

Long track record

For 50 years, the miniature train in Fort Worth's Forest Park has had a big impact on generations of riders

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LOCAL HISTORY

It's not even noon, and already the temperature is inching up into the 90s. In a few hours, it'll hit triple digits, but on this weekday morning, the heat doesn't matter to the crowd of kids, toddlers and assorted parents and grandparents. They're waiting for the train that will take them from this little depot to a bridge across the Trinity River, through the trees of Trinity Park, past the duck pond and, for approximately 40 minutes, back in time.

The Forest Park Miniature Railroad turns 50 this summer. Hidden away in the heart of Fort Worth, its main depot tucked neatly between the river and the Fort Worth Zoo, this little train has been chugging along, carrying multiple generations of passengers along its five-mile track since 1959. It is, perhaps, Fort Worth's best-hidden local institution -- and this family-owned business hasn't changed much since the day it opened.

'Like a big train set'

David Ledel was 12 when the train made its first run that summer.

The great-grandson of Bill Hames, who got the railroad started, Ledel remembers thinking of it as being "like a big train set to play with." And in fact, the trains looked like toys: They were two small-scale versions of Texas & Pacific Railway trains -- so small that passengers rode atop the cars, not inside, their bodies rising like giants above the silver steel.

The trains' seats were so narrow that it was difficult for two adults to sit side by side. But that didn't stop people from lining up by the thousands to climb on board. According to records, the first day the trains ran -- Friday, June 12, 1959 -- 1,500 people made the five-mile trip, 70 to 100 passengers at a time. But that was just the beginning. The next day, the crowd nearly tripled: 4,000 people showed up to ride. By that Sunday, the train attracted so many people there was a traffic jam in Forest Park. That day, 5,000 people got a ride while 3,000 more got a refund because -- well, there's only so much time in a day.

The railroad's two little trains just weren't cutting it. "It became apparent in the first two days that we needed more," Ledel says, so two more were ordered right away.

It took some time for Fort Worth motorists to get used to watching out for the little trains cutting across streets and rolling through the parks. The trains hadn't been running much more than a week before an 18-year-old driver misunderstood a flagman's signal and drove right into the train's path, stalling his car on the tracks just in time for the train to collide with his passenger side. (A few days later, the *Star-Telegram* published a photo that showed the proper way to stop at a railroad crossing, warning readers that "the trains can give a car a good solid wallop in a collision.")

There have been a few more accidents over the years, even a couple of derailments, but the trains and the track are inspected for safety, quarterly by the city and annually by the state.

A simpler time

Back in 1959, a ride on the train cost 35 cents. Today it's \$3 for adults, \$2.50 for kids -- still less than a Happy Meal or a movie matinee. And in a time when entertainment strives to be faster, louder and more overwhelming (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, anyone?), the slowness and simplicity of the train is a peaceful relief. The train heads east from the depot, then quickly cuts north to cross the Trinity River. It rolls under the highway, then makes its way into Trinity Park. For a moment, it's a bit of a cute anachronism amid the traffic on I-30 and University Drive, the patio of the Pappadeaux restaurant just across the river. But a few seconds later, it ventures deep into the trees of Trinity Park. The sounds of the traffic go away, replaced by the chattering of birds and squirrels, and the heavily wooded landscape seems miles -- or years -- away from home.

There are picnic tables, a playground, the Trinity Park duck pond. The train cuts a narrow path through trees so tall and so close you could reach out and touch them, if signs all over the train didn't warn against doing so.

Halfway through the ride, the train stops at the Trinity Park Depot. Passengers can board here if they like, although most use the Forest Park station. For the few minutes the train is idle, almost everyone hops off to stretch their legs. Kids chase each other through the trees, red-faced toddlers sit with their parents in the shade, and passengers line up at the depot's window to buy boxes of fresh popcorn and soft drinks in wax cups.

"My first job here was working in there," Ledel says, nodding at the Trinity Park Depot. There's no air conditioning, he says, even now. "In the summer," he says, "it gets -- well, 'oven' is too mild a word."

Even in the summer, we're used to living and moving in spaces that are conditioned for our comfort. But unlike almost anything these days, the train is still subject to the elements. It does not operate in moderate to heavy rain or high winds. It doesn't run if the temperature is below 55 degrees or above about 100. In fact, it's been shutting down early on the hottest summer afternoons to protect the track.

Today, Ledel again works for the railroad that his great-grandfather built; he's part-owner and the assistant train master. Most days you can find him selling tickets, drinks and popcorn at the Forest Park Depot.

His great-grandfather, Bill Hames, was a big name in the carnival business. And when he got the train started in the late '50s, it was just the latest, greatest addition to a whole park full of carnival rides: a merry-go-round, a roller coaster, a Ferris wheel. In fact, there was already a train in Forest Park when the miniature railroad was built -- but with its quarter-mile route that ran in a circle, it couldn't compete with this new train that ventured over the river and through the trees.

When it opened, the Forest Park train had the longest miniature-train route in the world.

"That lasted about two months," Ledel says, as other miniature trains sprang up across the country and around the world, each one designed to outdo the rest.

Tickets and memories

Frank W. (Bill) Hames is another of the seven family members who share ownership of the railroad. He's the grandson of Bill Hames, and when the trains started running in 1959, his son was 2 years old. When their toddler couldn't sleep, Frank Hames and his wife, Carol, would take him out to the train, which made runs until 10 p.m.

