



# The Woodland

*25 years  
and still counting*

by Jim Strong | Upper Marlboro, Maryland  
Photos by Marc Horovitz unless otherwise noted

**T**wenty five years is a long time to be involved with a hobby, but I've always enjoyed working on long-term projects. However, when I started the Woodland Railway, I had no idea that this project, like marriage and a home, would never be finished. There would always be maintenance and modifications required just to keep it in existence.



Engine N° 16 sits with a freight consist at the town designed after Pinocchio's village in the Disney movie. All the buildings were constructed of vinyl concrete stuccoed over styrofoam bases. The large forest trees towering above the railroad offer cooling shade, but present gardening challenges, including falling leaves and branches. Boxwoods, Japanese holly, yews, hemlocks and native mosses all grow well in the shade of these trees.



# Railway

## How it started

At the time I started the railway in 1980, my son Kevin, age 9, was already playing with electric trains. He and I were both fascinated by the large-scale LGB trains that could be run outside, and we put temporary tracks down in our wooded backyard to get a feel for what it would be like to run trains out of doors. The contours of the ground in the woods pretty well defined where the track had to go if it was

going to be anywhere close to level. Because I wanted wide curves in two reverse loops, and there being no flex track available at that time, I built my own track with aluminum rail that had just been introduced by Norman Rhodes. I made ties out of redwood, which are still in good shape after 25 years in the ground. Since the railway was going to have reverse loops and sidings, I also had to make switches. It took three years of building track and switches in the winter, and hauling dirt and laying track in the summer, to finish a railway in the woods. It was Kevin's continued interest and enthusiasm that prodded me on. Without him, it never would have happened.

## Early scenery

In 1983, the Woodland Railway was just tracks in the woods. Half of the reverse loops were built on embankments because of the sloping grade of my property. I knew I had to do something to keep the

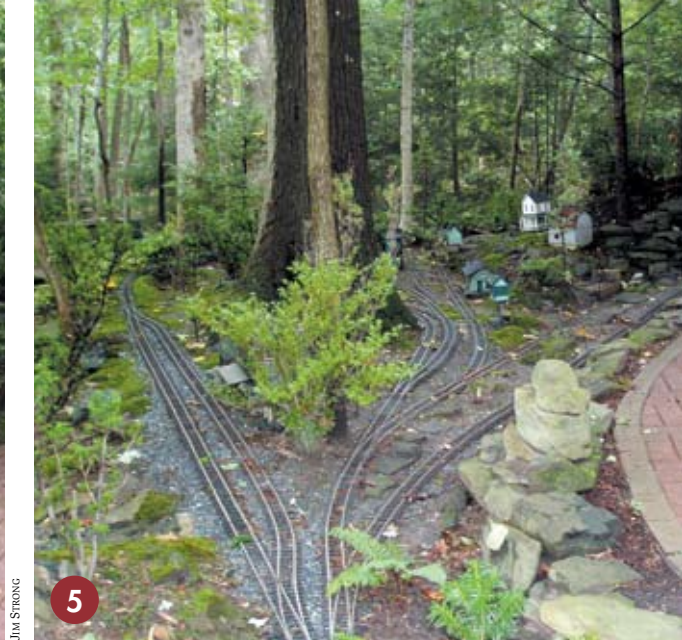
TOP: The first train of the day will be a passenger run from Willow Flats to Tall Oaks via Woodland Junction and Hemlock Hills. After the train returns, engine N° 16 will be put into way-freight service between the four towns.

ABOVE: The Savage Timber Co. receives logs from the timber dock at Tall Oaks and converts it into lumber, mine props, railroad ties, and other timber products.



**ABOVE:** The European flavor of Hemlock Hills comes through in this overview of the area. Native moss fills nearly every empty space.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** The loss of most of its cedar seedlings has given the Tall Oaks yard a desolate look. A major makeover, with new plants, is scheduled for next spring. Winding paths through the trees have “domesticated” the forest, and new plants tucked in below the trees have helped make the forest more of a “garden.”



