

Cottingham has world's greatest hobby

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Cottingham says model railroading can be enjoyed by all ages.

People in shorts wait in line to order popcorn, soda and other treats at the Starlight Express snack bar.

A few lounge on picnic tables to watch the evening feature "Hoosiers."

Nearly every parking stall is filled at the Starlite Drive-In with cars dating back to the 1940s through the 1970s.

Despite the miniature cars, people and setting, the place feels real, especially when the actual basketball movie is projected onto a small screen and the projection booth flickers.

Welcome to Jeff Cottingham's model train layout.

Just past the entrance to the drive-in, a passenger train weaves its way around the perimeter.

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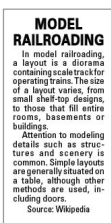
"I want it to give the feel of reality," Cottingham said about the layout that includes more than the drive-in.

Underneath a railroad bridge he built, hobos hover around a crackling campfire.

In another diorama, light flickers under a railroad car as a worker welds.

Cottingham, the minister of the Trinity Lutheran Church, started to build the layout when he belonged to a model railroad club in Grantsburg, WI.

Cottingham's part of the club's traveling 14 x 50-foot oval exhibit was the Starlite Drive-In.



He then brought his whole model layout to Gothenburg when he, his wife and daughter moved here 1 years ago.

Much of the 12 x 24-foot layout is plaster cloth over foam that he stains to fit the desired setting.

Synthetic grass, bushes, rock and more is added and eventually buildings, bridges, figurines and more.

In a city setting, Cottingham included a replica of the old Burlington depot in Omaha that he named Union Station.

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Nearby sits a Lutheran cathedral, complete with spires, and a memorial to 9-11 that he created.

A water tower that bears the name Essex sits next to a small town that includes an old railroad hotel.

“Essex was the name of a tiny town in Montana where my wife and I honeymooned,” Cottingham said.

He’s worked on the model layout for 14 years as a hobby, a pastime Cottingham learned from his father who was a railroad enthusiast and amateur railroad photographer.

“I’d go along with him to take pictures,” he said. “And I got a small model layout as a kid.”

Cottingham said he hopes to pass the hobby along to the couple’s daughter, first-grader Whitney, if she’s interested.

“Model railroading is something parents and kids can enjoy together,” he said. “It’s a good way to interact and it’s not generational.”

As a kindergartner at Dudley Elementary, Whitney told her teacher about her dad’s model train layout and the entire grade took a field trip to the Cottingham basement to see it.

The trip continued with this year’s kindergartners.

Cottingham has stuck with his hobby because it’s a release for him.

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And it continues to grow.

He hopes to add a cemetery for all the railroads in the country that have gone out of business.

On tiny tombstones, Cottingham plans to place tiny logos of each railroad.

Those railroads may be gone but not forgotten by Cottingham and other model railroading buffs.

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