

The granddaddy o

The Fairplex Garden Railroad—72 years old and still going strong

The Fairplex Garden Railroad in Pomona, California is located in the middle of the Los Angeles County fairgrounds. The 100' x 300' railway has occupied the same space since 1935 and has been a part of the annual fair every year except for the war years of 1942-1947. That makes 68 years of miniature trains running for the enjoyment of fair attendees. However, the fair's train display is even older.

The first LA County Fair was held in 1922. In 1924, an exhibit included a static model of a Pacific Electric Railroad trolley displayed in conjunction with a diorama of the LA County Parks & Recreation Department's Puddingstone Reservoir and Recreational area. That area is adjacent to the fairgrounds. For the 1925 fair, the trolley was motorized and a length of track was added to the display.

By 1935 the display had grown much larger and was moved outside the tent where it had been housed. Herman Howard built the trolley model and other railroad pieces housed in the tent. He was a shop teacher at Pomona High School and, with the help of his brother, Homer, laid out a ½" scale, outdoor railroad at the fairgrounds for that year's fair. After the 1935 fair, the size of the railroad was increased to 100' x 300' and has remained that size for more than 70 years.

Over the next 23 years, the Howard brothers developed their miniature railroad. They hand-built all of the ½" scale, 2½"-gauge (gauge 3) rolling stock and track. Herman bought all the materials needed to construct the rolling stock and obtained all

1. It's a pleasant afternoon at the 2006 LA County Fair in Pomona. Bleachers are placed at various areas around the fence so people can sit and watch the trains run. The rebuilt railroad celebrated 10 years in 2006.



f garden railroads

by Don Emmons | La Mirada, California | Photos by the author except where noted





This photo was taken during the 1959 fair. The buildings were separated by grassy areas that represented southern California's country living and small towns at the time. The early track was made of wood ties and pieces of iron strapping for the rails. Cuts were made in each tie and the rails were set into them. ARCHIVE PHOTO



2. Narrow-gauge trains of a variety of makeups show what might have been working the mountain's lumber and mining camps. Most of these volunteer-owned trains have been weathered and some are scratchbuilt.



3. By June 6, 1997 (when this photo was taken), the old strap-iron track had been removed and new gauge-1 track was being installed. The two bridges and the concrete elevated highway in the center of the photo are still being used. Compare this picture with photo 1. ARCHIVE PHOTO

the necessary drawings and measurements from full-size-train manufacturers. He assigned his shop-class students each a piece of rolling stock to build and supervised construction of the trains. Being a machinist, Herman made all of the parts needed. Everything was built to the same scale and the students were graded on how well each piece was built and how it performed on the railroad.

Homer passed away in 1958 and Herman turned the railroad over to Mr. and Mrs. Templin. The Templin family, with the help of John Huie, maintained and ran the railroad for the next 10 years. Just before the fair opened in 1968, Mr. Templin died suddenly due to a railroad accident. Mrs. Templin, with help from John Huie, operated the railroad for the next two years. In 1970, the LA County Fair Association took over the miniature railroad and contracted with John Huie to maintain it year round and run it during the fair. He did that for the next 26 years. After the 1996 fair, the Fairplex Association reevaluated the aging trains and the



4. Most of the younger volunteers work the weekends. Having spent some of their summer vacation working with older members on track maintenance and changes, young volunteers have no problem running the cab for a shift without supervision.



5. 2006, when this photo was taken, marked the 10th anniversary of the volunteers running the railroad at the LA County Fair. They rejuvenated the landmark, then developed it into the outstanding display that continues the tradition on this site since 1935.



6. The longest bridges on the railroad are located at the front side of the mountain area. In the foreground (not a part of the mountain line), a Santa Fe freight crosses a 15' bridge that the blue line runs over. The other two bridges are part of the mountain line. The black metal bridge is a curved, 30', through girder that was built in 10 sections. The trestle is 25 feet long. The forest trees are newly planted Alberta spruce.



7. Inside the front fence at about the middle of the railroad is the Pomona train station and a sandlot baseball field, a small park with kids on swings, and a couple of kids on skate boards stopping by to watch the game.

much overgrown gardens, which incorporated an area the size of a football field in the middle of the fairgrounds. They felt it was no longer a feature attraction of the fair and considered eliminating it.

Before a final decision was made, the Southern California Garden Railway Society was asked to evaluate the railroad and consider taking it over. Society members checked out the entire railroad and gave their findings to Fairplex management. They were asked if they could take on the rebuilding of the railroad. That was mid-April, 1997; trains would have to be running on a new setup by September 1.

The new railroad

It was felt that the old equipment and track were no longer usable, so the first task was changing the railroad over from gauge 3 to gauge 1. Gauge-1 track was readily available and all of the society members had gauge-1 trains that could be run at fair time, so the trains were not a problem.

In the five months that the group had to rebuild the railroad, long hours were spent nearly every day to change the railroad over and get it looking respectable. Between April 1997 and September 1998, 16,000 work hours were logged at the site and another 4,000 hours were put in by those same people working at home on structures. The resulting railroad was nothing like it is today, but gauge-1 trains ran on time, thanks to society members.

