

National Capital Trackers Rockville Lions Club 2015

The National Capital Trackers once again took part in the Rockville MD Lions Club Train Show at the Rockville Senior Center. This is a benefit for the Rockville Lions Club and one of their primary fundraisers of the year. This is also the oldest show the Trackers have participated in. This, as many know, my favorite show of the year to do. It is kind of like a mini-reunion as I see many old friends from past days in HO, N, and other train events in Montgomery County.

Due to the limited room allotted to the Trackers, we don't have much (any) variety in layout design. As a result, the standard rectangular layout was operated. This year's layout was a tad smaller than usual to allow more clearance for the public trying to make their way around the layout. In addition, Ed Beaver led a Standard Gauge operation in the adjoining sunroom. Great fun to have the O Gauge and Standard Gauge layouts next to each other.

The following participated with Modules:

- Your's Truly
- Jeff Talaga
- Tim Minor
- Dave Sealing
- Carl Condon
- Dave Malmquist
- Bob Bitzer
- Chuck Pestacchi

Of course, several non-module bearing members came to run trains including Gil Baldwin, Bill Hakkarinen and his Grandson, Andrew Israel and his boys, Russel Erhnworth, Dave Eadie, Dave Bonner, Bob Easton, and Mike Fistere. I hope I didn't forget anyone here. My sincere apologies if I did, it was not done on purpose!

George Tsakiris was our usual Trackmaster and I was next in line as the assistant Trackmaster. Tough job but someone's gotta do it!

All members produced some really beautiful modules. Tim Minor's scenery and track work was spectacular, Mike's oil refineries are a favorite of mine, Bob had his Dept. 56 collection, Chuck had a very useful siding, Jeff had his yard, Carl had a yard full of big steam, Dave Malmquist had lots of postwar accessories and Dave Sealing had a small town. I had my module with siding, house, and station and elevated Bump-'n-go trolley running.

Special thanks to the following:

Jeff and Dave for hauling the trailer

Mike Fistere for providing several tables for storage of trains.

Everyone's efforts are greatly appreciated.

In addition to the Trackers, railroads in T, Z, N, HO, O, Standard, G and Lego were operating. I always enjoy seeing what other clubs are up to and catching up with old friends.

I also had my "Intro to O Gauge Trains" poster set up and was handing out flyers to interest those in the hobby and had several express a sincere interest in getting a starter set for Christmas gifts and/or around the Tree. Please see below for my comments that I provided to my local dealer who helped with this display and attracting people to the hobby. We need as much interest in the hobby as possible! Also, I did my best to promote this show via several channels online and in person. The Lions Club does little to no advertising and the numbers reflect this. I like to think that due to my efforts, the 20% increase in attendance brought more income to the Lions. I promoted the show in the following areas:

-MTH Electric Trains (MTH did a really nice spread for us on their Facebook page).

-Lionel Electric Trains

-Potomac Library

-Rockville Library

-Davis Library

-Engine House Hobbies

-Hobby Works Rockville

-Washington Parent Facebook, could not get them to add event to website events calendar

- City of Rockville
- DC Urban Moms Calendar on their website.
- Montgomery County Child Care Resource and Referral Center
- My neighborhood HOA
- Montgomery County Tourism
- Rockville Economic Development
- Rockville Seniors
- Kentlands Neighborhood
- Local Railfan Facebook and webpages
- Trainorders.com Model Railroading forum (Thanks Bill Hakkarinen for doing this for me!)
- O Gauge Railroading Magazine online forum
- Washington Baltimore and Annapolis chapter of the Train Collectors Association.
- Toy Trains and Collectibles store in Manassas
- Rockville Town Square
- Fox5 DC News Facebook
- WUSA9 News Facebook
- Things to do in Montgomery County MD Facebook
- National Capital Trackers O Gauge Railroad Club Facebook (I'm one of several members running this page for our club).

634 people walked through the door, a 20% increase from last year. I hope to see even more next year and am already in talks with the show coordinator and Lions Club president to expand advertisements next year.

