



Grand Scales

Q U A R T E R L Y

Childhood Dream Comes True

by Jeff Uhlemeyer

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As a child, I remember spending a lot of time in the world of make-believe, especially when it came to trains. I grew up just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri (USA) in the small town of Cahokia, Illinois. The main road, Highway 157, had a railroad crossing on either end of town. It seemed like you could not get out of town without being stopped by a train, usually a long freight. It seemed like we were always stopped when my dad was in a hurry to get us somewhere. He hated the wait. I loved it. I'd see that big diesel engine with the rounded nose coming, which I later have learned was an EMD F series. I would immediately pretend I was driving it. Counting cars was fun too, but seeing the engineer up in the cab of that locomotive, that's where I wanted to be.

I did the same thing at Christmas time, because when I was 5 years old in 1959, Santa Claus brought me my first electric train set. It was a Lionel "Santa Fe" freight with twin F7 A units. It looked just like the one used at the beginning of my favorite television show, "Superman". It was the same as the ones that came through town. Every Christmas my dad would bring my train down from the closet and we'd set it up under the tree. I would lay down on the floor right next to the track and just watch my train go by. I would be in that make-believe world again, for what seemed like hours, pretending I was the engineer. Little did I know that soon I would actually get to ride in one. Well, not exactly.

The Drive-In Experience

It was around this same time in my life that my parents took me to a drive-in movie theater. The first one I remember was the Skyview Drive-In located in Belleville, Illinois, about 15 minutes from Cahokia. I recall being in my pajamas during the ride in the back seat of

my dad's car. I didn't know what to expect other than I think my parents told me there was a playground which, at age 5, was just fine with me. It turned out, they knew exactly what else was there too. You see, my dad worked in Belleville as an insurance adjuster. One of the accounts that he handled was for the family that owned the Skyview and most of the other drive-in theaters in the area. Needless to say, he was well aware of what each one had at their playgrounds.

The first thing I remember was that big marquee with the rocket ship that lit up like it was taking off. Then, the back of that huge screen, painted pink with white trim, and the words "Skyview Drive-In" lit up in neon. We waited in line to get our tickets, drove through the gate and into the gravel parking area. After finding the spot they wanted, my mom and dad let me out of the car and we walked towards the front of the screen to the playground. There was a small, white picket fence surrounding the area. Then I saw it. I couldn't believe my eyes. There it was, a train. Not as big as the real ones, but it was moving and carrying kids along a big oval track surrounding the playground. Not only could I ride it, but also it had the same style diesel engine as my toy train. It wasn't until 40 years later that I learned it was the most popular amusement park train and drive-in theater train of its time, the F7 style "G-16" made by MTC, the Miniature Train Company and later, Allan Herschel.

Well, from that moment on, I was in love! There wasn't a weekend that went by without me bugging my parents to go to the Skyview Drive-In just so I could ride the train over and over again. One time, we pulled up to a different one, the Cahokia Drive-In. Boy, was I disappointed. Until we got inside that is. It happened to be owned by the same family as the Skyview and they had the same kind of train there as well.

Over the years, I have been to many of the drive-ins around the St. Louis area, but I will always have my fondest childhood memories at the Skyview. As a 5 year old kid from a middle-class home, the thought of having one of those trains for my very own was strictly fantasy. There was as much of chance of that happening as there was of the engineer at the drive-in letting me drive the train. However, just like the train, what goes around comes around. Not only the train, but the Skyview Drive-In.

Coincidence Or Fate?

As I grew older, I never lost my love of trains. I just got "side tracked". For me, the 60's were bringing the Beatles, high school, and girls. What was leaving was true Americana, the drive-in theater. First, the trains were removed due to increased maintenance and liability costs. Then into the 70's, I watched sadly as one by one, the drive-ins themselves began to disappear. Although I had all but forgotten about those old miniature trains, I found out on October 15, 1998 that the excitement I felt 40 years earlier had never died. I have been an insurance adjuster like my dad for most of my working years and on that day, I and my love of trains had come full circle. I just happened to be working on a claim in Belleville, Illinois. I was on my way back to St. Louis, driving down a street that didn't look familiar at first, with all of the homes and businesses all around. It turns out the last time I was on that road was 40 years earlier when it was surrounded by farmland. All of a sudden, there it was! The same marquee with the rocket and not one, but two screens, the Skyview Drive-In. The sign on the marquee said "closed till spring" so it appeared to still be in business.

The butterflies in my stomach were the same as when I was 5 years old. The chain link gate was open. I just could-



n't help myself. I had to go inside and see if the train was still there. I drove up to the snack bar. I met the projectionist, Charles Kieskalt, who was there putting things

away for the winter. Unfortunately, the train was gone. Just as I was ready to leave, one of the owners, Steve Bloomer, drove up. I introduced myself as a long time fan of the Skyview. He kindly gave me a brief tour. I was saddened to learn that the train had been long gone since the mid 60's. It had caught fire and they decided it was too costly to keep. There were no records of where it went, or of the trains at their other drive-ins, which had closed years ago.

