

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 17, 2007

Electric Trains at Auburn Heights: As you can tell from earlier writings, this only child was spoiled, especially by his father. The father also hoped his son would develop a major interest in the things he liked: cars, trains, trapshooting, and machinery. He was highly successful in the first three. What better way to start off a tiny kid than with a wind-up train? I had one, a little steam-type with locomotive, tender, and two passenger cars that ran on a two-rail track about the size of "O-27." On Christmas 1926, trains changed here forever with my first Lionel set, a standard-gauge Locomotive #402 with three lighted passenger cars, all painted a dull brown. The trains ran here on Direct Current until 1930 when we got A.C.

My playroom, including the trains that usually occupied it from 1926 through 1933, was the room over the porte cochere, now called the North Bedroom. The photo from Christmas 1927, on display in the museum, was taken in this room. The use of this playroom and the Lionel layouts seemed to be limited to the Christmas season, however. By late January, the tracks had to come up and be packed away for 11 months. This practice lasted as long as I set up trains, until 1976, when I built the permanent layout still in the museum (the "high line" was added in 1977).

Santa Claus always came on Christmas Eve and even erected and trimmed the tree. One day about 1928, while alone in my playroom, I decided to punch out the isin-glass windows in the three coaches. Great fun at the time, I have regretted it ever since. In 1929, the first steam-type Lionel, #390, along with five freight cars and a track crossing, was added, which allowed for a figure 8 layout. Also, my first "O" gauge set, an electric-type locomotive and three passenger cars, came that year. Lionel "O" gauge was brand new. More track, another crossing, and a few manual switches allowed for a larger Standard-gauge layout each year—great fun. In 1931, having seen a double-circular "O" gauge spiral layout at Wanamaker's Toy Department in Philadelphia, my father came home and made one. As I recall, the Toy Department layout was made of metal from an Erector set (or something similar), and there were two spirals, one up and one down, perhaps with six rounds each. Ours had eight rounds in the spiral and was of wood construction, but the train turned around top and bottom with two switches, requiring only one spiral for the complete trip.

I was ill with pneumonia at Christmastime 1932 and was almost delirious with high fever on December 25. My father carried me to the playroom so I could have a quick look, but five minutes was enough. I was not strong enough to return to school until February 1 and soon thereafter contracted chicken pox. That year and in 1933, more track, manual switches, two electric signals, and a turntable were added. The year 1934 was a banner one for the Lionel trains. Not only was my playroom moved to a new place, the room under the brand new kitchen addition, but my father had bought a two-year-old collection of Standard-gauge Lionel equipment from a Philadelphia family who had to sell. I can remember waiting in the kitchen on Christmas morning for my parents to unlock the door at the top of the steps so I could rush down to see what was there. I saw a black Locomotive #400E with four passenger cars in light green, matching the cars I had except for color. A lot of track came with the lot, including six electric switches of the earlier type (they would not automatically "throw," making it possible to derail when trailing through a switch) and a deluxe station platform accommodating "Lionel City" station. With additions each year until Standard gauge was phased out about 1939, I had a great layout, always different, set up in the new "Recreation Room" under the kitchen until World War II.

The year 1946 was my first Christmas home in several years, and I set up the layout in the Recreation Room one last time. Everything was then stored until 1971, when the Magic Age of Steam opened its first "Old-Fashioned Christmas." Weldin Stumpf rebuilt the "O" gauge circular railway. Each year through 1975, automobiles would be pushed back and a different Standard-gauge layout put together on the floor of the museum. Finally, the track was built on a permanent table, much as you see it today. Thanks to many dedicated volunteers, the layout is still operating well and brings delight to children of all ages.