

Why go to a Train Show?

What is a train show?

Model railroaders enjoy sharing their hobby with other people, both non-modelers and modelers. Modelers usually exhibit their trains on layouts where the trains operate while some may have a static display. Active displays are most often constructed so that the trains operate on loops of track so that they may run continuously. The loops may be as simple as a circle, an oval or more often a rectangle with rounded corners. Sometimes they are contorted to disguise the simple loop shape. Scenery of a wide variety provides a landscape through which the trains run and justifies the existence of the railroad. Layouts are exhibited either indoors or outdoors. The trains may be in several sizes or scales from the tiny Z scale to Large or G scale. Some shows feature only a single scale. Many shows have sellers of model trains, accessories, and related items such as shirts, hats, and art work. Good bargains may be often found by the alert shopper. Larger shows will have manufacturer representatives present showing their latest products and "how-to" clinics on various aspects of model railroading. Frequently there is an admission charge to help defray the expenses of the show: advertising, site rental, electricity, table rental, etc.

Layouts are a good way to preserve history in a place where others can learn about it. Many model railroaders celebrate the history of railroading in our country by modeling railroads that no longer exist. They use models of equipment that has largely disappeared from modern railroading. A good example of this is the many logging railroads that operated throughout the nation. However, the steam locomotives they used to move their cargo are not forgotten. They are an old technology that served us so well and are so intriguing that their likeness appears far more often in children's books than the modern diesel locomotive. The choo-choo sound is instantly recognizable as that of a steam engine while most railroads stopped using steam power in the 1950-1960 era. It is a sound to be heard only on some excursion railroads today.

Where can I find a train show?

Many large cities host multiple shows each year while smaller towns may have only one show a year. Some are held in connection with a community festival. Check community calendars, festival advertising, or use your favorite WWW search engine to find shows in your area. There are many websites that list train shows.

So why go to a train show?

Railroads have played a critical role in the history of our country and the advance of the growing population across the continent. They continue to serve our nation by transporting passengers and freight rapidly and efficiently. By attending a train show one can see miniature railroads in action. Many layouts carefully replicate parts of real railroads from the scenery through which they travel and the industries they serve to the types of locomotives and cars they use. From this you can learn about the geography of our nation and many of the industries that are served by the railroads. As the trains run past you the names of various railroad companies may be learned as they are usually found on the locomotives as well as on passenger cars and many of the freight cars. The names of some companies that are served by the railroads may be seen on freight cars as well.

The changes in architecture over the last couple of centuries are observable at a train show. Layouts commonly depict a particular era with the elements of the scenery consistent with the chosen era. The architecture also varies with the geographical area where it is located. The layout builders also choose the geographical setting for their layout as well as the temporal setting. Where else can you travel through 200 years of history and see in three dimensions samples of life from across the three thousand miles of our great nation but at a train show? All this in less than a day of real time. Of course not all train shows cover all of this time and space but representative pieces may be found.

A train show is more than just a trip through time and space. It is also an art show, kinetic art as well as static art and an engineering exhibit. The skills of the artists appear in the realism of the buildings and scenery. While some strive for a high degree of realism others prefer to take an impressionistic approach. Limited scenery may be used letting the viewers' imagination fill in the details. Industrial design is illustrated in the trains and other railroad related objects. The results of mechanical and engineering may be seen in the structures that support layouts themselves as well as the buildings and bridges on the layout. Civil engineering work is needed to construct the roads and highways as well as the railroad roadbeds. Mountains are tunneled through and valleys are bridged. Electrical and electronic engineering is applied in the powering of the trains, animation of accessories, sounds and lights. Computer technology may be used to control the trains, track switches, signal systems and accessories.

With so many facets to creating a piece of the world in miniature it is no wonder that model railroading is often called the World's Greatest Hobby. So come to the next train show near you to learn, to enjoy the experience and appreciate the talents of those who like to share the hobby. Better yet become a model railroader yourself.

– Paul Almquist, October, 2005