

## A railroad you can model

# Taking to the streets with the Frisco

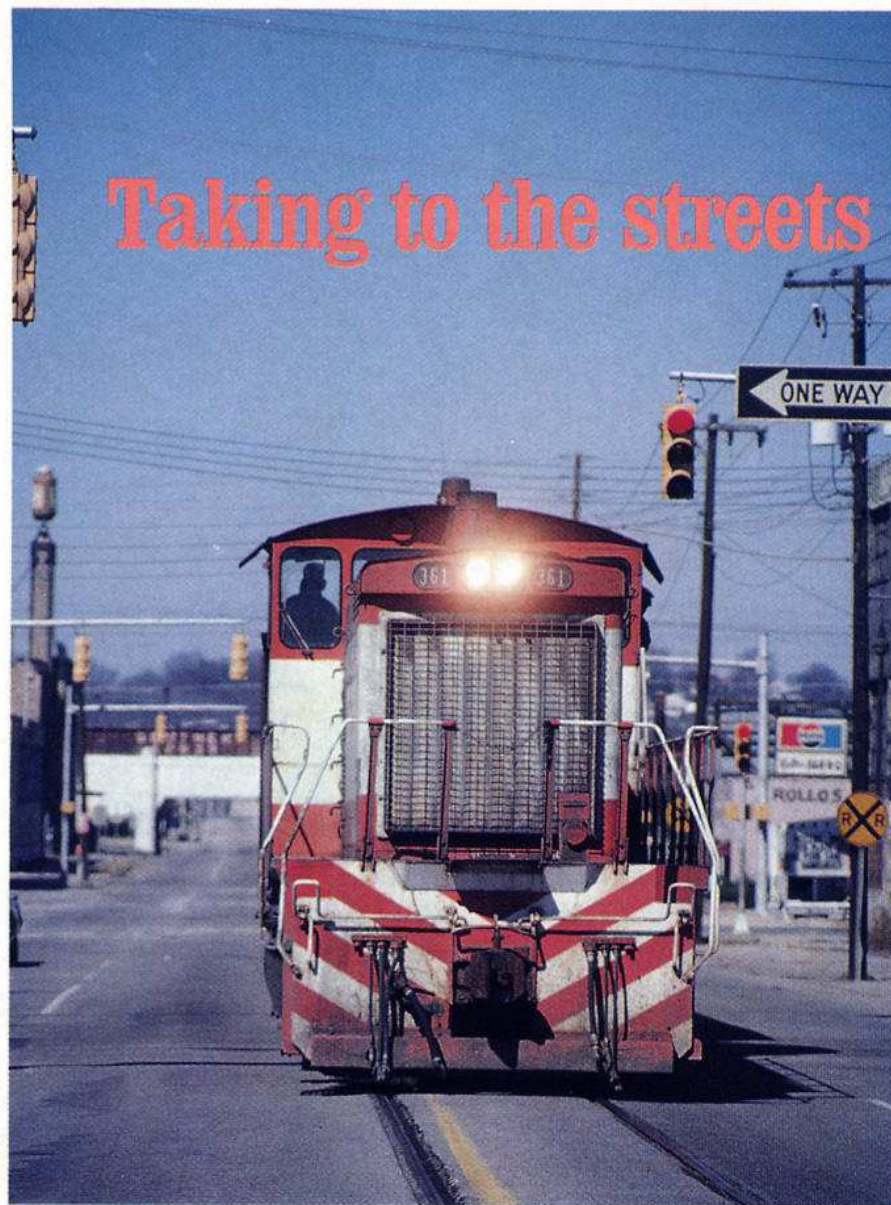
Prototype ideas for modeling a central-city branch line that switches in the streets

**BY G. WARREN REED**

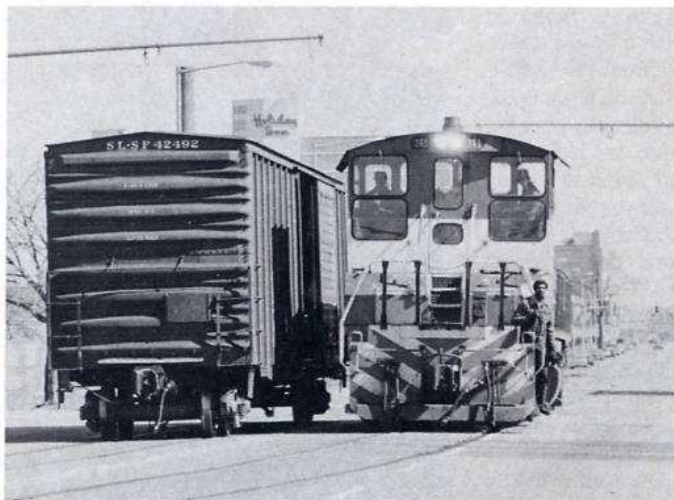
**PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR**

**T**O MOTORISTS in downtown Birmingham, Ala., finding a locomotive riding the center line of the street is a bit puzzling and somewhat aggravating. Instead of the casual encounter at a grade crossing, the motorist finds the train out in the middle of the street. Wary train crews and slow speeds help minimize any altercations likely to produce a mildly crunched automobile and injured feelings.

