



JILL TOYOSHIBA | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Bill Foster of Prairie Village, 82, got his first model train when he was just a year old. As an adult, he has spent thousands of dollars and countless hours assembling a large set in his backyard.

NEIGHBORS | The Foster and Sisco Railway has a short route but brings lots of joy

HOBBY KEEPS HOLD FOR 8 DECADES

Bill Foster handcrafts much of his outdoor model railroad.

By ALEXIA LANG
Special to The Star

Childhood dreams sometimes become lifelong passions — at least that was the case for one Prairie Vil-

lage man who says he has a bit of “railroad fever.”

Some boys want to be baseball players and grow up to be lovers of the game. Bill Foster wanted to be a railroader as a child and instead he grew up to be a Presbyterian minister who now runs a railroad in his backyard — a garden-scale (G-

scale), model railway that is.

“Every dream of a boy is to be an engineer,” 82-year-old Foster said. “I got my first set of trains when I was one year old and I still have it. So I have been doing this all my life.”

It wasn’t until about 15 years ago, when Foster retired and moved in with his daughter

near 95th Street and Mission Road, that he thought of moving his train sets outside.

“He had filled up my dining room with a Dickens Village and his trains,” said daughter Vickie Sisco. “One day he announced he couldn’t build onto

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it anymore inside so he offered to give me back the dining room.”

Foster then asked permission to take over the back yard and begin what he calls a never-ending job.

Foster excavated earth and carefully laid the tracks along the fence line of the yard watching closely to maintain the three percent gradient he wanted. Over the years, he has built intricate towns and villages that his trains — the Foster and Sisco Railway — wind through.

He has more than 20 buildings scattered about the yard.

Some of the favorite structures include the hobo village, the lumber mill, the farmyard and the school building. Foster purchases all of his moving stock pre-built, but tries his deft hand at building some of the structures found in his garden. While some come in kits, others are built from scratch, as are the fences.

Foster said one problem with constructing the buildings from scratch is that squirrels seem to like the glue and tend to nibble on the wood.

He said a lot of maintenance goes into keeping everything nice. All of the trains are put away and some of the buildings are stored indoors for the winter, giving Foster the chance to get things back into shape.

“Weather is very hard on



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Bill Foster handcrafts some of the landscaping and buildings in his elaborate backyard model railroad.

them,” he said. “I could paint all of the buildings one winter, put it out all summer and they would need it again the next winter.”

“And I know how to be a real railroader,” Foster said, offering pictures of his model towns flooded after storms. “I even have floods and other natural disasters to deal with.”

He has his own little workshop in the basement where he plans his additions and assembles and repairs the various pieces of his railway.

“It’s the planning and building that is my favorite part,” Foster said. “And being able to share it with the kids.”

Foster said being a model rail-

roader isn’t an inexpensive hobby.

He said he pays around \$700 per locomotive and then installs a \$700 rechargeable, custom-made battery because he does not have an electric system. The various train cars run anywhere from \$40 to \$80. And the assembly-required buildings cost from \$150 to \$200 apiece.

He has four locomotives, approximately two dozen cars and three cabooses.

“You do the math,” he said. “It’s not cheap but I do it because I love it.”

The art of building model railroads has become something of a family hobby for the Fosters.

“If you are around, you are

most likely going to be out helping dad with the trains,” Sisco said.

Bill and his son Jamie also have a model railway at Jamie’s house in California. They call it the PB&J Railway — Pacific Bill and Jamie Railway.

Bill goes out to California two months every year to help Jamie work on the garden. It features a 22-foot bridge, which is the scale equivalent of 528 feet.

Bill said he does not plan on giving up on railroading any time soon.

He told the story of going for an entrance interview for seminary at Princeton University in 1951 with the dean at that time.

“He asked me what my hobbies were and I told him I really liked trains,” Foster said. “He told me to stick with it because all people in the ministry need a hobby in which you can see the end result because when dealing with people you never know how you will effect them. And I have stuck with it.”

While kids are awfully fond of the F&S Railway, adults tend to be amazed by it as well, Foster said.

Residents of Prairie Village know to watch for a railroad sign in the front yard of Foster’s home each summer. It’s an open invitation for anyone passing to head to the backyard and check out the work being completed.

“But be careful,” Foster offered. “I just might put you to work.”