

Leominster train buff's garden display pays homage to his city

By Jack Minch, jminch@sentinelandenterprise.com Sentinel & Enterprise

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LEOMINSTER -- In Walt Pauli's world, the Columbia Hotel retains much of its magnificence, the station in Railroad Square still looks as it did in 1906 and the Rialto Theater is showing "Casablanca" with Bogart and Bergman.

They are all models he built for the G-scale garden-train display that runs outside his Overlook Drive home when weather allows.

Pauli collected about 100 bricks from the Columbia Hotel building before the recent snowstorm to lay in the garden.

Pauli's entry into the world of garden trains started about five years ago when his wife Janice told him to stop watching so much sports on television and find a hobby.

He had set up trains under Christmas trees with his father as a child, and then did the same with his now-grown sons, Karl and Benjamin, so he easily fell into the garden-train hobby.

It became a family hobby.

Janice is in charge of gardening and landscaping the display, and Benjamin helped move tons of rock.

"I've always loved trains," Janice said. "When I was a kid myself, I had three brothers, so I was into the trains as much as any of them."

Pauli didn't go into it like a runaway train.

He and Janice visited train shows, including one in Las Vegas where a train club set up a display that covered 2 acres, to learn the do's and don'ts.

He started with an electric train and coal car for about \$2,000, but had it customized to run on remote-control battery power for about \$700 more.

It didn't take long to realize oxidation on the tracks kept the electricity from flowing smoothly, and Janice got tired of using a green scratch pad for dishes on more than 300 feet of track.

"So there is no electricity whatsoever on the railroad," Janice said. "Everything is battery-operated, remote-control."

One of his trains with six Pullman cars is 18 1/2 feet long. The display includes a 13-foot metal bridge built by an Arizona company.

"There is a pond underneath it and in the summer there are frogs in it," Pauli said.

There is a 34-foot wood trestle with 1,600 pieces that took Pauli and Benjamin 2 1/2 days to install.

The track is elevated on pillars, so to fill in the space from ground to track level, Pauli got 120 tons of rock and stone from Powell Sand & Gravel and developer Peter Bovenzi. The stone filled six 10-ton trucks.

Once it was dropped off at his home, he and Benjamin carried it by 5-gallon buckets to the garden.

Without a trace of a smile, Pauli said he was 6-foot 4-inches before moving the stone and is now 6 feet tall.

The hobby relies on much of his professional expertise.

Pauli installs kitchens for housing developers. He estimates he has installed 14,000 kitchens in 28 years for housing complexes, elderly housing and locally for developer Peter Bovenzi.

His oldest son Karl, 31, is a U.S. Naval Academy graduate stationed in Hawaii, and his son Benjamin, 29, works in the family business.

Pauli developed the skills working with kitchens to use on his models for the railroad set.

"Because I do carpentry and install kitchens, I have the basic woodworking skills," he said.

He is meticulous in his research, relying on the Historical Society and Historical Commission and old photographs.

"I gather all my information, photos, dimensions, and it becomes the story behind the story," Pauli said.

The first model Pauli built was the railroad station. It took about 340 hours to make the replica in painstaking detail.

The work included cutting felt paper used on the underside of roofing into 5/8-inch tabs for the roof.

"Hours upon hours upon hours of doing that," Pauli said.

The station is based on a 1906 postcard, down to minute details, including placement of baggage carts.

Because every train that pulls out of a station must pull into another one down the line, he built a copy of a station in Troy, N.H.

It is a typical rural station once used on the Boston-to-Maine line, Pauli said.

The model of the Columbia only has four storefronts.

"It's called select compression," Pauli said. "You keep the key details."

Eventually, he plans to mark the storefronts for Leominster Gas & Electric, Allen's Florist, New England Telephone and Ken's Market, which were all in the building in the 1940s, according to a registry kept by the Historical Society.

The Rialto is now the Christian Life Center, but in the 1940s it was a theater with a soda shop called Gaffney's Drug on the corner of Columbia and Main streets.

He built it over the course of last summer and fall along with the Columbia based on pictures including a wonderfully detailed lobby with 1942 movie posters the size of postage stamps.

His labor of love was the coal tower. It is a cathedral to detail work.

He found a picture of the Pennsylvania coal tower online complete with the dimensions, so again, all he had to do was shrink it to scale.

Instead of a solid storefront, the tower is made of wood beams, stairs and coal shoots that open with pulleys and stairs.

It is 84 feet tall in real life and has stairs leading to the stop that Pauli duplicated.

"All the parts and pieces that had to be cut to make this one," he said reflectively.

There is a switch tower that was the first building in which he put interior details. The clock on the wall reads 3:10 in homage to the movie "3:10 to Yuma," and has a tiny calendar turned to August 1952.

Pauli approached the contractor who was working on the Hamilton Street Bridge last year and asked for the

http://www.sentinelandenterprise.com/topstory/ci_22302914/out-yard-its-all-aboard#state-crest medallions for his garden train.

The contractor got permission from state officials and gave Pauli two crests, the largest of which is 8 inches. One medallion is on a bridge abutment and the other is on a cliff wall.

There is more work to be done on the set, even after the bricks are installed, Pauli said.

"It's like any hobby," he said. "You can always add detail."

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