The entire 100' x 300' parcel is now covered with track, buildings, bridges, water features, and plants. All of the more than 5,000 feet of the old strap-iron track was removed and well over 9,000 feet of new gauge-1 track was installed. More than 2,000 linear feet of plastic tubing and conduit was used, both below ground and above, to carry the 17 miles of wire required to operate everything at this giant miniature railroad.

In the early years there was one main-line; now there are three—four, if you count the mountain area, which covers a good portion of the total size of the railroad. This area contains 265' of track, has its own yard and control panel, and can be operated independently from the main

This aerial shot shows the entire the 100' x 300' railroad, which is located in the center of the fairgrounds. ARCHIVE PHOTO



Plant list

A sampling of plants on the Fairplex
Garden Railroad
Pomona, California
USDA Hardiness Zone 10

SMALL TREES AND SHRUBS

Japanese boxwood
Buxus microphylla var. *japonica*
Winter Green Japanese boxwood
Buxus microphylla var. *japonica*
'Winter Green'
Korean boxwood
Buxus microphylla var. *koreana*
Jacqueline Hillier dwarf elm
Ulmus x hollandica 'Jacqueline
Hillier'
Seiju dwarf Chinese elm
Ulmus parvifolia 'Seiju'

GROUNDCOVERS

Tiny Green sage
Artemisia viridis 'Tiny Green'
English stonecrop
S. anglicum
Littleleaf sedum
Sedum brevifolium
Lesser Mexican stonecrop
S. confusum
Dragon's blood sedum
S. spurium
Lemon thyme
Thymus x citriodorus
Creeping thyme
T. serpyllum
Magic Carpet thyme
T. serpyllum 'Magic Carpet'
Woolly thyme
T. pseudolanuginosus
English thyme
T. vulgaris
Creeping veronica
Veronica repens

PERENNIALS AND ANNUALS

Peter Pan lily of the Nile
Agapanthus africanus 'Peter Pan'
Sweet alyssum
Lobularia maritima
Moss rose
Portulaca grandiflora
Gloxinia
Sinningia speciosa
Jerusalem cherry
Solanum pseudocapsicum

CONIFERS

Red Star dwarf white cedar
Chamaecyparis thyoides 'Red Star'
Dwarf Alberta spruce
Picea glauca 'Conica'

Railway at a glance

Name: Fairplex Garden Railroad

Scale: Various, between 1:32 and 1:20.3

Era: 1850s to present day

Theme: California Discovered—
The role of railroads in California's history

Motive power: Wide variety from various manufacturers

Length of mainline: Blue line, 1,095'; Orange and yellow lines, 570' each; Mountain line, 265'; total trackage, 9,800'

Maximum gradient: 1.4% on the three mainlines

Type of track: Gauge-1 track from various manufacturers

Minimum radius: 30' on mainlines

Structures: Various, including kits and scratchbuilt made of wood, plastic, cast cement, and Precision Board

Control system: Four mainlines, controlled from a central cab, track powered

Web site: www.fgrr.org

More info: To become a volunteer, visit the web site above or e-mail gardenrailroad@fairplex.com



8. A vintage Mikado hauls a freight train that carries a special car. The limited-edition white reefer is a USA Trains car commissioned to commemorate the new railroad's 10th anniversary. Rugged-looking dwarf Chinese elms with thickened trunks add a sense of age to the scenery.

control room, if desired, when a volunteer runs his train.

Of the other lines the Blue line is the longest at 1,095'. Orange and Yellow lines are each 570' long. All three are set up to accommodate two trains running on each track at the same time. All four lines are controlled manually by the crew in the cab.

