

PEOPLE

Neighbors in the news | People in the community

HO enthusiasts create a real world in miniature



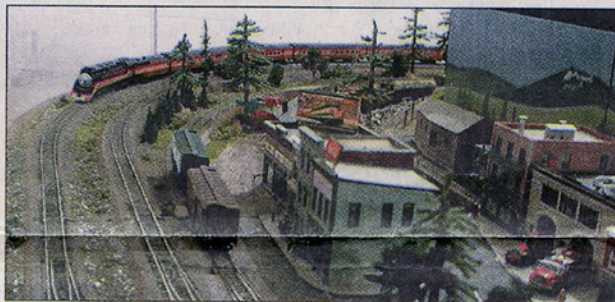
Photos by JERRY F. BOONE/THE OREGONIAN

Jim Derham looks over model trains in the switchyard at the Aloha & Western Oregon Lines clubhouse in Beaverton. Computer controls allow members to operate any number of trains at the same time.

Exacting attention to detail sets the scene for the Aloha & Western Oregon Lines

You've probably never heard of Jim Derham, but he is one of Washington County's most eclectic and successful builders.

He's engineered and constructed homes, shops, office buildings and mining and logging camps. He's helped build roadbeds, install traffic controls and moved a mountain or two.



A steam locomotive painted to look like the Portland engine that pulled the bicentennial Freedom Train in 1976 rounds a curve and heads toward the miniature village that is part of the Aloha & Western Oregon Lines' model train display.



JERRY BOONE

egon Lines.

All in miniature.

It is what happens when men such as Derham refuse to grow up.

"Really, we are just a bunch of old guys playing with kids' toys," he says with a grin. "And we're having a ball doing it."

He reaches into a switch yard and gently repositions a tiny boxcar on the rails that circle the HO scale world as a yard locomotive approaches to hook up to it.

The layout is frozen in time in the late 1950s or early '60s. That's when model railroading was perhaps its most popular.

"Kids today haven't grown up with trains, like we did," Derham says. "It's all electronic stuff now. I don't know if any of those toys will last over the generations like model trains have."

Most of the about 18 members of the A&OW Lines are retired or close to it. They get together a couple of times a month — either Friday or Saturday — for "formal" meetings. Those really consist of swapping stories and playing with any of the hundreds of engines and cars they collectively own.

The clubhouse is in an 1,800-square-foot room in an industrial building just north of Southwest Canyon Road and Beaverton's downtown. It is around the corner from where Derham works in the Ludeman's furnishings warehouse.

Most of the floor space is consumed by tables that hold the layout, built in modules that can be taken apart, loaded in a trailer and moved to model-railroad shows, holiday bazaars and community

Over the years, Derham helped create entire villages along the tracks of the Aloha & Western Or-

Jim Derham

Age: 59

Home: Beaverton

Hobby: Model railroading with the Aloha & Western Oregon Lines

Quotable: "Really, we are just a bunch of old guys playing with kids' toys."

Information: www.aloharail.org or 503-848-9620

celebrations.

The club makes enough money displaying the layout about a dozen times a year to rent its clubhouse and keep monthly dues at only \$15. Membership allows an enthusiast access anytime they get the urge to fire up one of the little locomotives.

Derham says some enthusiasts invest hundreds of dollars in a single engine.

"Me?" he says. "I don't own one that cost me more than \$20."

And if you think his trains are cheap, wait until he tells you about the building he's made.

"This one's out of a sheet of plastic I picked up somewhere," he says, pointing to what looks like a corrugated-metal mining camp shack.

"I cut the plastic into little sheets, glued them together and painted them silver," he says.

Another building is topped with 400-grit sandpaper, giving it the appearance of a tar-paper roof.

He says the club is always looking for new members to come in with fresh ideas or unused talent.

Some of the detail its members produce is impressive.

A metal shack at the edge of a village includes a flashing light that looks like the glow from a welder's torch. Home-built traffic signals blink green, yellow and red. The red lights on a police car flash as

the tiny cop breaks up a party. A few of the cars have been decorated with graffiti, and all carry the patina of having been used mile after mile.

It is all done to create a sense of real life in miniature.

Model trains have evolved over the decades since the much larger American Flyer and Lionel dominated the market 50 years ago.

First, they are much smaller. The HO scale is 1:87 to real life, so builders can pack a lot more track, scenery and buildings into the same space it took an American Flyer (S-scale) to simply go around in a circle. You can hold an HO engine and a couple of cars in one hand if you are careful.

The modern models rely on computer chips to control their speed and direction. Today, a single track can support two or three trains operating at the same time, just as in real life.

Bill Richards knows all about real trains.

The Hillsboro man began a 48-year career on the rails in 1941. Now 82, he comes to the clubhouse most meeting nights to get his train fix on a smaller scale.

For most of his career, Richards was a conductor on freight and passenger trains on the Penn Central and Conrail lines out of Cleveland.

"The railroad was all very romantic back then," he says. "And it was hard work and dirty work."

He was assigned to coal-fired steam locomotives into the 1950s.

"That was a great era," he says. "I was sorry to see it end."

It still exists. You just have to narrow your focus to HO scale to see it.

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