JIM STRONG

dirt from eroding on the embankments, so the “garden” started at this time. I obtained some large Pennsylvania field stones and placed them on the embankments, covering or replacing much of the dirt. Then I found some cedar seedlings (Virginia junipers) growing in the woods behind my home. These had a realistic appearance as a scale tree, so I planted lots of them on the railway—close to a thousand over 10 years. To keep the ballast from spreading away from the track, I transplanted moss along each side, also dug up from the woods. This provided a grassy-looking area along the tracks. A Pola station was placed next to the track in each of the loops and we had an operating railway—for passenger trains, anyway.

### Expansion

By this time, Kevin was becoming bored with running passenger trains round and round. He suggested we build railroad yards in each of the reverse loops in order to make up trains and deliver goods. This took many more wheelbarrow loads of dirt and the construction of several switches. Two years later

(1985), the yards were in and we were able to do freight operations.

I added several nursery-provided bushes and small trees to the railway to fill in the open spaces. Not being a horticulturalist, I killed quite a few trying to find ones that would survive the shade of the woods. The bushes that would survive were few and none of them had any color. Even azalea bushes wouldn’t bloom, although they could be trimmed to represent trees.

This lack of variety in plants, plus the fact that Kevin wanted to expand the length of the line, led to thoughts of building an addition to the railway in our side yard, where it was much sunnier. One thing that made this expansion possible was the fact that we had converted the railway to battery power with radio control. This would let us run the trains over a large distance without worrying about losses in track power. My wife Ruth, who looked forward to a new garden in the side yard, gave her blessing, and two weeks later a new railway was staked out that more than doubled the length of the original line.

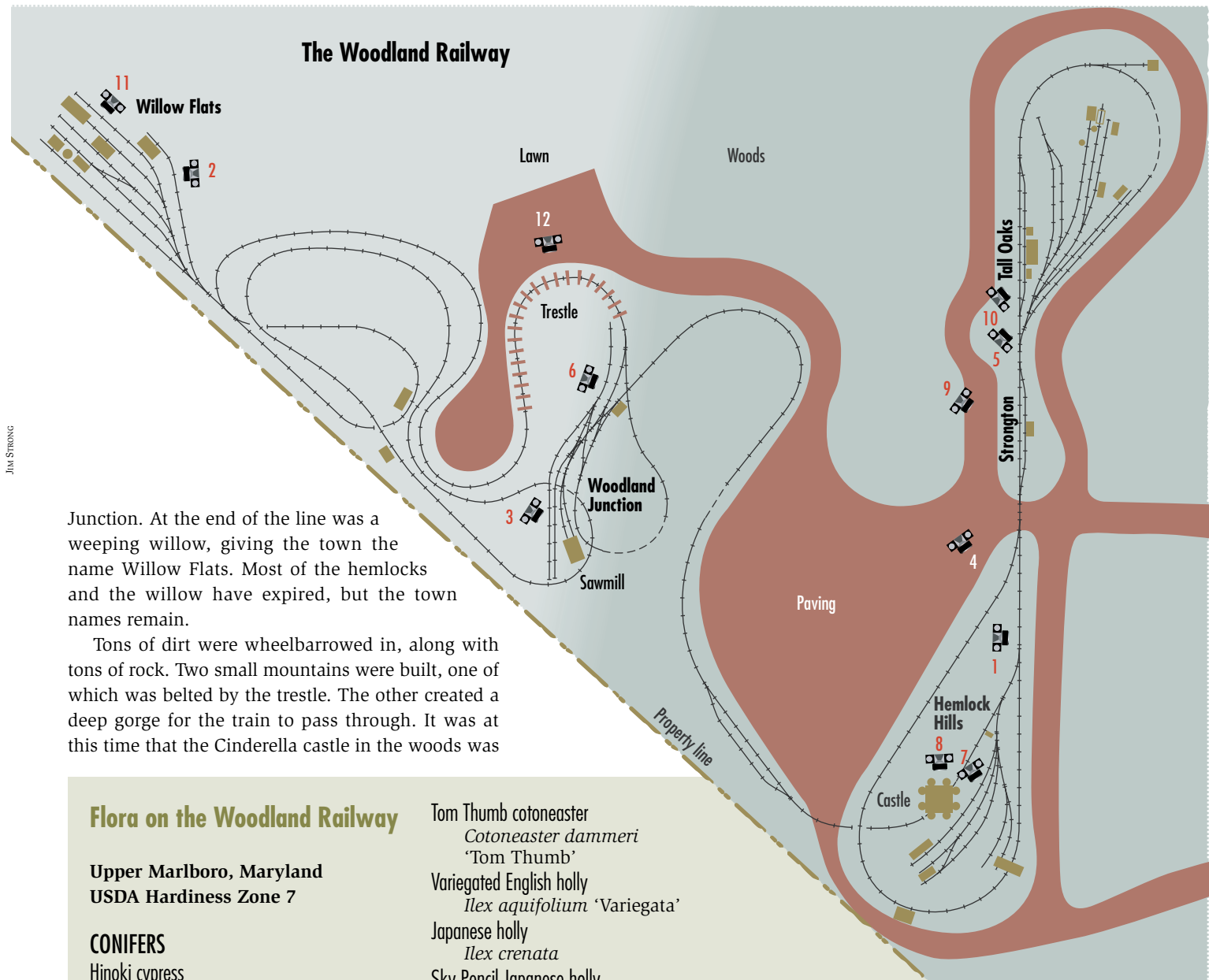
At the edge of the woods in the side yard was a three-foot bank that gave us a large elevation change in a short distance, much like that in Georgetown, Colorado. Rather than build a loop (like Georgetown’s), we included a long horseshoe curve, part of which was on a trestle.

