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# Keeping tracks: A model train set as autobiography

**Big Idea: Glen Rosenbaum's little locomotives chug through personal history**

By **Andrea White** | March 12, 2016

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Photo: Hester + Hardaway

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Glen Rosenbaum's model train room.

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**Idea person:** Glen Rosenbaum, a partner at the law firm Vinson & Elkins LLP.

**Big idea:** Showcase history through model train room.

**Where it came from:** In the early '50s, when Rosenbaum was three or four, his parents gave him a train set. With their help, he developed a simple looped layout. "I ran it so much I burned out the transformer!"

From then on, he dreamed of bigger and better trains. For his sixth birthday, he received a four-car Lionel freight set that featured a realistic steam turbine locomotive. Eventually he acquired enough track to fill a room that was 16 by 16 feet. He played with that set until he was 14.

**How it grew:** Two decades later, Rosenbaum unpacked his trains and built a layout for his nephew, Sean. Years passed, and Rosenbaum purchased a new set for Sean's son, Morgan. Then Rosenbaum decided to build the layout of his dreams.

In June 2011, he began working with Stern and Bucek Architects on the restoration of his parent's 1960s home on South Braeswood in Meyerland. Plans for the second-floor addition included a 22' by 38' train room.



When Rosenbaum operates the train set, the sophisticated lawyer's face lights up. The layout can run four trains simultaneously on three perimeter lines and a single mountain line at the center of the table. The 630 linear feet of track is interconnected using 37 switches. A bank of transformers generates the power. It looks complicated, but he claims that visitors — even those unfamiliar with the technology — quickly learn to operate it.

The layout design, landscaping and structures emphasize realism. Even the smells of the exhaust fumes, which differ based on the type of locomotive — coal-fired steam, oil-fired steam or diesel — are realistic.

The layout was built by TW TrainWorx of Dallas, which has constructed some of the best-known model train displays in the U.S. The firm is also in discussions with the Houston Museum of Natural Science regarding its possible holiday layout.

**Inspiration from Texas history:**

Rosenbaum's train room models Texas railroad operations between 1945 and 1965, with primary focus on the Southern Pacific Railroad's transcontinental line.

West Texas is depicted by virtue of the Pecos River High Bridge, which spans a deep gorge about four miles upstream from the Texas-Mexico border. The bridge is recognized as one of the outstanding railroad bridges in the U.S. "The starkness and expanse of West Texas are impressive," Rosenbaum says. Photos of the actual canyon walls near the Southern Pacific Bridge guided the rock formations seen on the layout.



Photo: Courtesy Glen Rosenbaum

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Rosenbaum and a fellow enthusiast.

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"By virtue of its massive size, the Pecos River High Bridge is the only scratch-built structure on the layout that is not modeled to scale," Rosenbaum notes. The layout bridge model is 13 feet long and stands 42 inches above the Pecos River water level; a full-scale model would be almost 29 feet long and stand more than 68 inches above the water level.

Rosenbaum also included a highly detailed model of the passenger depot the Southern Pacific built in Wharton, Texas, a century ago. The depot is a Spanish bungalow-style building with a distinctive French clay tile roof and deep overhangs, as well as brick bearing walls and plaster detailing. Restored in 2007, today the depot houses a train museum.



Photo: Hester + Hardaway

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The train set's West Texas side.

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**Personal landscape:** Rosenbaum's layout features two homes built by his parents: a contemporary ranch house on Fernwood in Houston's Riverside subdivision, built in 1948 and 1949; and the house on South Braeswood House, built by his parents in 1964. (That's the house where the train room is.)

The layout also pays tribute to one of the many non-profits that he has served. The Houston Grand Opera presented him with a railroad box car upon the conclusion of his term as HGO board chair in 2011. Megan Freemantle, the HGO properties design director, painted the HGO logo on the box car's exterior and placed miniature props inside. Freemantle also built the scale models of set flats from HGO's productions of *Aida* (the opera that opened Wortham Center in 1987) and *Coffin in Egypt*. Those are on the loading dock adjacent to the HGO box car.



Photo: Hester + Hardaway

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Rosenbaum's nephew, now Dr. Sean Rosenbaum, conceived of another personal touch. He used wood removed from the South Braeswood house during its remodeling to build a miniature outhouse for the Pecos River bank near the High Bridge. "To confirm the refined cultural literacy of West Texas residents, the outhouse occupant is reading a Houston Grand Opera publication," Rosenbaum says.

Any resemblance between the outhouse occupant and himself, he says, is coincidental.

*Bookmark Gray Matters. It looks complicated, but visitors — even those unfamiliar with the technology — quickly learn to operate it.*

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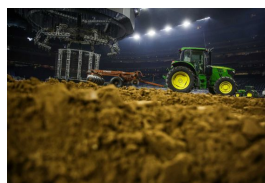
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**Andrea White**

Gray Matters Contributor,



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