

Thursday, February 17, 2011

All aboard!

Worcester Model Railroaders hosts annual show, open house



Ernest Gatzke of Webster works on an HO-scale train track.

By Dave Greenslit CORRESPONDENT
dgreenslit@telegram.com

DUDLEY — If you need proof that there's a little kid in all of us, look no further than the headquarters of the Worcester Model Railroaders.

There, in part of the old Stevens Linen building, you'll find model trains running on more than 700 feet of track on an elaborate, meticulously built layout that includes replicas of well-known buildings, landmarks and bridges, enhanced by decorative landscaping.

It's a small-scale railroad operation on, well, a large scale.

And the public will get an opportunity to see all that as part of the club's annual show and sale, which will take place from 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Feb. 27 at the Auburn Elks, 754 Southbridge St., Auburn. Admission is \$5, free for children younger than 12. Those who go to the show can also attend the club's open house from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at its headquarters, 137 Schofield Ave.



Ralph Kimball of Paxton watches as his HO-scale train crosses a hand-built railroad trestle at the Worcester Model Railroaders in Dudley. (T&G Staff Photos/PAUL KAPTEYN)

The show in Auburn will include 25 dealers and the raffle of a 4-by-8 foot starter model-train layout put together by Roger Richer of Auburn, with contributions from other club members. Five months in the making, the layout is worth \$1,000.

The Worcester Model Railroaders, formed in 1946, is one of the oldest continuously operating model railroad clubs in the country. It has about 40 members.

Treasurer Ralph Kimball of Paxton says that while there are a handful of members younger than 18, most are considerably older. Model railroading is a hobby that takes time, and “you don’t get that kind of time until you retire,” said Mr. Kimball, himself retired as a salesman in the printing business.

“We’re big guys playing with toys,” is how club president Peter Smith describes the members.

Many of them had model trains as kids, got back into them for a while with their own children, and then turned to model railroading as a hobby as older adults. This time around, there’s a lot more involved than watching an engine pull cars around the Christmas tree.

The layout in Dudley, which measures 43 feet by 51 feet, has been a work in progress since 2007, when the club moved from an old factory building on James Street in Worcester. The club’s fictional Worcester Central Lines depicts sections of the actual Boston & Albany, Providence & Worcester and Norwich & Worcester rail lines. Building them involves knowledge of history and skills in electronics, carpentry and scenery making.

Mr. Smith, a retired actuarial manager, says he brings administrative skills to the operation.

“They won’t let me resign,” he said jokingly about being president for 10 years. “Nobody else wants the job.”

Visitors at the open house will see some familiar scenes — in miniature, of course — in the Worcester Model Railroaders layout. In Boston, for example, there are the iconic Green Monster left-field wall of Fenway Park and the big Citgo sign at Kenmore Square, as well as a section of the Massachusetts Turnpike, complete with tiny cars; in Framingham, a replica

of the old General Motors assembly plant; and in Worcester, the M.J. Whittall rug mill building, near College Square, with its clock tower.

Mr. Smith built a replica of the Valley Green building in Oxford. The real thing, unfortunately, collapsed recently from the weight of all this winter's snow, he said.

Ernie Gatzke of Webster has been carefully recreating a section of the Norwich & Worcester Line in Webster, circa 1950, that includes the Middlesex Casket Co., the Webster-Dudley Ice & Coal tank, Union Point Ice Co., the Swift plant and the Harry Seder Wholesale Co., which Mr. Smith says was the town's version of Spag's.

The overall layout includes input from all club members. Much of it includes almost exact replication, while some of it — the stump-filled hillside of a logging operation in the Berkshires, for example — does not. Mr. Smith makes allowance for both approaches to model railroading.

"I've got 40 personalities I've got to satisfy, and that's not an easy job," he cracked.