In 1980 this trackage was the remaining segment of a loop originally known as the Belt RR, which once encircled Birmingham's downtown area. It provided daily switching service to the warehouses, coal yards, lumberyards, and light manufacturing plants in the central city. The Belt took care of the old St. Louis-San Francisco Ry. (Frisco) freight station and team tracks adjacent to the downtown yard where crews went on duty. The south side of the Belt Line ran in the middle of Fifth Ave. South from 32nd St. to 14th St. for 18 blocks.



1. Motorists may be surprised to find a Frisco switcher using the street to reach a number of local businesses in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. The headlights are kept on at both ends of the locomotive to help attract attention anytime it's working in the street.

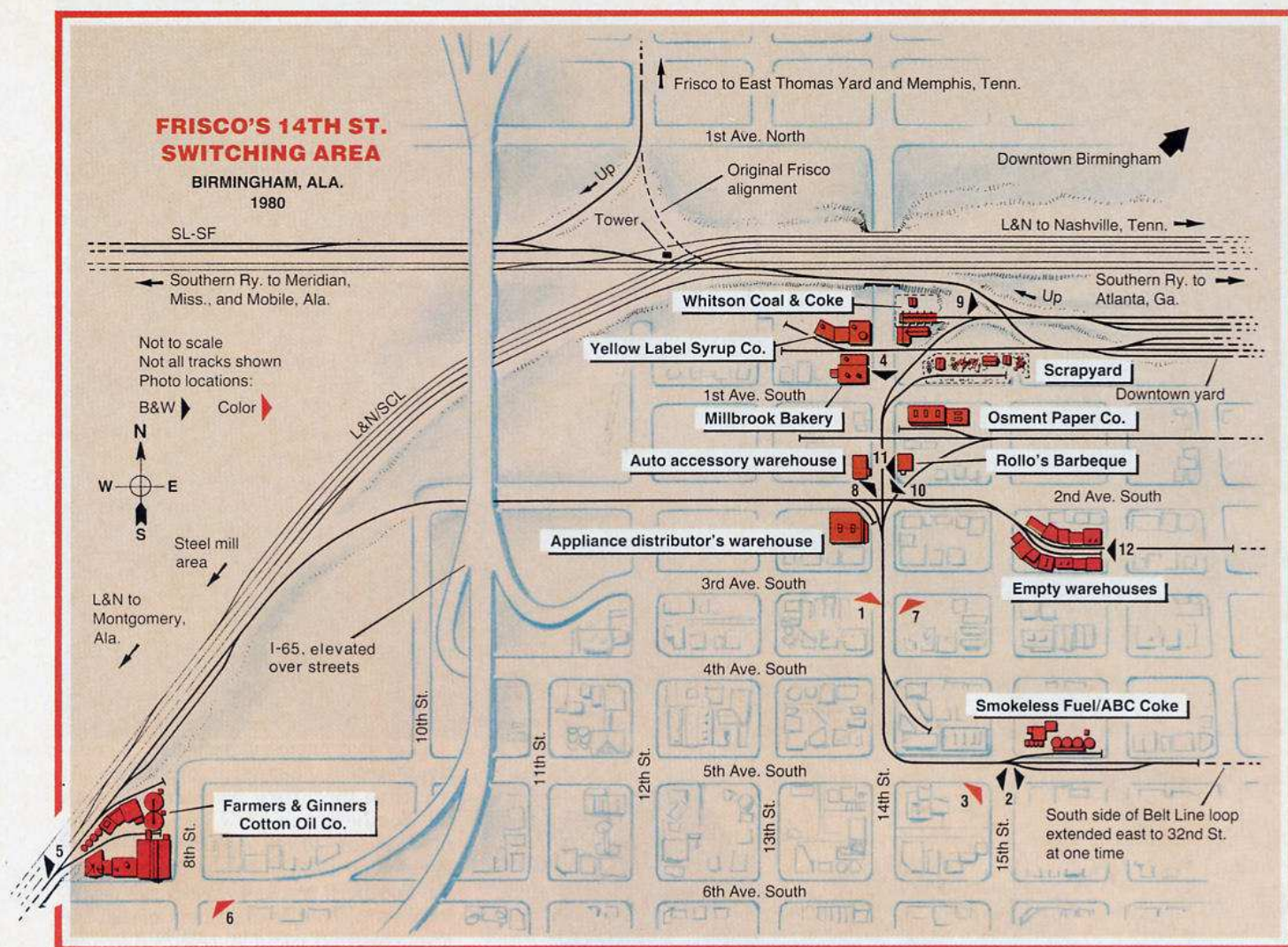


2. A runaround move is in progress at the Fifth Ave. passing siding alongside the Smokeless Fuel Co. The track doesn't always run down



the center of the roadway. Here a crew member checks for cross traffic as the engine moves against traffic on the right side of Fifth Ave.





Movement of the larger wholesalers, new and different use of the land, and trucks all took their toll on the many spurs and the Belt's "main line." By about 1973 that line was broken, and by 1981 the Frisco had become the operator for the remaining trackage.

The freight station remains, but is no longer used. The downtown site included Southern Ry. team tracks, but that location is now occupied by museum equipment owned by the Heart of Dixie Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society.

#### OPERATIONS IN 1980

By 1980 the remaining downtown yard tracks were usually deserted, although they still served as team tracks. At the west end of the yard, a connection dropped down a short, steep grade

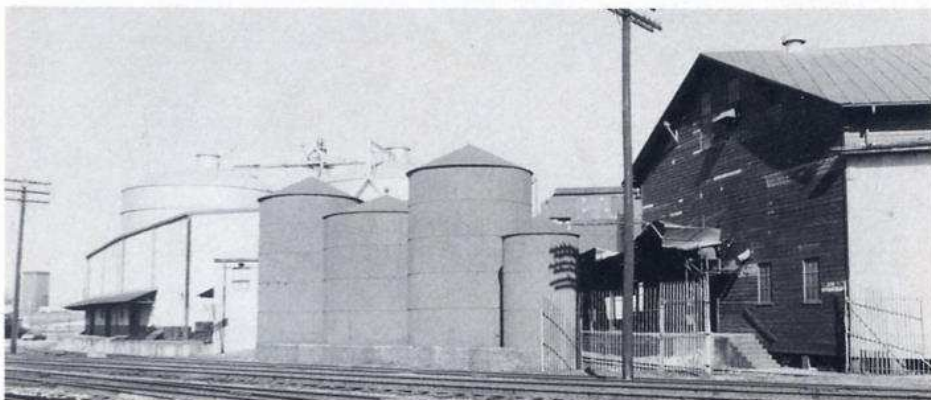


