

Toy trains make the world go 'round



"I get a big kick out of watching the kids get excited," said Bobby Daniels, shown here (right) engineering some excitement for Frank Lewis and his grandson, Scottie.



"He's gotten to the point where he can take an engine apart, wire the tracks, and build the accessories," said Bobby Daniels about his son, Robbie, shown here wiring an animation to his General Store.

When Bobby Daniels was six years old, his father gave him an electric train for Christmas. It was just a simple circle of track and a single train going "round and 'round

the tree—but the child’s joy and the father’s delight was complete. Bobby’s father had given him a world to play in, one where he could be the master and where he could be free.

As the child grew, he added more trains and track. He created miniature worlds for his trains to travel through: mountains, bridges, towns, industrial sites. He may have even built a tiny store, perhaps a hardware store. Here the child created the man he was to be.

Ever expanding, always growing richer in content, Daniels has come a long way since that first train set. Today he owns and operates a real layout, called Bevell’s Hardware in Blackstone. With the tireless energy of a steam engine, he moves from one end of the store to the other, paying attention to every detail, moving stock, arranging displays, animating whatever section of the store he is in. His throttle is always opened full—but never to the point that he runs off the track.

And in the center of this world, every Christmas—as if it were the anchored foot of a compass that draws larger and larger circles—he puts a train set. Not just a circular track, though. This L shaped table has 60 to 70 feet of outside rail. People come from as far as Lynchburg to see his trains.

Over the years the collection has grown, but Daniels never forgets its humble beginning. He still has the engine and cars his father gave him. He discovered it in a closet one day. “It still runs,” he said, almost gleefully.

On the walls in the back of the store Daniels’ train collection waits all year for this track to be laid. “My oldest train is a 1920 Lionel and it runs too,” he said. A train that didn’t run wasn’t worth much, he implied. His excitement was infectious as he talked about his trains.

He talked rapidly about what he was adding to his table this year. “Those mountains are made of rags dipped in putty and sprayed,” he said. “And I made the engine house, country store, and all the merchandise,” he said, passing one end of the table. Little animated people and industrial operations kept revealing more and more details, so you kept making discoveries every time you looked at the table. The possibilities released by the original train set had never been exhausted, it seems.

Daniels has become a knowledgeable train enthusiast, able to talk about the value and makes of his engines and cars, which go back to the 1900s. “A nice Lionel train costs \$1,000 to \$2,000 now. They make \$100 trains, but they’re not hardly worth buying. That’s sad because most parents can’t afford to buy a \$1,000 train to give to a six-year old to tear up.”

Daniels can’t explain why he has this passion for trains. “You can’t justify it,” he says. And he makes a point to separate it from his business and the profit motive. “It has nothing to do with sales, believe me.” And he knows collections inevitably get sold “and nobody will care about it after you’re gone.” So what good was it?

To answer this, all you have to do is watch the faces of the children who stand at the train table’s edge, eyes wide as they follow the passing trains. “I get a big kick out of watching the kids get excited,” said Daniels. To him the trains and the children are all part of the same circle—the same gift from his father.

But having children watching the trains is not as good as having a son who loves to operate them. Robbie, Daniels’ nine-year-old son, is taking the throttle from his father.

“He’s gotten to the point where he can take an engine apart, wire the tracks, and build the accessories...When I was his age, I couldn’t have done it,’ he said proudly.

Daniels no longer has to search for a justification for his trains. “Hopefully Robbie will save this stuff and when he’s 50 or 60, he’ll really have something.” But was Daniels only talking about the money the trains are worth?

Robbie was busy looking for a break in the track that had stopped the engine dead. Daniels could see in his determination the man his son would be. And he remembered his father.

“He only bought me one train,” he said...But it was perfect.