

“What is the AP Program?” --By Marvin Preussler, MMR --Midwest Region AP Manager

This is a question that has come up recently in various discussion groups. I will try to shed more light on what the AP is and how it works. I will pose some questions and add some comments to the questions that I have received recently.

Question #1. What is the AP?

The “AP” stands for the “Achievement Program”. It is a program that was started by the NMRA for its members a long time ago. It is based on the Boy Scouts Merit Badge Program. The AP is intended for NMRA members who would like to broaden their modeling skills and take on modeling projects that they normally would not do. **It is intended to make you an all around better modeler and to help other NMRA members with volunteer opportunities and serving the NMRA in various other capacities.** It is a learning tool that makes a person a better modeler because of the 11 different categories involved in the AP. The 11 categories are:

Railroad Equipment:

1. Master Builder Motive Power
2. Master Builder Cars

Railroad Setting:

3. Structures
4. Scenery
5. Prototype Models

Railroad Construction & Operation:

6. Civil Engineer
7. Electrical Engineer
8. Chief Dispatcher

Service to the Hobby & NMRA Membership

9. Association Volunteer
10. Association Official
11. Model Railroad Author

Once you have completed all the requirements involved in a particular category you will be sent a “Certificate of Achievement” with your name appearing on it that says you have “Mastered” all the skills necessary in that particular category.

Question # 2. What is a MMR?

“MMR” stands for Master Model Railroader. You can get to be a Master Model Railroader by receiving 7 Certificates of Achievement out of the 11 categories listed above. You must earn one certificate in each of the four areas listed above. This is so that it makes you a more well rounded modeler. There are plenty of excellent modelers around that never volunteer for anything with the NMRA. They will not be a MMR unless they do something in the “Service to the Hobby” department. There are others that are great at politics and running NMRA divisions or regions, yet they have never built a model or even have a layout at all. These folks may never be a Master Model Railroader either. The idea / example here is that there are very few folks that have done enough in all the categories to achieve that status. You can’t just be an excellent modeler only and not serve the hobby, or just serve the hobby and not do any modeling. This is one reason why there are currently less than 500 folks who have ever achieved MMR status. There is no timeframe as to achieving MMR status. Some folks who have done all the modeling and just did not fill out the forms can achieve MMR in a year or two. Others have gone 20 years or more between getting their first AP certificate to their last one for MMR. Time is not an issue. Record keeping is the most important thing. **Keep track of what you do as you do it.** This can be accomplished by using the “Record and Validation Form” for the particular category. All this information is available at the NMRA website at www.nmra.org.

Question # 3. What Is The Purpose of the AP?

Easy answer – **learning! The AP is a tool to make you a better modeler and to learn from other members how to be a better modeler.** For instance, usually, when you enter your model in a division or region contest and want it to be judged using the AP judging guidelines, very talented modelers who have judged models for a long time will go over your model using the AP judging matrix, which is found online at www.nmra.org. The majority of the time, the folks judging your model will answer any questions that you may have as far as why it received the points it did. The NMRA AP judges will take the time to point out what you did well on the model and what you could have done better. A lot of times, they can suggest new products to use that could make the job easier making for a cleaner, more professional looking model. At the very least, the contest judges should make notes on the judging form, if they are not able to talk with the modeler after the judging of the model. It has been my experience in my division that I have learned so many techniques and tips from our division contest chairman, which is what the AP is all about. You need to talk with folks and ask questions about what you can do better and what worked well on the model.

3A. Contests & Criticism: First misconception is that you are competing with other modelers when you have your model judged in NMRA AP judging. **Your model is being judged against a judging matrix that has been established by the NMRA for the purpose of getting more even judging across all divisions and regions.** It is not a popularity contest when it comes to AP judging. There are some divisions that have a popular vote contest as well, but we are not talking about that here. It is your model against the NMRA contest AP judging matrix. It is the tool that is used for all those wanting their model judged for AP points. If your contest judges are not using it, then they must download it off the website and print it out and take it along to the contest location and use it, period. Who you are, what your name is, is not important and it should never be disclosed on the contest form for other members to see. As long as the judges know who to give the model back to is the only thing. Some folks take constructive criticism well others do not. Some want to do better when challenged or things don't go their way, others will get mad and complain why they did not come out with the outcome they expected. People are going to react as they do, and there is no changing that. All that can be done is to talk with people and explain the reasoning.

Question #4. How Does The AP Work?

First off, the NMRA works by an entire volunteer staff. Many of the AP leaders have real jobs, family issues and the like. So patience is, and should be, expected by all NMRA members getting involved with the AP. I will try to give an overview of how this should work. First, every division in our Midwest Region, should have a person assigned as the "Division AP Chairman". This person is the person that a division NMRA member would want to talk to about getting involved with the AP Program. In my division, I am the guy. Many of our divisions do have a person with this title. A lot of times this person is a qualified NMRA contest judge too. I understand that there are some divisions that lack structure or cannot fill this position. I am not in charge of organizing divisions but this is something that all divisions should have. Nevertheless, if this is the case, then the individual member can contact me, and I can work with him. The Superintendent/Division President should be in charge of finding other division members to contact that may be a MMR or has a lot of contest experience to help someone interested in the AP within their own division in my opinion.

