

Train Spotting

Tracking Down a Seasonal Baltimore Phenomenon

By **Michelle Gienow** | Posted **11/15/2000**



MICHELLE GIENOW

Christmas gardens. Like duckpin bowling, sno-balls, and Crack the Sky, the Christmas garden is one of those Baltimore traditions that's been embraced locally with great enthusiasm while somehow failing ever to migrate--or even attract much attention--outside the Greater Mobtown metropolitan region.

If you're not from around here, you probably have no idea what Christmas gardens are. Mention them to even the most acclimated out-of-towner, the one who's enjoyed an egg-custard sno-ball while duckpin rock 'n' bowling to "Hot Razors in My Heart," and you're likely be greeted with a blank stare, or perhaps some prattle about holly, evergreens, and outdoor lighting displays.

Think again, hon. The Baltimore holiday garden is set up indoors, not out, and doesn't even involve plants, except for the Christmas tree around which it's clustered. Typically it takes the form of a tiny idealized village, set amid a plaster-of-Paris landscape and peopled with miniature citizens. Model trains are usually involved. Almost invariably you will find a Nativity scene, although some traditionalists believe train gardens have become too secular and remove the creche, relocating it to a place of honor elsewhere in the room. "The custom is known only to Baltimore and many of the smaller towns of Pennsylvania," according to a 1936 article in *The Sun*, "particularly those settled originally by people of German origin."

A Christmas Day 1949 *Sun* article offers more detail, tracing the phenomenon to an old German tradition of placing a manger scene, called a "putz" (no snickering), underneath the yule tree. More than two centuries ago, German immigrants brought the practice to Maryland and Pennsylvania, where it gradually

evolved into the elaborate Christmas gardens of recent memory. "Baltimore's gardens have departed far from the prototype," the paper reported. "People here appear to have become so fascinated by mechanical gadgets . . . that the religious theme has almost disappeared."

In my childhood in Baltimore and the nearby suburbs, most of the families I knew had Christmas gardens. They were usually simple--a simple cluster of houses, cars, and figurines endlessly encircled by an electric train. But there were always a few folks who went overboard, constructing elaborate displays with multiple train sets, scale-model airports (complete with planes circling overhead), erupting volcanoes, or re-enactments of the moon landing, to name but a few setups I recall.

For a few years, my grandparents were some of those people. In one of their early '70s efforts--this would be the era when we kept the gifts in the dining room instead of under the tree--the 18-piece Nativity scene was set up right next to a working miniature steam engine. Across the sand "road" was an Apollo rocket launch pad, beyond which model B&O locomotives chugged through a mountain range complete with tunnel. There was a church with stained-glass windows that lit up while music played, an incredibly detailed Esso station with uniformed attendant, and a lumberyard where the trains would stop so that a miniature crane could load Lincoln Logs onto its flatbed cars.

Our Christmas garden, like most of that era, was a homegrown affair, cobbled together with glue, paint, and tissue paper on top of cardboard and balsa wood. Pop, as we called my grandfather, made some of the buildings and did all of the layout and landscaping. Some of the set pieces were purchased especially for the garden, although Pop occasionally appropriated toys for the cause from me, my brother, and our cousins (which one year led to a special guest appearance by Evel Knievel). Congruence was never an issue, nor was scale--a car might be bigger than a tree, and the Nativity figures were half as tall as the mountain. But it didn't matter--after construction, all of the elements were visually joined together by a generous sprinkling of green sawdust (which for some reason we called "moss") and fake snow from the dime store, and it all looked marvelous.

Needless to say, all of us kids were captivated by this tiny kingdom, even if we weren't allowed to touch it. One year, as compensation for hands-off good behavior, I got to help Gram make tiny trees from pieces of sponge dipped in green paint. I never tired of pointing out my contribution to the neighbor kids who sometimes came over to gaze with wonder (and, occasionally, gratifying envy) at our family's Christmas garden.

