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## Train display highlights model railroading, coal region heritage

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FRACKVILLE - The sights and sounds of a huge locomotive pulling dozens of cars filled with anthracite coal is part of northeastern Pennsylvania's history and heritage. For many, it is part of their memories growing up in the coal region, and a group of model train enthusiasts are helping to preserve and pass along those memories.

The North Schuylkill High Railers, an informal group of hobbyists interested in trains and the role played by those tons of steel on wheels in transporting coal from Shamokin, Pottsville, Shenandoah, Mahanoy City, Tamaqua, Hazleton and points in-between to markets around the country, have a huge display in the Famous Labels wing of the Schuylkill Mall.

The group is not only trying to get the word out about the display, but is also hoping to find some additional enthusiasts to enhance the display and keep it open.

"Here we are at Cressona. What track do you want these emptied on?" can be heard as a locomotive backs 42 cars filled with coal into the station, the engine puffing smoke with the "chugga-chugga" and a train bell ringing to add to the authenticity of the display. Sound is a very important part of the display, which measures 24-by-55 feet, has four levels and is about 7 feet high. A visitor standing on one side of the display cannot see the other side due to the size, and the impact of the view at any location around the display changes. The small details seen close-up are contrasted by the impressive view looking at the entire length of the platform.

There are 12 trains that can operate simultaneously on the display, which has between 1,000 and 1,200 feet of track. Track signals actually indicate when a track is being used. Around the display, different towns have been built to represent Frackville, Ashland, Girardville, Big Mine Run and others. The group tries to simulate the coal region area in the 1920s era.

David Cruikshank, Reading, provided some background on one model train he was operating by remote control.

"The last steam train that the Reading Railroad ran in its entire system was between Gordon and Locust Summit. The cars would be pushed up the big grade that they couldn't get up normally," he said.

Cruikshank said the display has so much to offer.

"We're the best-kept secret in the area, and I don't want to be the best-kept secret anymore," he said. "We've been here for three years now and the display is run entirely on donations, along with putting our own money in to keep us afloat."

The costs go beyond the costs of augmenting the display, such as the overhead expenses of electricity, liability insurance and others.

"It's not free to be here. We'd like to see more people come and appreciate it," said Cruikshank. "We'd also like to get more people involved."

Wally Fetterolf Jr., Frackville, spends lots of time at the display and has his sons involved in working on the display.

"We're not a club and we don't charge any dues," said Fetterolf. "We chip in a few bucks a month to help with the electric bill. We really could use the extra help."

Members are from around the area, from Frackville to Shamokin. The latest addition to the group is Mike Kutch, Bear Creek, near Wilkes-Barre,

Luzerne County. Fetterolf said Kutch works in the area, and after learning about the display, decided to become involved.

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"Mike has been like a breath of fresh air for us. He's helped much to keep us going," said Fetterolf. "We can use people who are good with scenery. And it's not just guys. We encourage women to get involved."

The current group has been operating the display since 2007, but the display has been at the mall for about eight years, having been constructed over a 2 1/2-year period by Dr. Joseph Weber, Ashland, and eight volunteers. All houses are built either from kits or from scratch. The scenery is constructed on a plywood frame covered by wire screen, then covered with styrofoam and plaster.

"A lot of people come here and ask for advice, which is another part of having the display," said Fetterolf. "I like talking to the people, answering questions, and I've already gone to people's houses to work on their layouts. I'm interested in answering questions about the history. My hobby is the history of the area. Most of the trains on the layout are mine and my sons, including the track and power systems. Dave has quite a bit here, too."

As Fetterolf described some of the display, his son, Cabeb, 12, was building a mine scene. His other son, Bretz, 20, was helping Ashley Cress, Frackville, who is working on the display as part of her senior project at North Schuylkill High School.

"She's going to learn the history and talk to the people as they come in," said Fetterolf.

Cruikshank said that model railroading, especially at the level of the Schuylkill Mall display, embodies many aspects in design and operations. It is much more than running a train along a track. Even someone who may not have a specific interest in model railroading may find challenges in working on a display. Even someone who just wants to spend time at the display near the entrance greeting people would be welcome.

"It's history, art, carpentry, electrical, electronics, marketing, problem solving, working with others. It's just not playing with trains," said Cruikshank. "If you are an artist, you can paint a mural background. We want to have someone to paint the outside at the entrance to make it look like a train station. If someone wants to do an art project for school, or just interested in doing it, (they) can contact us."

Most welcome would be crafters who can use their talents in building homes, displays or painting small figurines, said Cruikshank.

Cruikshank said the admission fee is 50 cents, a far cry from similar displays that charge \$6 or more. Fetterolf said as the display develops, there will be more to see.

"We're working at making it more interactive," said Fetterolf. "Mike is working on push buttons for the trolley lines. Once we get all the bugs worked out of our digital controls, we'll offer to the public a chance to run a train around the layout for a donation."

"Our mission is to educate the public by preserving our anthracite and railroad heritage," said Cruikshank. "Most traces of that heritage are being demolished and lost forever. It's not the same area that you and I grew up with. Wally, his sons and I put in 90 percent of the work the first 2 1/2 years. Mike Kutch has literally been a godsend. He does everything we ask of him. He's been great. And Jim Barrett and his son (Seth) have returned after about a year's absence. So if we can have more help and have more people see the fruits of our labor it could really make a difference."

The current display runs O gauge trains, and Cruikshank said there have been inquiries from people with HO gauge. He said there is another room available at the location if HO enthusiasts would like to set up their own display for their favorite size model railroad.

Elaine Maneval, Schuylkill Mall general manager, said the train display is a great part of the mall.

"We believe the mall should have a strong mix of retail tenants for our shoppers, but also like to give our customers entertainment options while they are here," said Maneval. "The North Schuylkill High Railers train display provides one of those unique venues when our shoppers want to take a break and relax. The train display has been here for over eight years and has brought smiles to thousands of faces, both young and old. We are happy to have them here."

The High Railers are equally pleased to be a mall tenant and thanked mall management for its cooperation over the years.

"We appreciate everything that Elaine and the mall has done for us," said Fetterolf.

The display is open from noon to 5 p.m. every Sunday in December.

For more information about the group, hours and other questions, Fetterolf can be contacted at 205-6275 or at chugalong69@yahoo.com. The group is also on Facebook. Search for North Schuylkill High Railers. The page includes some YouTube videos of the display in action. SHAMOKIN - The Lower Anthracite Model Railroad Club opened its doors Friday to the public for its 25th annual open house.

The display can be seen from 6:30 to 9 p.m. Dec. 10 and 17 and 3 to 9 p.m. Dec. 11, 18 and 26.

In past years, more than 3,000 visitors annually have come to see the layout, with many returning each year to check on the progress and new features.

Visitors can follow the routes of the Pennsylvania, Reading and Lehigh Valley Railroads as they traveled between Northumberland and Mount Carmel in the 1950s on this more than 3,000-square foot display. More than 100 handmade models and local landmark buildings make up the display.

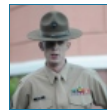
The club is located at 210 E. Independence St., in the Shamokin Community Center, on the second floor above the Shamokin-Coal Township Public Library. Admission is free, but donations will be appreciated by the volunteers comprising the club's membership.

For more information on the club, visit [www.trainweb.org/lamrrc](http://www.trainweb.org/lamrrc).



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