



My Friend of Fifty Years, Mike Brestel

By Larry DeYoung

After Joyce finished her PhD at Ohio State in 1974, we moved to Cincinnati. I was a committed model railroader, at age 27 a life member (since age 19) of the National Model Railroad Association and former member of both the Purdue Model Railroad Club and the Columbus Model Railroad Club. So, of course, one of the first things I did after we moved into our apartment on Ridgeacres Drive in Golf Manor was seek out a hobby shop. The first one I found was in the basement of a house on Losantiville Ave., just to the north of us. I can't recall the owner's name anymore, other than Ed. It had the advantage of proximity, but the disadvantage of being its owner's second job, so hours were limited and odd. I next found Walt's Hobby Shop, in a corner of a nearby strip mall as I recall (I can't place it on a map anymore). There someone referred me to a model railroad club in Glendale, but it was a negative experience, with an organizational structure that made it seem more like an obligation than an enjoyable social hobby. I didn't last long and then was back to Walt's seeking alternatives. Working there that day was this good-natured young college student if I recall correctly, about to become a dropout, named Mike Brestel, who suggested that I call John Wissinger, the president of the Cincinnati & Great Western Model Railroad Club (an ampersand is obligatory in railroad naming). On the phone, John was very welcoming and suggested that I drop by at an upcoming session of the club, which was in the basement of the Westwood Town Hall, I believe, all the way across town from where we lived. The model railroad was small and portable, but exceptionally well done. And with it I found a small, congenial group of modelers, including Mike himself! I really don't recall how we became close, but clearly it did not us take long.

Soon, we were sharing our passions for model trains, real trains ("the prototype" in the lingo of the modelers), popular music (Linda Ronstadt, for example), and photography, especially of railroads. We also shared an obsession with equipment: model trains, photo gear, and stereo sound systems. In the fall of 1975, I received an appointment as instructor in economics at UC and then had more control

over my work time, especially in the summers. Mike, new Club member friend John Roberts, Jim Slaughter, and I used that flexibility to take expeditions to surrounding railroad centers. I was ignorant of Cincinnati railroading, having grown up in northeastern Ohio, so native Mike and Kentucky native Jim served to educate me (and John) about the railroads of southern Ohio and northern Kentucky. We would travel and photograph whenever we could. We'd leave as soon as we could get Slaughter out of bed, travel out a couple hours' drive to a previously selected destination, and then pursue trains and photo angles until it was dark. The comradeship that grew out of those shared interests and field trips has been life-long, even though I moved away in September 1978. Mike taught me about the C&O, and of course about Cheviot Hill. I reciprocated to some extent about the Erie Lackawanna.

The model railroad club was made up of about a dozen young men, most of whom became published model railroaders; the group, however, was very welcoming and had among them an individual who would today be termed "learning disabled." It didn't matter; he was a full member of the group. That openness favorably impressed me. I became a significantly better model railroader from my association with those people. Mike also got me involved in Division 7 of the Mid-Central Region of the NMRA, in the course of which he introduced me to one of the all-time great model railroaders, W. Allen McClelland. I had the privilege of assisting with the 1975 MMRA Convention in Dayton.

Mike quickly went from working part-time at Walt's to going into business for himself, entering a partnership to take over Western Hills Camera. I had a couple of small roles in that venture's origins, lending Mike some money at one point for an expansion, and also serving as proprietor *pro tem* while Mike went to an industry conference. He paid, though, as I ate all of his previously unopened package of Pecan Sandies, leaving it *looking* full, but actually full only of air!

Mike and Mary already had a relationship, either when I met him or soon thereafter. I recall them getting married, but I don't remember when it was; he and I weren't yet close enough that I was invited to the wedding. I remember their apartment; we would have railroad slide shows there. I think it was on the ground floor in a typical Cincinnati small apartment building on Boudinot Avenue. During one visit, Mike expressed displeasure with his car, which was parked along the street out front, saying he hoped it would be hit by a passing driver. Shortly thereafter, we hear a screech and a crash and it turned out that an "old lady" (by our then-perspective) had made Mike's wish come true! The car was a goner.

Mike and Mary were partners, so much so that she would go to many NMRA events. Joyce had told me, after attending her first and only NMRA division convention, that if she had to go to a second one, it was grounds for divorce! (The only other grounds for divorce she ever disclosed to me were if I got a comb-over. There's no danger of that now.) Anyhow, Mary is very patient. I have a photo of her relaxing and smiling in their Ford minivan, reading a book while us guys are up to some model train mischief.

Photography: When Joyce and I moved to Cincinnati, I was using a Pentax Spotmatic 35MM camera. It was a good camera with the disadvantage of having screw-mount lenses, making changing from one lens to another a dicey proposition, with dropping one of them always a possibility. I decided to replace it with one having bayonet mount lenses. Since I wanted a camera with small dimensions to replace the small Spotmatic, Mike suggested that I try a new camera then entering the market, the Olympus OM-. I bought one from his store and have had at least one Olympus camera ever since. In my railroad career, I carried an Olympus XA (that I bought from Mike before we moved away) in my briefcase wherever I went and shot photos with it that won me awards and earned me publication. It was my railroad "stealth" camera. I still have it, and, beat up as it is, it still works. I now shoot

exclusively with Olympus digital cameras. That entire thread traces back to Mike and his welcome influence on my photographic equipment choices.

