



So what's the big deal about RailOP?

Editor's note: At our August meeting, members voted to adopt the software program RailOP as our club's official operating system. Here is some background information on that system taken from the website www.railop.com and other sources.

When we talk about operating sessions in the context of model railroading, we are talking about having a group of one or more model railroaders come to our layout and make up trains in the yards, run trains across the layout, dropping and picking up cars at sidings along the way, or perhaps running "through" passenger trains that make a number of station stops, and that may take priority over all freight trains, and doing other things that are typical of what real railroads do. The heart of these operating sessions are the engineers who run the trains, but we can have conductors, switchmen, yardmasters, etc., and one or more dispatchers who control the whole thing. For most of us, the object is to have fun by simulating in miniature the basic operations of a real railroad, without making it so complex that we get confused or lose interest. So how do we set up these operations? A long-used method is with "car cards". But now there is a better way: the computer.

Why use a computer program? The computer can manage your car, engine, train, and track location files as well as create the paperwork needed to move freight and trains of all types over your railroad. Once your railroad data is loaded into the computer, you will find that you can get rid of all those cards and your operators will carry only one piece of paper with them on their runs.

RailOp provides the following:

1. RailOP builds trains automatically from the data files but allows any manual changes you wish.
2. Handles an unlimited number of cars, engines, trains, and locations (cities and sidings)
3. Provides a "Manifest" on one sheet of paper gives an engineer all the information he needs.
4. Generates working switch lists for yards and towns -- user selectable.
5. Reports preview on screen before printing.
6. Switch lists can be generated before and/or during an operating session.
7. Every Operating Session is different.
8. Unit trains -- freight, passenger, and maintenance of way -- can be used.
9. Cars are handled individually or in blocks (Kernels).
10. Takes into account RR grades, car weights, and individual engine power.
11. Provides "local moves" - between industries in the same city.
12. Dynamically updates files as trains are moved.
13. Prints lists of all car locations, by city and siding.
14. Provides results at end of session.

What are the advantages of the RailOP computerized system over the car-card system? One primary advantage is that Engineers don't need to handle a stack of car cards, or worry about where to put them. They simply deal with one piece of paper. There is no setup between one Operating Session and the next. There is no fixed number of trains that constitute an Operating Session. A session ends whenever you want it to, and you're immediately ready for another one! And there is no repetition as there is with most card systems. Every Operating Session is different - there are no repeats.

Is a computer required at the layout? Ideally, you will have the computer located close to the layout. However, an entire session can be laid out and the paper work printed ahead of time at some other location. So, no, an on-site computer is desirable but not required.

We're using the program at a club. Do we need to leave our engines and cars on the layout? No, but when you put them back on the layout for an Operating Session the program needs to know

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the location of each of the cars. It doesn't need to know where the engines are!

If the program "randomly" builds trains, how do I control their length, number of car moves, etc.? Every train has its own characteristics, including the cities where it stops, the amount of switching it can do, the kind of cars it can handle, the maximum weight of the train, etc. You set these individually for each train.

Can you differentiate between loaded and empty cars? Most Operators never actually load or unload cars (with the possible exception of open hoppers, gondolas, and flats and our experience has been that most people don't even do that). So whether a box car is loaded or empty is largely a matter of "window-dressing" that plays little part in actually running an Operating Session. However, there are options to either specify whether each car is Loaded or Empty -- and for every car type at every siding you may specify whether it is a destination for a loaded or empty car. and whether it is to be loaded or unloaded there.

What happens when an Engineer drops cars somewhere they are not supposed to be? The car list always tells you where the car is supposed to be, even if a train has been moved only part way through its route. You can do one of two things -- move the car to where it was supposed to go, or simply tell the program where the car actually is and forget it.

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If the computer builds trains automatically, what if I don't like what it builds? Any train can be reviewed, reset and rebuilt before you print its Manifest. Or you can add or remove cars individually, change their destinations, etc. The "Auto-Build" can be a starting point that you can modify to suit yourself, although our experience has been that you will not want to make more than a few changes.

What if one of my Yard Operators doesn't show up? The information on Yard Switch Lists essentially duplicates the information on the Train Manifests, so Engineers can do their own switching in a yard if it has no operator.

Why don't you use the standard railroad designations for Car Types? The standard designations are not "intuitive", and we believe that only a minority of model railroaders are familiar with them. Particularly for people new to Operating Sessions, if there is a Box Car to be moved, we call it a Box Car. Also, it is much easier for layouts to define their own special car types. However, if you wish to use the standard designations, you can edit the Car-Type File to use them instead of the car types we provide with the program. A list of the standard designations is included in the "Help" File.

Can the file for this program replace lists I currently use for keeping track of my cars and engines? Yes. We believe the Car and Engine Files provide all the information you might want to keep. There is also a provision for indicating whether a car or engine is "On the layout", so you can keep track of all of them, even if they are not currently being used for Operations.

There is help at RailOP.hlp. This is a standard Windows Help File, which you can run by itself, or of course, from the Demo program. When you first start RailOP, click on the green 'Help on "Help"' button for the main reference to using the Help File. If the program cannot locate the Help file, it will tell you and show you a "Browse" button. Click on it, find the directory containing the Help File, and it will be "connected". You will only need to do this once -- not every time you run the program. The Demo Program does everything the regular program does except make changes in some of the basic data files. You can add or edit locations to see how they work, but you can not file the data nor can you delete any information that is there.