We also did some outreach for the club. We were approached by a gentleman that started a small train show/swap meet in Germantown each winter. We set him and Gil up and hope we can produce a layout for his event. He was appreciative of our willingness to help.

We had no technical issues whatsoever with the exception of a few “operator error” mistakes. Trains ran very well and it appeared that everyone had a good time.

Do remember however that when you are running trains, please be paying attention, not staring at phones, asleep, whatever. I'm sure you don't want your train damaged in a wreck nor does your track partner. Tear down was completed in 50 minutes - well done! My sincere thanks and appreciation to all of those that gave their weekends to making this show happen.

'till next year....

Matt Panagos (Assistant Trackmaster)

Comments on getting people into the hobby, discussed with the owner of Engine House Hobbies in Gaithersburg who helped me with the catalogs. This is important for all, especially during the train season:

This past weekend, November 14 and 15, the National Capital Trackers, Washington DC's O Gauge railroad club set up a modular layout at the Rockville Lions Club train show in Rockville, MD. This was the fourth show which I set up an "Intro to O Gauge Trains" display. I've created a small poster board and, with your support, set up lots of catalogs from MTH, Lionel, and Bachmann. I focus on the Ready to Run train set catalogs as this display targets beginners and those that may not be very familiar with the hobby to hopefully grow this hobby. We as hobbyists need to do the best we can to put our best foot forward and promote this hobby and get younger and new folks involved. I'm seeing good results but there is still a long road ahead. I also pass out American Flyer and the "Premium" catalogs from MTH, Lionel and Bachmann. Finally, Engine House Hobbies gets their name and contact info displayed on the poster and I also print out large stacks of paper with the store name and contact info, including website for my "customers" to take.

Talking to people about getting a train set and getting involved in the hobby has become one of my most favorite things to do at shows. While I don't do this display at every show, I try to expand as much as I can. This is not something sponsored by the Trackers - this is just me, a Tracker member, doing this to try to do what little I can to promote this hobby further. I've also seen that talking with people, explaining things to them, and handing them a catalog can increase the public's interest. While not everyone may be serious, I see many that are and this past weekend was no exception.

We do a show in Kensington, MD each September that draws approximately 2,000 people, the vast majority being local families from the surrounding neighborhoods. I ran out of catalogs during this show. Another thing that stood out - I was running my MTH Railking Imperial ES44, the same locomotive MTH includes in their starter sets. I was approached by a grandmother wanting to get a CSX train for her grandson. She was familiar with HO trains but I really tried to steer her away from the smaller scales with younger children. I explained the O gauge sets that MTH produces, how they can be easily expanded, upgraded, etc and that exact engine I was running can be purchased in a starter set from MTH. I showed her the train set catalogs and included a flyer to Engine House Hobbies. She couldn't stop thanking me for taking the time to explain it to her "in English" and answer her questions. She also asked about buying trains off Craigslist and I steered her away from that as 1) I want to support the local guys and 2) the local guys can be of tremendous help before, during, and after the sale. Plus, a warranty is included.

I had similar encounters this past weekend at Rockville. While I did not have the ES44 engine with me, I repeated the process, many, many times. Again, while we may not be able to "hook" everyone, a substantial amount had good, serious questions and were serious about getting sets

for Christmas and/or under the Tree. This is what we are here to do. I don't hesitate to say that doing this promotion for the hobby is more fun than running trains on the layout.

Having the catalogs along with the actual display and someone to answer questions is key. Even more key is a dealer that is willing to explain things, patience, and friendly. We are lucky to have several first class dealers in the DC area.

A few other observations -

1) I've seen far too many train guys respond to beginner questions and considerations with snarky, condescending attitudes and answers. AOL did an online article about Rod Stewart's HO layout (yes, THE Rod Stewart). The first sentence of the AOL article read "Model Trains may make you think 'creepy dude in a basement. "This does no good to the hobby. Or, I've seen guys bore people with technical discussions and terminology to the point where the person they may be talking to is more confused than they were before. As I've said before to other clubs, written about on the OGR forum, and other venues - "know your audience, answer their questions, no matter how "dumb" they may be with a smile. Be patient." If this hobby is going to grow and survive, we need to follow this. There is a time and place and audience for technical talk. Most don't need or want it but there may be some that do. Grandparents and frankly, most people, don't need the technical talk or how this is a terrible engine because the tender has one less chunk of coal in it than the real thing running at some museum. Same goes for all dealers regardless of the customer. It is much easier to lose a customer than it is to gain one. Not to mention, most upset customers will talk more about their poor experience than they will good ones.

