

Working on the railroad

by MARIENNE THOMAS OGLE

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Photos by Marienne Thomas Ogle.

Bob Beaty has spent 15 years building and improving the model railroad in his Riverchase home.

Bob Beaty says his fascination with model railroading began at age 3, when his dad “bought me my first Lionel that really was for him.” Rather than waning, the 72-year-old Riverchase resident’s enthusiasm for trains has only flourished.

Today he “splits as much time as possible” between the train set housed in his garage and the one built and maintained by the Wrecking Crew, a Birmingham model train club. Twice retired — after 26 years in the Navy and 15 years with BellSouth — Beaty said as a child, he spent much of the 1950s building train layouts in his family’s Georgia home.

“I got away from it in college and while serving as a pilot in the Navy, of course,” he said. “But I got married in 1967, and in 1968, [my wife] Carol gave me a train and a book about a Maine railroad as a joke. That got me revitalized.”

While in the service, Beaty said he built a small layout he had the Navy “cart around” each time he was reassigned.

“I built the cars, engines, scenery and structures, but my space was limited until we moved to Hoover in 1987,” he said. “Then I made sure when we purchased a home, it had enough bedrooms for the family and a big basement space for me.”



Beaty fell in with fellow model train enthusiasts in 1988 when the group was planning a National Model Railroad Association Convention at the BJCC. The event included bus tours to view different area modelers’ layouts, including Beaty’s. They’ve been a club ever since.

“One of the guys was anal-retentive and the woodwork on his layout looked like fine furniture,” he said. “So one night a bunch of us showed up at his house with chainsaws and an ax, and when his wife answered the door, she said, ‘Honey, the wrecking crew is here.’ And that became our name.”

The Wrecking Crew Model Railroad Club, which evolved into a nonprofit education corporation, has about 30 members from throughout the Birmingham area and beyond, said Jason Parham, club president.

“We’re a diverse group, ranging in age from 30s to 80s, and include a chef, photographer, architect and retired Navy captain,” he said. “We happen to be all men at this time but would certainly welcome women members.”

Those applying to join the club must be members of the National Model Railroad Association and, among other things, submit a letter of intent about what they offer the group and want to learn and accomplish.

“The club exists to promote the hobby of model railroading and help members advance their skills and enjoy their hobby to the fullest extent,” Parham said. “We encourage our members to take part in the NMRA’s Achievement Program, which offers 11 certificates in areas such as scenery, electrical work, and building locomotives and other equipment from scratch. Those who get seven of the 11 achieve the status of Master Model Railroader.”

Parham, who has served on the board of the NMRA, southeastern region, said Beaty has earned all 11 of the NMRA’s certificates.

“He’s one of the finest modelers I’ve ever met,” he said.

The Wrecking Crew and its train, the LG&W (Locust Grove & Western Railroad), have called the basement of the McWane Science Center home since 2009. There, club members meet every Monday night, doing repairs, upgrades and renovations to the ever-evolving HO scale layout.

In November, the group dismantles the 16-piece modular display — each piece measuring 5 feet by 30 inches — and reassembles it on the center’s third floor as the 20- by 40-foot focal point of a model railroad exhibit that runs until mid-January as part of the McWane Center’s Winter Wonderland.

Though not quite the size of the club’s LG&W, Beaty’s personal model, the PT&S (Port Townsend and Southern) railroad display measures 9 feet by 12 feet and is shaped like an E. Laying the track, running the wiring and creating the scenery, he fashioned his layout after the 1940s narrow gauge, or trains that ran in “inconvenient” locations in the country, such as the logging areas in Alabama. While a fictional railroad, it operates in the “setting” of the Puget Sound of Washington.

Beaty started the layout in 2000, then began its ongoing expansion in 2012.

“They’re never finished, because people who do this always want an outlet for our creative energies,” Beaty said. “My wife paints, and I have male friends that sew and knit. Making something from scratch is so rewarding, and it’s one of the few things in life you have complete control over.”

Beaty has four sons and they, along with their mother, Carol, have all worked on the train in some capacity over the years. But, in spite of some heart issues, Beaty said he intends to remain in complete control of the PT&S.

“It’s part of the family, and I intend to stay in good health, physically and mentally, with my model train,” he said. “Like they say, if you’re not having fun, you’re not doing something right.”