

Lancaster Farming Antiques Center

Nostalgia: The Engine That Drives Train Collectors

LOU ANN GOOD
Food And Family
Features Editor

MOUNT JOY (Lancaster Co.) — As a 6-year-old, Ray Laverty still remembers the thrill and intrigue he felt when he received his first train. It was a Lionel placed to run around the family Christmas tree.

That was in 1941. After Christmas, the train was packed away with the holiday ornaments.

By the time, Laverty was 8 years old, he had talked his parents into letting him keep the train on display year-round. He set up an extensive display on the pingpong table in the basement.

"I'm still down in the basement," Laverty said of his train display. By now, his extensive collection has grown to include hundreds of sets not only from this country but from around the world.

In his early years, Laverty fashioned buildings, towns, and boxcars from discarded wooden boxes that packaged Philadelphia cream cheese.

"I made the boxcars to the scale of the trains and hooked them to sets of wheels that could be purchased," Laverty remembers.

For several years, Laverty's



Ray Laverty holds a 1933 Lionel Standard gauge 390-E (electronic reverse). His basement walls are lined with shelves filled with his extensive train collection.

passion for railroading was strong. He said, "About the time I turned 14 or 15 and got inter-

ested in girls, trains took a back burner."

But after college, Laverty was stationed in Germany for two years and his interest in trains was rekindled.

"In Europe, trains are everywhere — real trains for transportation, and hobby trains."

After the service, Laverty even purchased stock in a tourist train company. He began attending train shows, intrigued with the buying and selling of trains.

Lionel, he said, produced top quality trains until the 1950s, but by then people became more interested in slot cars than in trains. To keep prices down, the quality was often reduced. During this time, several smaller companies were founded that started producing good quality. The competition resulted in Lionel again producing quality train sets.

Today, Laverty said American companies have their trains manufactured in the Orient because they are able to manufacture die-cast trains at much cheaper prices. Reproductions and newer models are continually introduced to the market. One can purchase a new, nice complete set for \$200-\$300.

Old sets vary in prices. It is often more affordable to buy individual pieces to reconstruct your own set, Laverty said.

According to him, there are two groups of collectors: those who run the trains and enjoy them, and those who collect for investment.

Laverty prefers to run trains, but he does have many sets kept in boxes or on display.

Outward appearance is everything when considering what to purchase. If the train is scratched, it's worth less than one that has been used but is in good condition. If packed in the original boxes, prices are higher.

Some metals also disintegrate with age.

Wiring that is brittle with age can be replaced. Guidebooks show how to repair them.

But Laverty said that many trains that have sat for years and will not run can easily be fixed by spraying with WD40, let sit to dry, and refurbished with oil and grease.

The production of trains was most prolific from 1945-1958. O-gauge was most popular to place beneath the Christmas trees. Today, there are collectors for every gauge. Some collect only brass sets, steam, diesels, or engines.

Popular in the 1880s were pull toy trains. The late 1930s was noted for windup trains sold at dime stores but today command \$150 for an average set.

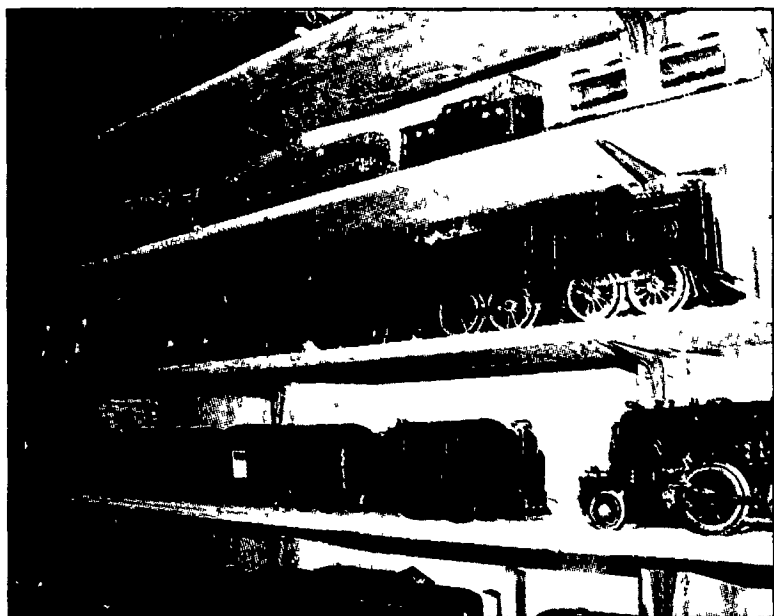
Laverty is a member of the Strasburg Train Collectors Association, which has an extensive library and information on trains of all sizes and types. In other countries, such as the United Kingdom, train collecting is even more popular than in the U.S. Laverty surmises this is probably because most countries rely on trains to provide public transportation.

Laverty keeps in close touch with collectors in other parts of the world. They help find models and train-related collectibles for each other.

For those interested in train collecting, Laverty advises reading about trains and going to shows. He also visits museums worldwide to expand his "train" knowledge.



Hafner windup train in the box is valued at \$150.



This standard gauge 1930 New York Central Lionel commands prices up to \$2,500.



Laverty examines a foreign-made train. Many are good quality and quite old. Many of the original train manufacturing companies are no longer in business.