He happened to mention that the Skyview would be celebrating its 50th anniversary on July 8th, 1999. At that moment, my brain went into overdrive with a wild and crazy idea. I loved the old place. I wanted to be part of its once in a lifetime celebration. I wanted to give back some of the pleasures it gave me growing up. What if one of those old trains could be found to use for the celebration?

The Dream Becomes Reality

I had no idea how or where to begin finding one. I didn't know who made them. I didn't know anything about them. The only thing I did know is what they looked like and that I wasn't going to stop trying until I found one. I began my search on the Internet. Hours, days, months went by with very little to go on. Then, I found a great website, AAmusement Park Trains@ at www.trainweb.org/parktrains [this website is hosted by GSQ's own Park Trains editor, Matt Conrad]. There I saw pictures of the G-16's. Through more research and phone calls, I got in touch with Bob "Smitty" Smith who works on the G-16's owned by Bob Panella in northern California [the Panella Pacific was the cover article of GSQ #5]. Smitty introduced me to Greg & Susan Robinson, publishers of this magazine, GSQ. Through one of the

ads, I got in contact with Gary at Custom Locomotive in Chicago.

I discovered that the G-16's were out of my price range. I also decided that in order to help pay for a train, I wanted to find one that I could transport from place to place and rent out. The first trains made by MTC were the smaller and portable G-12's. They looked similar to the G-16's but were less detailed, less cumbersome, and most important, less costly. Gary notified me of one that had come in on a trade-in. It had been renovated with hydraulic drive and a bigger motor, original cars with matching serial #'s, 270 ft of track, and was ready to run.

I scrambled to raise the funds and with the biggest help coming from a very close and dear cousin Gary Uhlemeyer, who had faith in my ability to succeed, I flew up to Chicago with the down payment and bought myself a train!

Other Equipment Needed

I had to figure out a way to transport it and for one man to load and unload it in case there would be occasions that I wouldn't have any help available. I came up with a design and gave a drawing and dimensions to a local trailer company, Davis Trailers. I had them add on framing to a standard, single axle, trailer with a 12 ft long tilt bed. I had angle iron mounted in the center of the bed as rails for the locomotive with a hand winch mounted at the front. The previous owner of the train had installed steel bars across the front of each set of wheels on all of the trucks to help prevent major derailing. The one on the front truck of the locomotive works perfect for attaching the winch hook so I can load and unload it from the trailer.

There is a compartment on either side of the locomotive for each of the middle cars. Directly above the locomotive is a space for the observation car. The track sections are stored, in numbered sequence, equally on either side of the observation car. I plan on making some changes in the off season such as a motorized winch, roller pins for under the cars, and rubber padding on the sides. For now, I use the rolls of plastic mesh fencing for padding during transport.

For fencing, the orange plastic mesh that construction companies use works just fine. If the job is on grass or gravel, I use the green steel poles for supports. If it is on concrete or blacktop, I use framing made from 1/2" PVC. It takes a little longer to set up, but it looks nicer. My son Eric enjoys it

because it's like building with Tinker Toys. The cost to make 350 ft of it was about 1/10th the cost of the aluminum fencing used by carnival operators and it uses a lot less space for storage.

The excitement I felt driving up to Chicago to pick up the G-12 and then bringing it home was second only to the thrill I had watching my son being born. I would compare it to the very best Christmas I ever had as a child and multiplying that by infinity!

The Dream Comes Full Circle

The first job for my new part time company, Rails Of Fun, was for the biggest traveling model train exposition in the country, the Great American Train Show. With the help of my 10 year old son Eric, my brother Douglas, and my friend Larry Abernathy, the train and portable fence was set up and ready for riders in about 3 hours. Even though that job made money, it was the next job which I was going to do free of charge that I was most anxious and excited about. The expense of the truck rental, gas, mileage, and time was nothing compared to the thrill and satisfaction I would receive. During the week of July 5th - July 11th, my train and I were at the place where my dream had begun 40 years before, the Skyview Drive-in. For me, that was a thrill of a lifetime. Finally, I got to drive the train at the drive-in! Not only that, I got to take it home with me!

The smile on my face every trip was matched only by the smiles on the kids faces and their parents. In fact, some of the adults were more fascinated by it as they hadn't seen one since they were kids. One of the former employees of the drive-in, Jim Greathouse, came dressed in a complete conductor's uniform which added that much more realism and fun as he helped in the train operation. How ironic that I had my 50 year old train there to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the drive-in. I have since brought it back for the Labor Day weekend and the owners have asked me to bring it back next July 8th to make it an annual birthday event.

I am forever grateful to everyone who has helped me fulfill my childhood dream. I am having the most fun ever in my life and I wish that all who ride my train will have Rails Of Fun too!

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