

# All aboard for gardening

## Outdoor railroad trend gains steam

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Staff Writer

CENTER TWP — Ernie Graham said he was the kid in the neighborhood who built the cabin in the woods.

The retired Benbrook Road carpenter continued his love of outdoor creations and constructed a 24-foot gazebo last summer.

It was while he was roofing the gazebo and contemplating landscaping from his lofty perch that Graham struck upon the idea of a garden railway.

Graham traveled to Sharon to look at trains but was put off by the prices. Then he found someone with used trains.

"It was like a dream come true," said Graham.

Graham, 59, climbed onboard the new gardening trend and is going to York this weekend for a G-scale convention.

Graham bought 100 weatherproof train cars of the G-Scale (½" to a foot) and is in the process of constructing buildings to suit the scale.

"My goal is to have a half mile of track," said Graham. He uses brass track that doesn't rust. He said the trains are made to be outside year-round and can even be fitted with snowplows.

"I have big dreams — a couple of towns of maybe 10 to 12 buildings each and 2,600 scale feet of track," Graham said. The carpenter has finished three buildings and has another three under way.

Graham is even making corrugated roofing from pop cans.

"There are all kinds of things you can do with this that I'm just learning," said Graham. He said the Internet, magazines and other garden railroaders are the best resources.

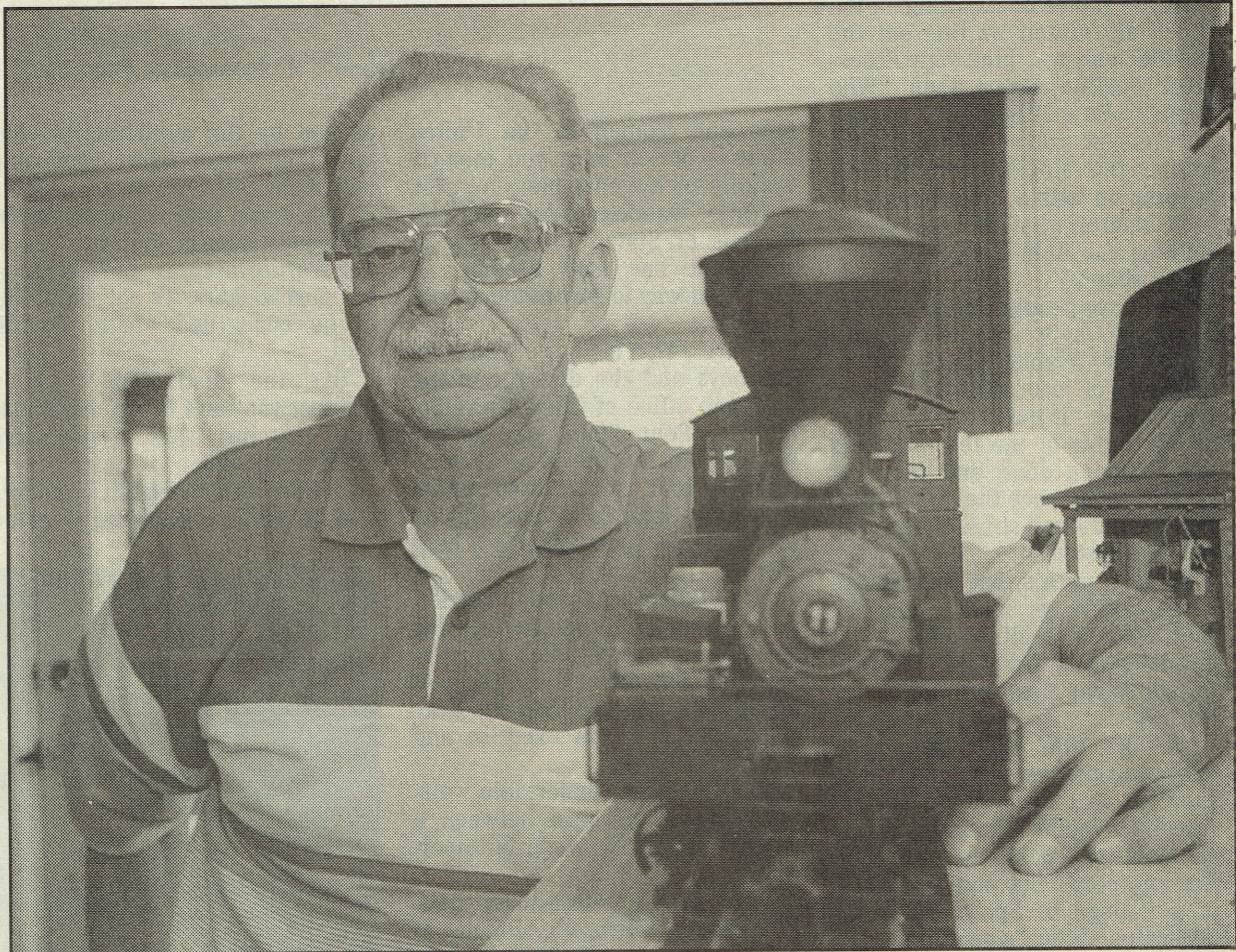
Graham explained G-Scale railways can be an expensive hobby, but it doesn't have to be.

