

Klamath Falls Man Runs His Own Railway, But Engines, Cars, Scenes Are Miniature

By DEAN A. KRENZ

Pete Silani of Klamath Falls is a railroad man.

Although he makes his living in an auto body shop, the middle-aged mechanic-repairman is at the same time president, the board of directors, sole stockholder, engineer, oiler and repairman on some pretty impressive track, age and rolling stock.

The fact that his engines are only a few inches long and the gauge of his track is a mere 3.5 millimeters doesn't detract a bit from the scope of his "second calling."

Silani, of course, is a model railroader. His demanding "profession" costs him a pretty penny, but there are compensations that far outweigh that drawback.

Model railroading has absorbed most of Silani's spare time for the past five years. But he has something to show for his time and effort. In a shed in back of his home in the south suburban area, Silani has a collection of 11 tiny scale-model steam engines, 100 authentic-looking boxcars, gondolas, tank cars and cabooses that would bug the eyes of adult and youngster alike.

When you talk to a railroader like Silani, you realize he has left the "store bought" whistle tooters 100 miles (or maybe we should say 100 inches) behind. Ready made trains that are a tradition at Christmas are fine, but to the hobbyist they're just toys.

Silani's variety is built of brass castings and punched plates, detailed fittings, exquisitely tiny flanged wheels and almost microscopic screws purchased in kit form. Engine kits are complete in almost every detail, even though they are built to a scale of one-eighth of an inch to a foot. The product of a craftsman like Silani is beautiful to see.

His biggest engine cost \$61 in kit form and contains 750 parts. It took more than 100 hours to assemble the kit.

The stubby little logging engines or the elongated Mallets, last of the steam brutes spawned before the advent of diesels, are intricate and watch-like in construction. Point to an engine and Silani will tell you its history, function and good and bad points.

Area loggers probably recognize such famous names as Climax, Heister and Shay, engines that once were the backbone of the logging industry. Some are still in use.

If a longtime resident of Klamath Falls you may remember seeing a mammoth Mallet engine pulling a seemingly endless string of cars through the city.

The romantic steamers and their history are all a part of Silani's amazing collection.

"Part of the trouble with real railroading today is they've taken the romance out of it," Silani said as he adjusted one of his miniatures. "I guess the diesels are okay, but everybody seems to be in such a hurry to get no place."

Curio steam runs made by railroads for model railroad clubs are an example of the strong interest in the "good old days" of railroading, Silani declares. He pointed out that some of these steam engine powered excursions are booked solid for years ahead of time.

Silani got into the "railroad business" in 1935 after a doctor

advised him to take it easy on his eyes, cut down on reading and get a hobby. His interest in railroads began when he was a child in Standard, Calif. A victim of polio, young Silani watched trains day after day and developed an interest that some 50 years later would lead him to buy his first model engine kit.

Although his choice of a hobby was no accident, 100 per cent relief of eyestrain wasn't exactly accomplished. Assembling the diminutive rolling stock takes more than good eyes, too.

Silani sighs and admits he wishes he knew more about electricity.

The 12-volt system that operates the locomotives is a mystery to the layman and might even tax the imagination of an electrical engineer. His system seems to operate smoothly, but Silani readily admits he has two "shorts" somewhere that he just can't seem to track down.

At commands from the central control area any one of the 11 engines or even a handcar will roll onto the track and run smoothly by finely detailed scenes including factories, stores, cars and trucks. Silani says he's far from done with his scenes, but he also readily admits the typical model railroader is never really satisfied with his layout.

Silani's wife, before her current illness, helped her husband build some of the buildings and generally encouraged him in his hobby. Meanwhile, he would put in uncounted hours on such engines as the inspiring 20-wheel Mallet that even in miniature can pull 100 scale-model cars. All 12 drivers on the Mallet operate in syncopated rhythm that tells the story of magnificent power.

These tiny engines, surprisingly, will develop approximately scale power. When a smaller engine needs help up a 3 per cent grade on Silani's system, he just sends out a helper to lend a hand.

A purist, Silani deplores fancy automatic systems that "you just sit and watch." He contends that running the railroad manually is most of the fun.

With pride Silani showed a string of special shorty coaches used in California's rugged Sierras. Tiny seats await tiny people,

who for the time being, are reposed in a box.

