

Local Hobby Store Moving Full Steam Ahead - Neal's N-Gauging Trains And Side Tracked Hobbies In Staunton

November 14 2021 7:15 AM



STAUNTON - Once upon a time, there was a man named Neal Carnaby who worked for an ice cream truck company as a summer job selling ice cream in Staunton. That may not sound like an impressive or important job, at first. But the company opened a branch in Ferguson, Missouri in 1983 and Carnaby got his first opportunity at management.

As you can imagine, the ice cream business tapers off quite a bit in the winter months, so Carnaby took a part-time job at a St. Louis hobby store during the off months to supplement his income, and to keep in tune with a hobby he already loved, model trains.



The owner of the hobby store, Steve Mohan, had some surplus model train inventory he wanted to move and he asked Carnaby if he wanted to attend a trade show in Springfield, Missouri with the items. Carnaby had some excess items of his own to sell but had never been to a show, and frankly had never been west of St. Clair, Missouri either, so he emphatically agreed.

Shortly thereafter, Carnaby's life became chaotic. He moved his family to New Hampshire, opened a hobby store, moved that store, closed that store, and ended up back in Staunton. Sidetracked Hobbies and Neal's N-Gauging Trains opened at the urging of Carnaby's son, Norman, who assured his father that he would do all the work. Considering that Norman was only in junior high school at the time you can imagine how that progressed. But Neals N-Gauging Trains and Sidetracked Hobbies did indeed open, however, Carnaby did little more than piddle with it for a while. Then one day he decided to actually DO something with it. He revamped the store, added inventory, including the popular Melissa & Doug toy line, and moved forward, full steam ahead, much like the miniature N-Scale locomotives he sells that attract customers from near and far.

N Scale is one of the smallest scales in the world of model trains. The scale is 1" = 160 real-life inches. That's pretty scaled-down. It's half the size of HO scale (87 times smaller than the real prototype) so N scale trains can fit into even smaller spaces and are the perfect size for many hobbyists from beginner to veteran.

The gauge (the distance between the rails) is 9 mm or 0.354 in. N scale has a large worldwide following. Models are made of very many standard gauge prototypes from every continent. N scale's popularity is second only to that of HO. In Japan, where space in homes is more limited, N scale is the most popular scale, and HO scale is considered large. Not all modelers select N because they have small spaces; some use N scale to build more complex or more visually expansive models.

Creating N scale model train layouts is an extraordinary hobby and one that you can find a ton of hours of enjoyment in. Enthusiasts explain that N scale model train collection is an awesome experience. This hobby allows you to be as creative as you want and also allows you to spend as little or as much time as you want on it and can help you relax and unplug from the stresses of work and life. Like any hobby, it can be costly if you want to focus on realism and great visuals – but you are in control and you can do whatever you want with it.

According to Carnaby, the best plan is to start with a track layout and add accessories and adornments as you go. The trains are fully functional, just like real trains, and you can make your setup as simple or as elaborate and detailed as you desire. Add trees, mountains, buildings, highways, etc. While I was at Neal's conducting this interview, an avid hobbyist came in and purchased several hundred dollars worth of accessories to add to his model train landscape without blinking an eye. Customers come from some distances at times as such hobby stores are getting fewer and far between.

Carnaby attends many trade shows in the United States and two in England each year to keep updated on the industry, establish vendor connections, and purchase items for his store.





Neals N-Gauging Trains is the anchor of the business but Sidetracked Hobbies, a cute correlating name for the other side of the business, is quite lucrative too. Between the entities that share one retail space you can find the N Scale trains and accessories, HO scale trains and accessories, all the accessories you need to build or add to your set up, Lionel toy trains, Matchbook and Hot Wheels cars, Melissa & Doug educational toys, railroad books, even some dolls, and airplanes, including vintage, and much more.

“People that come into the store with a preconceived notion of what they are going to find sometimes think all we have is trains,” Carnaby said. “But if they take the time to look around, most often they find something they want or need. Melissa & Doug toys are big sellers for us, but it’s hard to keep those items in stock, especially around the holidays.”

Carnaby says that although the store has come a long way since they opened in 2014, it’s still not where he wants it to be.

“Originally we were just in the front half, now we’ve almost doubled the retail space by expanding back,” he commented. “I have visions of upgrades and remodeling that will give us more storage and better display angles, but the day-to-day operations always take precedent.”

By the way, Carnaby just couldn’t walk away from the ice cream truck business altogether. He owns his own ice cream truck company now, Chill Bros. Though ice cream sales wane in the winter, the Chill Bros. Ice Cream Truck is only closed for two months out of the year. From Jan 15-Nov 15 you can book Chill Bros. Ice Cream Truck for your business event or private party.

And Norman ... he is now attending Western Illinois University in Macomb, but helps out at the store on breaks and whenever he ventures back home.

Neal’s N-Gauging Trains and Sidetracked Hobbies is located at 100 W. Main Street in Staunton, IL. They are open Tuesday-Friday, 10-6, and Saturday 10-5. For more information (including booking the Chill Bros. ice cream truck) call 618-635-2525. You may also visit <http://www.nealsngauge.com> or find them on Facebook.com/Neal’s N-Gauging Trains.

Originally published in [Buzz Magazine](#) - November 2021.