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This Backyard Model Railroad is Large Enough for You to Ride

Dave Rasdal/SourceMedia Group News

DELAWARE — The whistle blows, the locomotive chugs and it's "All aboard!" the Cinder Curve and Northern railroad.



So we climb onto Tom Steffen's 1/8th-scale outdoor model

railroad for a third-of-a-mile journey over a bridge, through a tunnel and among Maggie Steffen's fall flowers.

"It's something I've wanted to do for a long time," says Tom, 65, a retired carpenter. "The best I can recall, in 1979 I ordered a catalog of this stuff. That ignited the idea."

But it would take another 20 years before he'd buy the \$10,000 locomotive kit, an additional five years to build it and the ensuing years to construct the track by hand — preparing the raised rock bed and laying the 10-foot rails one at a time on ties he'd cut from scrap wood.

"You sawed them up from shelves in the closet," laughs his wife.

"You know how it is when money is tight," Tom laughs back.

Actually, he used scrap lumber which wasn't hard after they'd built their house north of Delaware in 1996. Installing the model railroad in the backyard made perfect sense since the real Milwaukee Road once ran north and south on these very grounds. An all-weather map on a stand beside the tracks leading to his railroad storage garage explains it all.

"We keep finding clinkers along the old railroad bed," says Maggie.



Railroads haven't been a major part of Tom's life — "I had the Lionel on the proverbial 4-by-8-foot sheet of plywood," he says of his childhood — but he's always enjoyed watching them. He did ride a train from Waterloo to St. Louis in 1967 for the Army Reserves and a couple of years ago he and Maggie rode Amtrak to Glacier National Park in Montana.

As Tom began building his railroad, he perused magazines and looked at the layout for a same-size club track in Mount Pleasant. Others are in Iowa Falls and Nora Springs.

"Garden railroads are a lot smaller than this," Tom says, holding his hands about a foot apart as the size of a car. "We call this the very large scale garden railroad."



His bright red 8-foot long locomotive weighs about 800 pounds, partly because it holds four large 6-volt batteries to power the four 1/2-horsepower electric drive motors (one per axle) and a 12-volt battery for the accessories which include lights and sound effects. It is two feet tall and 16 inches wide, riding on rails that are 7 1/2-inches apart. If he wanted to operated his train on one of the club tracks, he'd need to build a spur track to drive it into a pickup.

"Maybe some day," he says.

"Maybe not," Maggie says with a laugh.

Actually, as she tends her extensive flower garden while Tom plays engineer, she's become a fan.

"It's just fun to see people's reaction when they're riding the train," she says. "I like it that Tom was able to fulfill his dream."



Beginning with 1,000 feet of track, Tom has added another

700 feet. The layout includes loops at each end with manually-operated switches so he can circle them clockwise on one trip and counterclockwise on another. The north loop features a bridge over a valley; the south loop a 60-foot tunnel that he completed this summer by using a skidloader to move field stone around it for aesthetics.

As cold weather closes in, it's about time to put this toy train away for the winter. But that will give Tom time to think about what he'll add next. For, like all model railroaders, he laughs as he says, "You're never done."

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