

HM Visits

Jeff Troy

Strasburg PA's Choo Choo Barn

I'm not a train guy; I'm an animator. These are the words that Tom Groff uses to describe how he approaches his amazing displays at Choo Choo Barn, Traintown, U.S.A., a booming tourist operation in historic Strasburg, the heart of Amish country near Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Strasburg is also a major tourist destination for full-scale and model railroading fans, drawing heavily with the Historic Strasburg (live steam) Railroad and several other full-scale railroad exhibits and museums.



Choo Choo Barn, Traintown, U.S.A. owner, Tom Groff, shows off his store's incredible content.

Every spring since 1961, "Lancaster County's newest old attraction" has been opening the doors of its 1700-square-foot display of miniature Lancaster County and American landmarks, all built around an O-scale railroading theme. Each of the complex layout's hundreds of displays is fully animated, mesmerizing onlookers with moving figures and vehicles over every inch.



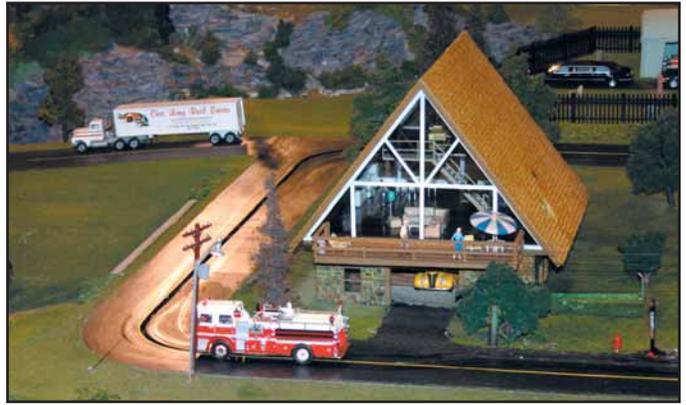
Clever animations and meticulous attention to detail cover every inch of Choo Choo Barn's enormous layout.

I had heard about Choo Choo Barn. Chris Chianelli had recently hosted a thoroughly entertaining DIY Network special there, so naturally, I was very excited when I received an invitation to visit with Tom Groff and see what all the excitement was about, first hand.

This is an amazing setup. In a time when most store owners hope to find an affordable location with a few anchor stores to help draw traffic, Choo Choo Barn and Traintown, U.S.A. are the anchor stores, drawing bus loads of tourists to their own shopping center daily.

Groff's displays change and expand each year, and he especially enjoys creating scale replicas of the area's other world-famous tourist attractions. Choo Choo Barn features convincing models of Dutch Wonderland, a huge amusement park along scenic Route 30, and Dutch Haven, another tourist destination shop, not unlike Pedro's South of the Border in the Carolinas.

The Choo Choo Barn, Traintown, U.S.A. layout is open to the public from April through December each year, except for Christmas Day, Thanksgiving Day and



As a “fire” begins to glow in the A-frame, the engine leaves the nearby firehouse and travels to the fire scene, where it shoots water to quell the blaze, then continues around the block and back into the firehouse garage.

New Year’s Day. Admission is worth twice the price, and every visitor leaves with the thought of building his or her own model railroad in mind.

In addition to his expansive layout and two ground level model railroad stores, the upper story of Tom Groff’s shopping center holds additional railroading retail stores, including a book & video shop and a dedicated Thomas products store, each one the size of most large-scale hobby shops.

One of the Choo Choo Barn’s downstairs operations is a souvenir shop that carries all kinds of railroading memorabilia and remembrances of the animated layout. The other side of the “L” is Tom’s primary retail store, catering to everything trains with no partiality toward

scales. Railroaders can find everything imaginable from Z to G, and they’ll find it in quantity. Choo Choo Barn’s on-site warehousing is packed with merchandise, and shoppers will never see an empty slot on any shelf or showcase in the house — ever. Other stores in Groff’s shopping center are Isaac’s Restaurant & Deli, Country Keepsakes, Candy Junction and an ice cream shoppe.

If you’re planning a trip to Lancaster County, make sure that Choo Choo Barn and Traintown, U.S.A. are on your itinerary. I promise you that the visit will be pleasant and worthwhile, and that you may come away with a few new tricks in mind for your own operation.

Stores are open seven days a week, all year round, and you don’t need a reservation to drop in! **HM**



Groff’s operation covers two floors of his own shopping center. Upper shops are Books & Videos and Thomas.