"You can buy a decent locomotive for \$69, a superb one for \$350 or a hand-built brass one for \$6,000. You can buy anything online or from catalogs," he said.

Graham said he has one engine with a video camera so he can operate it by remote control from inside the house.

He plans to have six trains running at once. To that end, he bought a remote control that can handle multiple trains on the same track.

Bill Malick, a railroading friend of Graham's from Connoquenessing,



Ernie Graham shows one of his garden scale railway engines, which cost \$350. He has already constructed three scale buildings and expects to have a lay-

out encompassing about a half-mile of track in his yard when he's done.

DAVE PRELOSKY PHOTO

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— Ernie Graham, retired carpenter

also has a collection of garden-scale railroad cars and plans to start building his outdoor layout. He said he would use radio-controlled engines he can operate from a distance.

Malick said garden railways really aren't new, but are new to the Butler County area. He said they have been popular in the United States since the 1980s.

Garden railways are generally the G-scale that Malick and Graham use, but others use a 1:19 to 1:32 scale. Jan Vogt, president of the Pittsburgh Garden Railway Society, said some members even run the much smaller O-scale (1:48) outdoors. The problem is, O-scale

trains aren't designed to get wet.

Vogt of Brentwood said tracks used outdoors are generally brass, steel or aluminum. Vogt said most people dig a 6-inch deep trench, line it with landscape fabric, and fill it with limestone.

"This acts as a floating base for the tracks," said Vogt.

The power pack for the trains must be protected from the weather and most keep it inside and use an outdoor switch or remote control to run the train, she said.

Vogt said almost half of the garden railroaders incorporate water in their layout.

She also said most layouts are built on level ground, depending on

how much room is available.

"There are some cog trains that can climb a grade like the roller coasters at Kennywood. They make that noise," explained Vogt.

Vogt said people, buildings, cars and even streetlights built to garden railway scale can be bought.

"You can build a village," she said.

Many train enthusiasts use miniature and small plants to match the railroad scale.

Some of the plants used to highlight the railways are sedum to mimic small shrubs. Boxwoods are trimmed to look like trees.

Dwarf Alberta spruce is one of the most popular types of garden railway trees, according to Vogt. Its appearance is similar to a towering forest tree, yet its needles are less than half an inch long.

The dark green dwarf Canadian hemlock called "Jervis" also has tiny needles suitable for G-scale railways.

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Scotch moss and low-grow thyme can be used to simul. grass.

"Wooly thyme looks just like pasture," Vogt said. Wildflower with tiny blooms are perfect, as are smaller grasses, she said.

Floss flower, an annual bedding plant, adapts well to miniature railroads because of its tiny flowers that bloom throughout the summer. Winter heath, a ground cover with tiny leaves and colorful flowers, is suitable for the small-scale railroads.

Many plants suitable for rock gardens translate nicely to railways.

Some tricks that garden railroaders employ to enhance their layouts include roads made from drywall compound over wood or foam. The roads are made to look authentic with multiple coats of paint and yellow lines.

Ceiling tiles, when stacked and broken irregularly, can simulate jagged rock faces.

Vogt said members are happy to share their tips with other members and novices alike.

Vogt said the Pittsburgh Garden Railway Society has 80 members from as far away as Ohio, and Coudersport and Johnstown in Pennsylvania. The group meets monthly at various locations. Information can be found on its Web site: [trfn.clpgh.org/pgrrsl](http://trfn.clpgh.org/pgrrsl)

The society, which was started six years ago to promote outdoor railroading, has a permanent display at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and sets up displays at the Home and Garden Show. Group members also visit schools.

Perhaps the biggest and most popular garden railway in the area