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Profile

Home is where the trains are

By LAURIE SCHLATTER
News Correspondent

WARREN — At first glance, it's a dusty toy laying in the middle of the hallway. But slowly its magnetic power is revealed through the words of father and son. The sparkle in their eyes communicates an understanding that rarely exists in this age of television and time constraints.

What is this thing that is more powerful than a locomotive (as the Superman show was introduced)? It is none other than a two-foot by four-foot module for model railroad operations. And its power lies not in the electrical wiring underneath the painted mountains, the buildings alongside the track painstakingly constructed of cardboard and paint, nor the ballast (cement) used to hold the track in place.

The power lies in the combination of imagination and reality that exists in the world of built-to-scale railroad models and the art of railfanning.

What, you may ask, is railfanning? According to Robert Buck, owner of Tucker's Hobbies in Warren, it is the activity of following railroads and every possible connection that can be made with railroads. This variety of interests is represented in the membership of a single club dedicated to railfanning.

Although Buck has occupied much of the spotlight in recent months, spearheading the battle against a proposed hazardous waste plant in Warren, his favorite pastime is railfanning.

As past president of Amherst Railway Society, Buck says of its 120 members, there are "those who just like trains," or are interested in the restoration of the equipment, photography, sound recording, architecture, toy train collections, and model building. Buck's hobby store serves as a focal point for anyone seeking information about railroads: books and magazines angled toward the general interest or specific obsession blanket one wall. The rest of the store is dedicated to providing the necessary supplies to model builders, whether they build from scratch or from hobby kits.

In serious earnestness, grown men gather in Buck's store to discuss their hobby of scale-model railroading. They pass along information about the latest discovery of an actual locomotive engine in a local resident's garage. They avail themselves of Buck's almost-encyclopedic memory of "railroadiana": the railroad mining operations in Colorado, the architecture of depot stations and bridges, the dates, names and cars belonging to just about any railroad line in America.

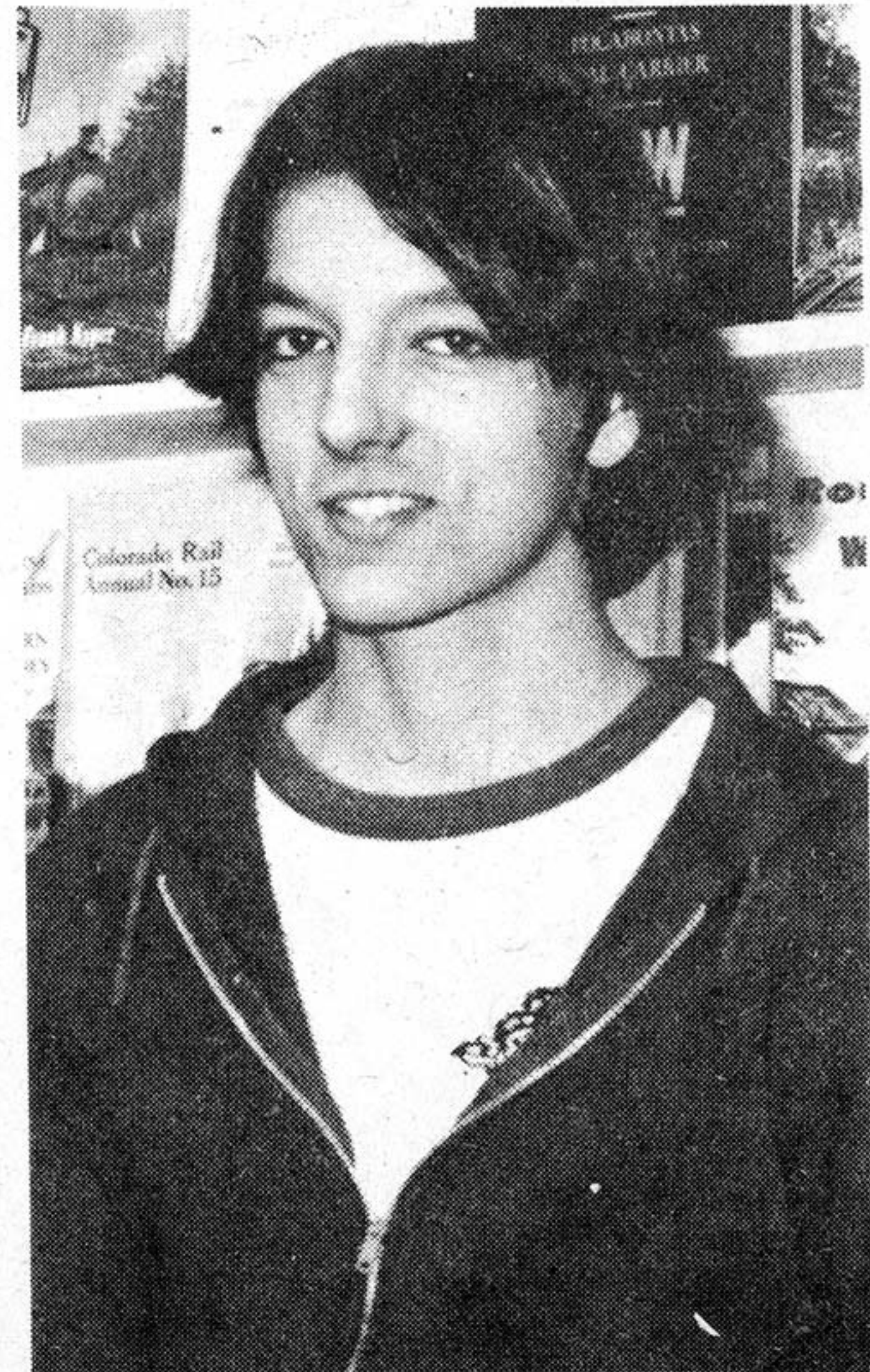
Buck is a member of the National Railway Historical Society, the Mass. Bay Railroad Enthusiasts, and the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society.

