



Friday, August 1, 2003 12:00AM EDT

## Choo-choo nation

### Model railroad enthusiasts assemble in Raleigh for a train show

By MATT EHLERS, Staff Writer

A miniature nation is growing in Bob Harper's basement, filled with tiny people. They all drive little cars, eat at little restaurants and shop at little stores, built between and among the emerging country's centerpiece -- model trains.

Harper, 64, has been involved with model trains for 40 years. As a member of the Great Appalachian Model Railroad Club and as a hospitable guy with a good-sized finished basement, he's also unofficial mayor and host of the club's mammoth miniature country.

For Harper, the trains are a reminder of simpler days. "I think of it as a time of growing up," he said, remembering how he rode a train to a nearby town each Saturday as a child in Virginia. While the adults shopped, he went to the movies.

Today, model train enthusiasts help to keep that traveling railroad vibe alive. This weekend, thousands of train cars will be on display, along with working train layouts, equipment vendors and how-to clinics, as part of The Great American Train Show at the Raleigh Convention and Conference Center.

The North Carolina LEGO Train Club also will have a display at the show. Those bringing two canned food items for the Food Bank of North Carolina will receive an entry in a drawing to win a LEGO train set.

The model train layouts can be extraordinary. When the Appalachian club assembles its train layout this weekend, it will stretch at least 88 feet. The display is divided into modules built on 42-inch high tables, to ease assembly, and includes a section with a working waterfall. Only a portion is in Harper's basement.

In a day and age when Game Boys rule attention spans, model trains might seem a step out of the times. But the club has members ranging in age from high schoolers to retirees.

WHAT: Great American Train Show.

WHEN: Saturday and Sunday, 11 a. m. to 5 p.m.

WHERE: Raleigh Convention and Conference Center, 500 Fayetteville Street Mall.

COST: \$7, kids under 12 are free.

INFO: [www.greatamericantrainshow.com](http://www.greatamericantrainshow.com)



Scott McLellan of Raleigh glues ground cover on a train layout.

Staff Photo by John Rottet



Bob Fuller works on the Great Appalachian Model Railroad Club's layout in Bob Harper's home in Raleigh.

Staff Photo by John Rottet

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#### Crushed cars cause multiple vehicle wreck on I-95

When a tractor trailer loaded too high with crushed cars hit an overpass on Interstate 95 early this morning, two cars fell off the truck and were hit by four vehicles traveling on the roadway.

#### Reports: Russian hospital blast kills 20

A vehicle exploded outside a Russian military hospital near Chechnya on Friday, officials said.

#### Alcohol citations rise

License revocation, suspension rare when stores sell to underage drinkers.

#### Home-school growth slows

North Carolina had the smallest-ever percentage increase in the number of new home schools this past school year, the state reported today.

#### UNC's PAC a top player

A political action committee created last year by wealthy UNC-Chapel Hill alumni, donated \$182,000 to 91 candidates and political groups in 2002.

#### Pillowtex leaves workers stranded

The beleaguered company's workers become statistics in the largest single job loss in state history.

#### Edwards late with property taxes 9 times

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**Ohio State's Clarett held out**

Buckeyes football star won't practice while the NCAA investigates his eligibility status, school says.

**Manufacturing's challenge**

The sector needs to compete on basis of technology, not price, state officials say.

**GDP acceleration an encouraging sign**

New claims for jobless insurance drop to their lowest level in five months.

Model trains "are becoming more prevalent as families look for more wholesome activities," said Kurt Jablonski, a spokesman for the Great American Train Show. Trains are something that families can build together. "With video games, the kids just don't want to be bothered."

This weekend, Cliff Ward of Cary will present a layout he worked on with his 13-year-old son, Jeff. The pair built their model railroad using an interior door as the base. They even have the perfect place to display it at home, the bottom bunk bed in Jeff's room.

A lifelong model railroader, Ward said he wanted a way to introduce his son to the hobby. Son Cooper, 5, has learned to operate the train.

"To me, it's not so much about the trains, but it's about being together," Ward said, noting that the father-son conversations around the track aren't always about locomotives.

There's a camaraderie that builds around constructing model railroads, and the guys in Harper's basement in Wake County, just outside the Cary town limits, know all about it. In preparing for the show in Raleigh and one last week in Charlotte, they've been working double time, building scenery, painting roads and sharing stories. In short, just having fun.

"You can take something you saw as a kid and rebuild it, or you can make up something," said Greg Hager of Raleigh. "It's a great way to forget stress."

Staff writer Matt Ehlers can be reached at 829-4889 or [mehlers@newsobserver.com](mailto:mehlers@newsobserver.com).

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