

SATURDAY NIGHTS
FOLKS ARE SINGING...P.2

MOTHER'S CENTERS HOST
A HOUSE TOUR...P.3

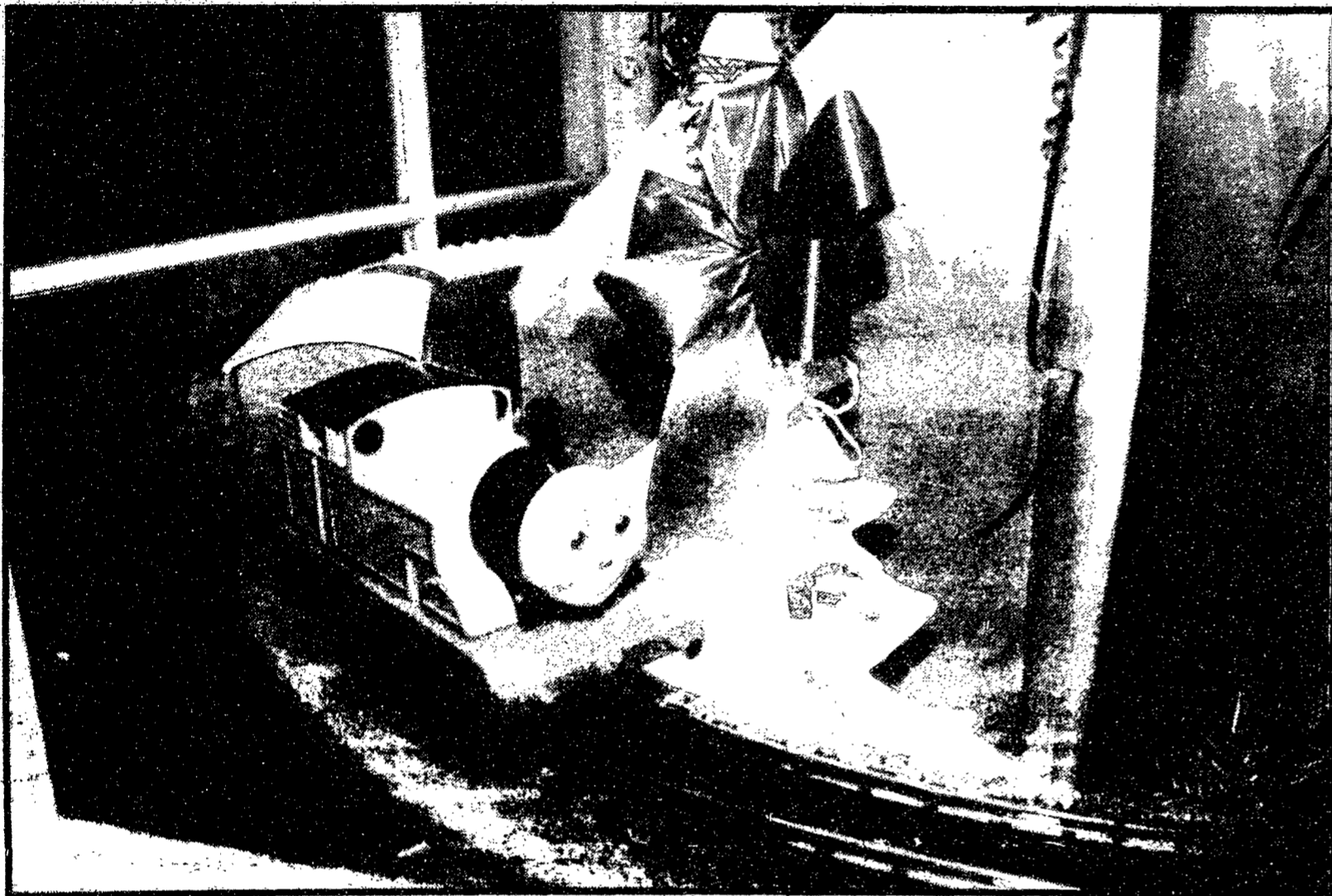
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ENTS



Thomas the Tank Engine and other trains make the rounds in lots of retail windows this time of year, like this one at Wiggs Opticians in Stony Brook. (Above: Parents and kids crowded into a wet, dank basement in St. James Sunday to view a Lionel train exhibit put on by the St. James Model Railroad Club.)