His knowledge includes the actual construction of individual locomotive engines, passenger cars, and freight cars. He knows the combinations actually used in the periods of steam, diesel, electric, and gas turbine engines. And he helps his fellow railfans translate that knowledge into intricate creations scaled down to authentically represent the full-size trains and their environments.

"It is possible to model just about anything you're interested in," Buck explained one recent rainy Saturday afternoon. There are three basic types of scales or gauges. The smallest is the N-scale, which is 1-160th of the real size of a



Robert Buck



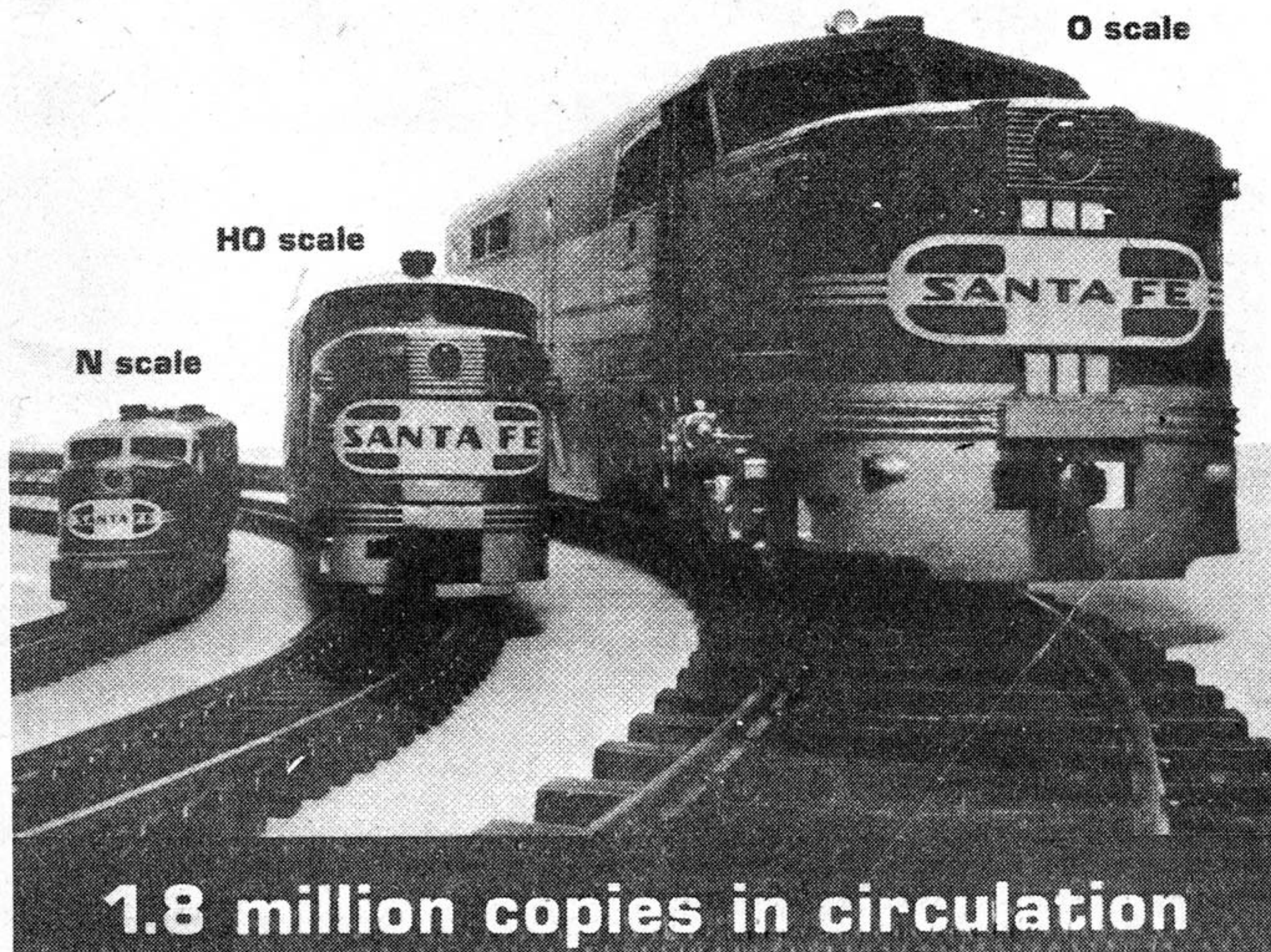
Russell Buck

INTRODUCTION TO SCALE MODEL RAILROADING

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By Linn H. Westcott, Editor
MODEL RAILROADER MAGAZINE

A KALMBACH PUBLICATION



1.8 million copies in circulation

railroad train. The HO gauge is 1-87th, and O gauge is 1-48th actual size.

Facsimiles of genuine railroad yards can be created by constructing two-foot by four-foot modules hooked together forming a layout. Down to the most minute detail, the real bridges, track patterns, scenery, tunnels, and the train itself reveal the difference between toy trains and model railroads. "You're modeling the actual prototype," says Buck's son Russell.

Russell explains that it can take three weeks to a month to complete the framework, lay the track, hook up the electrical wiring, design and construct scenery, and paint it. That is just the beginning, because father and son agree that the real fun comes in creating, as realistically as possible, the model train.

Some people buy the train ready-made, but others prefer to make their own engine and cars in genuine detail. The variations in box cars alone can include such facets as rib sides, single or double doors, on undercushion, or a side sill. All this authenticity can easily take a couple of weeks.

"A lot of people are fascinated by operating (a model railroad)- you can run it and make it any size you want. It's the motion, whereas some other hobbies don't have that," Russell says.

After patiently constructing a module or a complete layout, there's no doubt about it: the best part of railfanning is sitting down and having some fun. It's a perennial case of Christmas morning.

