

The Tafel Holiday Train Tradition

The penguins have their march, the salmon swim upstream and the Leonard Tafel branch of Philadelphia has their holiday train platform tradition. Surely, the tradition of model trains must have something to do with our family DNA. The National Geographic society has traced our DNA to the Cro-Magnon people that lived 30,000 years ago. The Cro's were people known for the artistic skills and cave drawings. Certainly, our annually migration to setup the trains must be traced to our genes. Come to think of it, the march of the penguins or salmon jumping a water falls would be a clever addition to the layout. I wonder how we could automate that scene?

Over the years, the trains have been more than a train circling the Christmas tree. The elaborate layouts required sacrifices from all corners of the family. Who can forget that Shelly and Sue Tafel had to be evacuated from their bedroom for the months surrounding the holidays in order for Uncle Walt to build his version of Disney World. In our house, my mom (Ruth A. Tafel) had to sacrifice her back room for our layout. All those years of yearning to have the family Christmas dinner in her recreation room had to be placed on hold until the off spring left the nest. Similar settings were seen in Uncle Lou's recreation room. Uncle John, always the thinker, was fortunate and had the basement for his trains.

The joy of the holidays is always something special. As a child, the thought of seeing cousins and their trains just raised the level of excitement. I remember one year when we shared a holiday night with Uncle Walt, Aunt Agnes and their family. The first stop of the evening was our home with the return trip to see their trains later in the evening. You can imagine the chaos created when their nation of kids (eight) descended upon our home. As we prepared to travel to their house, I decided to make a last minute pit stop before beginning the long journey. To my astonishment, when I came out of the bathroom, our house was quiet. The noise and mayhem was gone. The march of the Tafels to Uncle Walts had started and this penguin was left behind. Forget the childhood trauma of being forgotten by your parents. My holiday dreams were crushed, there would be no visit to Uncle Walts this year for me. In those days, there were no cell phones and no text messaging. Being too young to drive my holiday dreams had hit a roadblock. Alas, my future brother-in-law, Dave Rohland, appeared on the scene like an act of God. My disaster recovery plan to salvage the holiday began to unfold. Dave and I hopped in his car and he drove me to Elberon Avenue in Fox Chase. I am forever indebted to Dave for saving my holiday that year.

As the years past, the tradition of a holiday train layout shifted to my home. As we searched for our future home, there was a particular model that caught Pop's (Rudolph E. Tafel) and my eye. This one had a nook in the basement that was the perfect setting for our train layout. The migration continued as we strapped the plywood board on the top of our car and moved the train layout from my parent's home to my house. That was twenty two years ago.

The homes have changed, but the tradition continues. We start the annual family trek of building the platform during the Thanksgiving holiday. We formulate the plan of what

new features to add and then start the mission of building the layout. Our target date for completion is another holiday tradition, the neighborhood caroling party. Our kids (Melissa and Derek) are always a great source of ideas. With the Phillies winning the World Series this year, we added the video of Brad Lidge throwing the winning pitch on our stadium's fan-a-vision screen. Melissa spotted the fibre optics that eventually became our platform fireworks celebration. Derek built the three foot high Free Fall Tower. The motorized model sends a small carrier of passengers up and down the tower. Since I'm footing the tuition bill for two Penn State students, I added the Nittany Lion being passed up the stadium crowd (a Penn State tradition). Linda, my wife, molded and baked the small clay Nittany Lion.

The plaster mountains and German model houses provide a Bavarian look to the layout. The bell of the Durango-Silverton steam engine clangs in the background as we back up a steam engine in the yard, through the turn-table, and into the train house. A PC-AT drives the lights that form the zodiac constellations that twinkle in the night sky. In another area of the layout, an earthquake occurs as the platform separates. A hidden dragon with red LEDs for eyes appears with smoke spewing from the crevasse. Santa and his sleigh circle one of the mountains with Rudolph's, the reindeer, flashing red nose (another LED) leading the way. Pop's hand-made church complete with pews and chandeliers brings more magic to the scenery. Did I mention that there are trains too. Our train layout includes twenty-two trains that run on their individual tracks.

As with most aspects of life, the real fun is sharing the layout with family and friends. Seeing the reaction of the kids to the different attractions is always a treat. There was the time when a 10 year old David Anderson stepped back from the platform when the witch was flying in his direction. Robbie Ward, the 3rd grader who lives across the street, who didn't want to see the dragon a second time. And Dan McDermott, the ninth grader, who has over the years been able to memorize which train engines run on the different tracks.

These days I get to return the favor and have my aunts and uncles visit me during the holidays. All these years and I finally figured out that the trains are a great excuse to have family over during the holidays. This is one ride in life that I am glad that I didn't miss.

If you are in the area during the holidays and wish to see the trains, send me a note at dtafel@verizon.net. There are additional pictures and video clips of the layout at www.tafel-family.org website.

