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MY OPINION

Kids: The Future of Garden Trains

By Noel Widdifield
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This is a story about two little boys and their love of trains. One is now 63 and the other is four.



It is the story of how they both love trains. It is a story that all of us who love "playing" with trains should be able to relate because the story is one that each of us could tell. It is a story about helping to continue our hobby after we are gone.



The first little boy (me) was born in 1940 when there were trains everywhere.



My father was fascinated with trains and began to share his love of trains to me at an early age.



Pop is holding me as we wait for a NYC train to come along the backside of our property on a Sunday after church. We didn't have to wait long, because the NYC Southwestern Limited was on time.

When I was a little over a year old, an article appeared in one of the local papers written by a reporter who rode the engine with L.F (Roy)Steig, the engineer, and the fireman J.H. Cost. The reporter wrote about the thrill of riding in the big Hudson rolling along at over 80 miles per hour.

The reporter says, "Running along opposite Mounds State Park (near Anderson, Indiana), Mr. Steig 'laid on' the whistle, waved his arm out the window, turned to me and said, 'A little boy always waves to me from that brick house over there.' A traditional part of the railroad is the engineer who waves to little boys, and Mr. Steig is one of those heroes for little boys."



I was that little boy in the brick house who always waved. During the day, Pop would hold me up so I could see the train and at night, when Mr. Steig was on his way back to Bellefontaine, Ohio, we would wave an electric lantern. At a very young age, I learned to tell time so that I wouldn't miss waving at the train.

A couple of days after the reporter rode the train and the article appeared, a newspaper was thrown off the train to us and with the article and a note from Mr. Steig with his name, address and phone number. The next day, dad called and thus began a long family friendship with Mr. Steig and his family.

He was my first real hero and represented all of those "heroic" men and women who drove those huge engines and worked on the railroad. My dad and I rode with him several times on the majestic Hudsons that led the NYC passenger trains. Later, when the NYC converted to diesels we rode some of the covered wagon cab units that pulled the Southwestern Limited in the late 1950s. He remained our friend until he died, and his wife attended our wedding before she also passed away.

During the 1940's and 50's, Dad continued to encourage my interest in trains. In 1947, he had Santa give me an American Flyer Pacific. It came as a Pennsylvania K-5, but he removed the lettering and decaled it as a NYC engine.



I had to share that set with my younger brothers until the next year Santa gave them each an American Flyer Atlantic, also lettered for the NYC. A few years later, in the early 50's Dad gave me an American Flyer GP-7 lettered as a GM demonstrator.



I guess that since he worked for GM, he decided not to paint and letter it for the NYC. My love of trains was started at an early age because my father introduced me to the thrill of trains and that thrill continues to this day.

The second little boy also had an interest in trains at an early age. His dad was not a train buff, but he and his wife recognized the little boy's interest. They had heard about my interest in trains at the church we all attend. One Sunday, his mother mentioned her son's interest in trains as we were leaving the service, and I invited the family over to see the trains. Later, that day, Matt, his mother and older sisters arrived and Matt loved watching the trains. He had me run every engine and watched each train with the complete attention that only a four-year-old can exhibit. His sisters soon lost interest, but Matt and his mom stayed in the train room for over an hour. Matt clearly loved trains.

A few weeks later, Matt's dad asked me about the trains at Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. They were thinking of taking the family to see some other things in the area and based upon Matt's love of trains thought they might stop there. I have been there several times and encouraged them to be sure to take Matt. He returned completely fascinated with trains and the thrill of riding a real one.

For the next few weeks, Matt's mom would hear Matt talking about trains in the back seat of their van and just thought he was talking about Mr. Noel as the family calls me. One day, when Matt was particularly animated, she paid a little more attention, only to discover he was talking about a Mr. Mole. After questioning him, she realized that when he had heard my name as Mr. Mole. Now they all call me that.

Matt returned again to watch my indoor trains and again I ran every engine at Matt's direction. After he left, I thought about my father giving me trains at an early age and I decided to do the same thing for Matt.

I came up with an ARISTO Little Critter, flatcar, tank car, cattle car and a shorty caboose from the stuff I wasn't using. I included one of ARISTO 1.8 amp power packs that I no longer used. At the April Train Collector's of America (TCA) train show at York, PA, I purchased a circle of 4-foot radius track and some Life Like G people and set it all up in my living room. I told Matt's Mom what I had in mind and she was very pleased. On Sunday after church the family came again. Matt couldn't believe it when I told him the set was his.



He quickly learned how to make it go forward and reverse and after playing with it for about half an hour, we packed it up and he took it home.

A couple of months ago, when our three youngest grandchildren were visiting, my wife invited Matt and his sister Abby to come over for a couple of hours to visit and play with our three.



That day I also had my outdoor railroad running so the kids spent some time watching the railroad run.

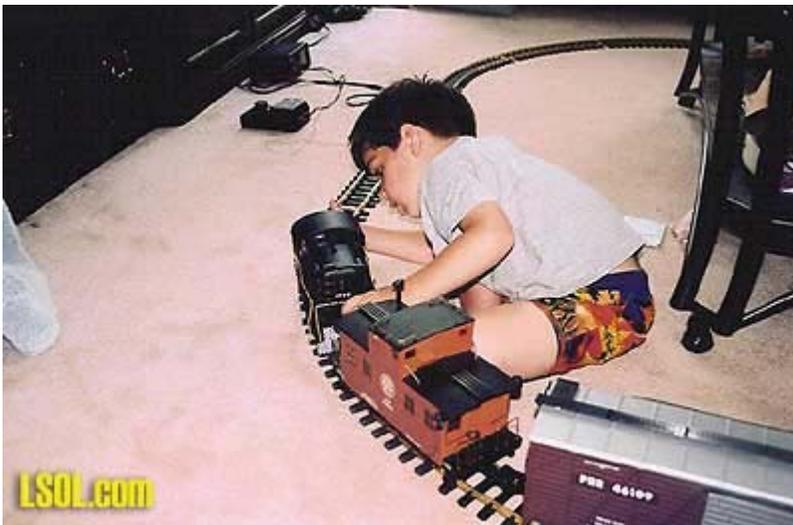


Matt definitely understood what was going on and pointed out the important aspects of the railroad to the others.





Matt keeps his train set up in the dining room and goes to run it the first thing each morning.



The last time I talked to him, he told me that he had moved the engine to run behind the caboose. He told me that he likes it that way best. I wasn't sure why he would do that until I thought about the Stroudsburg Railroad. There, most of the time, they put the engine behind the train rather than in front.



So that is my tale of two little boys. I hope that I have encouraged Matt in his love of trains that this 63 year-old still has. Perhaps in sixty years Matt will still be playing with trains and introducing young people to the fun of railroads and trains.



What about you? Tell us about your experiences of introducing young people to trains.

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