

## Large-scale model train hobbyists are on the same track

BY LES O'DELL, FOR THE SOUTHERN | Posted: Sunday, January 29, 2012 12:45 am

Many people remember a childhood with an electric train set. Perhaps it was an HO-scale layout on a sheet of plywood in the basement or a brand-new Lionel set first discovered under the Christmas tree. While most of those train sets have been long since put away, some Southern Illinoisans' fondness for model railroading has grown, both in levels of interest and in the size of their trains.

John Bible of Jonesboro is among area G-scale model railroading enthusiasts, pursuing a hobby that can take over not only basements and garages, but outdoor spaces as well. In fact, Bible's train layout takes up the entire front yard of his home near Jonesboro

Officially, G-scale trains, also known as garden trains, run on tracks that are 45 millimeters (about 1¾ inches) wide. That makes the trains themselves about 1/29th the size of actual rail cars and engines. As such, G-scale locomotives are up to 18 inches long, stand 5 or 6 inches tall and weigh up to 8 pounds. The size of the models and their ability to withstand less-than ideal handling and all sorts of weather make G-scale very popular for outdoor train layouts.

"I had a small HO (1/87th size) scale layout in my bedroom when I was younger that my father helped me with. I had forgotten about it, then one Christmas after my son was born, we got a starter G-scale set and it's sort of gotten out of hand since," Bible says, adding that he's always been intrigued by the G-scale, especially the trains' applications for outside layouts.

Today, Bible works on his outdoor layout almost daily, often assisted by his son, Noah, age 7. "It's a family hobby," Bible explains. "It's not just trains; this hobby gets you outside and even involves gardening."

During the winter months, Noah helps with inside projects such as painting rolling stock or making electrical connections. When the weather's nice, father and son often can be found working on the outdoor layout or running the trains around Bible Grove, the name they have given to their layout and model railroad. "We have a few hundred feet of track and more to put down," he says. "This is a hobby where you're never really done; you're constantly changing things."

Bible's layout is not as big as those of other area hobbyists. Andy Clarke says the G-scale layout at his home south of Nashville consists of nearly 1,200 feet of track; that's the scaled equivalent of more than six miles of rail line. "My wife says we built our house around the railroad," Clarke says. "It runs through the basement and outside through a window."

He says his model railroad includes 30 locomotives and some 200 freight cars. Unlike when he was a child with an HO model railroad, Clarke says this layout is about more than watching trains run in circles. "I'm setting it up as my own fictitious railroad, and I'm into operations, meaning I model things like actual runs, picking up and dropping off cargo."

"Ops," as enthusiasts call this type of modeling, is growing in popularity, says Scott Fowler of Benton. Fowler, who has a 630 -square-foot G-scale operation of his own, is president of the Southern Illinois Train Club and a worldwide organization called the Big Train Operators Club.

"The camaraderie of the clubs is great, and you are able to get advice from other G-scalers on everything from how to wire a switch to how to keep the miniature trees in your outdoor layout looking right," he says. Fowler says one of the things he likes best about the hobby is the range of people involved in model railroading.

"I'm a blue collar guy, but at a G-scale convention, you can sit with millionaires and all be talking at the same level and about the same things," he says.

Many of the hobbyists with outdoor layouts participate in the Garden Gateway Railroad Club, a St. Louis-based organization that regularly meets at member homes to share their passion with others. Bible credits the club

with helping him advance his railway. The Garden Gateway club is responsible for trains at Barnes hospital and both clubs exhibit at conventions and shows.

"It's a growing hobby and is becoming extremely popular," Jim Kirk, owner of LGB Train Shop in Carterville says. "Garden railroading is probably only about 40 years old, which is relatively new in terms of hobbies. Indoors or out, I think people like G-scale because of the size of it. It's large enough that small hands can hold them, people with bad eye site can see them better, and they can run in the rain and the snow -they're impervious to weather, so they're great for around gardens, pools and ponds."

Bible says the larger size also allows for easier customization of models. His stock of equipment includes a railroad snowplow for winter and a trestle carries rails up to the edge of a swimming pool, perfect for delivering drinks to swimmers, he says. Across the yard, track snakes through tunnels, around shrubbery and over bridges.

While older model railroad locomotives ran from powered tracks, today's G-scale locomotives use lithium ion batteries placed inside the engines, says Robby Dascotte, owner of RLD Hobbies in Albion. Dascotte's company is one of the nation's largest suppliers of G-scale models, shipping around the globe. "The technology today is amazing," he says. "The battery issue is fantastic, and there are a lot of different things you can do."

Dascotte tells of cameras that can be placed in the noses of locomotives, relaying "engineer's eye" views of the layout to monitors. He says there are also sound systems for realistic railroad ambiance. Everything, from the movement of locomotives to rail switches and the lights on accessories, are controlled by a wireless electronic remote control, allowing operators to move around their layouts. He adds that hobbyists' trains can range from those modeled after 1860s steam engines (there are even some that actually are steam engines) to locomotives, tankers and freight cars that look just like those on the rails today.

Kirk says a basic starter G-scale train set is about \$200, from there, he adds, "the sky is the limit." Dascotte says with batteries, lights and sound, a modern-looking locomotive can run as much as \$800, and "trains don't look right with just one locomotive," he adds.

Model railroaders don't consider the cost as much as they value what the hobby brings to them in terms of enjoyment and fellowship. "Working on the railroad really takes my mind off of everything else," Bible says. "I'm outside with my family; I can have music playing and its fun."