

LAYOUT
DESIGN

02686. 021108. SILETS. BUS. 60010, S.N.

SITE
PREPARATION

TO: Rep. Mark Kirk
FROM: Elaine Silets
DATE: February 11, 2008
RE: The Acquisition of the EJ&E by CN

ENGINEERING

Dear Rep. Kirk:

INSTALLATION

I build railroads, albeit miniature, and all the same rules apply. I have watched with great concern the unfolding saga of the people versus Canadian National as regards the acquisition of the EJ&E Rail Line.

PROJECT
COORDINATION

I think it should be noted that while the aroused citizenry have protested loud and clear, it is now time to take stock of the situation in a even handed manner.

OPERATION

Rail freight is essential to our economy. First and foremost it is energy efficient using the diesel electric locomotives that are at our disposal, which minimally impacts our environment. It supplies us with the cheapest method of transport, while airfreight continues to guzzle mid-eastern oil and pollute the environment in a disgraceful manner, we continue to embrace the non-eco friendly airlines and try to inhibit trains passing through our communities.

BOTANICAL
EXPERTISE

It is now time to act in a proactive manner, because like it or not I think they are coming. If Canadian National wants to enter our communities we and our elected representatives must persuade CN to do the following:

San Jose Transportation Board
CN EJ&E SIS - FD-35087
Log and Distribution

Date Recd: _____

HDR File No. _____

HUFF & PUFF INDUSTRIES, LTD.

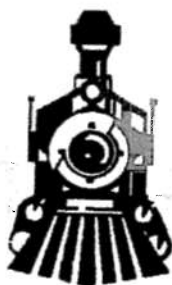
Elaine Silets, Designer/Engineer

"Manufacturers of Train Lady® Products Including TreeMountain®"

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Original - Job File



Manufacturers of Indoor and Outdoor Custom Model Toy Train Layouts in all Scales,
and Garden Railways for Commercial Displays and Private Homes.

125 Arrowhead Lane, Barrington Illinois 60010-6970
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- First, in areas of high traffic density they need to install viaducts with under passes which would allow ingress and egress of emergency vehicles, fire, ambulance, and police, as well as enabling vehicular traffic to pass unimpeded. (A case in point is the grade level viaduct just south of Ela Road on Rt 12, which allows for the continuous flow of traffic and trains.)
- Also of great concern are the issues of safety. There seems to be a general misunderstanding about stopping trains. Trains can not stop on a dime if they are going 40 MPH. What happens is that they will derail or jack-knife, which will result in injury and death. Most railroad traffic accidents are a result of people, cars, busses and trucks trying to evade and avoid crossing gates in the down position. (The tragic history the school bus stalled on the tracks in Cary, is a case in point).

This can be remedied by adopting the crossing gates that are used throughout all of Europe and other parts of the world. These gates have a steel mesh or bar mechanism that closes the gates to the ground, making it impossible to circumvent the barricades. This prevents human beings and vehicles from becoming entrapped, potentially causing catastrophic accidents. I strongly recommend this type of gate be mandatory not only in the Chicago area but also mandated NATIONALLY.

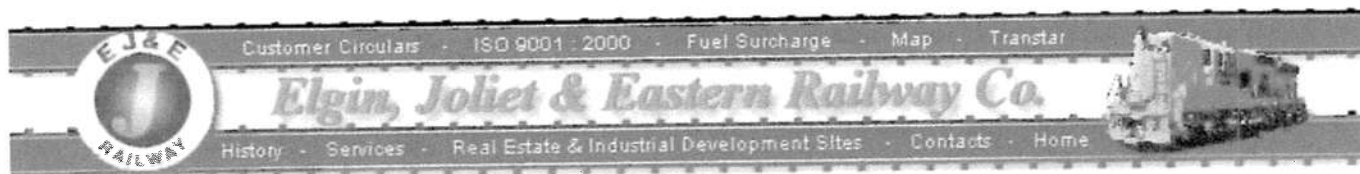
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I hope the aforementioned will give everyone involved some ideas about the suggested resolution of this dispute and help to bring both factions together to find common ground upon which to build our futures together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Elaine Silets".