But even this was small potatoes compared to the elaborate holiday setups at local VFW halls and fire companies. Our family spent many weekends between Thanksgiving and Christmas touring enormous and intricate train displays, oohing and aahing in admiration, while simultaneously garnering inspiration for our own small-scale efforts. In those days it seemed as though every neighborhood supported a community Christmas garden, but no more; today the only Baltimore City fire company that still mounts one is Engine Company 45 in Northwest, where an elaborate display has been constructed each holiday season since 1956.

"These days we call it a train garden instead of a Christmas garden, which is what everyone from Baltimore always calls it. But we want anyone to be able to come and enjoy it, regardless of their religion or holiday," says Lt. David Joeckel, a Company 45 officer and supervisor of this year's garden construction. Joeckel estimates that 20,000 to 25,000 visitors come to ogle the 480-square-foot display

annually. "Some of them are third generation, people who came here when they were kids now bringing in their grandchildren," he says.

Construction on this annual project is an ambitious four-month undertaking. Each year, the train garden is torn down to its plywood platform and rebuilt from scratch. According to emergency-vehicle driver Tim Cadwaller, who specializes in building mountains and snow scenes, there are as many as five or six trains running on up to five different levels. "We like to change it every year so people have something different to look at," Cadwaller says. "It keeps us entertained too, building it,"

Perhaps the most popular features of the Company 45 garden are its animated scenes--more than 100 each year, from tiny skaters circling a pond to an entire three-ring circus complete with swinging acrobats. "One of the neatest things we have is the architect's model of the roller coaster from Carlin's Park," Cadwaller says, referring to the long-defunct Northwest Baltimore amusement park. "Older people who remember Carlin's get a real thrill seeing it." The functioning mini-coaster is based on a mock-up of the original's design, donated by the widow of the park's builder.

While the display changes year to year, some features are perennial, Joeckel says. "We always have some kind of water scene, a lake, and some waterfalls with bridges for the trains." (Around the station, this year's body of water, designed by Paul McClure, another fire-truck driver, is jokingly called "Lake Leak-a-Lot.") Another fixture is a fire scene, where tiny hook-and-ladder trucks race to a building with gray cotton "smoke" pouring from its windows.

"We say it takes four months to build this thing, but actually we work on it all year," Joeckel says. The builders are always on the lookout for new items and glean them from every possible source, including McDonald's Happy Meals. "We like to have cartoon scenes the kids will enjoy--this year, we'll have the Grinch," Joeckel says. He is also conversant on the relative merits of *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Bear in the Big Blue House*, and *Chicken Run*, dioramas of which are in the current display.

The train garden is built entirely by volunteer labor and funded only by donations. "Let me emphasize that not 1 cent of city money goes into this," says Lt. John Johnson, another Company 45 officer. "We have a barrel for collecting donations when the garden is open, and the guys put their own money into it as well." Johnson also confides that attendance has been dwindling in recent years, and that donations have dropped along with it. "We literally used to get busloads of people, even coming down from Pennsylvania to see it," he says. "Now it seems like people aren't as interested. And we're the last big Christmas garden in the city, that I know of."

It's heartbreaking to contemplate the decline and fall of such an endearing local tradition. Maybe it's just been too long since many Baltimoreans made time to ponder the Zen of a model train zipping smoothly around a miniature mountain, not far from a clutch of dinosaurs tromping alongside a Victorian village. As George Schaun wrote in *The Sun* in 1936:

Office workers who long ago sidetracked their youthful ambitions to hold the throttle of a space-devouring locomotive can now, for a season, control the operations of an entire railroad system . . . Care-ridden housewives, kept within four walls by silken bonds of duty, may check seething waterfalls at will, or carve mountainsides in a way to bring envy to the heart of Boulder Dam's engineers. And in this pageantry of

miniature art, every man is free to design and build his own castle. . . . So it's hammer and saw, scissors and paste, paint and thumbtacks, to shape innumerable worlds nearer to the heart's desire.

What native-born Baltimorean can resist such a poetic pitch? I think the time has come to build my very own Christmas garden. I'm going to call my grandmother right now and find out what happened to those painted sponge trees.

Engine Company 45 and Truck Company 27's train garden goes on display Dec. 2. The firehouse at Cross Country Boulevard and Glen Avenue will be open to the public daily until Jan. 7 (including Christmas and New Year's days), 10 A.M.-9 P.M.