



Posted by: [Samuel Smith](#)

Posted on: July 14, 2013

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HobbyWeek: The Denver Garden Railway, Colorado's coolest railroad

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S&R HONORS



This Mason Machine Works locomotive, which belongs to Joe Foss (who repainted it and the cars it pulls), steams past a reconstruction of Dallas, Colorado, a defunct town near Ouray. Several alternate versions of the shot are

posted at [5280 Lens Mafia](#).

WikiPedia's [List of Hobbies](#) page is a long one – over 170 entries. Included are some you'd expect: cooking, birdwatching, knitting, stamp collecting, all manner of sporting activities, etc. There are also some you may not have thought of. For example:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chainmail making • Conlanging (artificial language construction – think Esperanto and Klingon) • Locksport (the sport or recreation that aims to defeat locking systems) • Worldbuilding (the process of constructing an imaginary world, sometimes associated with a whole fictional universe) • International Science Olympiad • Mushroom Hunting (or Mycology) • Radio-Controlled Car Racing (Hobby Grade) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hooping (generally refers to artistic movement and dancing with a hoop [or hoops] used as a prop or dance partner) • LARPing (Live-Action Roleplaying) • Sand castle building • Element collecting (collecting the chemical elements – one presumes that Plutonium is hard to come by) • Rock stacking • Gongoozling (watching activity on the canals in the United Kingdom) • Magic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Color Guard • Table football • Paintball • Bus spotting • Bonsai • Knapping (no, not “napping” – the shaping of flint, chert, obsidian or other conchoidal fracturing stone through the process of lithic reduction to manufacture stone tools, strikers for flintlock firearms, or to produce flat-faced stones for building or facing walls, and flushwork decoration) • Urban exploration
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Most of us have a hobby or two, and the intensity of our investment might range from casual to obsessive. Take me:

- I'm a novice photographer
- and blogger
- who spent years as a creative writer
- and played all kinds of sports (mainly soccer and basketball) to the point where my knees are in tatters



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- and I'm also a dedicated sports fan (hoops, soccer, and especially Chelsea FC, which routinely finds me up and off to watch the games with the rest of the Rocky Mountain Blues as early as 5:00 or 5:30 on weekend mornings).
- Finally, I try desperately not to think about how much money I have spent on music through the years.

The photography habit has its hooks in me deep, and over the past couple of weeks it led me to inadvertently discover a fascinating group of dedicated hobbyists not far from here. A few days ago I went out to the Colorado Railroad Museum in Golden to see if I could learn a thing or two about photographing old trains. This, in and of itself, was plenty rewarding.

However, what I didn't know is that the museum grounds are home to the Denver Garden Railway Society, a collection of model train enthusiasts who have developed an insanely cool complex of tracks and to-scale buildings and towns.

Except that this group goes well beyond just the model train part.

A Garden Railroad is most often a model railroad layout placed outside, usually winding through backyard landscaping. Garden Railroading may be described as the marriage of two hobbies; model railroading and gardening!

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Paul Gunther, Etzel Wilhoit and Sam Kunugi prep for departure.

Already I'm learning. I knew there were plenty of model train enthusiasts, but I'd never heard of this garden thing before. It's hard not to be impressed, though. The landscaping and engineering is extensive, resulting in a site that's both functional and beautiful. Relaxing. Tranquil.

I went back out this past Wednesday morning – they stage a number of events on the weekends, but Wednesdays are apparently the club get-together day – and met some of the mainstays. Alan Olson, the ringleader, is one of those people who knows more than you can even think to ask about. (He's also a talented kinetic sculptor.) He graciously agreed to let me take some pictures and even showed me around, telling me a bit about the history of the local society (they're the oldest organization of their type in the US) and helping me understand just how large the garden railway community is nationwide. He introduced me to some of the other members, all of whom were ready and willing to help me set up shots