The tiny figures are bought ready made, but innovation saves the railroader a lot of cash. For instance, Silani wanted some scale model barrels and found just the thing in some small automotive bearings. Part of the grille of an old car serves as an absolutely authentic looking fence.

Silani builds most of the cars of his lines. His tankers are made of broomstick sections fitted with necessary metal carriages and other scale hardware. Details and correct paint colors complete the miniature.

Much of his unmeasured trackage is also painstakingly laid with tiny cross-ties.

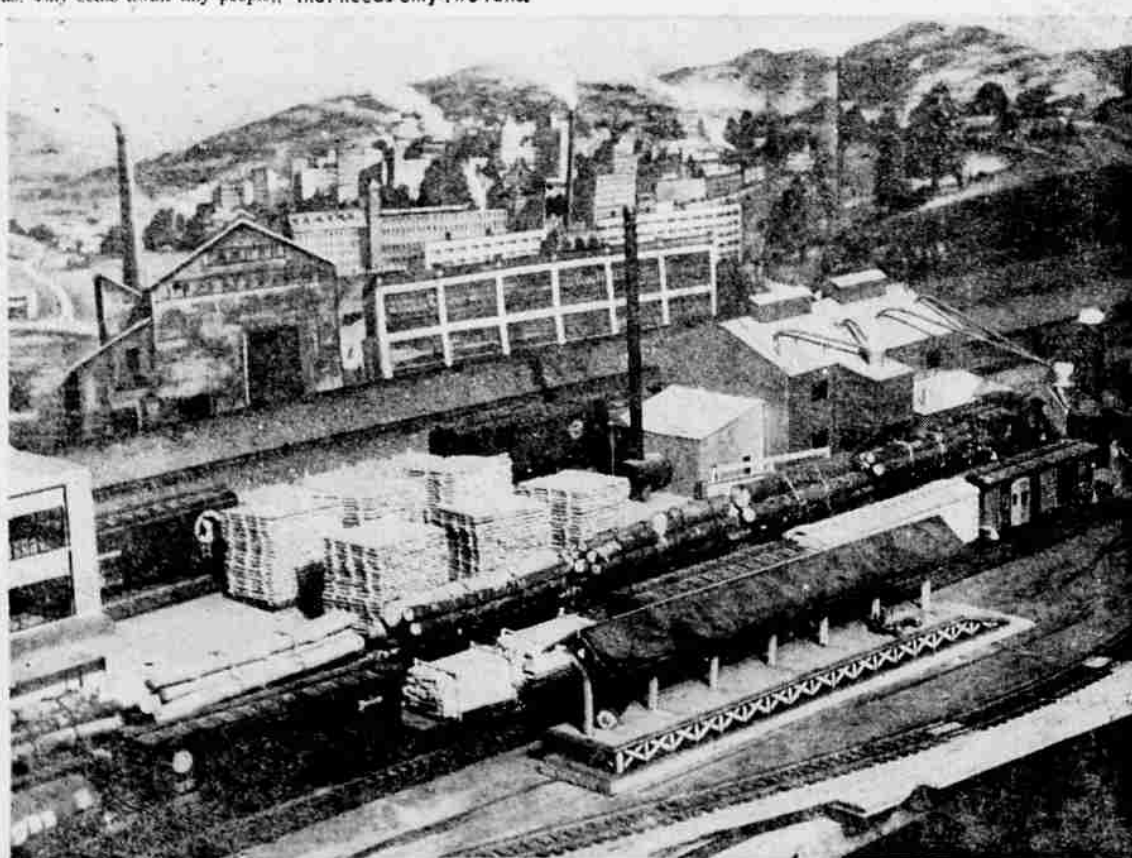
"You feel more like you've accomplished something when you build everything," he said.

Besides adding more detail to his selection, Silani says he may break down and add some diesels. But he'd really like to put the layout on display and turn the proceeds over to his favorite charity—the polio fund.

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A GOOD IDEA of the size of the model engines is shown in this picture of Pete Silani and his Heister logging engine. Such engines run on a 12-volt electrical system that needs only two rails.



STACKS OF LUMBER backdropped by an industrial scene lend amazing reality to this view of the model railroad. Like most model railroaders, Pete Silani wishes he had at

least twice as much room for his layout that fills every corner of a shed back of his home.

The Cover

Nothing as old-fashioned as a sleigh will do for the Santa poised on the chimney of the Howard L. Douthitt home in Falcon Heights. St. Nick was captured in this blast-off position by Wes Guderian.