

ALL ABOARD FOR 2015

Balboa Park's Model Railroad Museum plans railway garden for Centennial Celebration

By [James Chute \(/staff/james-chute/\)](/staff/james-chute/) 12:01 a.m. July 7, 2013 Updated 1:31 p.m. July 5, 2013

Some might call it obsessiveness. Anthony Ridenhour, the director of the San Diego Model Railroad Museum, prefers to call it “passion,” the driving force behind the museum’s more than 300 volunteers. Especially in the Balboa Park museum’s HO and N scale layouts, everything from the tiny adobe tiles on a model of the Santa Fe Depot (built from the station’s actual blueprints) to the napkin holders inside a model of a restaurant is meticulously rendered.

“We are extremely fortunate to have these volunteers,” Ridenhour said. “We lovingly refer to some of the model builders as the rivet counters. They make sure every single rivet is in place on these miniature trains and that the details on the buildings are just as they appeared back in the day.”

The decidedly volunteer nature of the Model Railroad Museum is one of the defining characteristics of an institution that calls itself the largest and only accredited model railroad museum in North America and one of the top model railroad museums in the world (probably second only to Miniatur Wunderland Hamburg).

It’s as much a clubhouse as a museum. On almost any given evening, you can find members of the San Diego Model Railroad Club, the La Mesa Model Railroad Club, the San Diego Society of N Scale or the San Diego 3-Railers Club maintaining their exhibits and talking about model railroading.

With the upcoming 2015 Centennial Celebration, the museum is informally involving members of yet another group of volunteers, the San Diego Garden Railway Society, in the creation of a Centennial Railway Garden behind the Casa del Prado.

“For years, we’ve wanted to do a garden railroad for the Model Railroad Museum somewhere in the park,” Ridenhour said. “With the centennial, we thought, wouldn’t it be great if we could do a miniature park, a miniature representation of the park as it was in 1915, within the park?”

Balboa Park re-imagined

While the San Diego 3-Railers Club’s lively Toy Train Gallery is full of fancy (just the idea of conventional trains running on three rails is a fantasy in itself), most of the exhibits in the museum are based on actual or historic railway lines, executed in 1:87 (HO),

1:160 (N) or 1:48 (O) scale.

On occasion, club members will get together and stage an “operating session,” where they’ll pick a midcentury timetable for that particular line from the museum’s library, assign members the tasks that replicate a real railroad (yardmaster, dispatcher, engineer, among others), and run the model line on the real timetable.

And unlike a conventional museum, many of those same volunteers created the exhibits they are now running and maintaining.

“A lot of museums, they hire exhibit designers,” Ridenhour said. “They have people on staff who actually design the exhibits and put them together and create budgets to make sure those exhibits are executed. The majority of our exhibits are funded by volunteers and built and maintained by volunteers — meaning they put their time and their own money into it.”

For the Centennial Railway Garden, the museum is taking a page from the 3-Railers. Because of the limitations of the outdoor space available (16 by 32 feet), the location of three palm trees, and the whimsical inclinations of designer Robert Treat (a former animation director at Disney), the layout of Balboa Park has been compressed and re-imagined to allow most of the iconic 1915 sites to be part of the exhibit, from the Organ Pavilion to the Botanical Garden.

And unlike most of the museum’s layouts, the garden exhibit will be professionally built (meaning the professionals will be paid) and will allow a number of technically sophisticated features, including the development of a mobile phone application to enable visitors to interact with the exhibit and solar panels that would keep the exhibit off the grid.

The museum is in the process of raising the \$286,000 necessary for the construction, staffing and securing of the exhibit, which would open in January 2015 and operate for at least a year.

“We’re proposing it as a temporary exhibition,” Ridenhour said. “But it’s possible it could become a legacy exhibit” and be permanently installed.

Detail-oriented

An ongoing outdoor exhibit would help alleviate one of the museum’s legacy challenges: visibility. Even some of the larger museums in Balboa Park are concerned about single-minded visitors going to a specific institution and walking right past the others. But few institutions in the park are as hidden as the Model Railroad Museum.

“We don’t have any kind of storefront or outward face to the park,” Ridenhour said. “So it’s a challenge. I often wonder what it would be like to have that storefront. How many people would we draw just from the sheer curiosity factor?”

In 2013, a year of transition after founding director John Rotsart retired in 2012, the museum is “on target” to draw 140,000 people, which would be a record.

“For a number of years we were in a good, sustainable phase,” said Ridenhour, who was Rotsart’s deputy. “Now we’re in a revamp, a modernization. We’re done everything from updating our logos to putting in brand-new exhibits, to more strategic planning —

everything from business structure all the way up to programming and outreach.”

The potential Railway Garden would face the parking lot behind the Casa del Prado (the proposed new location for valet parking), and the fencing, modeled on the fencing of the Cabrillo Bridge, would allow people to look into the exhibit from the outside.

They won't be able to miss the garden's primary feature, the G (1:32) scale replicas of the streetcars John D. Spreckels' San Diego Electric Railway Co. developed for the 1915 exposition. But they may have to look closer to see some of the other features, which could include the pipes in the facade of the organ Spreckels also had built for the exposition.

Visitors entering the exhibit from the museum will be able to activate the organ and hear music that would have played in 1915.

“We're known for our attention to detail,” Ridenhour said.

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