



Trains in the garden

By Ben Burd

Hands up all those readers who have not possessed or played with a train set at some time in their childhood? How many of you have a set now or still play with trains? Although many people think that this popular hobby is just that - a hobby to be played with during childhood - some think that the activity is on a higher plane. Most of us left our trains in the basement when we moved away from home. George Parker certainly did but he now he is right back it with a vengeance.



George Parker became involved with the Streamway nursing home, located in Cobourg, after his mother was debilitated with a stroke. The stroke removed all of her capacity to speak and communicate but she still had all her motor skills and needed constant physiotherapy. Convinced that he could contribute to her quality of life he put his career as a planning consultant on hold and became her fulltime carer and walking assistant. This was in 2003. As an advocate for a greater level of care within institutions he became involved with the Residents' Council, over the years, and in the fall of

2009 he asked to allowed to look into the establishment of a model railway layout in the facility. Being convinced that it would be good therapy he, with the help of some of the residents, built a small indoor layout and had it up and running in 2010. "There was a retired CN worker who was not in very good spirits and it came to me that we should build a system, it may cheer him up - so I did." The results were good, residents became involved in the building and then the operating of the system. Those residents who did not operate the trains became avid watchers, overall the response to the system was a good one. "Unfortunately the CN man did not get to see the results, as he passed away before the system was up, but the momentum was there." George told us.

With a proven system built for the inside George was convinced that the next move should be to build a larger system in the garden and let more people participate. The design of the system was up to George but the first criteria was to pick the size of the trains. The size that he picked was an easy one, "We wanted to use the biggest size and this was the most practical." George explained, most garden layouts use the "G" scale and equipment is no problem to get. "G" scale is available in at least three track widths. George chose a 45mm wide track as this represents the most common railway gauge in North America - the three feet standard. The next choice was the rolling stock - locomotives and carriages plus cargo wagons. No real problem here, "I chose the scale to give the biggest impact; it can be seen from the dining room. The colours of the stock were chosen for visibility." The train system is sourced from many places: the five hundred feet of track from Germany, the cars from a Californian company, the locomotives from Philadelphia and the couplings from Oregon. The system is driven by a hydro transformer that supplies eighteen volts and ten amps. The high amperage will allow many trains to run at the same time.



From the start of the project the residents have been involved in the planning, layout and of course the watching of it all coming into operation. A major part of the track needs to be anchored to the bricks that the track sits on. The anchoring system is a wooden clip that is painted black and when finished the clip looks like a trestle support (look at the picture for

details). The residents took ownership of the painting and helped the project immensely.

George is convinced, due to his experience with the indoor layout that the model train system is therapeutic for all of the residents. “Residents can run the system, we have proved that with the HO system last winter. We have sufficient motor skills, in-house and they (the residents) can understand the system.” George states emphatically. “Residents have the capacity to run it.” This assertion is what drives George Parker on. He will not consider this project a success until the residents have taken control of it, he is just a builder. And the success of the project is not measured by the direct involvement of those residents running the trains. “We’ve actually got residents to come outside to watch the trains.”



When *Sideroads* went to visit the project it was a definitely a work in progress, the switches controlling the track switches had not been wired, the track clips had not all been assembled and painted, but four times a week George gets the three locomotives on the track and puts on a show. “Come back next year and we will have three locomotives running in three different areas and the residents will control the trains.” Any model railroad system is more than the trains. The garden scenery will blend into scale buildings

surrounding the sidings. “A logging mill, a railway station and another scenic display is planned. I want the whole experience of railroading including shunting will be available to users and they will all run on different circuits.” is how George describes the project in the future.

At George’s side, in the garden, is stroke survivor Dave Savage. Dave is a well known local railroad enthusiast but prefers to study railroad infrastructure and the histories of all known railway lines and companies in Ontario, rather than rolling stock and locomotives. He has self-published two books - “Directory of Railway Stations, Vol 1 & 2, and is working on a third Vol. 3 titled “Gone but not forgotten”. These books chronicle all the railway stations that have ever existed in the province of Ontario. Dave figures has listed them all. “I’m missing about five references in the Province.” he says. Retailing them at trade shows he tells that he has sold about sixteen hundred of them. So observing from the sidelines while he quietly exercises with a rubber ball he states, “I think it’s a fantastic idea. My interest was there before I had the stroke - I have my own collection of trains. I think the interest that has been generated to get people in the garden has been because of the trains.”



When asked about the project Christina Verleysen, the Life Enrichment Coordinator at the Streamway Villa, comment quickly turned into a enthusiastic endorsement of the project and the endorsement of the project’s impact on the lives of the residents. “From the get-go we have been wildly enthusiastic about the system. The impact on the resident’s lives can be measured, they wait for the regular sessions of the system and quickly move into the garden to watch, or they look from the dining room windows some will even watch from their rooms, Yes it’s a huge part of their day.”

But back to George and his idea that trains are therapeutic; the building of the system has been on his dime to prove a point. Asked the number of hours he has into the system, as

he hand-builds the track and the system, "It's a lot , I can't count. Put it this way its something you like and want to do - it's not a job!" But he is convinced that the idea can be replicated at other Nursing Homes. "The learning curve has been conquered, and all the unknowns inherent in building a system from scratch have been encountered, my goal is to get the job done. I want to see if this project will work and will it work in other nursing homes. I want the residents to run the trains, it's a long path to get to that point. Automation of the present system takes time meanwhile everybody wants to see the trains so we run and build at the same time." Asked when that will be he says plainly, "The official opening will take place when the residents are running the trains."

1405 words

notes: image cutlines

image 1 "George Parker at the controls"

image 2 "a section of track showing the supports painted by residents"

image 3 "the train and the spectators in the garden"

image 4 "Dave Savage, train enthusiast"