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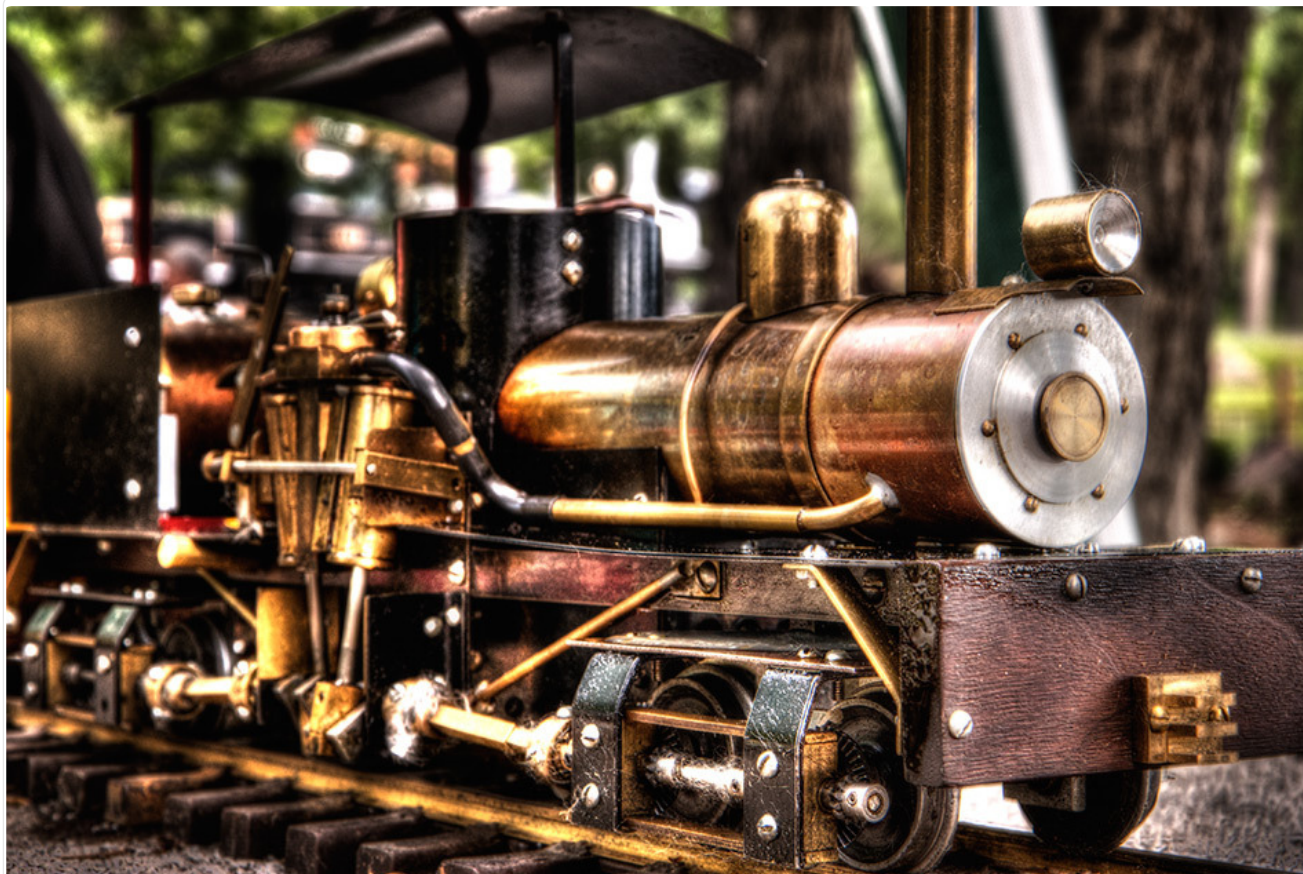
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(and also to answer any question I might have). The great thing is that they not only know about model trains, they know a lot about real railroads. For instance, I now know what that huge rotor engine on the museum grounds is for (snow removal).



This gorgeous locomotive is Etzel Wilhoit's. I liked it so much I processed it several different ways. See the rest at [5280 Lens Mafia](#).

As I have noted elsewhere, I am by instinct and training a culturalist. Whether we're talking the kind of working class popular culture that contextualized my upbringing or more intellectual pursuits, such as the arts, I'm fascinated by the things that people do, and in particular the things they do together – the activities, events, histories, philosophies, material artifacts and so on that provide the gravity wells into which we all seem to drift.

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So even though I know little about trains and absolutely nothing about the garden railway world, I was instantly fascinated. The machines are beautiful – intricate and detailed engineering marvels – and if you doubt the passion of the *aficionados* themselves, all you need to do is look around and ask yourself a few questions about what went into the construction of the grounds and how much work is involved in their ongoing maintenance. Then, since you haven't begun to understand the challenge, ask Olson about the deer eating the landscaping and the raccoons raiding the koi pond.



Alan Olson talks things over with Sam Kunugi, the society's youngest member.

I have tried to take some shots that convey a bit of the obvious joy and pride Alan and the rest of the society's members. Enjoy, and please give their Web site a look to learn more. And stay tuned, because my guess is this isn't the last you'll hear from me on this group.

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Tommy Stewart cleans the tracks.

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Paul and Etzel working in the shop.

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Mike Harris enjoys the morning. I need that apron.

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Joe Foss services his locomotive before sending it out.

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Close-up of Joe's locomotive. Alan and Etzel work in the background.

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Kids love trains.

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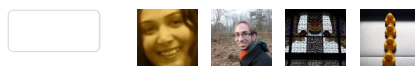


What? Of course they have Thomas.

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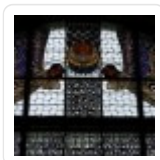
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wufnik July 14, 2013 at 6:34 am #

This is great. There's something about trains, isn't there? Last spring when the grandkids were visiting here we took them to the Model Village out in Bekonscot, which is an old UK version of this. Train mania! <http://www.bekonscot.co.uk/models-and-attractions/model-railway/>

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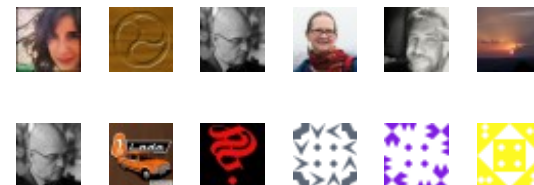
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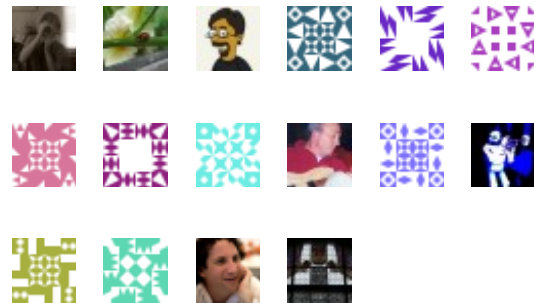
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