Elaine Silets
The Train Lady ®
Huff & Puff Industries, Ltd.
Barrington, Illinois



EJ&E MAP



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A 'COOL HAND LUKE' CHRISTMAS | LAST-MINUTE GIFT IDEAS

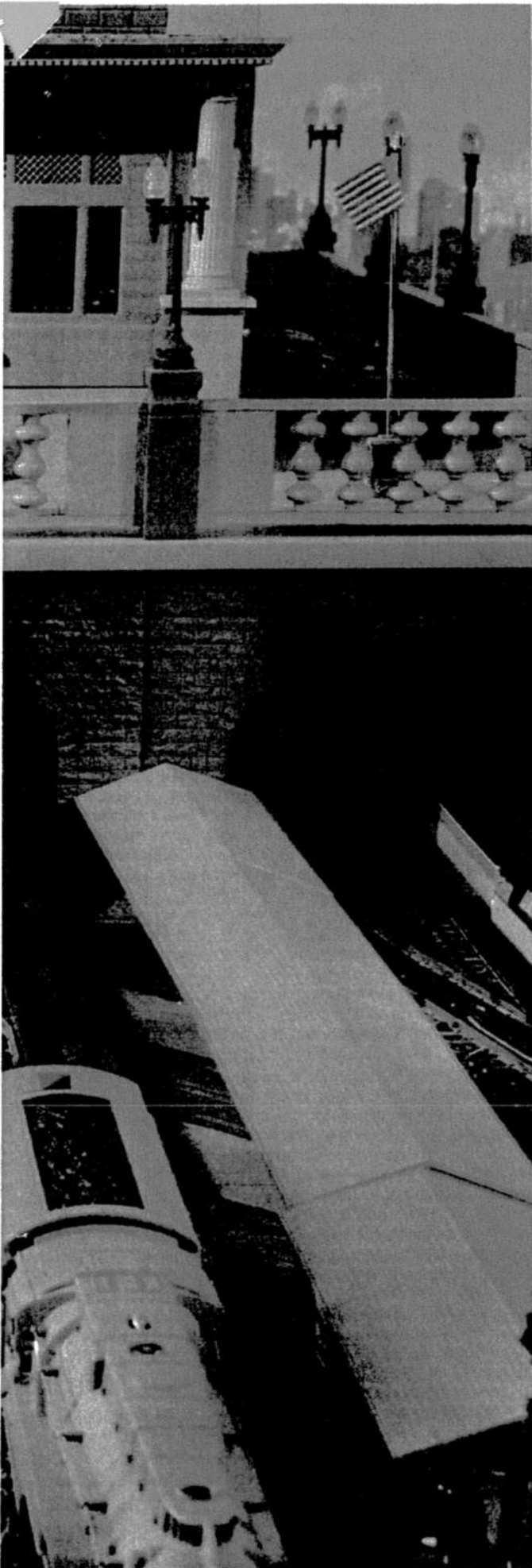
Chicago Tribune Magazine

DECEMBER 23, 2007 • SECTION 10

**Metra, beware.
Chicago's about to get
a new rail system.**

(So what if the cars are
only a foot long?)





Playing **Santa** with the **Santa Fe**

NOTHING SAYS CHRISTMAS
LIKE AN ELECTRIC TRAIN SET.
BUT THE ONE THAT ELAINE SILETS
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On the night before Christmas,

not so long ago, a teary-eyed woman appeared at the door of a big white house in Barrington. She was in a terrible fix: She needed railroad track. Right now. A dealer in the city had run out of the good stuff. If she didn't get it in time, her little boy's holiday would be ruined. Could the Train Lady save Christmas?

The Train Lady, also known as Elaine Silets, got up from dinner and went out to the barn. There, amid the work benches, drafting tables and walls papered with drawings of exploding chocolate volcanoes, she rummaged through her stash of tiny towns, miniature people and track of various gauges. A few minutes later, the young mother was dashing home, dry-eyed and smiling.

Emergencies do come up, like saving Christmas. But ordinarily, Silets doesn't deal in individual pieces of track.

The Train Lady's specialty is wonderment.

Silets, a grandmother of three, is one of the few women in the male-dominated world of high end—very high end—model railroad layout design and construction. Silets and her helpers make everything from tiny, N-scale, table-top layouts that traverse mountains and rivers under glass, to burly outdoor garden railroads at G-scale that wind past waterfalls and trees, chug through snow drifts in winter and through canyons that bloom with impatiens in summer. (N-scale has a ratio of 1:160; something that is 16 feet long in the real world would be a foot in length as a model. The G-scale ratio is 1:20, or roughly 1/2-inch to the foot).

