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Train enthusiast goes all natu-rail

Model railroader creates elaborate layouts with botanical materials

by **Julie Robinson**
Staff writer

PARKERSBURG, W.Va. -- The model trains in Joe Stephens' layouts don't run along molded plaster hills. They chug over bridges made of willow branches, past flowing waterfalls and emerge from hollow log tunnels to run past cedar bark hillsides.

Stephens creates garden railway settings entirely from natural botanical materials. One of his settings graces a track with seven G-scale trains in a display at the Mid-Ohio Valley Model Railroad in Parkersburg.

The bulk of his work resides in slightly loftier locations.

For about six months a year, Stephens, who owns [Stephens Outdoor Railways](#) in Vienna, fashions cedar bark, grapevines, acorns and other woody finds into elaborate railway garden displays in high-traffic areas such as the botanical gardens in New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C., [Krohn Conservatory](#) in Cincinnati and the Texas State Fair.

G-scale trains are the largest model trains. One inch on a G-scale train translates to about 25 inches on a real train.

The settings frame intricate buildings that often replicate well-known local structures, also made entirely of botanicals by [Applied Imagination](#) in Kentucky. The team of artists at Applied Imagination builds fanciful buildings, tree houses and gazebos as well as impressive landmarks commissioned for the display. Stephens travels with the Applied Imagination team as they install the gardens.

Stephens recently commissioned Applied Imagination for a personal project. He had them create the Parkersburg Train Depot, an 1883 landmark that was destroyed in 1973.

"This was my way of bringing the station back to Parkersburg. When I was a kid, my grandfather took me around the station. He was always crazy about trains," said Stephens.

Eucalyptus leaves line the station's roof in a realistic miniature facsimile of a slate roof. Cinnamon sticks and whole cloves trim the roofline. The front stoops are made of wood fungi, the windows of willow twigs and silver maple bark lines the foundation.

A building such as the train station takes about 200 hours for the artists to make. At a rate of \$60 an hour, the retail price tag was about \$11,500. The larger and more expensive buildings commissioned for big-city displays can run into tens of thousands dollars. A 10- by 8-foot replica of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., is insured for \$200,000.

He plans to commission other Parkersburg landmarks such as the courthouse and log cabin, fountain, statue and band shell in City Park.

Last year, more than 168,000 people toured the display at the New York Botanical Gardens. Many of the larger installations change their theme yearly to generate ongoing interest.

Before an installation, Stephens inspects the track layout, which is created at Applied Imagination's Kentucky facility, to get an idea of what is needed. He sculpts sylvan settings for the imaginative indoor/outdoor train gardens from cedar bark, which he molds into tall hillsides, waterfalls and backdrops. In his hands, grapevine and willow branches become bridges and towers.

There's no such thing as a casual walk in the woods for Stephens -- or anyone at Applied Imagination. Their eyes dart constantly in search of building materials. Willow makes great bridges and trim; a rotten stump often yields shelf fungus. Acorns are perfect for house and handrail trim.

"I don't see a twisted grapevine. I see something decorative to hold up an overhead track or to use in the mountain

backdrop," he said.

His need for woody materials attracts the attention of his friends, one of whom brings treasures such as tree fungi that he finds on frequent walks in the woods.

Stephens constructs his backdrops mainly of cedar bark. Before he joined Applied Imagination six years ago, the company used worn railroad ties, but stopped because of concerns about hazardous materials in the ties. Stephens uses more cedar bark than he can salvage, so he orders it by the bundle from Cedarville Mill in Kentucky. The bales are delivered to installation sites.

"I arrive at a new place and get to work on bundles of cedar. I create onsite," he said. "I look at the track plans and see how much area I have to cover. Then I tweak it."

During the off-season, Stephens operates a furniture restoration business and Stephens Outdoor Railways, a full-service train store in Vienna featuring trains and supplies of all scales, from minuscule Z through the larger scales. His love is the G scale.

"It's the largest and most detailed scale and is designed for outdoors. It's also great for the whole family. There are trains and gardens and landscaping," he said. "The dad who is crazy about trains can share it with his son, and so on."

The roots of his infatuation with G-scale garden layouts weren't formed in childhood -- at least not in his own childhood. He never owned a train set.

But he gave his own 3-year-old son a train for Christmas 12 years ago. The layout that started out under the Christmas tree was still in the family's living room in April, when Stephens finally acquiesced to his wife's request to remove it. He took it outdoors, where he began building an extensive layout on his store property.

Highlights include wooden trellises that cross streams and rock formations, gravel tracks, terraced levels, landscaped miniature buildings, two koi ponds, tunnels and an overhead track. He's adding three bridges this summer.

The woodworking skills he employs in his furniture restoration and train garden construction were acquired during the shop classes he took as a student at Parkersburg High School. Charles Eaton, now retired, taught the class. Today, Eaton builds intricate projects such as a working carousel that is destined for an Applied Imagination installation.

"He started me as a woodworker. He took pride in what he did and gave me a lot of encouragement," said Stephens. "In high school, I did some furniture refinishing and moved into restoration. It's remarkable how a love for woodworking developed into this career."

Today, the furniture restoration business he started 28 years ago takes a back seat to the trains. During his six years with Applied Imagination, he's become devoted to the large trains.

"There's nothing like seeing a kid's eyes light up as he watches the trains go around and overhead," said Stephens. "That's why we do what we do."

People are welcome to stop by Stephens Outdoor Railways in Vienna for tours of his original layout when he's around, but he warned that it will be under construction this summer.

The nearest permanent railroad gardens installed by Applied Imagination are at Krohn Conservatory, in Cincinnati, and at the Columbus (Ohio) Metropolitan Library's Grant Avenue branch. The National Garden Railway Society will host a public day June 8 at its convention in Cincinnati. Visit www.ngrc2013.com for details.

Mid-Ohio Valley Model Railroad, in Parkersburg, does not keep regular hours, but it does hold open houses for the public. Email ggaugetra...@frontier.com for more information.

Stephens Outdoor Railways is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. Visit www.outdoorrailways.com or call 304-295-4403.

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