



# OLD FORT MODEL TRAINS

By Mike Conley

Old Fort has long been known as a railroad town what with its historic depot and Southern Railway bay window caboose dominating the scene. Andrews Geyser, a local railroad landmark, is just down the line. Now, a new store on East Main Street offers a selection of model railroad supplies and train memorabilia. When you are not enjoying the model trains, you can take a look out the store's window and maybe see the real thing rolling by. Old Fort Model Trains opened its doors on July 1 at 37 E. Main St. Wes Lael and Kristy Chinery own the business. The store has just about everything a model railroader needs to set up a layout, including locomotives, rolling stock, buildings and scenery.



At the store, you can pick out a locomotive or a building in HO, the most popular scale for model railroading. However, N scale, which is smaller than HO, is gaining in popularity and Old Fort Model Trains has plenty of items in that size, too. Old Fort Model Trains has a good selection of Lionel products, which are in O scale. You can also buy trains in G scale, which is even bigger and sturdier. Trains in G scale are often used for outdoor garden railroad layouts.

Lael, a longtime model-railroading enthusiast, said there is not another store quite like it in this section of the state. Other hobby shops have model cars and ships, in addition to trains. This store focuses mostly on miniature railroading. The closest one like it is in Spencer, the famous railroad town that is home to the N.C. Transportation Museum. Lael said he can also order radio-controlled airplanes, boats and racecars. But the store's emphasis will remain squarely on trains. "It's a good hobby for kids and adults," he said. "It's one of the most popular hobbies in the country."

A McDowell native, he operated a model railroad store at Smiley's Flea Market in Fletcher for 2 1/2 years. Although it was small, the store had a lot of stuff. But the new business has 2,200 square feet and a completed HO-scale layout in the front window. Lael's love for trains started as a boy when he would travel along with his grandfather James Ted Hensley. Together, they would watch as trains rolled through Marion. For many years, both the Southern Railway and the Clinchfield Railroad served McDowell County. Today, Norfolk Southern Corp. and CSX have replaced those companies.

Lael's grandfather would also take him along on the Clinchfield Railroad's excursion train, which used to operate in the fall back in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Old Fort Model Trains is appropriately decorated with pictures of Clinchfield's famous No. 1 steam locomotive and Tweetsie Railroad. Lael models CSX trains, which run today over the old Clinchfield line. He plans to offer monthly workshops for people who want to learn more about different aspects of the hobby, which combines carpentry, electrical wiring, model building and historical research. The workshops will allow folks to brush up on some skills that they need to construct a layout. Old Fort Model Trains will also do layaways, something other stores no longer offer. Most of all, Lael and Chinery want the business to be a meeting place for other train enthusiasts. It is within walking distance of the depot, the caboose and the monument to Major James Wilson, who oversaw the railroad's construction in the 1870s. Folks are welcome to come by and bring pictures of their layouts.

A few years ago, McDowell County had a model railroad club. Lael said he hopes to get another one started again. For more information, call 668-9434 or [e-mail](#).

*Mike Conley is a member of our club and reporter for the McDowell News. Photo by Clinton Smoke*