W

hat I do is trains as art," Silets says. And she has suffered for her art. She wore out two knuckles on her right hand building railroads and had to have the joints removed and replaced. (One of her train layouts, which she constructed while healing from the surgery, will be featured as part of "eMotion Pictures: an Exhibition of Orthopaedics in Art," which will be at the Chicago Cultural Center from April 16th through July 22). "I have the grounds for a great employee's-comp case," she says. "The problem is, I'm self-employed."

Beyond the toll on her health, model railroading "can be a cutthroat business," she sighs. Once a competitor sneaked onto her property and photographed her garden train. Then he ran an ad in a model train magazine, saying that he could build the exact same layout.

Her creations have graced the pages of the Neiman Marcus Christmas book and the cover of the Hammacher Schlemmer gift catalog.

Even Silets' least expensive railroads—say, a small holiday setup with flying reindeer, soaring skiers and a train circling beneath the branches of a tinsel tree—can easily cost \$6,000. The prices climb steadily up from there, like the little engine that could. Her company, in fact, is named Huff & Puff Industries.

Over the years, she has built layouts costing tens of thousands of dollars for heiresses, business tycoons, restaurants, the John Hancock Center and the heavily armored home of a deceased suburban politician who was reputed to be on a first-name basis with more than one Chicago mobster. With playmates like that, no wonder the pol lived in a house with steel shutters covering the windows and entrances.

"I couldn't find the front door," Silets says. "He also had two of the fiercest birds I have ever encountered in my life. That gray parrot followed me everywhere. That was one scary job."

But now the Train Lady wants to give her grandest, most expensive creation away as a gift to the people of Chicago. She calls it the Great Wandering Tree Railroad, named after her arboreal 10-acre estate, Wandering Tree.

The stunning, 44-foot by 27-foot multimedia layout is worth well north of \$1.5 million and took her, with a team of six, more than two years to build, racing against death and sorrow.

It is an O-scale (1:48, or ¼ inch to the foot) interpretation of the city, with freight, passenger and elevated trains running through, over and around the miniature metropolis, the tracks even stretching out to the farmland of a simulated McHenry County. The layout, Silets says, contains 60 switches; two interactive freight and passenger yards; 61 operational miniatures; two custom lift bridges; and a complete working signaling system. It required 36,000 linear feet of wire and is powered by six transformers, which juice 16 trains, two trolleys, two "L" trains, two subway trains and 54 of the working miniatures. There are also tiny cameras installed in four of the engines. The cameras project moving images on four flat screen televisions in the control booth, making it seem as if you're actually driving each train from the cab.

"Her layout ranks right up there with the best in the country," says Tom McComas, whose production company produces videos and books about model railroad layouts across America.

When it's going at full throttle, the Wandering Tree sounds more like a thundering stampede. She has to turn off a few trains and miniature automations so she can be heard. There are bells and whistles, horns and exclamations of awe from first-time visitors.

The trains and trolleys zip past some of Chicago's iconic landmarks, new ones as well as old ones like Wrigley Field, its bleachers packed and a tiny ballplayer running the bases. "If you've ever tried building Wrigley Field," Silets says, "then you know it's no small task."

An "L" train pulls up to the Friendly Confines and a conductor's voice announces, "Addison Street, Wrigley Field." Across the street from the park is a McDonald's restaurant. A car is in the drive-thru and a child's voice pesters his mother for a Happy Meal. Silets says she didn't have room for U.S. Cellular Field, the home of the 2005 World Champion White Sox. But she did put a Sox decal on the side of one of the trains.

There's Union Station, the Art Institute and a merry-go-round in a park. A man is swinging back and forth in a hammock. Push a button and the park slowly rises, revealing a missile silo. Push another button and the missile goes sailing through the air. "That's just something I came up with in the middle of the night," Silets says. "I don't know of a real missile silo in Chicago today."

There's a seedy part of town, with shabby buildings and a group of hobos gathered around a fire. "Children today don't know what hobos are," she says. "I always tell them they are homeless people. Then they get it."

