

The Mainline in Miniature

Portage man replicates area path of trains during the 1950s

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Article Photos



(Mirror photo illustration by J.D. Cavrich and Tom Worthington II)

Portage area resident Charles Edwards stands by the train layout he helped to create at the Portage Station Museum.

Fact Box

MINIATURE DISPLAY

WHAT: 225 feet of track that runs through the heart of the Mainline from South Fork to Altoona and Hollidaysburg.

WHERE: Portage Station Museum, 401 Lee St.

COST TO BUILD: About \$1,600 for materials and construction, partially covered by a \$1,000 gift from the late Robert “Bing” James, a Portage-area resident who took an interest in the museum.

MUSEUM HOURS: Noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday. To see the trains running and arrange for group tours, call 736-9223.

PORTAGE — As a boy living on South Fork’s hills, Charles Edwards often gazed down from his bedroom window at the miles of trains passing before him.

While he never worked on the real railroad — a boyhood fantasy — images of the tiny, model-like trains he saw on the other side of the mountain stuck with him.

Today, the Portage man, whom young visitors call “the train man,” is a conductor just the same — of a meticulous mini-Mainline railroad he built.

On display at the Portage Station Museum, his 173-square-foot track is a 1950s-era replica of the path trains traveled from South Fork to Altoona and beyond, complete with the region’s picturesque mountains, Gallitzin’s tunnels and the Horseshoe Curve.

Edwards, 66, spent more than a year on the track with two colleagues, trying to make the display as accurate as possible.

The project, he hopes, will give today’s young people and future generations a better understanding of the path the mighty trains once traveled — and for the most part still do — and a little about the role the industry played in building the region.

“When I was young, I remember thinking, ‘I wonder what’s around that next curve?’ and ‘I wonder where that train is coming from?’” he said. “These tracks are such a big part of our area’s history, and hopefully, people will see that when they come here.”

The train ride begins in South Fork, fittingly for Edwards. There, an HO, or smaller model scale, K4 locomotive heads toward Wilmore, passing the town’s old mine shaft before heading through the Lee Street Tunnel in Portage.

It heads past the Sonman Tipple and the mines behind it, through Lilly and Cresson and then the famous Gallitzin Tunnels, where it heads down the track and around the Horseshoe Curve.

Then it makes its way into a miniature Altoona — complete with the Alto Tower, a motel and other shops — where the track splits, and a different path heads toward Hollidaysburg.

Edwards said it took a year to build, and he’s still tweaking it.

Pointing toward a bony pile in one corner of the track, Edwards said he plans to have railroad cars come out of the tipple beside it loaded with coal.

Artist Frank Serbian handled the scenery and painted backgrounds that give the illusion that

other tracks, towns and hills are off in the horizon.

“We settled on making it a summer scene, and we took pictures of the terrain in the area so we’d be able to make it as realistic as possible,” said Serbian, a Portage oil painter. “But a lot of it was Charles. He dreamt this stuff up. He always had a new idea.”

Another builder, Al Moore, took care of the buildings that dot the hills and valleys —assembling replicas of train stations, shops and other landmarks.

The result is 225 feet of track that snakes around hills, climbs mountains and disappears into tunnels.

“I didn’t want people looking down on this to see a flat track going around in a little circle. If I was going to model the area, I wanted mountains,” Edwards said. “If you want to see the real trains around here, you have to move — drive from place to place. And if you want to see everything that’s going on [in this model], you have to walk around past the mountains, too.”

A model train builder for decades, Edwards approached the Station Museum operators about his idea for the track more than a year ago.

He was hoping for a 4-by-8-foot track at least — “and they told me to run with it.”

So he did.

The display takes up most of the station museum’s second floor — about five times as large as Edwards’ original vision.

There, Edwards says, visitors can watch his model or take a look out the museum window and watch the real trains rumble by.

In his black and white conductor’s cap, he spends part of his week guiding tours of the display.

“As far as the kids are concerned, it would be nice if they learn a little bit about the history of it — maybe they’ll take an interest and get some questions answered,” he said.

Museum staff said they are just beginning to publicize Edwards’ miniature Mainline, but it’s already become quite an attraction.

Train buffs young and old travel miles to see the real thing every day, so museum officials are hopeful they’ll stop by and see a scaled-down model as well.

“We’ve gotten a lot of compliments,” said Irene Huschak, a museum worker and member of the Portage Area Historical Society. “And the kids are excited. I’ve seen parents dragging them out of the museum, screaming that they don’t want to leave.”

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