

Local News

Trains: Once a Fascination, Now His Business

By Frederick A. Smock
Of the Regional Staff

WARREN — This is the story of a little boy whose fascination with trains never went away.

No, he didn't grow up to be an engineer, but he did become an expert on trains. Finally, last year, he decided to turn his railroading hobby into a business.

His name is Robert A. Buck. In the past six months a lot of people have come to know "Bob" Buck because of his involvement in STOP IT, the citizen's group opposed to construction of a \$100 million hazardous waste treatment plant in Warren.

But long before his involvement with STOP IT, newspaper reporters in this area knew that if they wanted an "expert" opinion on something about railroads or railroading, Bob Buck was the person to seek out.

Buck says his fascination with trains began as soon as he could see over the low windowsill of the family homestead on Bacon Street.

"Our house had low windowsills and at a

very early age I could look out and see the Boston & Albany (Railroad) tracks across the common," he explained. "And it was because of the B&A, I am sure, that I got hooked (on railroads) at that early age."

But because he grew up in the Depression years, Buck had to limit the early years of his hobby to reading and dreaming about trains. It was not until later, when he had become a successful businessman, that Buck was able to make many of those dreams come true. In fact one just came true last year.

Sold His Hardware Store

After 29 years in the hardware business on Main Street in Warren, Buck decided that it was time for a major decision. A part of the hardware store had always been devoted to model trains. But, as the years passed, the train and hobby business took up more time and space.

So last year, "I had to decide on one or the other," Buck said. He opted for trains and hobbies. After selling his hardware store, he moved around the corner on Bacon Street and established Tucker's Trains and Hobbies in

what had been the old family homestead.

The store — crammed with model engines, cars, tracks, and accessories — is a railroad buff's dream.

Prominent display is given to all kinds of books about railroads. It's not just a coincidence. Buck is a recognized photographer of trains and has a large collection of rare train photographs by other photographers as well. His photos are featured in train history books.

Buck said that in the early years, before he learned how to handle a camera himself, he managed to get pictures of engines and other railroading memorabilia, by "getting Dad to take train subjects."

Rare Diesel Train Photos

But it was luck, and perhaps a little foresight, that helped Buck and a handful of other buffs record some rare train pictures. Buck explained that when the first diesel engines appeared in the late 40s, most train buffs wanted nothing to do with the dull, unexciting, diesel trains, preferring to focus on the mighty steam locomotives.

What the steam train buffs did not know, he said, was that diesel locomotion would undergo many rapid changes in a short time. New models quickly replaced those first trains. The old ones, and their history, were sent off to the scrap heap.

"I'm glad some of us decided to point our cameras at those early engines," he said.

Over the years, Buck has developed many friendships and learned a great deal about trains in other countries from pen pal train buffs around the world. He also has travelled around the country — accompanied by his two sons Kenneth and Russell, and his wife Silvia, librarian of the Warren Public Library — visiting railyards, riding trains or driving over old railroad beds, reliving the history of railroading.

'Looked Like Real Thing'

Buck doesn't miss an opportunity to experience something new in railroading. Last year, when their son Russell went to England with the Quaboag High School Band, the Bucks went along as chaperones and arranged a ride on the new 120-mile per hour English passenger train, plus visits to several famous train stations.

From an early age, Buck was interested in model trains. He remembers spending 10 cents for model catalogs filled "with absolutely unattainable" models. If he had had the money to build them, they would be worth hundreds of dollars today, he said.

Finally, when he reached high school age, Buck was able to begin working on models. He loved being able to build accurate repro-

ductions. "The attraction was that you had something that looked like the real thing, but didn't have the concessions that toys do," he said.

The penchant for modeling was taken up by his sons. Kenneth, now in college, is a stickler for detail, creating scale models by hand, Buck said.

Russell, who spends after-school hours helping in the store, is a proponent of the newest model railroading craze, N-scale, a notch down in scale from the familiar HO scale trains. Russell has also been busy teaching local modelers how to build modular railroad layouts.

'Big and Alive'

The concept, made possible by the very small N-scale units, involves building model railroad layouts in sections which can be added together at shows or meetings to create a single, large layout.

Buck is also involved in the Amherst Railway Society, which was started many years ago at the University of Massachusetts and brings together railroad buffs, modelers and railroad employees. The society holds regular meetings at the university, sponsors an annual model railroad show and runs periodic rail excursions.

What is the fascination that brings man and train together in a love affair?

"Well, I think it has something to do with the sound of the flanged wheel against the steel rail. And it's big and alive. In fact, in the days of steam, the engineers would say the engine absolutely had a soul," he said.



Telegram photo

Russell Buck and his father, Robert A. Buck, in the family model railroad and hobby store on Bacon Street in Warren.