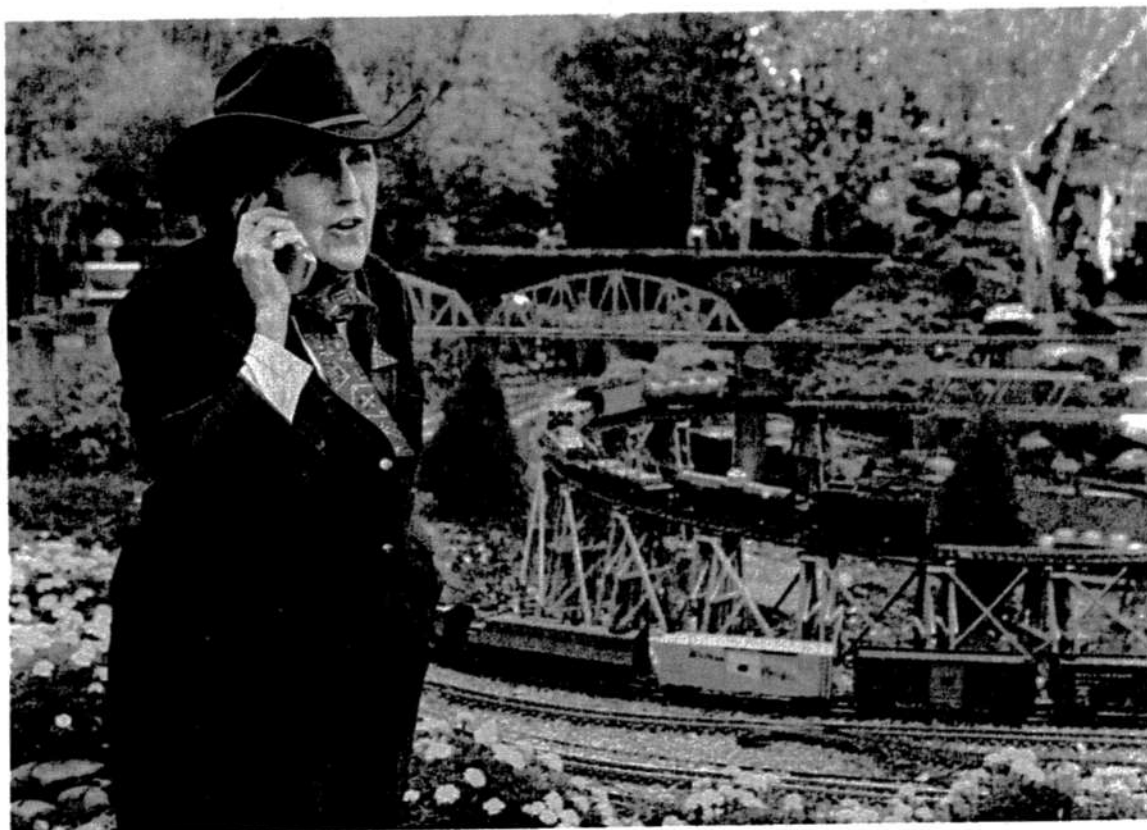
And there's a drive-in movie theater, with a real film playing on the screen, which in The Train Lady's Chicago is run by a portable DVD player. The current feature is "Silver Streak," the Richard Pryor, Gene Wilder action comedy about love and murder on a cross-country train trip.

Down the track, along Michigan Avenue, sits Millennium Park. There's the same billowing steel grid of the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion and the shiny beauty of Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate sculpture, better known around these parts as The Bean.

Neither the real park nor the miniature one would be nearly as much fun without the Crown Fountains, with their huge video screens of ordinary Chicagoans spraying water from their mouths. In Silets' version, her face is on one fountain and the face of her husband, Harvey, is on the other, "spitting at each other," she says, "in perpetuity."

Lois Weisberg, commissioner of cultural affairs for the City of Chicago, traveled to Barrington with two of her assistants recently to see—and hear—the Great Wandering Tree in action. "We all thought it was wonderful," Weisberg says. "In certain ways it's a work of art. It has all these touches of fantasy. It would flow more into the arts category than a model railroad as we think of them."

Since that visit, Weisberg and her staff have been trying to find just the right home for Silets' masterpiece, which currently sits in a specially constructed building on her estate. Weisberg says she is confident it will be placed in a museum or maybe a venue such as Union Station or the



Elaine Silets, "The Train Lady," takes a call in her garden, which is crisscrossed by one of the elaborate outdoor train displays on her Barrington estate.

Garfield Park Conservatory. A delegation from the Museum of Science & Industry is expected to come out and see the railroad this month. The museum has a huge model railroad layout of its own, but it lacks the whimsical touches of the Great Wandering Tree. "We think it's charming," Weisberg says. "The adults will love it and the children will love it. And one of the best attractions is that it is totally about Chicago."

