

St. Croix Valley Local News

community news & voices

Oak Park Heights > News

All aboard!

[Print Page](#)

Published: Thursday, December 29, 2011 11:42 AM CST

Dedicated group keeps Boutwells Landing trains running on time

By ERIK SANDIN - Stillwater Gazette

OAK PARK HEIGHTS - In a former basement storeroom at Boutwells Landing, the trains always run on time to the delight of young and old.

A dedicated group of model railroaders have turned a room that once stored chairs into a two-level set running HO- and O-gauge model trains. Group members have turned parts of the two levels into winter scenes for the holidays, but they have bigger plans for their set-up.

"We're thinking of putting in the roads and trackage that they had in Stillwater and Bayport in the 1940s," said Jess Escue. "There are a lot of local people here (Boutwells Landing). They remember the 1940s and 50s."

The story of the B&L Railroad Club begins earlier this year when Escue and several other Boutwells residents interested in model railroading asked Boutwells' management if there was space in the facility to pursue their hobby.

"My wife came up with the idea," Escue said. "She said we ought to have a train club here for the guys who don't like to play pool."

The train club's request fit with Boutwells' philosophy of offering residents opportunities to pursue their hobbies and interests, said Holly Minners, Boutwells' community relations manager.

"If there is something we don't have at Boutwells Landing, we try to provide the space (for it)" she said. "We try to figure out what to do to address residents' needs."

In the case of the model railroad club, Boutwells officials found a basement room with enough space to handle the group's 20-by-22-foot, two tier track setup. There was only one problem,

"Boutwells Landing had a room full of furniture. They couldn't get it clogged out," Escue said.

The furniture was eventually moved and the model railroaders began planning their track set-up this past spring.

"I was surprised at how agreeable they were and as quick as they did it," Escue said.

Besides the room, Boutwells provided the group some money to get started and assistance in setting up the railroaders as a charitable organization that can accept donations of equipment and money from the community.

"We can give them (donors) a tax write-off," Escue said.

It took train club members several weeks "to figure out what to do" with the space the club was given, according to Escue. The club got help building its two-tier table from Boutwells wood shop group.

"The wood shop boys did quite a bit of work for us," Escue said.

The track, trains and scenery items came from club member's collections and community donations,

Club members said their holiday set-up was a popular stop for Boutwells residents and visitors. Club member John Lawton said at least 150 people stopped by the club's room to view the setup.

"We encourage people to come," added club member Bill Fletcher.

A way club members spread the word about their group was setting up a "Polar Express train outside Boutwells Terrace Caf . "We've had this train out there that people enjoy." Lawton said.

As the holiday season winds down, club members said they have two goals for 2012. One is attracting more associate members from outside the Boutwells community. Lawton said the club has about 14 registered members.

"We'd like to have associate members join," Escue said.

Minners said Boutwells guidelines call for associate members of any of the community's groups must be approved volunteers at Boutwells.

"We need volunteers," Fletcher added. "We need to be self-supporting. So we need to go to the people."

The club's second goal is recreating Stillwater and Bayport in the mid-1940s.

"The top tier down there is going to be the city of Stillwater," Escue said. "The bottom tier will be Bayport."

The difficult part of the transformation is getting the layout and model buildings historically accurate, Escue said,

"A lot of it will be custom-made," Lawton said. "We have a couple of people interested in doing models."

Once the club starts building the scenery, several members said the project is not likely to ever really be finished.

"The Twin Cities Model Railroad Club is 80 years old and they're still building" their scene, Fletcher said.

"It's going to take a long time to build it." Escue added. "We can build something and have it here. If people have something to do that they're interested in, they live longer.

There's another reason why model railroading remains popular in the computer age, according to Escue.

"Kids today have all their so-called computer games where they build worlds. It's not real," he said. "They're doing something, but it's not real with real objects. This is as good as a computer and more accurate."