Anyway the chain of command on the AP in our Midwest Region goes like this: The NMRA member enters contests and has their models judged using the AP Judging Matrix. This judging is done by competent judges, not just any NMRA member. When all requirements have been met, and all paperwork has been signed by the Division AP chairman, superintendent, etc, (Usually requires 3 signatures) the paperwork is given to the Division AP Chairman. He can record it if he wants (Not Mandatory). The Division sends the completed paperwork to me. I record the information in my MWR AP record book and then send it to Frank Koch. He is the current National Assistant AP Chairman. He looks at the paperwork and then sends it to the National AP Chairman, who currently is Paul Richardson. He records all documents and then sends the AP Certificate of Achievement back to me via USPS. I then record that the certificate has been approved and then mail the Certificate of Achievement directly to the NMRA member who applied for the certificate. Sometimes I will mail the certificate to the Division AP Chairman so that he can present the certificate to the member at their next Division meet. This way his peers are there and can see what he has accomplished.

As stated above, we are all volunteers, so there could be anywhere from a one to a three month period that could go by from the time that I send the paperwork into National until the member receives his certificate. Patience is important. Also, you do not get your paperwork back, so be sure to send copies of photos and things that you do not need back, because you don't get your paperwork back.

Question # 5. Who Is Responsible For What?

The way the AP Program works is that the responsibility of doing things in the AP program is dictated by the individual member themselves. Now, as promoters of all aspects of the NMRA and the programs it offers, we are all responsible to encourage members to get involved with the division, region, the AP, whatever. That is always the goal and we should all be promoting the various tools that the NMRA uses. The best answer I can give is that the individual member is responsible to get involved with the AP. Then, it should be encouraged by the Division AP Chairman. He is the person who should be the contact or the "go between" between the individual member and myself at the Region level. The Division AP Chairman can work with the division member and help with printing out the forms and is responsible for signing off on the forms as well. It all starts on the Division level. If there is not a person assigned as the Division AP Chairman as stated above, then the Division Superintendent is responsible for doing this and getting the individual in contact with other MMR's in the division or other talented modelers who have some experience in the AP. I personally learned from a MMR that I eventually became good friends with. He taught me a lot of what I know about the AP. These are some of the folks that can be tapped into to provide guidance to other members new to the AP. Part of the responsibility of being a Master Model Railroader is to pass on what you have learned about the program, how to do things, and how it all worked out for the MMR. I do not claim to know everybody or have all the answers, but a few folks that are MMRs that could be of help would be David Leider, James Wise, and Dave Crement. They are all MMR's and live in Illinois. My brother, Mark R. Preussler, myself and my friend Don Manlick are all MMR's in Wisconsin and are active in NMRA. Ronald Lane has just become a MMR and he lives in Indiana. These are just folks who come to mind as I type this. Any NMRA member can ask any division or region board member about who to contact too. I believe the majority of the folks that I have ever dealt with are more than happy to share their knowledge on their favorite hobby. I am responsible for approving the paperwork on the Region level, and responsible for turning in the paperwork to the National folks I mentioned. I am then responsible for sending out the actual certificate to the individual member on a timely basis. I work with the Division AP Chairman and work with the National folks (Frank & Paul) when a problem arises. I answer all telephone calls and respond to all e-mails on a timely basis in my opinion. Again, we are volunteers.

5 A. The ultimate responsibility in getting involved with the AP Program lies with the individual member themselves. The phrase that comes to mind here is "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink". I say this because I personally know a number of very talented modelers who are better modelers than me. These folks could become Master Model Railroaders if they would fill out some of the paperwork, as they have the models all built and judged already. I do my part any time I see them at a meet to tell them and encourage them to fill out this form or work on this aspect, get involved with the board, whatever to get the AP certificate. I am not going to continually hound people if they don't want to do things they don't want to do. I can't fill out and forge documents for members. It is always up to the individual. This is a very individual hobby for most people, kind of like golf. Sometimes the hobby is shared like in a club environment, but some of the best layouts are done by one person working alone and just enjoying the hobby with no politics or other motives around them. And that is just fine too.

Final Thoughts

Internet and the NMRA AP Program:

One of the most useful tools and one of the most time wasting tools that has ever come along is the internet. On the positive side, the internet has made the AP Program available to everyone who owns a computer. I know that the average age of NMRA members must probably be in the 40-55 age range. At least that is what I see at shows. Anyway, there are fewer and fewer people everyday that don't have access to the internet (at least in the US). The NMRA has done a great job in my opinion in putting all the information that I have just provided on their website. You can download all the necessary judging forms, statement of

qualification forms, record and validation forms, and all the basic information needed to get involved with the AP. You just have to read, and re-read what is on there. It really is not too hard in my opinion. They list all the categories, they list all names of MMR's, they list contact information, links to Regions and Divisions. It really is easy. Some folks say, "just don't tell me to go to the website" but if you look at the cover of the NMRA Magazine it now has the prominent NMRA .org blue logo in the right corner. The facts are that everything is going web based. Our division just went web based with our quarterly newsletter because of rising Postal costs and red tape/forms that make it tough to mail something out. We have had a lot of positive feedback on this. So the answer to me is look at the website and don't make it more difficult than it is. It is all there on the website.