Mike was a judge of NMRA photo contests and got me involved in doing that, too. Through the intensive discussions we would have with the other judges about the reasons for choosing one photo over another, I learned a lot about quality photography. My going-in tendency had been to think primarily about the subject, but Mike in particular insisted that photos be judged AS PHOTOS, not as simple representations of the subject in the frame. Technical quality, lighting, and composition were matters that I didn't think about much, but Mike viewed them as essential. It occasionally resulted in the consternation of a contest entrant who had presented a photo of, say, Southern Railway steamer No. 4501 when a photo of a "mere" diesel won because it was actually a superior photograph. It was, as Mike would point out, a *photo* contest. The photography lessons I learned in associating with Mike have lasted ever since, and are now basically second-nature to me. When I find that I have taken a bad photo, I nearly always determine that it is because I failed to pay attention to what Mike taught me. He was a great teacher. And of course I am far from the only one he has influenced in their photography.

After Joyce and I moved to Pennsylvania in 1978, Mike and I naturally did not see each other as often, but we remained in touch. It was always difficult for Mike to travel since he was owned by a business (it IS that way, isn't it?), but I landed a job with Conrail that would see me traveling occasionally to the Cincinnati area, and he and I nearly always would get together. The advent of email made communication easier, too. We shared slides of our respective railroad field trips, mine in the passenger-heavy northeast or along Conrail lines, and his in a Cincinnati-centered circle in the Midwest and Kentucky.

Something over ten years after we had moved away from Cincinnati, Mike told me that he and Mary were adopting a child, an infant girl that they named Rebecca. I think they had already moved into the house on Vittmer Avenue by then as I remember Rebecca being a little live-wire running around the cozy house. Of course, having a child introduced into a family is life-changing, and so it was for Mike. Much of the freedom he might have had to take day-long excursions in pursuit of railroad subjects was gone, taken up with parental responsibilities, especially since Mary continued working in the Cincinnati libraries. As Rebecca reached her teen years, I recall Mike's frustration at some of her inevitable teenage behavior as peer pressure came to influence her. It's great to see that she and Mike now have an adult loving relationship and Mike has become a loving grandfather, twice-over: granddaughters Arion and Zenovia.

Later came "round 2" of our relationship. I think it was a conspiracy. One day, for some long-forgotten reason, I had gotten together with John Roberts in Baltimore, and afterward we were driving toward his home in Pittsburgh. At that time, John and Mike were becoming heavily involved in the leadership of NMRA at the national level and one of them had been elected president. I had written several books on railroads, and John hit me up about taking on the role of manager of publications for NMRA. [They mistakenly thought that I actually knew something about publishing! I tried to tell John otherwise, but he wasn't listening.] I had never been involved in NMRA in more than a minor way, doing local clinics or judging a contest here and there. But Mike and John were setting out to fundamentally change the course of the NMRA and they wanted me to be part of that. I succumbed (that is a weird word, isn't it?) to the pressure they brought to bear on me and agreed—good salesman as always. The very best part of it as far as I was concerned was that I got to spend time several times a year with my old friends, Mike and John.

Although there was serious Association business to attend to at those meetings, we also allowed time for fun, visiting model railroads in the localities of the board meetings and railfanning. Texas, Arizona, Georgia, California, Nevada: I have digital photos I took at NMRA events in all those places and more in the company of my friend Mike and our mutual friend the late John Roberts. I think the team that Mike and John put together, including such luminaries as Tony Koester, helped protect the NMRA from a significant demographic decline. The organization has been financially stable and has held its own against pressures that have weighed heavily (or fatally) on other hobby groups. And I think my involvement helped them accomplish that: the team that we chose many years ago to produce the *NMRA Magazine* (renamed at the insistence of Tony Koester) continues to do so today, turning out a quality monthly magazine. The model railroad hobby is far better off today for the deep involvement of my friend Mike Brestel.

Mike's and my relationship has become so casual after all this time that we sometimes have forgotten when we **didn't** tell one another something! An email would show up: "Did you see the YouTube video of the tornado hitting a train in Kansas?" The phone would ring: "Hi, it's Mike. I have a story to tell you about what's happening in the NMRA!" (Joyce always says that Mike sounds anxious when he leaves a message.) We would just start into conversation. It was all perfectly natural, as if we had known each other all of our lives. Well, fifty years is a substantial part of any life, so that should be no surprise. To me none it was a surprise until I sat down and thought about it to compose this letter to, and about my friend. Mike, you are a great friend and it has been a joy to have you as part of my life. I am grateful to know you, to count you as my very good friend.