

# Bozeman Daily Chronicle

Monday, March 31, 2008



Washburn Vista - Yellowstone Park, photograph by Thomas Lee

E-Chronicle

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## Railroading on a slightly smaller scale

By MICHAEL BECKER Chronicle Staff Writer

Doug Lanphear's hobby requires a jeweler's eyes and a surgeon's hands.

But as he holds up his slightly unsteady hand and points to the glasses on his nose, Lanphear admits that they are pretty loose requirements.

Lanphear builds N-scale model railroads, 1:160-scale models of real world trains and scenery. At that scale, a diesel locomotive is about as wide as your hand and weighs a bit more than a Matchbox car.

"When you look at the size of these things, some of us old guys, our eyesight isn't that good," he said.

Lanphear is a member of Montana NTRAK, a local N-scale club that was founded in October. The group held its second-ever exhibition over the weekend at the Gallatin Valley Mall.

Club president Ken Allen, a Virginia native who has been building model railroads for 50 years, explained that N-scale railroad layouts like the one in the mall are composed of "modules." These 2-by-4-foot scenic dioramas are built to national NTRAK standards, which allows a module to hook to any other module in the world.

As children and adults crowded around the train setup, Allen said that the hobby can get very expensive. His replica Spanish bullet train cost more than he was willing to say out loud. Instead, he communicated the cost with a raised eyebrow and an exasperated whistle.

But he said it was not a hobby solely for wealthy retirees. Most N-scale train cars cost between \$8 and \$40, with locomotives costing more; and a hobbyist can put together a module for around \$100.

While it's a bit more than most kids can afford, Allen said it was great for families or clubs.

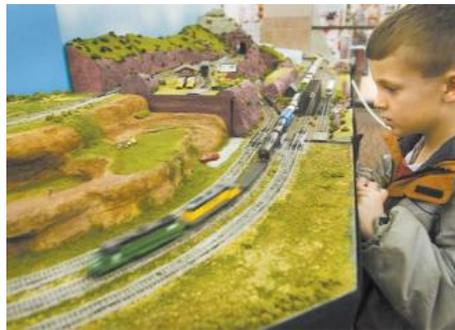
Lanphear, who supplied five modules to the track layout, said that for him the joy of N-scale railroad was in putting the scenes together and watching them in action.

"To me, the fun thing is building this," he said. "The next guy you ask, he hates building, but loves the trains and being out here running them."

The exhibitions always draw a crowd, Lanphear said. Couples and adults marvel at the attention to small-scale detail. Parents warn their kids that they have only one or two more minutes to watch.

Meanwhile, children -- deaf to their parents' clock watching -- follow the tiny freight trains and gasp at the flashy bullet train that whizzes by at a scale 300 miles per hour.

Even though most of the club's members are in their 30s and 40s, Allen said learning about railroading history and watching the children revolve around the diorama makes it easy to feel young again.



ERIK PETERSEN/CHRONICLE Timothy Quick, 6, stares in awe as a model train zips by at the Montana NTrak's model railroad at the Gallatin Valley Mall Saturday afternoon.

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"I think this is the greatest hobby I've ever been a part of," he said. "You can be 12 years old all over again."

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