

Prisoners helped build capitol Christmas train

Former prison shop teacher has kept layout together for more than 30 years.

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

SALEM — The model railroad layout under the main Christmas trees in the Oregon Capitol rotunda every year is the brainchild of the late former Oregon Gov. Vic Atiyeh and, in part, is the handiwork of prisoners.

Don Curtis, who taught vocational training, wood-

working and cabinetry at Oregon State Correctional Institution from 1969 to 1999, was first asked to set up trains and a miniature scene to go under the tree in 1984.

“We had some very talented men at the institution that really got into the project and did a great job,” Curtis said in a phone interview this week.

Many of the miniatures — such as a scale version of the Bush House in Salem — were built by prisoners in the woodworking shop.

That, too, was a request from the governor, Curtis said.

“Our first layout in 1984 was really sort of modest, and someone asked, I think it was in the paper, someone asked Gov. Atiyeh what he thought

of this,” Curtis said.

Atiyeh said he liked the layout, but that he couldn't wait to see models of historic Salem homes the next year, Curtis said.

“Guess what we did the next year?” Curtis said. “We made the models of historic Salem homes.”

There's a model of Salem's Victorian-era Deepwood house, and the railroad station is a replica of the one in Salem around the turn of the century.

The structures are built from scratch — no kits involved. Curtis also made the natural features. Azalea branches are especially good for making tiny trees, he says.

Devoted to making the replicas of historic buildings to scale, Curtis raised some eyebrows when he went up to the bank building in Independence with a tape measure. He began sizing up the building's features and, after some inquiries from the bank manager, eventually was invited in for a tour.

The trains themselves are antique American Flyer models, most of them from the 1950s, Curtis said.

Curtis said they chose the American Flyer trains because the company was owned by A.C. Gilbert. Gilbert, a doctor who was born in Salem and went on to develop a host of classic children's toys, is



Claire Withycombe/EO Media Group

The model railroad that runs under the Capitol Christmas tree each year since 1984 was the brainchild of then Gov. Vic Atiyeh. The original layout and many of the scale structures still used were built by inmates at the Oregon State Correctional Institution.

the namesake of the Gilbert House Children's Museum in Salem.

There are a number of locomotives available for use — if the one that is currently running around the tree “gets tired,” Curtis says, another can take its place.

The seasons in the Christmas layout have changed over the years, Curtis said. It was a summer scene for a while,

then winter for about 20 years. But it was hard to keep all of the fake snow clean, so Curtis redid the set to depict autumn.

The whole structure sits on plywood boxes and can easily be packed up when the season's over.

Curtis works with Alan Bennett, a train enthusiast from Keizer, to put the scene together every year. After more than 30 years, what

keeps him setting up the miniatures?

“Well, you know, it's just a real joy to see the reaction of the children when they come to the Capitol building, and not only to see the tree, but they come to see the train and operate the train underneath the tree,” Curtis said. “So that's sort of an encouragement to us.”

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Cleo reunited with family before Christmas

EO Media Group
Bellingham Herald

Cleo the cat has returned home.

The 7-month-old Russian blue, gone missing for nearly two weeks after a car crash near Pendleton on Nov. 27 and found in a barn a mile away, is back with her family in Bellingham, Wash.

The *East Oregonian* published a story on Dec. 14 about the Egan family crashing while moving from Cedar City, Utah, to Bellingham. The four people in the vehicle weren't hurt badly, but their dog was killed and Cleo was gone.

The Egans didn't expect to see her again, but Cleo turned

up in the barn of Robin Harris, who called the number on the tag and got in touch with the owners. Harris then brought the cat to Pendleton Animal Welfare Shelter and together with the Egans worked on a plan to get her back to her owners.

Pet transport services were too expensive, Amanda Egan told the *Bellingham Herald*, and it was difficult to find someone who was headed even as far as Seattle. A last resort, Egan and Harris decided, would be to send her with a shelter board member as far as Portland, which was still farther than the Egans had hoped to drive.

The story ran in the *EO* in hopes that someone would come forward and offer to bring Cleo home. The idea worked.

The story caught the eye of the Debbie and Mike Doyle, a Bellingham family who had

lived in Pendleton and were making the drive to Boise, Idaho, where their daughter, Kaitlin, had just graduated from Boise State University.

The Doyles were one of several families who reached out and offered to take Cleo, but they were the only ones going clear to Bellingham, Harris said.

“I guess we're just softies for cats,” Debbie Doyle said Friday, adding that her family has two of their own. “Plus, we know what it's like to lose something.”

Cleo reunited with the Egans on Sunday, Dec. 18.

“I can say it was one of the best Christmas gifts to get at least one of our pets back,” Egan said. “I can't really describe the feeling because we were very attached to our pets, and we are still incredibly sad about losing our dog, but it makes it a little easier to have Cleo back with us.”

Student of the Week

“So often you find that the students you're trying to inspire are the ones that end up inspiring you.” The staff and administration at Joseph Charter School would like to congratulate Austin Lynn who is our **Most Improved** student-of-the-week. Austin is the son of Sean Lynn and Melissa Campbell. He is a freshman this year and has shown great improvement in his work ethic, study skills, and effort. We are all very proud of you and congratulations. Keep up the great work Austin!

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ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

This week's athlete of the week is Enterprise High School Sophomore Cole Gomes. The 15 year-old archer, who is one of the finest young archers in the country, just received a tip of the hat from Alpine Archery in La Grande.

The archery/outdoor store recently took on Gomes as a field shooter, a mutually beneficial title that allows Gomes to represent the store at archery tournaments while receiving tips on how to further his career in archery.

Cole Gomes

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