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All aboard, from Chicago Botanic Garden's summertime railroad to the year-round Great Train Story at MSI

By William Hageman, Chicago Tribune reporter

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It started as a one-shot deal — a seven-track train layout at the Chicago Botanic Garden that was intended for a five-month run in 2000.

"But it was so popular," says Dave Rodelius, a lifelong train enthusiast who oversees the Model Railroad Garden program. "People wouldn't let it go away. People demanded it. If I'm not mistaken, in that first year we had 100,000 people. You couldn't walk through here. You just had to move with the crowd."

So here we are, in the 13th season, with 18 trains, a 7,500-square-foot exhibit, and a part-time crew of 16 headed by Rodelius "I'm, so to speak, the chief engineer," he says with a laugh.

A lifelong train buff, he had been a tram driver at the Garden. When the train setup was being built, he was called into a vice president's office and asked if he'd like to run the railroad.

"I got the job," he said, "and I didn't even have to ask how much I had to pay."

The Botanic Garden's railroad runs about 1,700 feet of track. The layouts are built around points of interest from throughout the United States — Mount Rushmore in South Dakota, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the White House, Yellowstone Park, Pike Place Market in Seattle; Mount St. Helens in Washington State, Lombard Street in San Francisco.

"We do keep things up to date. When the Obamas moved into the White House, we put in a garden and a play area for the kids," Rodelius says.

Among the revisions in the layout this year are Cape Cod and New Orleans' French Quarter. The various tableau have small details worth noting — block out an hour to see everything — and also explore the plants. The grape vines in the Napa Valley vineyard are really English duckfoot ivy, which looks like tiny grape vines. The pines in the Mesa Verde National Park display are Meth Dwarf white cedars, in perfect scale.

"We have a lot of people who come through just to look at the plants," Rodelius says. "(Horticulturist) Kelley Heim does a really good job with putting out signs."

He says that train wrecks on the layout are rare, but interesting. "Sometimes we'll have one, and nobody will have been watching, and some kids will come scooting over. 'Hey mister, you got a wreck!' My first words are always, 'Anybody get hurt?' So we do have fun."

10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily through Oct. 28 (and until 8 p.m. on Wednesdays through Aug. 29). Admission to the Model Railroad Garden is \$5 adults, \$3 for children 3-12. Admission to the Chicago Botanic Garden is free; parking is \$20 per car. Visit chicagobotanic.org/railroad

All Aboard exhibit

at the DuPage County Historical Museum: Visit a railroad layout with more than 2,000 feet of track and numerous county landmarks represented in Wheaton. The layout was set up by the DuPage Society of Model Engineers, who operate the entire railroad from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. on select Saturdays. At other times, visitors can push a button to get things moving.

The museum is open 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, and noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at 102 E. Wesley St., Wheaton; admission is free (donations welcome). Train Saturdays are listed at dupagemuseum.org/exhibits

Taltree Railway Garden: Started in 2011, the highly regarded setup at the Taltree Arboretum and Gardens in Valparaiso, Ind., covers nearly an acre and tells the story of American railroading. Railway lines that are featured include canyon, mining, mountain, prairie, steam passenger and the South Shore Line. Visitors will see trains run over more than 3,000 feet of track, over bridges and past waterfalls. *Trains run from 10 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily through Oct. 31 at 71 N. 500 West, Valparaiso, Ind. Admission to the arboretum is \$10 adults, \$5 for children 5-12; visit taltree.org*

Blackberry Farm: Model trains (scale sizes HO, O Gauge and other types) will take the spotlight for a weekend at Blackberry Farm, and the farm also has a miniature train to ride.

11 a.m. to 4 p.m. July 21 and 22 at Blackberry Farm, 100 S. Barnes Road, Aurora. Admission to the farm is \$3.75 to \$7; visit foxvalleyparkdistrict.org

Illinois Railway Museum: Model railroads give way to the real thing at this museum dedicated to the role railroads have played in the growth of the Chicago area. Visitors can watch historic steam, diesel and electric trains run on a 5-mile stretch of track; streetcars run on a separate streetcar line. Among the special events scheduled in Union are the Trolley Pageant on Saturday and Diesel Days July 21- 22.

The museum is located at 7000 Olson Road, Union; admission costs and more information at irm.org

Museum of Science and Industry: The museum's Great Train Story, capable of handling more than 30 trains, follows a railroad journey between Chicago and Seattle.

Open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at 57th St. and Lake Shore Drive. Adult admission is \$15 (\$13 for Chicago residents), \$10 (\$9) for children; visit msichicago.org

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by Superfish