3. Engine 361 is picking up empty hoppers at the Smokeless Fuel/ABC Coke Co. spur while one of the crew members directs traffic on Fifth Ave.





4. With a green traffic light, 361 heads south on 14th St. with five cars of coke and a boxcar.



5. Above: The southwest corner of the cotton oil plant includes a warehouse and storage tanks.

6. Below: The main plant has a large warehouse, a processing building, and more storage tanks.



from the elevated main lines, while another track curved around to the south between Whitson Coal and a scrapyard before hitting the streets. Prior to its removal in the early 1980s, the Belt was a prime example of railroading in the streets. Locomotives obeyed traffic signals and stayed at the front of their movements whenever possible. Street travel, frequent runarounds, and complex switching moves abounded.

With the aid of maps and photos we can follow a crew to see what was involved in handling cars for the Belt industries in February 1980. The overall map on page 93 shows how the Frisco reached the Belt from East Thomas Yard by traveling down the middle of 12th St. As it crossed First Ave., the line curved westerly and climbed up to parallel the Southern Ry. main line. Here, the crew made a runaround move before proceeding east on the Southern tracks toward downtown. As part of this move on the Southern, the Frisco crossed the Louisville & Nashville main line to reach their downtown yard. Since it was a switch run, the Frisco Belt Job often had to wait some time before it could slip across between through trains.

This arrangement reflected a relatively recent change in procedure. At one time the Frisco track crossed both the Southern and L&N just east of the interlocking tower. A trackage rights agreement allowed Frisco trains to use the Southern tracks to reach the downtown yard. This arrangement meant the level crossings could be removed to simplify maintenance around the tower.