The side-yard addition, like the woods line, consists of a mainline between two reverse loops. Two yards were added, allowing us to carry freight between four towns. In the woods we named the towns Tall Oaks, for the trees surrounding one of the reverse loops; and Hemlock Hills, because of several hemlocks planted in the other. In the side yard, the town at the edge of the woods was called Woodland



**A mixed freight leaves the water tower at Woodland Junction, preparing for the long steep grade up to Hemlock Hills. If the consist is over six or seven cars, a helper engine must be called out.**

## The Woodland Railway



Junction. At the end of the line was a weeping willow, giving the town the name Willow Flats. Most of the hemlocks and the willow have expired, but the town names remain.

Tons of dirt were wheelbarrowed in, along with tons of rock. Two small mountains were built, one of which was belted by the trestle. The other created a deep gorge for the train to pass through. It was at this time that the Cinderella castle in the woods was

### Flora on the Woodland Railway

Upper Marlboro, Maryland  
USDA Hardiness Zone 7

#### CONIFERS

- Hinoki cypress  
*Chamaecyparis obtusa*
- Virginia juniper, Eastern red cedar  
*Juniperus virginiana*
- Dwarf Alberta spruce  
*Picea glauca* 'Conica'
- English yew  
*Taxus baccata*
- American arborvitae  
*Thuja occidentalis*
- Canadian hemlock  
*Tsuga canadensis*
- Weeping hemlock  
*Tsuga canadensis* 'Pendula'

#### SHRUBS AND TREES

- Littleleaf boxwood  
*Buxus microphylla*
- Green Velvet boxwood  
*Buxus* x 'Green Velvet'
- Common boxwood  
*Buxus sempervirens*