2) I'm happy to see Lionel including many lower priced and "kid oriented" train sets into their catalogs such as the Dinosaur train, etc. We had a new junior member this weekend and his father (actually, we had several children/dad/grandpa teams this weekend). The boy was about 10 years old and was running his Lionel locomotive with the Lion Chief remote and was outside of the layout. As this kid walked around the layout, a large group of kids followed. This is what we want! Lower priced sets can be key - I've seen many balk at the prices on sets.

3) I do not like the direction some are taking with starter sets. MTH has long said that they see their starter sets as the gateway for newcomers and they want to put their best foot forward. MTH's starter sets are leaps and bounds ahead of Lionel. Lionel DOES make nice stuff. However, with the new Lion Chief technology, if that LC remote dies, gets lost, broken, whatever - that train set, and it's owner is dead in the water and can't run. Stores don't sell remotes so the only option is to go back to Lionel; a wait that can take several weeks or longer. Is this the way to get people into the hobby? NO! I do not understand why Lionel doesn't include Remote/Transformer switches on their LC engines like they do on the Lion Chief + products. I don't dislike Lionel's stuff - I've got several including Lion Chief+ products. However, consideration should be taken that the ability to run on an old school transformer is key. It can't cost Lionel much to add a transformer/remote switch to their products. Also, Lionel's "wall wart" power supply is very inadequate for expansion. As a result, one would need to buy a new transformer (\$100+ dollars) if they wanted to expand, not to mention the cost of track, etc. While I understand the economics by the decision and the money making, I think this is a major turn off to a lot of people. MTH is doing a very good job by giving a "real transformer" that can easily be hooked to an MTH controller to run conventional, DCS command capability, and more. If MTH's train set remote dies, a new one can be found on a dealer's shelf and purchased for a reasonable price. Also, the train can run with a basic conventional transformer. While MTH's track is a downfall, they really are putting their best foot forward. Many of the people I've spoken with are more than willing to spend the extra money and get an MTH set for the features, "upgradability" and more. Bachmann's catalog that covers all product lines is also a terrific move. Many people are confused by the many different catalogs produced by Lionel and MTH - HO, Track and Power, Ready to run, Christmas, Railking and Premier Volume X, Signature catalogs, American Flyer, etc. As a former HO and N Scaler, I find it kind of fun to look through the Bachmann catalogs to see the other product lines as well as the Williams line. Consolidating all product lines into one large catalog would make a lot more sense and be a lot less confusing to those interested in the hobby. I would think it may be cheaper to print and ship that tons of separate catalogs for various product lines.

4) Get these things into people hands. Let them run the trains, blow the whistles, etc. If I feel comfortable doing so with my audience, I have no problem whatsoever to hand one of my locomotives over and tell them to take a look at the quality, feel the heft, etc. I'm often seen handing the DCS or Lionel remotes to kids to blow the whistles, etc. I think the manufacturers need to do more to keep dealers in business and make selling trains a more attractive market. We are seeing far too many hobby shops closing across the country.

5) This outreach to younger/new people is working. I attended a WB&A TCA chapter show several weeks ago. Lots of young kids but especially gratifying was an operating layout built and run by pre-teens and teens. OUTSTANDING! This past show at Rockville saw, 5 father/son or grandpa/son teams running trains. Even better. When people see kids running trains, it is one of the best ambassadors for the hobby. While this is great, we need to do more. This includes manufactures, dealers, and hobbyists. Get trains into public places. I recall an MTH display at Washington's Union Station several Christmases ago. Even late at night, the layouts were surrounded by people. Get the trains in the public eye and let people know this hobby is alive and well.
