

Tucson Garden Railway Society - Club History

The Tucson Garden Railway Society (TGRS) was begun in 1994 by Clint Watkins. Under his leadership a group of families interested in Garden Railroading began meeting in an east side park. After a bit, the group moved to the Fort Lowell Depot Restaurant. The first major function of the fledgling society was the construction of a fairly large Garden Railroad layout at the Southern Arizona Home Builder's Association (SAHBA) Home Show which was held that year at the Tucson Community Center (TCC).

It was about this time that we began to build a portable layout in sections or modules that could be set up and taken down more quickly and with less effort. Beginning with hollow core doors, we built a modular layout designed to be set on tables for operation.

At the Great American Train Show (GATS) held at the TCC, we made a serendipitous discovery. When the tables we had been promised failed to materialize a member volunteered concrete blocks to be used as legs to hold the portable layout modules. As a result the layout was lowered to 18 inches off the floor. The response from children was fantastic since they could view the layout without being lifted up by their parents. That is why our modular layout is still only 18 inches off the floor today.

Clint moved to Colorado due to a job change and vice-president Craig McGinnis filled the vacancy. The club continued to display layouts, to which scenery was gradually added, at the GATS and SAHBA Home Shows each year. The public exposure helped us to add new members on a regular basis.

When Craig retired and relocated to the San Diego area, Loyal Hart was elected to lead the club. It was under Loyal's leadership that the club decided to retire the doors and build modules that could be moved and set up more efficiently. The members built a number of 48" by 32" modules with foldable legs to maintain our 18" above the floor height. Each module carried track for both an inner and outer loop and provided a space for buildings, roads and other scenic effects. The new modules enabled the TGRS to build a layout of up to 60' by 32' for public shows.

With modules standardized at 48"x32" and the track height standardized at 18", one of our members built a canyon module with bridges carrying the track above the chasm. This was followed by mine modules with the mine shaft above track level and entering into Styrofoam 'mountains'. These modules are still in use today.

After several successful terms Loyal retired from the presidency and Jon Anderson was elected as our fourth President. Under Jon's leadership the club developed a charter and by laws and incorporated as an Arizona not for profit entity. We also purchased a trailer and built wheeled "pie-racks" to enable rapid loading and unloading of the modules at our increasing number of shows and displays. The trailer and racks also allowed us to reduce the damage the modules suffered during loading and transport.

Gary Martin succeeded Jon Anderson as our fifth president. It was under Gary's leadership that new lightweight modules 48" x 16" were introduced. The lighter weight modules allowed us to incorporate passing sidings and a smooth operating rail yard. The older heavier modules were relegated to serving as tables for improved scenery behind the tracks at our displays. We also had an operating lift bridge module made to allow handicapped access to the interior of the module displays. With the improved opportunities for scenery Nick Buchholz, who later became the club's sixth president, designed and built an operating trolley line with a car shuttling from the 'town' to a 'park'. Other members have also built scenery for the modular layout which has won prizes at various shows and displays.

The flexibility of the module concept allowed us to provide smaller modular layouts at the VA Hospital and at a local elementary school as part of a transportation study. The club worked with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Tucson to provide a display with trains that the children could operate and held a workshop where each participant was able to build and keep a simple railroad car. Each December the TGRS provides display railroads for elementary schools and for a church preschool. The club also participates in raising public awareness by constructing an operating garden railroad each holiday season at the Tucson Botanical Gardens and by setting up and operating a large modular layout for eleven days at the Pima County Fair.

All members are welcome to participate in all of the club activities. Typically these include monthly meetings held at various member's homes. This allows members to see each other's layouts and gain ideas for their own home layouts. There is also an annual holiday party held at the December meeting where inexpensive railroad related gifts are exchanged in a grab bag like game. From time to time the club also holds clinics or workshops on various aspects of garden railroading and participates with exchange visits with the garden railway clubs in Phoenix.