As a boy, Buck used to watch the trains chug through Warren from the family home. In 1937, he "conned" his father into buying his first railroad magazine, adding to his steady accumulation of railroad information culled from reading books on the subject. Since then, there's been many a trip to historical places of interest to railfans with his family.

On one of eight trips out to Colorado with his wife Sylvia and their two sons, Russell and Kenneth, they were following the old abandoned railroad bed of the

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The other life of Robert Buck

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Denver South Park and Pacific Railroad. The National Park Service levels the railroad beds with a grader so enthusiasts can drive along the same route as the trains once did. The particular line crossed the Continental Divide southwest through 14,000-foot mountains and the South Park in Colorado, which is a huge plateau the size of Connecticut.

At a point 10,000 feet up in the Sawatch Range, 11 miles from Pitkin and heading toward the Alpine Pass, Buck and his family were intrepidly following the four-percent grade along Quartz Creek Valley. "At the end of the valley, the railroad takes a hairpin turn and continues climbing," says Buck, telling the story. "About 900 feet from the (11,060 foot) summit, a thin strip of the old railroad bed can be seen. 'Are we going up there?' my wife asked."

They sure did. But once at the summit,

the plateau can be seen surrounded by the majestic mountains conquered by the Iron Horse so long ago.

It is the strong sense of excitement combined with the living history of railroads that seems to make the hobby so enticing but also very dangerous. Railroads are "big, heavy, and just plumb dangerous: to be respected," Buck says. "Don't go into the dangerous areas." The bumper sticker proclaims "We Support Responsible Railfanning." That means people should conduct themselves in a responsible manner, not trespassing or crossing the tracks or stealing from the yards, he says.

The family home on Bach Street now holds Buck's "hobby corner" from Tucker's Hardware. That family industry was sold last year to develop a full-scale business of model railroads. "It is my specialty," the quiet man says proudly and he says it's infinitely more fun than stopping it.