0 Nº 5 brings the daily freight into Shade Gap. This is one place where the author wishes he had a little more space between the track and the fence for more background plants.

7a. LEFT: Blacklog began as an open field of dirt with a few small plants and a roughed-in shell of a depot. Consolidation N° 3 pushes a load of timbers onto the Beers & Green siding, though the building hadn't been built. 7b. RIGHT: Ten years later, N° 3 is still working Blacklog, though things have changed considerably. A new depot and other buildings, a tunnel in the back corner (behind the bench), and mature plants have transformed the scene into a lush rural landscape. Shrubby boxwood trees add structure to the landscape while a mugo pine tries to hide the 1:1 bench.

probably a dozen or so bushes and replenishing groundcovers here and there. While frustrating on one hand, this does allow me the chance to experiment with new things, and I've re-envisioned several areas of the garden much-for-the-better as a result.

Operation

My second goal was to do prototypical operations on the railroad. I've always had a fascination with how real railroads operate, and simply running trains around a loop has always seemed a bit flat to me. I designed sidings and industries so that there were places from which to get resources and places to take them to.

Lumber is big business on the TRR so there are a number of timber-related industries, such as the Minnick tannery (bark) and the Beers & Green pin mill (cut timber). Timber is also shipped to the "outside world" via an interchange track with the East Broad Top, which also brings goods to various freight depots along the line. I've added additional spurs that serve more industries and locations. With 14 freight cars on the railroad, it takes me about two hours to move all of the freight that needs to be moved on the line. I keep the cars in a storage shed at one end of the railroad so it's easy to hook up a locomotive and get trains running.

Finally, I wanted the railroad to be reliable. Running the railroad—whether I'm having an operating session or just watching a train run around the garden—has to be stress free. This is what I do to escape reality. Nothing ruins the mood like a train that keeps derailing. Of all the goals I set for the railroad, this one has

Plants on the Tuscarora Railroad

Centennial Colorado | USDA Hardiness Zone 5

DWARF CONIFERS

Dwarf Alberta spruce
Picea glauca 'Conica'

Dwarf mugo pine
Pinus mugo

Spreading yew
Taxus x *media* 'Densiformis'

GROUNDCOVER

Massachusetts kinnikinnick
Arctostaphylos uva-ursi 'Massachusetts'

Sweet woodruff
Galium odoratum

White Nancy deadnettle
Lamium maculatum 'White Nancy'

Spearmint
Mentha spicata

Irish moss
Sagina subulata

Scotch moss
Sagina subulata 'Aurea'

Sedum, Stonecrop
Sedum sp. (various)

Thyme
Thymus sp. (various)

Turkish veronica (aka Turkish speedwell)
Veronica liwanenses

PERENNIALS

Boxwood
Buxus sp. (various)

Chrysanthemum
Chrysanthemum sp. (various)

Euonymus
Euonymus fortunei 'Emerald Gaiety'

Blue fescue grass
Festuca glauca 'Elijah Blue'

Russian sage
Perovskia atriplicifolia

American red raspberry
Rubus strigosus

Dwarf spirea
Spirea nipponica 'Little Princess'

Plus, many other plants I thought would look cool but whose names I've forgotten.

8. This storage shed provides shelter for rolling stock ready for an impromptu operating session. Not having to hand-carry cars from the railroad to storage shelves in the basement or garage greatly increased the frequency of operation.

9. Lumber is big business on the TRR. Logs, cut timbers for mine props and railroad ties, and other forest products provided the backbone of revenue for the railroad through most of its life. The presence of East Broad Top 2-8-0 N° 7 on the point of the daily passenger train sets the time of this photo at sometime prior to 1913. Variety in groundcovers up front, like the white deadnettle on the right, is balanced by a backdrop of dwarf Alberta spruce.

required the most attention to detail—not the same kind of detail as the other goals, with respect to studying the prototype and accurately recreating it, but detail in the way of making sure that the engineering of the track and trains is the best I can make it. My philosophy is that everything starts with the track; if I keep that in good shape, many other ills go away. It's a railroad. It's outdoors. This is sometimes a chore but the end result of worry-free running makes it well worth the effort.

What would I have done differently?

When I had the railroad open for last summer's National Garden Railway Convention tour, the most asked question was, "What would you do differently?"

When I built the railroad, I laid PVC pipe along the route as a support to keep the track in place. I've since found that, as the ground moves through natural forces, the pipe has a tendency to "roll up" in the ballast, so I had a lot of humps between my vertical support posts, which caused the track to hump along with it, as it was secured to the pipe every foot or so. I've since removed many of the screws holding the track to the pipe, screwing it down every five feet or so. This means the track is more floating in the ballast than tightly secured but it withstands the dogs and kids well enough and stays more even as the weather changes. If I were to do it again, I'd use support material with a square or rectangular profile instead of round.

The other thing I wish I had done differently, but is too much work to remedy, is that I had built the narrow parts of the garden, where it runs along the fence, just a foot or so wider. Those parts are about 30 inches wide, from the back to the edge of the rockwork, which I thought would be sufficient. What I've found, though, is that I don't have as much space for plants between the fence and the track as I would like. In some places, the track is as close as six inches to the back edge of the railroad, which doesn't leave much room for vegetation. I've started placing rocks in those locations to hide the fence but I'd much prefer greenery.

About the author

Kevin Strong often thinks he was born 100 years too late, except for that "no indoor plumbing" thing. He's long had a fascination with narrow-gauge steam and the industrial revolution. That passion is evident in his backyard and also through "Colorado's Most Endangered Places," an annual documentary that he produces for CBS in Denver to bring attention to historic sites in the state that are in need of preservation, and for which he won the State Honor Award last year. When he's not doing that, or his more regular task of editing stories for the evening news, he can usually be found on a road trip somewhere in the state with his wife and kids, searching out trains (for Kevin), playgrounds (for the kids), and hot springs (for everybody). TRACY CALVERT, PHOTOGRAPHY TLC

The future

What does the next 10 years hold? There are still some places that frustrate me, visually, so I'll tweak those areas in the hope that something finally clicks. I'm also the kind of person who gets completely random ideas (like my tunnel) so it's anyone's guess what's going to happen down the road.

While I may have already written about how the TRR got its start, and how it would ultimately come to its end, there's no limit to the number of chapters between those two points, chapters that get written with every new idea. I'm going to have fun writing those stories.