"We'd take off with high hopes on the train," he says, "and long before we got back to the station, he'd be asleep. The clickity-clack, clickity-clack puts you to sleep."

Now, after 50 years, generations of kids have fallen asleep, bounced in their seats, fed popcorn to the birds, squealed with joy when the train crossed the river, pointed at squirrels and trees, asked endless questions about railroad tracks, and waved at joggers and picnickers as the train ambled slowly by.

Church groups and play groups, day-care kids and students on field trips show up to ride the train. Children and adults come in out of the sun to wait for the train in still-stifling shade, settling at picnic tables and on cinder-block benches.

Cars pull in and out of an unpaved rock parking lot at the Forest Park Depot, stirring up dust that hangs in the hot air.

Around noon, a young man with sunglasses and a cellphone walks up to the ticket window and asks when the next train leaves.

"12:30," Ledel tells him.

He looks around. "Aren't there carnival rides around here, too?" he asks Ledel.

"There haven't been rides here since '85, '86."

"I remember them from my childhood," he says, then wanders off toward the dusty parking lot.

Generations all aboard

A bright green train appears in the distance, slowly making its way toward the depot. The blue-and-silver trains were replaced by these C.P. Huntington models in 1973, open trains with wooden benches that seat two passengers on each row. They're the same ones Sheila Miller rode when she was growing up. Now she and her husband, Rod, have brought their 5-year-old son, Dalton, and baby daughter, Brooklyn, to ride the train before an afternoon at the Fort Worth Zoo. The Millers live in Decatur, and it's the first time for Dalton to ride.

"I wanted to bring him here just to share the experience I had," Sheila Miller says. "He loves trains."

Ledel, who talks to a lot of passengers as they buy their tickets, says he hears from a lot of people who remember riding the train when they were kids.

"Some people have been coming for years," Ledel says, "and some people are now bringing their grandchildren."

And, in fact, Don Lee is waiting in the hot shade with his 3-year-old grandson, Maxwell Lee, apple juice bottles in hand.

Lee remembers taking his sons to ride the train when they were 4 or 5.

"We lived just up the hill, and we had memberships to the zoo," he says. "And when we went to the zoo, we'd go ride the train."

Now that Lee has a grandson "it's a multigenerational thing," he says. Maxwell loves trains. They've taken him to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe yard to see the trains come in and leave. He has ridden the TRE to Dallas. And he loves to come to Forest Park to ride the miniature railroad.

"Every now and then," Lee says, "once every month or two, we'll ride the train."

A family operation

There are seven owners of the train, a combination of three families now who are bound together by blood, marriage and the miniature railroad.

"It's one of those things," says Raymond Hames, the brother of Frank and another of Bill Hames' grandsons. For years, he has been the miniature railroad's president, and he and his siblings and their cousins all share ownership of the train.

"The train ride is something the family does take a little pride in doing," he says. "The profits -- well, there are so many people, they're diluted, but that's not the whole object of why we've been there this whole time.

"The way things are right now," he says, "people aren't leaving town to go on vacation, and a lot of them don't have much money. It can give people a fun outing for the day."

There's talk of remodeling both depots, adding landscaping to the Forest Park station and giving the one at Trinity Park a total overhaul. Raymond Hames says he hopes to get started in the fall, but there's still a lot of planning to do.

Much of the family checks in on the train just occasionally, but Ledel still shows up every day, selling tickets and watching the people who come and go. On the day of the railroad's 50th anniversary, he put up a sign. There weren't any parties or balloons, big announcements or unnecessary hoopla. And there's certainly no big push to promote the railroad as a Fort Worth landmark, a local institution, a tourist destination. It is all of those things, but then, it has been for decades.

"It's just a family business," Ledel says, "and the family's still in it."

ALYSON WARD, 817-390-7988

By the numbers

5: number of miles the train travels

6: number of bridges the train crosses

350 feet: length of the longest bridge, which crosses the Trinity River

35 cents: price of a ride in 1959

40: number of minutes it takes to complete a full ride

\$1: price of popcorn and soft drinks at the depot

\$40,000: cost of the first four trains in 1959

40,000: approximate number of pounds a fully-loaded train weighs

36: number of years the current trains have been in use

Riding the train

Where to go: The train's main depot, in Forest Park, is just off Colonial Parkway, north of the Fort Worth Zoo's main parking lot (see map). The Trinity Park Depot is at 2700 Trinity Park Drive. Passengers may board in Trinity Park, but all tickets are sold at the Forest Park Depot; you can ride to Forest Park and then purchase your ticket when you arrive.

Tickets: \$3, \$2.50 for kids and seniors. Cash only.

Hours: From March through October, the Forest Park Miniature Train is open Tuesday through Sunday. Trains run approximately every 45 minutes, from 11 a.m. to 5 or 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 6 or 6:30 p.m. on weekends. From November through February, the train runs on weekends and special holidays, from noon to 4 or 5 p.m.

Call ahead: The train doesn't operate in inclement weather, including extreme heat. Call before you go to make sure the train's not closing early because of the weather: 817-336-3328. The railroad updates its recorded message when it's closing early.

More information: Go to www.fpmt.us.