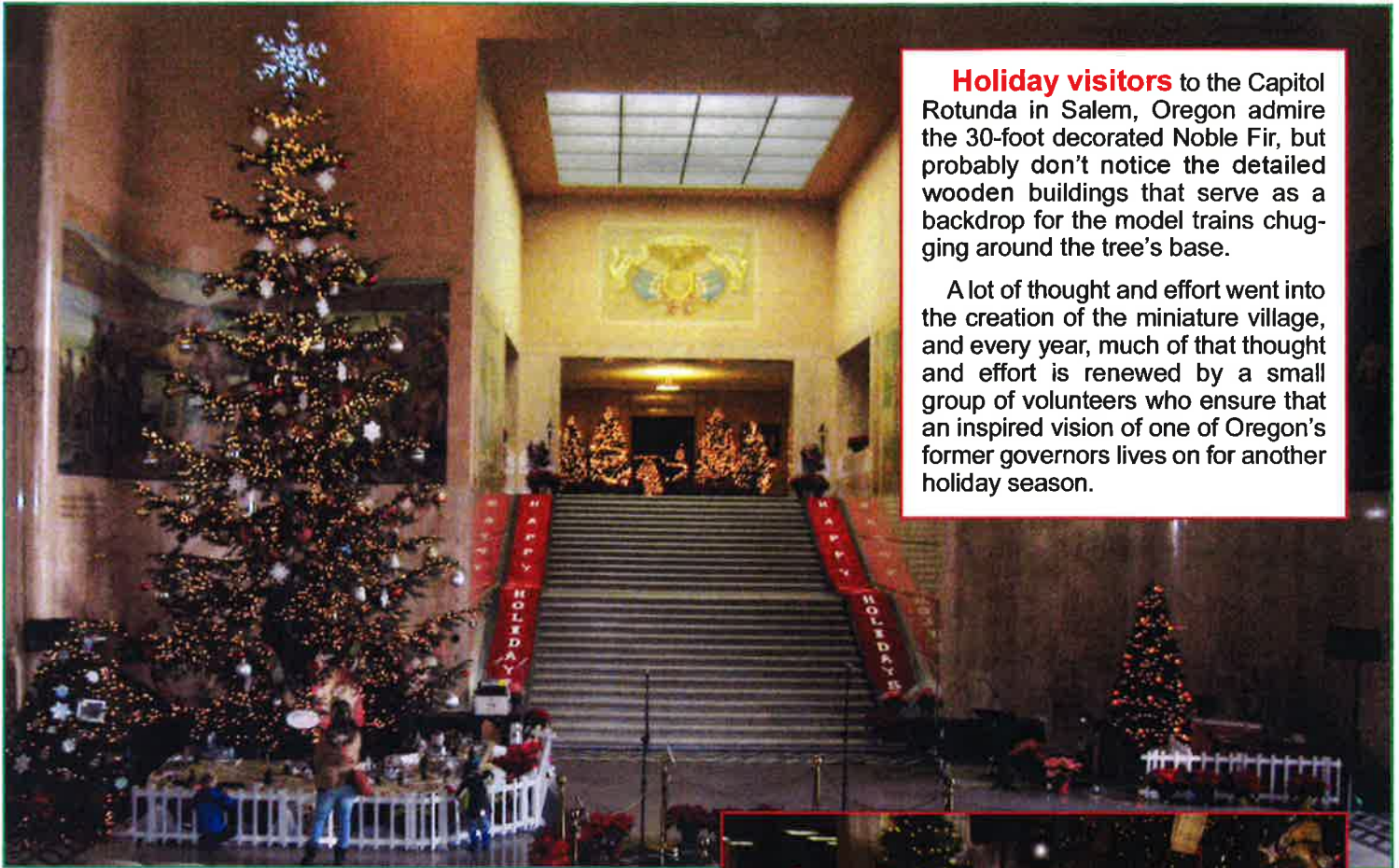


THE DISPATCH



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A Capitol Christmas



Holiday visitors to the Capitol Rotunda in Salem, Oregon admire the 30-foot decorated Noble Fir, but probably don't notice the detailed wooden buildings that serve as a backdrop for the model trains chugging around the tree's base.

