

# RAILROAD YARDS

Today's miniature locomotives travel routes that go beyond laps around the Christmas tree



The Sleepers' backyard railroad, which runs next to the 18th hole of the Dorado Golf Course, hauls a cargo of golf balls.

**S**moke puffs out of the German Harzquerbahn locomotive as it lumbers across the track, hauling precious cargo — drinks destined for the patio.

The Beverage Express chugging through Lew and Jan Sleeper's Dorado Country Club home is usually a big hit with guests.

"When we have parties, all the drinks must be served by train and all dirty glasses returned by train," Lew said.

"Don't ask me how many glasses he's broken," said Jan, who insisted that her husband add a railing to prevent such mishaps.

The Sleepers have three trains running through their home. A fourth chugs along the perimeter of their back yard past neatly trimmed rosebushes and the Dorado Golf Course's 18th hole.

Trains that cut through gardens and circle pools account for a popular trend in model railroading — the garden railway. And Tucson boasts many train enthusiasts like the Sleepers with layouts that put the little locomotive zipping around the Christmas tree to shame.

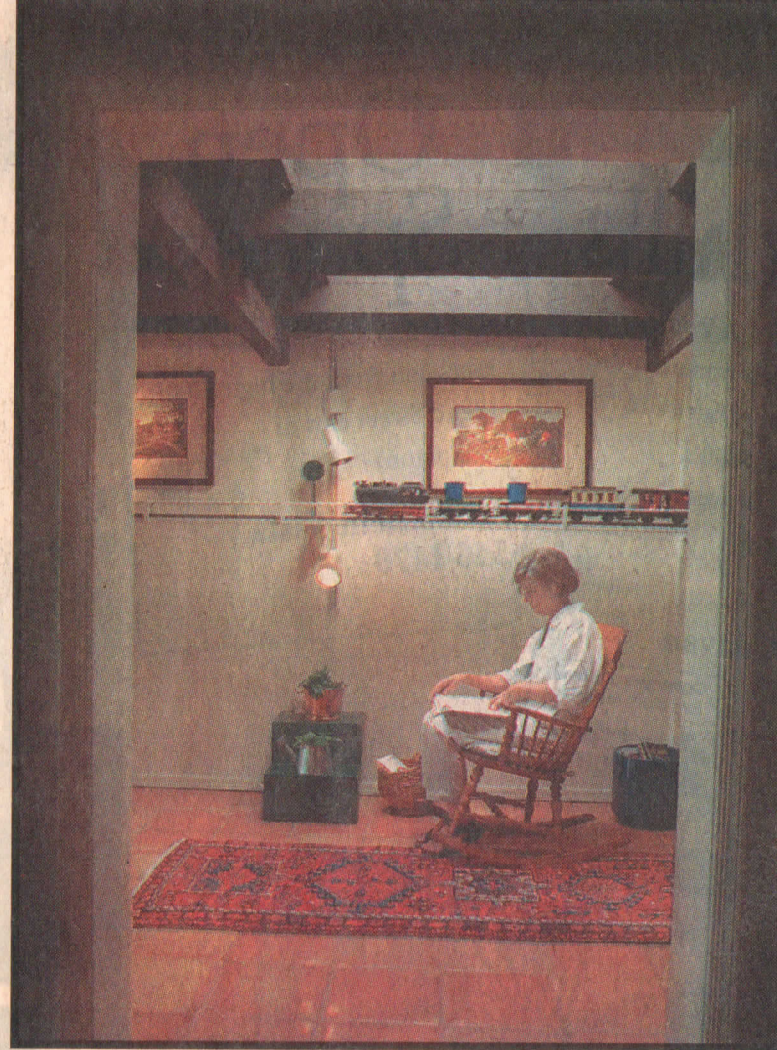
The child's hobby is all grown up.

"You build just like it's a real railroad," said Gary Martin, a retiree and vice president of the

Tucson Garden Railway Society, a non-profit organization that boasts about 50 families.

Martin — who constructed an elaborate railway of about 450 feet of track and is working on another — had to take into account drainage of his desert yard and compact the earth. He also laid down a fine, gravel-clay mixture under the track to keep it level and prevent it from shifting.