NMRA Magazine and the AP Program:

If there are more questions about the NMRA Achievement Program, go get or re-read your issues of NMRA Magazine...formerly Scale Rails...formerly NMRA Bulletin. I can't remember the exact issues or the exact years, but it was either 2009 or early 2010, but they called it "The Year of the MMR". There was a little yellow flag on the front cover of every issue of Scale Rails where an author went and broke down every category of the AP. One month someone wrote about AP Master Builder Cars, next month someone wrote about Master Builder Motive Power, etc, etc. These articles were very informative and told the story of what the person did and how he went about it. Perhaps if you don't subscribe to the NMRA Magazine as part of your membership, you should think about doing so. It is really informative. I would think you could get back issues of the Scale Rails magazines to get those articles as well. The information is out there, you just have to go get it.

Another chance to get information was at the National Train Show in Milwaukee this past July. The NMRA had their booth there as well as an area to "Ask a MMR". I am sure those manning those booths would have been happy to assist too.

Communication and the AP Program:

There are many great aspects to our hobby that we all enjoy. One such thing is the meets that the divisions put on. In this day and age where we all sit behind our computers and talk on social networking sites, e-groups, etc., I still enjoy going to division and region meets when I can. These sites seem somewhat popular to model railroaders as many are somewhat introverted and just enjoy the hobby working on their own layout. I must admit I fall into that category myself. That is fine in my opinion. But, usually when you go to a monthly division meet, region meet, historical society meet, everyone gets name tags. This is a great way to introduce yourself to other modelers, put a face to a name from an e-group, and generally make new contacts with other like minded modelers. I am saddened to see that a lot of my own division meets attendance has been going down the past years. I still think it is better to go to a meet/contest and see what is being done, who is doing what, asking questions face to face, and talking with the modeler. I have met so many great modelers who have become my friends through these types of events. So if you talk to folks at these meets, you may get to know others who can direct you to another person that may be able to answer your AP or any other model railroading questions.

Where I am Coming From:

I have been a model railroader as long as I can remember. My dad started me with Lionel, then went to HO scale and that is what got me hooked. I was painting and decaling cars and locomotives when I was about 14 years old. I entered NMRA division model contests at 18, and failed miserably to the older more advanced modelers of the day. But I just wanted to become a better modeler. I joined the NMRA in 1993 when I was 23 years old and was told about the AP a few years later. I then got involved with trying to become a MMR because my friend Don is MMR #56. I accepted the "job" as Winnebagoland Division AP Chairman many years ago and got a lot of experience in the AP that way. I then was asked to become the MWR AP Chairman in 2006 and took over for Bill Myers. In the four years that I have been serving the Midwest Region, I can say I have enjoyed the majority of the time as the AP Chairman. I have met a lot of great people from doing this "job". I have also been falsely accused of things and my decisions that I have made on one occasion has been questioned. I have a great working relationship with the folks at National

and they have backed my decision when it was questioned by a Region member. One thing I would like to make clear is that I do not enjoy telling someone that their model does not qualify for a merit award or their layout is not good enough for a Scenery certificate for example. The person is usually proud of what they have done and it makes me uncomfortable in breaking the news to them that their layout did not receive the minimum amount of points for a certificate. I just got to be a MMR because I was doing a lot of modeling so I figured I might as well fill out the paperwork and get the credit for it. It is nice to have the certificates and the MMR plaque on the wall, but it does not make you any better than anyone else. You don't get a discount at the hobby shop for being a MMR! I am not the "gate keeper" but I must uphold the standards that the NMRA has set otherwise I am not doing my "job" properly.

Final Thoughts:

In conclusion, I do not claim to have all the answers on the AP and never will. Everyday it is a learning experience, but then again, that is what this is all about. You meet a bunch of good people in this hobby. Majority of modelers are very detail oriented and intelligent. I just try to do the best job that I can do with the AP Program. It does take time out of my busy schedule, but I will do it for the near future. I have enjoyed working with our members, writing articles and answering questions. As I always say, work with your Division AP Chairman first, but if you need a question answered, e-mail me. Again, my contact information is on the website. Also, I will be giving a clinic at the Midwest Region Convention on April 16 2011, in Madison Wisconsin at 10:30 am. It will be just about the Achievement Program. I hope you will consider coming to the convention. I would enjoy answering all questions and talking to everyone interested in the AP that entire weekend. Hopefully, I have answered some questions, and shed some light on what the AP is about and my thoughts on it. Take care and happy modeling!

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