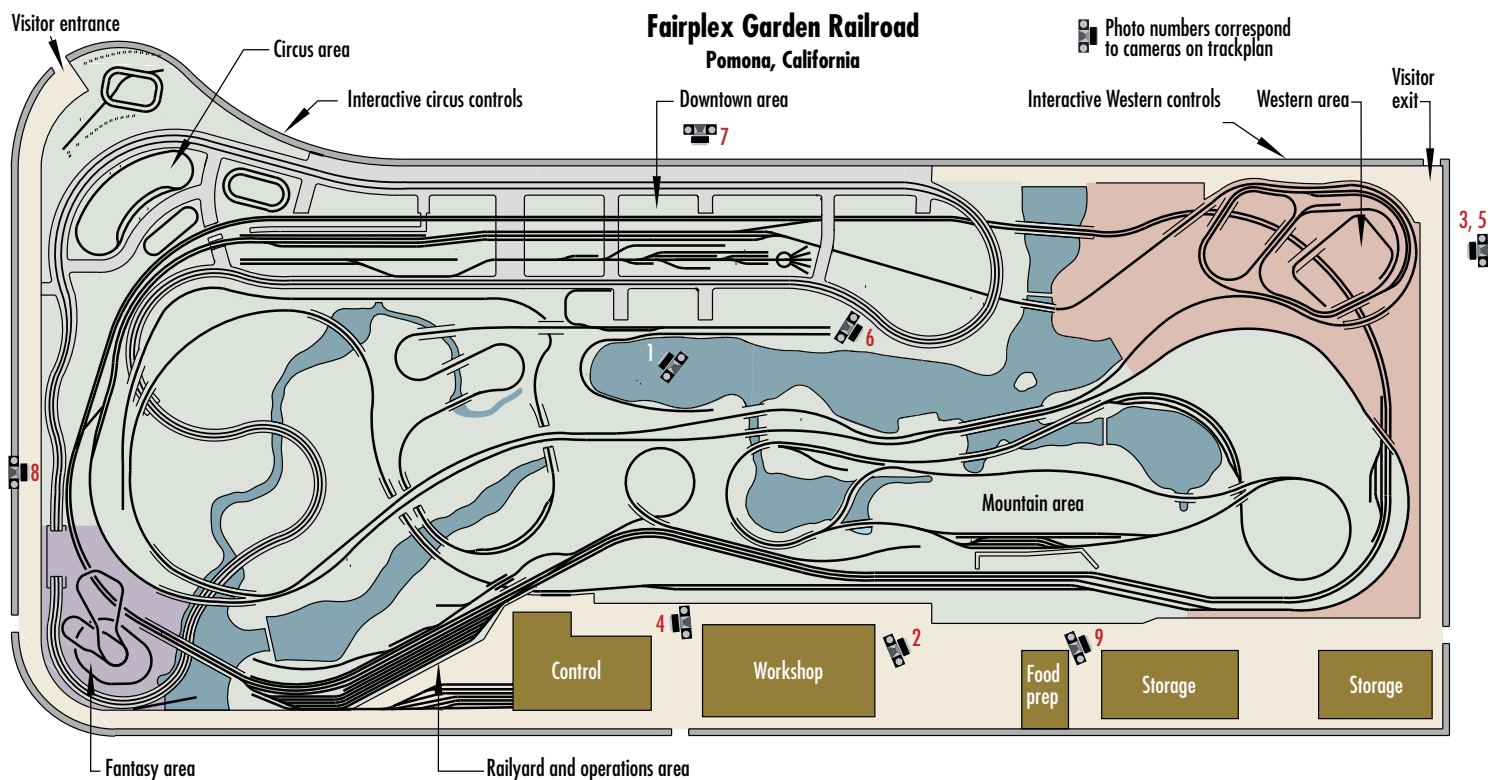
Features of the railroad

This garden railroad, being open to the public, has numerous other areas with things going on during the fair hours.

There are yard engines, streetcars, trolleys, and early circus trains in motion, as well as battery-powered trucks that run on highways. Most of those are started in the morning and continue to run all day, not being controlled by the cab.

The entire football-field-size railroad is used in some way. A large circus fills the northwestern corner. It has many operating features, including a cutaway big-top tent for a view of the three-ring circus inside.

Two popular features that keep many fair goers (especially younger ones) coming



back year after year are the interactive areas. Located at the front two corners of the 300' fence are openings with panels containing buttons that control three trains on short loops, set up so kids of all ages can run a train by simply holding down the button. There's nearly always a line for a chance to play. Docents are stationed to make sure that big kids don't hog the buttons and to show the smaller ones how to find which train they are going to run. These are the first trains to start each day and the last to be turned off.

This railroad has 60 switches scattered throughout its many systems. Twenty-three are used in the large yard alone. The railroad has 45 bridges and trestles of various types and materials. The smallest is a one-foot wood girder bridge on the mountain line; the longest are a 30' long, through-girder and a 25' wood trestle, also part of the mountain area.

The crew

Ten years have passed since the group took over this giant railroad. Their dedication has remained constant. Most of the original group who converted the railroad remain a part of the crew today. There are about 80 volunteers: men and women, and young people working alongside their parents. Some younger members work in operations and can handle the entire



9. Over the years, the mountain area has been a problem, as the trees have grown out of scale. When the volunteers took over in 1996, the trees were over 6' tall. They were pruned regularly, but became so unrealistic that they had to be removed. In January 2006, over 100, 18"-tall dwarf Alberta spruce were planted.

railroad during fair time. Volunteers work year-round on the railroad, adding new items, but mostly maintaining the gardens and tracks.

Trees

Over the past few years, controlling the trees in the mountain area has become more difficult. The cypress trees had been there for a long time and it was difficult to keep them in scale. The group contacted a tree farm and, in January of 2006, the old cypress trees were replaced by 100 dwarf

Alberta spruces. Now the mountain has trees that are in perfect scale.

Workdays are Wednesdays and Saturdays. The railroad is open to the public on the first Sunday of each month, in addition to special events held at the fairgrounds. The best time to see the railroad is during the fair in September (the fair is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays). Come in the afternoon and stay until after dark, as the railroad looks quite different with all of the lights in the buildings and passenger cars. **II**