

Retired middle school teacher crafts outdoor model trains

Five trains sit on their own tracks in a workroom in Merwin Foster's home.

But with the flip of a switch, they chug to life and amble out into Foster's backyard in Sioux Falls. There, they head out and over seven bridges, through a tunnel and around a realistic small town, with train stations, a bank, a hotel, houses and a leather store.

Passengers peer out from the cars. And the city lights up at night.

It's life, in miniature.

Foster, 65, a retired middle school industrial arts teacher from Sheldon, Iowa, spent three years perfecting this, his garden railroad.

He made the railway more personal through naming parts after his children, such as Nicksville and Victor Falls.

"I run it like a real railroad," Foster said. "When people come over and see it, they like the real feel of it."

Garden railroads are train railways set up throughout or around a garden. Since the

railroads are outside, they must be built with special materials to avoid water damage and varying temperatures. Garden railroads run on the G scale, which is notable for its size and durability, making it a good match for outside railways.

"Merwin's train is really something," Jay Manning, president of the Sioux Valley Model Engineer Society, said.

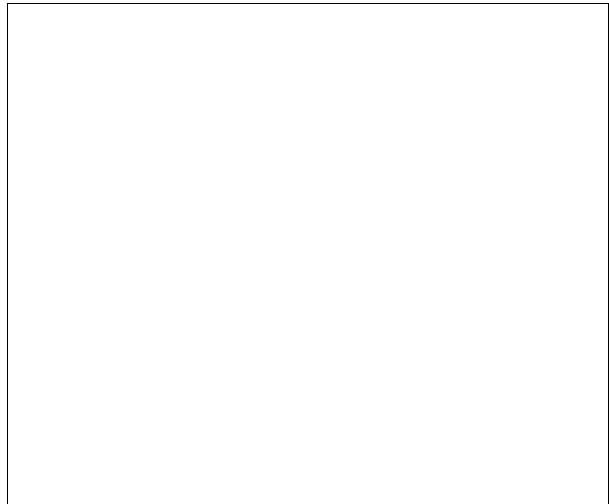
Foster said the hobby became popular in Colorado and California first, but is now spreading.

"It's a relatively new hobby," he said. "It's been around for the last 15 or 20 years after it was popular in Europe."

Foster said he became interested in model railways because of his industrial arts background, and he always has had a passion for trains. He has three large trains that run on his outside track and three small ones that run on an inside track.

Foster is finishing his railway's lighting and

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putting together a gondola and Ferris wheel. But he says it will always be a work in progress.

And he's invested a lot of time in it — spending winters in his workroom, sawing wood for bridges, trestles and other features. He built the trestles out of redwood and cedar, using superglue, nails and the occasional bolt.

“Everything is original,” Foster said. He created the design of the town and intentionally placed water and sand features to give a 1800s-1930s small-town feel.

Foster takes special care of his delicate project through consistent cleaning and checkups. He plans to cover the towns and other parts with plastic for the winter.

Tom Redlin, an employee at Donovan's Hobby & Scuba Center, said trains attract people of all ages.

“They're very popular,” he said.

Bill Kading, a retired television engineer, used to own Universal Hobby in Sioux Falls.

“People loved the trains,” he said. Model railroads accounted for a third to half of his shop's total sales.

While Foster works on the railway, his wife, Laura, tends to the garden. He said they're going to plant dwarf plants, specifically bonsai trees and ferns, to add to the garden.

Foster emphasized the social aspect to garden railroads.

He had one train setup on the railway for his stepdaughter's graduation in May and has had multiple neighbors come and check it out.