#### ENGINE 361 GETS TO WORK

Number 361, an EMD MP15 switcher, was heading south along 14th St. when I encountered it. The orange and white diesel had SL-SF 42492, an empty boxcar, in tow for eventual delivery to the





7. With a crew member flagging traffic, 361 moves onto 14th St. heading south while a mainline train rolls across the viaduct in the background.

Farmers & Ginners Cotton Oil Co. However, the crew continued on to the Smokeless Fuel/ABC Coke spur on Fifth Ave. Using the siding in the street, they ran around the boxcar and picked up six empty hoppers from the fuel dealer before heading north on 14th St.

At Second Ave., the engine turned west and traveled to Farmers & Ginners, where the empty boxcar was swapped for SL-SF 47210, a load of by-products from the cotton oil process. Another runaround brought 361 to the east end of the cars for the trip back to 14th St. Then it pulled everything south to clear the switch and pushed the cut

northward into the yard with a crew member riding the lead car.

Now the crew picked up five coke loads for the fuel company and SL-SF 43169, a loaded boxcar to be delivered to the Osment Paper Co. on 15th St. Once again, 361 led the consist on the short trip south to the passing siding on Fifth Ave. There it ran around the train and spotted the loads at Smokeless Fuel.

With the boxcar in tow, 361 rumbled north toward Rollo's Barbeque at Second Ave. Here the switch in the street was lined so the crew could head east through Rollo's parking lot onto the spur that provided access to the paper

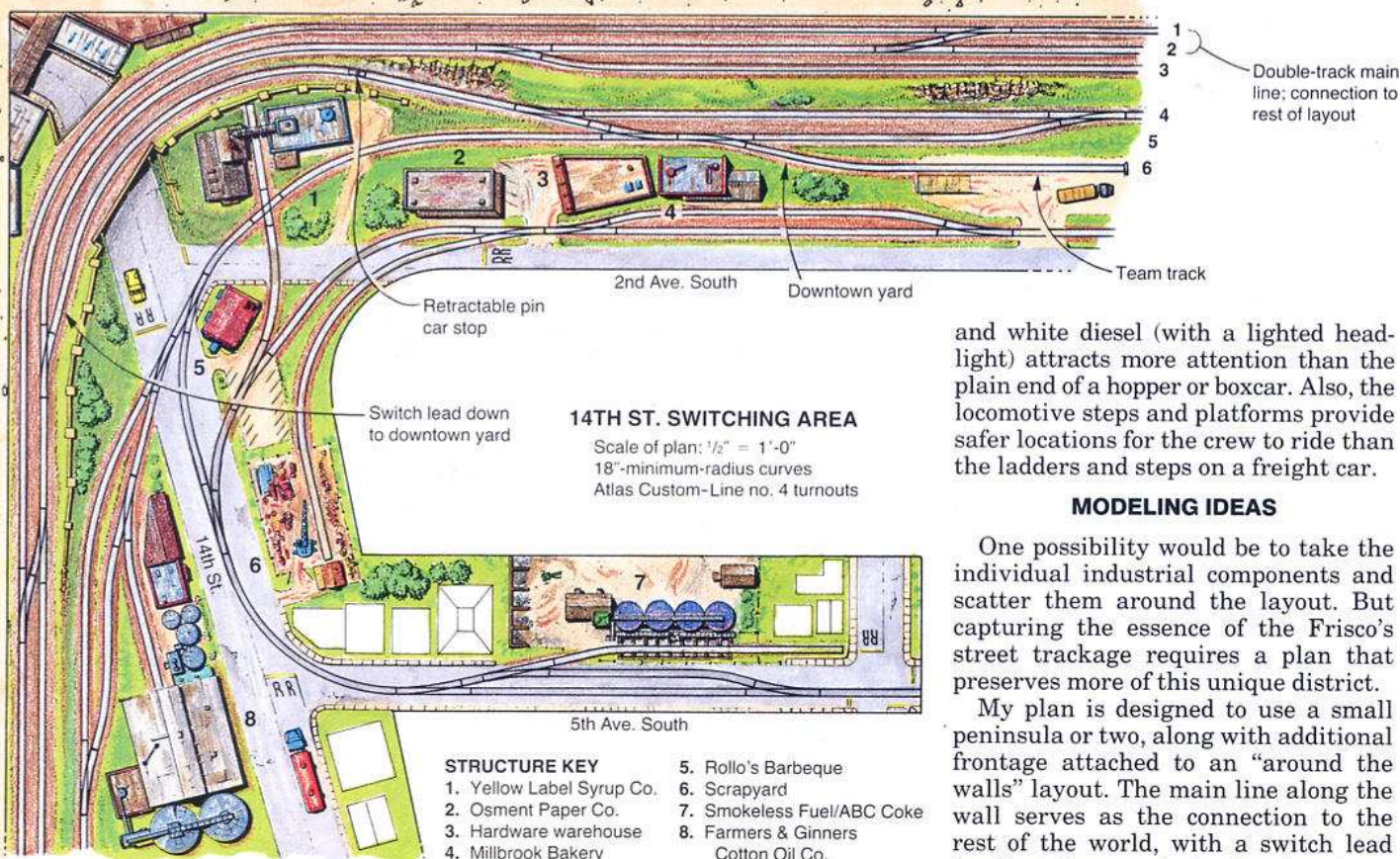
company. Using a switchback move, the crew swapped the paper load for empty boxcar Delaware & Hudson 27049.

