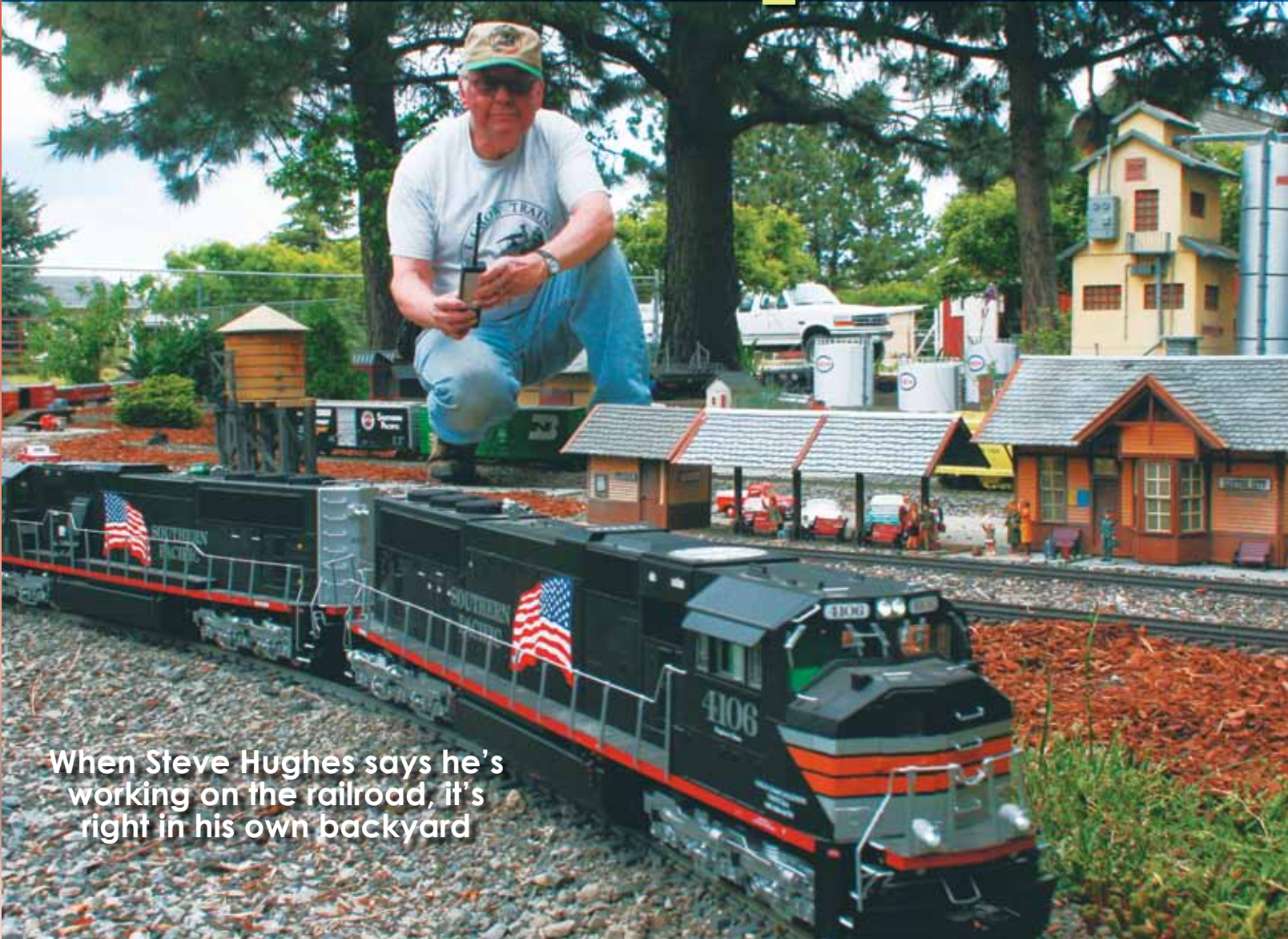


the front porch



When Steve Hughes says he's working on the railroad, it's right in his own backyard

On Track in the Garden

Turning a passion for trains into a full-scale hobby

By Darin Burt

LIKE MOST BOYS, STEVE HUGHES LOVES PLAYING with trains. The only thing is, Steve is no longer a kid; he's 68 years old, and his trains are far from toys.

Chugging in and around a tiny community, which Steve says could be Anywhere Small Town USA, is the Spokane Division of the Southern Pacific Railroad. A modern diesel freight train, nicknamed The Black Widow, shares the rails with a vintage steam locomotive. And it's all taking place in Steve's garden.

Steve is a member of the Inland Northwest Garden

Railroad Society (www.ingrs.com), and he's worked for 10 years building his fantasy railroad in the backyard of his home in Otis Orchards.

"I've always liked trains; I like the size and power, and the smell of the oil and smoke," he says.

A retired police officer from Southern California, Steve has been into model railroading since he was five years old. When he and his wife moved to the area 16 years ago, they looked for a place with enough space for him to expand his hobby. "Our property in California

the front porch

was a postage stamp and way too small,” he says.

The 6,500 square foot layout, meandering around native pine trees, contains 660 feet of track encompassing a highline that climbs a two and a half percent grade and a lowline that travels through a tunnel of boulders - all of which Steve scavenged from around his property.

“It took all summer to build the inner loop; there were no switches, it was just a loop. I had to dig a 4-inch trench all around with weed block and heavy gravel. Then I put in paving stones with half-inch shims underneath to put the track on, then more ballast on top and level it all the way,” Steve says. “The track expands and contracts, so I have to balance it just like a real railroad.”

The custom-built G- scale trains are three times the size of typical HO scale model trains. A single engine can cost over \$700. Punching in a specific channel on a hand-held remote control, Steve can direct the trains’ speed and direction; pushing another button plays the realistic sounds.

The orange and black SP 4449 steam locomotive is Steve’s favorite. It’s a detailed replica of the actual engine manufactured in 1941 and used to haul “Daylight” passenger trains between Los Angeles and San Francisco on the Southern Pacific. Steve still fondly recalls riding the 4449 as a kid when it was running on the Southern Pacific’s *San Joaquin Valley* line.

The knee-high buildings that dot the bark mulch landscape are made from durable plastic and constructed from kits. There’s an old-fashioned movie theater, roadside



and vehicles inside come October, gives them a good cleaning and stores them away until next season. A few of the larger structures, like the grain elevator, warehouse and train house, that are just too large to keep indoors, he lays on their side and cover with a tarp to protect them from snow and rain during the winter.

“They’ve been through hell and high water and high winds and survived quite nicely,” he says.

Steve spends a good deal of time on the weekends tending to his railroad - relocating the cars and people, cleaning track, watering plants and clipping Alberta spruce trees to keep them at a diminutive size.

“It’s a very high-maintenance layout because of the trees,” he says pointing out the pine needles on the branches above.

“It keeps me real active, but it’s also very therapeutic and relaxing,” he adds. “When I’m working on my trains, the time just flies by.”



gas station, warehouse, oil refinery, a rooming house called “The Broken Arms” and, of course, a whistle stop with tiny passengers waiting to board the train. There are plans to add a fire station, school and a bank.

Steve painstakingly puts the pieces of the town in place each spring and then takes the buildings, people