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There's A New Club in Town

By JAMES GELUSO, Staff Writer

Railroad hobbyists rebuild in Alger

A little less than two years ago, something awful happened to the Bellingham Society of Model Engineers. The club lost its lease.

A massive model railroad layout that had been built during a 10-year period had to be disassembled. Tracks were torn up. Some of the layout could be moved, but for the most part, the plaster hills and painted scenery were lost.

"That was a sad day, a sad month," said Dave Henley, a club member who lives at Lake Samish. "It took us a month."

But today, the club is in a new home in Alger. And the move south, just into Skagit County, has had an upside.

"Once we moved out here, we've gotten a lot more members from Skagit County," Henley said. About 14 people have joined since the move, doubling the size of the club.

The club opened its doors Saturday for its monthly open house, allowing a dozen or so visitors - a typical turnout for a sunny day, Henley said - to see the progress the club has made while an equal number of members controlled trains and worked on construction. The layout is in the old Alger Grange building on Highway 99, which is owned by the Alger Community Church.

The club actually has two layouts - one at HO scale, or 1:87, the other at N scale, or 1:160. The larger trains of the HO scale were running along mostly completed hills and a hand-built trestle salvaged from the Bellingham layout. There's a downtown scene already finished, and a dock area with some boats that's still under construction. The N scale layout, featuring trains about half the size of the HO trains, runs along a set of walls. The scenery is less complete there, but will eventually feature two levels of scenes, including a logging railroad, a tourist camp on a section of "abandoned" track and an urban setting modeled after Seattle's King Street Station.

The double-decker approach to the layout required a lot of work, and that's where Skagit County came in handy. The move prompted Paul Petrezelka of Burlington to join the club.

Petrezelka built a pair of helixes, long coils of track that allow the trains to slowly work their way between levels. One of the helixes has two sets of track, for a total of about 160 feet of track. In modeling terms, that's about 10 scale miles of track, he said.



Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald

Barbara Richey of Bellingham looks at trains with her children Brenden, 6, and Fiona, 4, on Saturday at the Alger Grange building on Highway 99.

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Petrezelka had been building his own layout at his home, and he often traveled to Anacortes to meet with members of the HO-scale railroading club there, just for the camaraderie, he said.

The layout officially belongs to the club, but all the trains belong to its individual members - except a circus train owned by the club. Each member has a large collection of train cars - usually more than they'll admit to.

"How much rolling stock do you have?" Henley asked a group of five members. The only answer most gave was a laugh.

Visiting the display on Saturday was Bellingham 6-year-old Brenden Pelkie. He was less shy about how many cars he has - eight HO scale Union Pacific cars that he uses, and two more that often derail.

He tends to build small layouts that can be changed every week or so, said his mom, Barbara Richey. "It's nice for him to come and see permanent stuff," she said.

Most of the hobbyists said they had gotten involved as children. Many stepped away in their late teens, but came back to the hobby when they approached middle age. But there are a few teenage members, Henley said.

The club will hold two more open houses, on April 9 and May 14, before taking a summer break.

Information

Check it out on the Net: <http://www.bsme.org>

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