A crew member flagged the move back into 14th St. and relined the switch, then 361 headed for the yard with the boxcar. One more move remained, placing D&H 27049 at the other end of 361. That was performed by an interesting gravity-assisted move. Number 361 shoved the boxcar up the yard lead's short hill, and its hand brakes were set tight to hold the car there. Next, the locomotive was uncoupled and run into an adjacent track to clear the switch. When the hand brake was



8. The Belt Line's tracks pass on all sides of Rollo's Barbeque, including one that curves right through one of the restaurant's driveways.





and white diesel (with a lighted headlight) attracts more attention than the plain end of a hopper or boxcar. Also, the locomotive steps and platforms provide safer locations for the crew to ride than the ladders and steps on a freight car.

### MODELING IDEAS

One possibility would be to take the individual industrial components and scatter them around the layout. But capturing the essence of the Frisco's street trackage requires a plan that preserves more of this unique district.

My plan is designed to use a small peninsula or two, along with additional frontage attached to an "around the walls" layout. The main line along the wall serves as the connection to the rest of the world, with a switch lead heading downgrade to the downtown yard. The balance of the plan re-creates as many of the prototype switching moves as possible.

In this simplified design, I left out the 14th St. tower and the crossing of the L&N and Southern main lines. Tracks 1 and 2 serve a dual role as the main line and the access route used by the Belt RR. Tracks 4, 5, and 6 represent Downtown Yard, while the end of track 6 is used as a team track. Track 4 branches off the main line, crosses 14th St. on the overpass, and drops steeply

released, the car rolled right past the locomotive and into the yard.

That accomplished, 361 coupled the six empty hoppers and the two boxcars together and the crew was ready to return to East Thomas Yard. The engineer called for a route through the interlocking with the diesel horn, but no switches moved and the dwarf signal remained red. A crew member walked over to the tower to learn they had to wait for a few trains, including the

northbound *Southern Crescent*. About five hours after arriving, switches moved, the dwarf changed, and 361 hustled its cars onto the Southern, through the crossovers, across the L&N, and back to Frisco tracks. With one more runaround on their own tracks, the Belt train headed north on 12th St. for the yard.

Through all of this switching, the crew was careful to keep the engine at the head end of as many street movements as possible. After all, an orange







9. Gravity switching in progress: Once 361 was clear, the hand brake was released so the boxcar could roll past the switch and into the yard.

down to the yard. This lets you model the overpass with a minimal clearance for trucks using 14th St.

With appropriate grades, tracks 4 and 5 could be used to re-create the gravity-assisted runaround. A small retractable pin controlled by a switch motor or manual linkage could engage an axle and serve as a brake to hold a car on the grade. After the engine moves clear, the pin would be retracted,

freeing the car to roll down track 5. Then the engine could follow it and couple onto the car.

Devoting more space to the design would allow longer runs between the various industries. Appropriate urban buildings will be necessary to re-create the congested appearance of the real area. It might also be interesting to add working automatic traffic signals at the street intersections as a complication

the crew must keep track of during its switching activities.

Another operating scenario might be to use track 3, which wasn't mentioned previously, as an interchange track. Mainline trains could drop off and pick up cars on the Belt Line at this location. Then an engine and crew could be assigned just to work the street trackage, handling cars between the interchange and the downtown businesses. ♣



10. Left: This warehouse at 14th St. and Second Ave. has its front wall and platform built at an angle to clear the connecting track that cuts across this corner of the intersection. 11. Above: Large warehouses that were once major rail customers line both sides of the Belt Line's right-of-way along Second Ave. 12. Right: City warehouses tend to be rather plain with few openings to minimize security problems. This 14th St. auto accessory business is housed in a former beer distributor's building with an unusual arched roof.