

Model trains take visitors to a past era

BY MARINA SARRIS, SPECIAL TO THE SUN
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Time stops at the door of Sykesville shop that serves railroad hobbyists

Whether it's the creaky wooden floorboards, the big brass cash register on the counter or the faint smell of oil, walking into Purkey's Toy Trains in Sykesville is like taking a step back in time. There are no scanners, no neon signs, no big-box store lighting. If you're lucky, you might hear the clankety-clank and horn of the freight train that ambles by 100 yards behind the shop.

Owner Wiley Purkey has worked hard to create a place where time seems to have stopped decades ago. He opened his store in 2000 after painstakingly restoring part of the building to its original 1878 exterior.

He added touches such as oak cabinets and retro lighting inside the store on historic Main Street. There he sells electric trains and just about anything else you might need for a display: tracks, porcelain buildings, tiny people, cars, even a fluid to make your train smell like coal.

Plastered across the front door is a bumper sticker proclaiming, "Sykesville is the model railroading capital of the known universe."

There's no mistaking the interest in railroading - both real and toy - in Sykesville.

The Baltimore and Ohio Old Main Line arrived in this rural outpost in the 1830s, part of the first commercial railroad in the United States. Passenger service there ended in 1949, though CSX freight trains still pass through.

"A major part of the town's history is the railroad," said Kari Greenwalt, director of the Gate House Museum in Sykesville.

The town of about 4,500 is home to Old Main Line Park, the Little Sykes Railway children's ride, and the Sykesville and Patapsco Railway model train group.

"Railroad junkies equate Sykesville with railroading," said Town Manager Matthew Candland. "Mr. Purkey has tapped into that interest."

Purkey believes that trains provide a welcome escape from the pressures of modern life. His customers range from those who put a simple circle of track around the Christmas tree to devotees who build permanent displays that recreate a favorite era.

"It's like a happy island in a crazy world," he said.

Purkey's island is an elaborate, multilevel train display that takes up more than a quarter of one room.

His trolley, steam and diesel trains chug along a series of loops and twists, through tunnels and a covered bridge, on elevated tracks, and around a toy village.

The display is powered by a transformer slightly bigger than a toaster, with digital display. Like many such displays, Purkey's looks vintage.

There are no Hummers, big-screen TV stores, or other hallmarks of 2007 in his model village. Along his tracks are a 1903 Ford, a log cabin, an outhouse and a whimsical flying saucer.

Train displays often evoke a past era, but many new model trains have capabilities that didn't exist 50 years ago. They have computer chips, digital remote controls, sound systems with digital recordings and fan-driven smoke systems. The steam B&O passenger train in Purkey's display has puffing smoke, squealing brake sounds and talking engineers.

Purkey's shop sells O- and standard-gauge trains, plus the large G (garden) trains typically used for outdoor displays in warm weather. He doesn't stock the smallest trains, the HO or Half-O gauge.

The store also repairs trains, both antique and modern.

Chris Young, a computer consultant from Ellicott City, has picked up items for his family's train display at Purkey's.

"It's not like a regular storefront in a strip mall. It's downtown, it's historic and you'll see a train come by sometimes," he said. "Sometimes you just go out there to talk."

The success of the family movie *The Polar Express* and the *Thomas the Tank Engine* series for preschoolers have fueled interest in trains among the younger set, Purkey said.

He believes these shows - and the worlds they've created - offer the appeal of a simpler time. There are "no guns, no hospital drama, no crime - just good values," he said.

The *Thomas* series, which began as a children's book in the 1940s, now includes wooden push trains, a television series and videos. The talking engine *Thomas* is helpful and friendly, his train world simple and predictable. Purkey stocks a fair amount of *Thomas* merchandise in one room.

Children come into his shop with the "same moon-eyed wonder I had at 5 years old," he said.

Purkey, 53, remembers that feeling. When he was a boy, his mother brought him home a box of secondhand trains she bought for a dollar. He would push the trains along, but he eventually put them away, as children do.

Purkey ran the Craftsman Art Co. for years in one of the two attached buildings his train shop now

occupies. He then bought and restored the second building and added interior archways connecting the two. He decided to switch from selling art to trains.

"I went back and thought about what made me happy at 5 years old, and here I am," he said.

His store is deliberately old-fashioned, with stained-glass windows and handwritten receipts.

"I put back as much of the historical fabric as I could," he said.

But he's not anti-technology. Behind the curtain, he says, an employee enters data into a computer. Although most of his customers live within a 100-mile radius, he said, he operates a Web site, sells used merchandise online on eBay and ships trains around the world.

Not surprisingly, Purkey said, business is best during the Christmas season. "I do half my business in the fourth quarter," he said.

Although model trains have more competition for people's time than they did a generation ago, Purkey does not see them falling out of fashion.

"There are people who say this is a dying hobby, but I've seen nothing but growth since I opened the doors," he said.