- Tom Thumb cotoneaster  
*Cotoneaster dammeri*  
'Tom Thumb'
- Variiegated English holly  
*Ilex aquifolium* 'Variegata'
- Japanese holly  
*Ilex crenata*
- Sky Pencil Japanese holly  
*Ilex crenata* 'Sky Pencil'
- Steed's Japanese holly  
*Ilex crenata* 'Steed's'
- Dwarf heavenly bamboo  
*Nandina domestica* 'Nana'
- Otto Luyken laurel  
*Prunus laurocerasus* 'Otto Luyken'
- Pink azalea  
*Rhododendron eriocarpum*

#### GROUNDCOVERS

- Woodwaxen  
*Genista lydia*
- Turkish sedum  
*Sedum bithynicum*
- Periwinkle  
*Vinca minor*
- Barbie's apple (local name)  
*Vinca minor* 'Miss Jekyll's White'

### The railway at a glance

- Name:** Woodland Railway
- Size of railroad:** 4000 sq ft;  
20' x 100' in woods, 20' x 100' in side yard
- Scale:** 1:22.5
- Gauge:** 45mm
- Theme:** Freight operations & fantasy
- Era:** 1930s
- Age:** 25 years
- Motive power:** Steam and early diesel;  
Aristo-Craft, LGB, Bachmann
- Length of mainline:** 700'
- Maximum gradient:** 6%
- Minimum radius:** 5'
- Type of track:** Handlaid aluminum;  
and Kalamazoo & LGB flex ties with  
Micro-Engineering rail
- Structures:** Pola kits and scratchbuilt
- Control system:** Battery & R/C



7

**ABOVE:** The coal tippie at Hemlock Hills provides coal loads to be delivered to coal docks at Tall Oaks and Willow Flats. Filled hoppers are placed on the siding next to the tippie by the engine crews.

**RIGHT:** Cinderella's castle, made from styrofoam coated with a sandy, vinyl-acrylic paste, has survived more than 20 years at Hemlock Hills, needing only minor maintenance and repainting.



8

added, with the track tunneling under it. In the side yard, more cedar seedlings were planted, along with boxwoods, dwarf junipers, hinoki cypresses, hemlocks, and azaleas. Wonder of wonders—they all grew! One of the interesting features of the side-yard extension was that the track passed between two large trees, making it look like a full-size railroad passing between two redwoods. The extension and a connecting track linking it with the woods line took about four years to complete. By 1989, the trackwork on the Woodland Railway was virtually the same as it is today. Most of my time from then on consisted of maintenance and adding buildings.

### Changes

A lot has happened to the railway over the last 16 years. Cedar trees I planted as seedlings now stand 20' tall in the side yard. Trees that once shaded the railway have died and been chopped down. Some of



the buildings have rotted away. Two years ago, virtually all of the hundreds of cedar seedlings I planted in the woods died from some sort of blight and exist now only as stumps.

Much of the maintenance work consists of cutting back growth in the sunny side yard and replacing dead plants in the shady woods. Fortunately, the side yard acts as a nursery for many plants that can then be transplanted in the woods.

Other changes to the Woodland Railway have been caused by changing conditions in my life. As you may have gathered, my son Kevin has been a primary motivator and motivation in the development of the railway. Our roles in its development were synergistic. He was interested in the train operations and he took care of the rolling stock and locomotives. I, on the other hand, was interested in building the railway—planning, digging, planting, and generally playing in the dirt. We “played well

together.” When Kevin went off to college in 1992, I was left without a playmate. Although we were active in the Washington, Virginia, Maryland Garden Railway Society, I hadn’t found a group of buddies who liked to run trains. Consequently, the actual running of the trains on the railway took a back seat to developing new features, which was more in line with my own interests.

The cover of a Disney magazine at that time featured a picture of the village in which Pinocchio lived in the Alps region of Europe. I had just the location on the railway for such a village, which would complement the Cinderella castle. The village, which was built over one winter, now sits on a hill next to the main line at Hemlock Hill. A couple of years later, I built four more elaborate houses based on David Winter Cottages, and placed them in another area above the mainline at Hemlock Hills. Hemlock Hills has developed a European flavor.