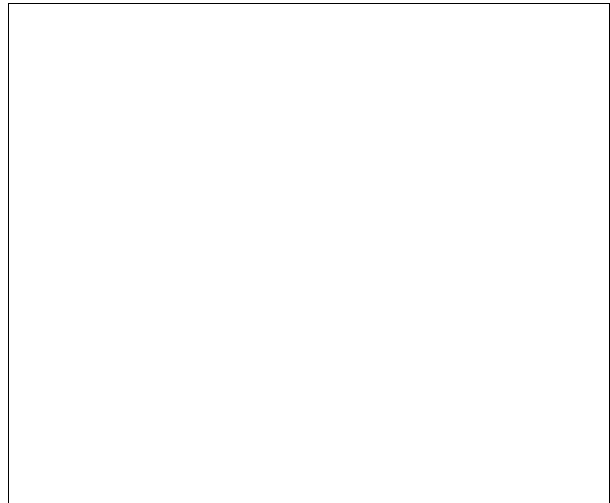
Foster also had members of the Sioux Valley Model Engineer Society over to his house to look at his garden railroad earlier this summer.

Though Foster is not a member of SVMES, he said he loves socializing with people who enjoy model trains as much as he does.

SVMES is about 75 years old, has 30 members and operates out of a donated building at the fairgrounds.

The only credential for being a member is simply to “be interested in model railroading,” Wayne Hanson, SVMES treasurer, said.

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"There's so many positive aspects to the hobby," he said. "It's a great way to meet people."

Kading is the electrical expert and has helped SVMES members, as well as Foster, with the lighting and wiring for their railroads. He has helped program railroads with radio controls so people can wirelessly control their trains.

When it comes to model railroads, "Everyone helps everyone," Manning said.

Both Manning and Foster said they were good with the building aspect, but Kading's electrical background is essential to the railroad's function.

"When it's night out, I can just flip on the switches and everything lights up," Foster said.

"Hearing the chugging of the engine, when the lights come on, seeing how people react to those things made the three years worth it," he said.



Zoom

Merwin Foster adjusts one of his G Scale trains in his backyard garden railroad in Sioux Falls. TOP: A boxcar rests on a wooden bridge. Foster says the railway took three years to build. / Photos by Elisha Page / Argus Leader

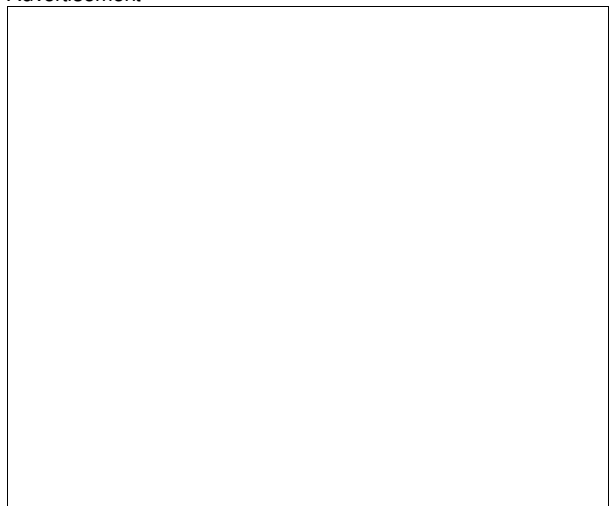
Upcoming events

SVMES has two major upcoming events.

Aug. 4-Aug. 12, the members are displaying model trains during the Sioux Empire fair.

Their other major event is Trains at Christmas, an event held on Nov. 17 and Nov. 18.

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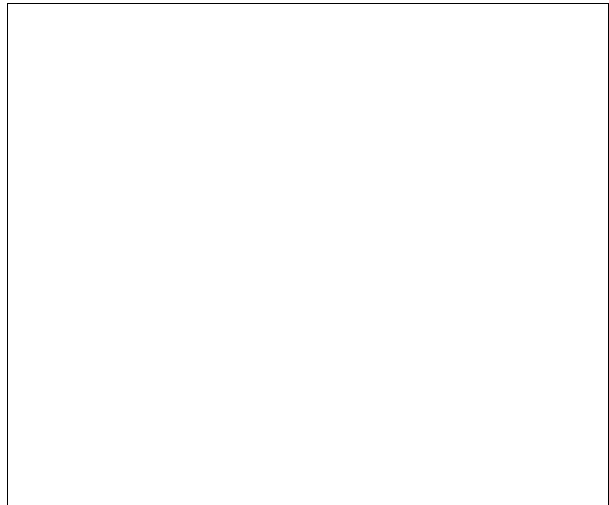
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