

North Shore train enthusiasts have model club in Wakefield



By Wicked Local Photo by Beth I Gandelman

The North Shore Model Railroad Club features nearly nine miles of intricate, hand-painted buildings and scenery and meticulously built models of the 1950s Chesapeake Railroad System.

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By Beth I Gandelman / wakefield@cnc.com
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Wakefield -

Hidden in the expansive basement of Brothers Restaurant on Main Street is a treasure that has had perhaps more visitors from around the country than from around Wakefield — The North Shore

Model Railroad Club, featuring a magnificent display of meticulously built models of the 1950s Chesapeake Railroad System.

Containing about 1,500 to-scale model freight cars, more than 100 passenger cars, hundreds of '50s automobiles and trucks, buildings and scenery, this is definitely not child's play.

In the 45- by 90-foot basement there are nearly nine miles of intricate, hand-painted buildings and scenery that appears so real when photographed it looks like the outdoors. Yet, with all the miles of wiring, 134 siding switches, hand-place ties, tracks and lighting, it has taken club volunteers nearly 30 years to build, and it is still a work-in-progress. One of the most impressive buildings is a large white hotel, a replica of the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia, formerly owned by the Chesapeake railroad, which ran between Virginia and West Virginia.

All of the trains on the line are functional, and it takes about 20 minutes for any train to complete the run. Of the nine clubs in Massachusetts, Wakefield's North Shore Club is the largest and one of the largest in New England.

Featured on the June 2009 cover of *Scale Rails*, the official publication of the National Model Railroad Association (NMRA), club member Malcolm Laughlin of Belmont wrote an eight-page feature on the club that reads like an article for an engineering journal. From the National Convention of the NMRA held in Hartford, Conn. this past week, three busloads of members came to visit the impressive layout designed by the North Shore Model Railroad Club and some were thrilled to have the opportunity to operate the system. They ran seven trains with about 15 to 20 cars per train for their guests. The North Shore Club served as the National Convention's Layout Tour Host. They've also had tour groups from England, Scotland and Australia.

"Our club features mostly freight trains, and clubs from Europe, Canada and Australia and around the world are fascinated with the U.S. railroad system and model their clubs after our systems," said Wayne Slayton of Woburn, who grew up in Wakefield and serves as one of the club's tour guides. Slayton now has a section of the model named for him as one of the original members. He served as an equipment operator and brakeman for a number of railroads, including Boston & Maine, Amtrak, MBTA and others, following in his father's footsteps.

Many of the club's 64 members are former railroad workers and managers and train lovers from childhood. They live in various towns throughout the state. But, they all have three things in common: they have a passion for trains; they show great attention to detail; and they are all men, ranging in age from 23 to nearly 80.

The club began in 1977 with eight members meeting in homes and starting with a train layout donated by someone who was moving across the country. They moved to the Brothers Restaurant basement in 1979 and began designing the layout, with actual construction beginning in 1980. Some of the towns in the model are named after actual towns on the railroad line and some are named after longtime members.

Each member goes through a probationary period of about three months and then is given a key to the building. Everyone must sign up for a committee and perform tasks. Committees are representative of a real railroad company: operations, scheduling, and maintenance; and there are committees for construction and painting. Five of the members work on sophisticated electrical wiring. A chief dispatcher controls the operations and assigns crews to trains. It takes a minimum of four men to operate the system for demonstrations and many more for the complete operation.

John Burroughs of Waltham, past president and club official, said members pay only \$20 per month in dues. The only other money raised is through donations and their large annual Open House and Dealer Train Show, to be held on Oct. 17 at the American Civic Center from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Cost is \$3 per person, including entrance to the club's model railroad.

The club also buys and sells models and hosts a "white elephant" table. The club offers monthly tours for the public and special tours for scouts and schools at no charge.

Burroughs, who owns a company that manufactures train car boxes, explains that Malcolm Laughlin's job as the club's operations manager is to make up a "waybill," or identifier ticket, for each freight car and assign schedules. Each car is assigned a unique number. (Laughlin is the former manager of car distribution systems for the New York Central Railroad, now known as SCX.) There are also schedule cards showing the sequence of events for each train.

The men meet on Thursday evenings as a group to work on operations and layouts and monthly they hold a business meeting, which includes committee reports.

"We are a casual club and we've become good friends. Some of us even travel together around the country on trains," said Burroughs. "We have the responsibility of re-enacting railroad operations as they were 50 years ago. We are loosely based on the Chesapeake system, with steel mills and coals trains."

Jeff Brown of Ashland has been in the club for 16 years and he said, "there is always something new here. It takes a lot of time and patience, but we all have a passion for trains."

The members never cease to admire the work that has already been accomplished, and they are excited to be working on additions and modifications to the layout.

The detail in the village scenes are extraordinary and exact in replicating the 50s with authentic billboards, a cat in the rubbish, a woman watering plants in a top-floor window box, a wedding at the church, women at a gift shop, parking meters and drunks on the street. Three hours in this room is not enough time to view every detail. For instance, some of the trucks dump coal into the trains, and one train stops and drops express mail into another train.

With about 1.5 million trains in the 1950s in the U.S., club officials estimate the North Shore Railroad Club has about one-tenth of one percent of all the trains in the U.S. at the time.

The club has free parking in the lot off of Princess Street. It is open to visitors the first Saturday of each month (or the second Saturday when the month starts on a Friday or Saturday) from 1-5 p.m., at no charge. Clubs and groups may schedule special tours by calling 781-245-4742. There is no charge for group tours and a fare box is available by the door for donations.

Visit their web site at www.nsmrc.org.

Tables are available for a fee at their October Open House and Train Show by sending an e-mail to show@nsmrc.org.

If you go:

What: North Shore Model Railroad Club

Where: Brothers Restaurant, basement, 404 Main St. rear

When: First Saturday of month (or second, if the month starts on a Friday or Saturday)

Times: 1 to 5 p.m.

Cost: free.

More info: see www.nsmrc.org.

And also:

What: Open House and Dealer Train Show

Where: American Civic Center, 467 Main St.

When: Oct. 17

Time: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Cost is \$3 per person

To exhibit: send e-mail inquiry to show@nsmrc.org.

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