Toy Train Enthusiasts Celebrate Season

By George Wallace

Call it the boy in me. But when I read that there was going to be a holiday train exhibit up the road, I suddenly felt compelled to relive some boyhood conviction that Lionel and HO trains were the epitome of Christmas magic.

Never mind that the concept was probably concocted by Madison Avenue in the early days of television. Never mind that the smell of train tracks and electricity always made me feel slightly nauseous. Never mind that my dad never sat on the living room floor with me nor did he encourage me to marvel over the presumed wonder of miniature trains. Never mind that all the infernal machine ever did was to go around in predictable little circles without variation until I tired of watching it.

We're talking toy trains here. A sentimental journey back to my childhood! American boyhood! The Christmas gift that bonds father to son!

Come to think of it, it is true that among our holiday icons, toy trains are a legitimate item. Not as hyped as Santa Claus and Nat King Cole, mind you, but a legitimate item nonetheless. Look around your average town on the North Shore of Long Island, and there is bound to be one or more enterprising retailers who have dressed up the window display with a toy train act to attract the boy in each of us.

It should be no surprise then that when the St. James Model Railroad Club announced its 10th annual holiday Lionel train exhibit held at the Mills Pond House this past weekend, crowds would show up — even in a drenching rain on Sunday. Or that those crowds would squeeze uncomplainingly into the cramped basement of the historic old house in

St. James to view the club's setup.

That's right — a musty old basement, full of wet kids and their parents, jostling for a view of toy trains careening over the track of a 38 x 48 foot operating layout built high enough off the ground so that only a fully grown adult could observe the action. Sound like it's worth it?

Know what? It was worth it. The club has transformed that big cellar in St. James into a veritable shrine to toy trains. Vintage Lionel trains, both diesel and steam, included circus trains, camouflage Army trains and what appeared to be a '60s era Cold War getup with missiles and satellite gear riding on flatbeds.

Then, too, there was a more recent Thomas the Tank Engine train set. And all sorts of animated accessories: newsstand operators hurling bundles of papers at the train; a watchman popping in and out of his shed; skaters doing figure 8's on ice, oblivious to the passing cars.

I did note that not everyone was as bemused as people like me with the train club's offerings. "It's just a strange, tight old basement, and it was probably dug out by mules a hundred years ago," I overheard one woman complain to her husband. Another woman, holding a 2-year-old squirming in her arms, pointed when a train momentarily derailed: "Oh look, son, something finally happened!"

But, hey, it's a free country.

Speaking of free, there was a little competition going on in the toy train world over in St. James this weekend. Seems that once again the St. James Lionel train gang had competition up the road a piece for the toy train visitor trade.

Seems that the Smithtown Society of Model Railroaders has been putting on a holiday open house in

a little trailer tucked away in the Flowerfield complex across the street for a couple of years, too. They, it should be noted, are HO scale railroaders and have put together a layout in a narrow but well-heated space that emphasizes local relevance, visitor participation and the issue of realism — which to HOers apparently means paying attention to such items as the surroundings through which the train passes.

One stop, it was noted, emphasizes a town with a large engine facility and freight yard. The yard area has recently been ballasted, and the control wiring is nearly completed. At the east end ... will be a small city/industrial scene." After this town, they note, the line climbs two feet "on a 2-1/4 percent grade to reach the ... upper level."

Another issue is speed. The HO fellows have set up their layout so that the trains move at a realistic scale speed through the narrow trailer in Flowerfield. "It takes a train eight minutes to run from one end of the layout to the other," they note. They do not mention whether this time is affected by the front door to the trailer — which, if slammed too hard when someone enters or exits, causes the little HO trains to shake nearly off their tracks.

Want to see either of these model train layouts in operation? Sorry, you can't until next year — unless you join the club. However, there's an outfit in Lake Ronkonkoma called Wrong Island Railroad, which is open through January 30 and which boasts five main lines plus an overhead line capturing "the feeling of upstate New York and eastern Pennsylvania in the early fall during the late 1940s and early 1950s."

Who knows? Even if it never did when you were a kid, maybe the toy train spirit will move you this time around the track.