A lot of thought and effort went into the creation of the miniature village, and every year, much of that thought and effort is renewed by a small group of volunteers who ensure that an inspired vision of one of Oregon's former governors lives on for another holiday season.

The Capitol Holidays Layout has been an integral part of holiday decorating at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem, Oregon since 1984. The 12'X 12' modular layout features A. C. Gilbert American Flyer and other S gauge trains traveling through an autumn scene with scratch built models of both actual historic homes and buildings and representative Salem and Willamette Valley structures evoking pre-1950 Oregon. A. C. Gilbert was a Salem native, hence the decision to use S gauge American Flyer trains made by the A. C. Gilbert Company.

This layout was originally constructed in 1984 as a project for the inmates of the Oregon State Correctional Institution. Working under the supervision of Industrial Arts Instructor Don Curtis, inmates constructed the initial layout and "the box it comes in." Many of the structures were projects of individual inmates. Don Curtis did the other structures as well as the scenery design and installation. After the first year it was displayed at Christmas, Vic Atiyeh, the Governor of Oregon at the time, commented that he "could not wait to see what historic Salem buildings would be added to the layout the next year." The historic Salem area theme has been carried forward ever since.



Alan Bennett of Keizer, Oregon provided the authentic Gilbert American Flyer track and supplies the vintage American Flyer trains to operate on the layout which is placed under the giant Oregon Christmas tree in the Rotunda of the Oregon State Capitol Building. Celebrities like the Governor of Oregon and Santa Claus throw a switch that lights the tree and starts the trains during an annual ceremony held in early December. The train stays up and operates until the tree comes down, usually the week after Christmas.





Former Governor Atiyeh, who died this year at 91, said he didn't remember asking for the toy trains and village, but he said he could probably guess why he asked for the stately homes rather than businesses in the landscape. "Businesses come and go, but homes stay put. We were right there in Salem, and it seemed like a good idea to feature it."

A couple of years after its debut at the Capitol, Alan and Don decided to take the layout on the road. It was selected as Best in Show at the first train show in which it was entered. Inspired by their initial success, Don and Alan have enjoyed displaying it at local and national conventions and train shows around Oregon and Washington ever since. Venues have included the Oregon State and Polk County Fairs, the 1987 National Model Railroad Association convention in Eugene, Oregon and three World's Greatest Hobby on Tour shows. It is scheduled to be displayed at the 2015 NMRA Convention in Portland, Oregon.

Always a popular attraction at Christmas time, the layout has proven to be a spectator magnet at the train shows. Since 1984, thousands of people have seen and enjoyed the layout at the Capitol during the month of December, and thousands more have seen it at other locations during the three decades that the layout has been on display.



In 2004 the Capitol layout was a snow scene. Five years ago Don Curtis stripped it down to the plywood and recreated it as a fall scene.

Don Curtis has retired from the Oregon State Corrections Department and the layout is no longer a project of the Correctional Institution, but Don and Alan, with the help of volunteers and family members continue to set up and maintain the layout at the State Capitol in Salem during the Holiday Season and at other events through-out the year. In addition to vintage American Flyer equipment, Alan also runs modern S gauge trains from S Helper Service, American Models and American Flyer by Lionel at these events. While operating the layout is a treat, the volunteer operators agree that the fun is meeting the people who come by to reminisce about their old toy trains or about days gone by in Oregon and seeing all the children who simply want to see the trains go.

This story was written by Alan Bennett. The introductory paragraph was borrowed from the December 9, 2013, Salem Oregon Statesman-Journal story written by Carol McAlice Currie. Photos by Bill Pyper and Alan Bennett.