Martians at the Great Scale Model Train Show?! It’s true…sort of…

Yes, Martians have been participating in the Great Scale Model Train Show (GSMTS) for some time. We’re not the green, bug-eyed kind of Martians with deeley-bobbers sprouting from our foreheads (although some of us wear funny hats). Actually, we’re MARRSians—members of the Meade Area Railroad Society—MARRS—a railroad club located near Fort George Gordon Meade, MD.

MARRS is dedicated to railroad-related hobbies including model railroading, train spotting, collecting, and history. We’re a rather loosely knit bunch—we have officers and monthly meetings, but no dues. Our only membership requirement is an interest in railroads—real and imagined; domestic and foreign; past, present, and future. If you’ve attended the GSMTS in the past, you’ve probably seen us in the Timonium Fairgrounds Cow Palace with either our modular point-to-point continuous loop N-scale layout, or our (up to) six scale mile modular HO digital command & control (DCC) layout.

Why are MARRSians willing to spend considerable time and energy (and money) to design, build, and operate modular club layouts at the GSMTS? Well, due to the fact that most MARRSians do not have home layouts, participation in the GSMTS often affords the only opportunity for many MARRSians to publically display their modeling artistry, and to run model trains during the year…and MARRSians really like to run trains—especially LONG trains!—something that isn’t possible unless you have a really LARGE layout. Both of our modular layouts are far larger than most home layouts—our HO layout typically has a footprint greater than 90’ x 30’!—thereby allowing those MARRSians so inclined to run 70, 80, and even 100+ car trains. Yes, it’s fun!

Have you ever wondered what it takes to set up and operate a modular train layout at the GSMTS? Planning MARRSian participation normally begins once the GSMTS schedule is announced--usually nine months to a year in advance of any given show. Believe it or not, most MARRSians have lives beyond model railroading (shocking, but true!), so advance planning helps ensure non-railroad activities don’t interfere with train show weekends (significantly contributing to peace in many MARRSian domiciles). Since our members are scattered over a multi-state area, most planning is done via E-mail and during our monthly meetings. It is during this stage that we decide which modular layout (N-scale or HO) we’re going to operate during each of the upcoming GSMTS dates.

MARRS also conducts monthly or bi-monthly workshops. Workshops provide members an opportunity to collaborate, build, modify, repair, and test their modules as well as the engines and rolling stock they’ll run at upcoming shows. In order for everything to work properly, all modules are built to established guidelines that specify the size, height, wiring, electrical connections, and track placement. Standardization is the key to success—if the modules don’t fit together, or if the tracks don’t align, the trains don’t run…If the wiring is crossed, or if the electrical connections are incompatible, the trains don’t run. If the trains don’t run, all the time, effort, and money expended goes for naught, and you’re left with a group of very unhappy MARRSians—a state of affairs best avoided!

Why modular? Well, in addition to the aforementioned SIZE advantage, the answer is simple: flexibility. Having a wide array of standardized modules allows our respective module superintendents wide latitude in designing the size and configuration of the layout. There is no set design for either of our modular layouts. Each show is unique with final layout design being driven by, primarily, who is available to participate on the given show weekend and which of their modules they are willing to bring. Both layouts, however, feature large staging yards which allow MARRSians the luxury of setting up long trains or multiple consists.

On set-up day—normally the Friday immediately preceding the GSMTS weekend—the logistics involved in setting up a modular layout can be considered as either a true marvel, or as semi-organized chaos depending on your perspective. The MARRSian module superintendents face an unenviable task: starting with an empty space in the Cow Palace, they must orchestrate the staggered arrival, unloading, assembly, and testing of a layout pieced together from bits delivered from across a multi-state region. Our superintendents—through gentle encouragement and careful choreography (…and maybe a bad word or two)—always persevere. Depending on which scale we’re exhibiting, it normally takes 3 to 10 hours (including some pre-show time on Saturday morning) to assemble a fully operational layout. Yes, we do face a few challenges occasionally (…someone can’t make it, modules don’t work or fit, overly creative wiring or track work, bad weather, and so on…), and the layout has to be redesigned on the fly. However, we MARRSians consistently demonstrate that we can overcome any problem (or combination thereof). Even “Snowmageddon 2010” didn’t stop MARRS from setting up and operating a layout at the GSMTS (albeit one much smaller than originally designed).

If you’ve visited our layouts during past shows, you’ve no doubt noticed our highly eclectic mix of scenery, and the equally eclectic mix of trains we operate—we’re definitely ***not*** prototypical. Scenery and train choices are left up to each individual MARRS member. For example, at a show you may see a layout with a loop tunnel through an abandoned Styrofoam mine, Hogwarts Castle and Hogsmead train station, traditional cityscapes and bucolic farm scenes, gravel pits, or even a crashed flying saucer surrounded by tanks. It’s also normal to see the Hogwarts Express sharing the layout with a 100+ car Pennsy coal drag, or a European bullet train passing the Southern Pacific “Daylight” being pulled by a 4-8-4 Northern locomotive. Our eclectic mix reflects the diverse interests of our members. MARRSians believe model railroading provides an escape from the mundane and, besides, it’s supposed to be fun—not another job!

Another thing you may have noticed if you visited our layouts at past shows is that MARRSians actually welcome the opportunity to talk to the public—something else we’re very proud of. Sure, we’re at the GSMTS to run trains (…and to shop), but we also enjoy discussing all aspects of the hobby with whoever stops by the layout—even though carrying on a conversation while running trains can result in some—let’s say—interesting operational challenges.

In closing, we’d like to thank Howard Zane and his organization for providing MARRS the opportunity to participate in the GSMTS over the years. We’re also excited to welcome new owners Scott Geare and Mike Militello. Scott/Mike, the MARRSians look forward to working with you, and to strengthening the existing GSMTS/MARRS relationship in the future.

Thank you for taking the time to read about MARRSian activity at the GSMTS. I hope we’ve stimulated your interest in model railroading—just maybe—in MARRS. MARRS is always interested recruiting new members. While we’re not highly structured, we do have fun, and we invite you to join us. We’re on the web @: www.MARRSrail.org. Also, please consider stopping by our modular layout for a chat the next time you see us at the Great Scale Model Train Show!

…and remember:

We’re from MARRS! We come in pieces!