The result of his careful engineering is an impressive railroad winding through desert shrubbery and a small waterfall across the yard of his Catalina Foothills home.



**Jan Sleeper enjoys a quiet moment, undisturbed by the train carrying some refreshments from the house out to the patio.**

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Photos by A.E. Aralza, The Arizona Daily Star

**Ken Karrels and his wife, Mary, left, operate a bed & breakfast and encourage their guests to bring their trains with them when they stay**

# Railroad

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Martin shares gardening duties with his wife, Peggy.

About every 5 feet, Martin has created different scenes from an old Western town with a saloon and mercantile to an Indian village and even a prehistoric scene with a dinosaur, a pair of human feet dangling from its mouth.

Martin, who started building model trains when he was 7, estimates he spends about an hour a day maintaining his garden railway.

"I like the outdoors," he said. "I don't want to be cooped up in a garage."

Of course, an outside train track means the engines and scenery are not only exposed to the elements but also wildlife, which poses an occasional threat. Martin plants only greenery that rabbits don't find appetizing.

Once, one of his trains emerged from a tunnel with a tarantula sprawled across the engine. Martin let it off at the next stop.

But even not-so-wild wildlife can wreak havoc on model train sets.

Ken and Mary Karrels' rambunctious Weimaraner, Mystic, occasionally bounds through the miniature towns at their northeast-side Double K Ranch. During her puppy chewing phase, she maimed one plastic person and chomped on a horse.

"Having young, active dogs and a garden railway sometimes don't mix," laughed Mary, an artist and dog trainer.

Though family legend has it that one of Ken's first words was "choo-choo" and he's collected train memorabilia for years, he didn't begin working on a garden railway until about three years ago.

The Karrels' outdoor tracks jog past a gnarled mesquite tree, a towering saguaro and a palm tree. The train even passes across a bridge raised above a waterfall that cascades into a pool.

"This is our little oasis," said Ken, a psychologist who, along with Mary, runs a bed-and-breakfast that has a train-themed suite. "We've had people sit there and say their blood pressure drops."

Each scene has special meaning for the Karrels. A schoolhouse is similar to one Mary went to while growing up in Wisconsin. A church, like the one the Karrels got married in, has a sign bearing the date Nov. 14 — their wedding day.

The Karrels' scenes are intricate as are the trains. Peek through a train car door, and the detail is amazing, from the frosted glass on a restroom to miniature lamps lining the aisles.

Such detail doesn't come cheap.

Martin estimates he probably has about \$15,000 tied up in his hobby. So, needless to say, he doesn't crash his trains into one another like Gomez Addams



A.E. Araiza, The Arizona Da

**The garden railway at the Double K Ranch where train buffs Ken and Mary Karrels are proprietors of a bed & breakfast.**

used to do on the old "Addams Family" TV show.

But you don't have to spend a mint to get into railroading. Train enthusiasts say you can buy a complete plastic set for about \$100, which is fine for indoor use. A decent outdoor setup could run about \$500.

You also don't have to build a sprawling railroad that's guaranteed to be time-consuming to maintain.

"I've seen too many people get carried away when it's too big," said Lew Sleeper, a retired American Red Cross volunteer. "They can't keep up with the maintenance."

The Sleepers have short tracks at their town. One by their front door runs along a ledge carrying wrapped Christmas presents. An Austrian cogwheel chugs back and forth from the office to the back porch.

Sleeper said he gets the most pleasure out of showing up his models for others to tinker with and work on.

"The thing I enjoy most is seeing the kids love it," he said. "Big kids like it, too."

## ON THE RIGHT TRACK

If you're interested in building your own garden railroad:

- Read up on the topic. Tucson Garden Railway Society members suggest "Garden Railways and Fine-scale Railroading," which you should be able to find at Barnes & Noble Booksellers and Arizona Trains & Hobbies.
- Visit a garden railroader and find out what the hobby entails.
- Start small — upkeep and maintenance can take a lot of time.
- A strong foundation is important. Spring for good track that can withstand the weather.
- Be on the lookout for bargains, which aren't confined to train stores. Ken Karrels said he's found bargain accessories at places like Ace Hardware and Target.