**TOP:** Freight engine № 16 and excursion passenger engine № 3 await orders to proceed from Strongton station. Native mosses, gathered from the Strong’s backyard forest, mixed with small-needled conifers, provide most of the railway’s “local” landscaping.

**ABOVE:** The Tall Oaks station complex, abandoned for two years, is awaiting refurbishment once funds (and time) become available.



11

**The East Broad Top Railroad and Coal Co. has generously loaned its Augwick N° 7 to the Woodland Railway until WRY's N° 6 gets its boiler retubed (i.e., new batteries installed).**

The final building effort on the railway, starting about 1995, was based on our idea that the railway should have sources and destinations for its freight. Accordingly, some sort of storage area suitable for goods carried in a boxcar (primarily freight houses) was built for each town. Storage tanks were built to service tank cars. A sawmill was added to service flat cars, which could carry timber and rough lumber, and boxcars, which could carry finished lumber. A coal mine was added to provide loads for hopper cars, and coal tipples were built to take delivery of coal. A gravel tipple provided loads for gondola cars. Water towers serviced locomotives and a car-maintenance building was added. In addition, I wrote a

computer program to print out train orders based on the number of cars we wanted to put into service during an operating session.

Then there was a major change in the environment of the Woodland Railway. Up to this time, the railway in the wooded portion of our backyard was really “in the woods.” In 2000, Ruth and I decided to pave the paths through the woods. Suddenly the area was no longer a woods, but more of a park. We had embarked on a path of “domesticating” the woods, raking up leaves and putting in plants and bushes. Our whole woods is now more of a garden. The Woodland Railway has become absorbed into the Woodland Garden & Railway Co. The railway is no longer the sole focus of our attention, but part of a bigger picture.

In 2004 the railway suffered a big loss. As I mentioned before, virtually all of the hundreds of cedar trees planted on the railway in the woods died. This was very discouraging to me because many of the visual barriers that made the railway interesting were now gone.

Other things have changed in my life, too. After I retired from NASA in 1996, I spent much more of my time working on the railway. Predictably, burnout occurred and I had to look for other things to do. I



JIM STRONG

**Each year the two gum trees on either side of this track have to be cut back with a chainsaw to maintain clearance.**



took a course in sculpting, and railroad projects have been replaced by sculpting projects in the winter. In addition, computers have allowed me to renew my interest in animation and making movies. Although my life is now much more interesting and varied, the Woodland Railway gets much less of my time.

**Rebirth**

Ruth and I have now realized that we can no longer manage the Woodland Garden & Railway alone. This past spring we obtained the help of a landscaper to work on an area I have been wanting to finish

for several years. I'm encouraged that they can help me maintain and improve the garden and railway and add needed plants each year.

The biggest asset to the railway right now is a group of people who enjoy coming over every few weeks to run trains, primarily in realistic freight operations. With these fellows badgering me, I now have great incentive each summer to get the railway in shape to operate and, with the help of the landscapers, keep the scenery up. Now if I could just find someone who enjoys maintaining buildings. II

**Engine N° 16 hauls a mixed freight consist from Willow Flats up to Woodland Junction. The trestle is part of a horseshoe curve needed to keep the grade reasonable between Woodland Junction and Willow Flats.**



Jim Strong has lived his entire life within 20 miles of the Nation's Capitol. A graduate of the University of Maryland, he received a Ph.D. at Maryland after having been registered at the school continuously for 16 years. Jim spent his working career at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, designing advanced computers. He ended his career developing techniques to visualize earth-science data using computer graphics. Jim now enjoys his retirement making computer cartoon animations, sculpting, and working on the Woodland Railway (pretty much in that order). He's seen here with his wife Ruth and a cake presented to them by the Washington, Virginia, Maryland Garden Railway Society to commemorate the Woodland Railway's 25th birthday.