Silets built Wandering Tree for her husband, a grocer's son from Albany Park who grew up to be a nationally renowned tax attorney and ardent arborist. "We were very, very different people," she says. "Harvey was totally un-mechanical and when I was a little girl my mother would ask me to fix the toaster. I loved adventure. He loved accounting. But he was brilliant and the most charming man in the world."

They met in the early 1960s. The Train Lady was Elaine Gordon in those days, a young painter living in Paris. She came home to Chicago to visit her wealthy parents, who threw a cocktail party in her honor. Her father invited an up-and-coming lawyer he had been impressed with after watching him argue a case. Four months later, Harvey and Elaine

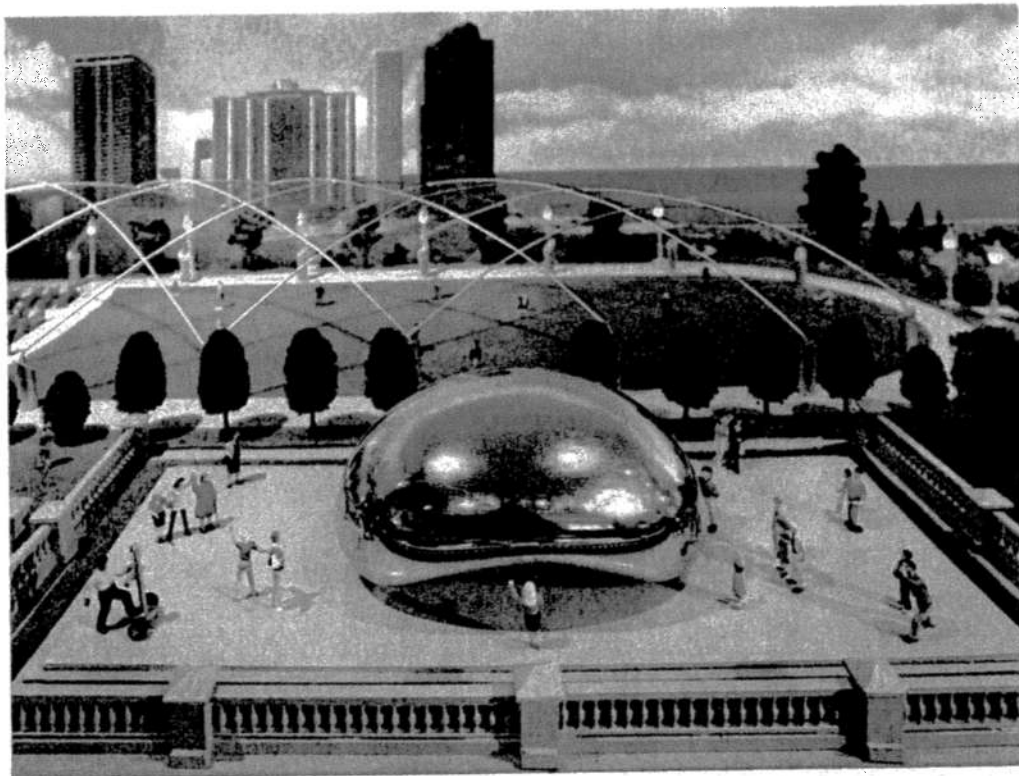
became Mr. and Mrs. Silets. "I never expected to spend my life married to a very conservative lawyer," she says. "It turns out I made absolutely the right choice."

Harvey went to work for the U.S. Attorney's Office, prosecuting tax fraud, and he and Elaine started a family. They had three children, two boys and a girl. Harvey soon went into private practice.

When their sons were 4 and 2, Elaine's parents bought each of the boys a Lionel train set from Marshall Field's. "I had to set them up," Elaine says. "My husband couldn't operate a screwdriver."

Sitting on the floor surrounded by track and locomotives, Elaine was filled with memories of her own childhood. When she was a little girl, her uncle bought her older brother, Sheldon, "a magnificent Lionel Santa Fe Superchief" train set, she says. World War II was blazing across Europe and the Pacific. Toy trains made out of steel were hard to come by because of wartime rationing.

Her uncle handed Elaine what she calls "another ubiquitous doll." But Sheldon, who loved horses and building model airplanes, showed little interest in the train. Elaine was thrilled. She tossed away the doll and



Millennium Park is a major feature of the Wandering Tree Railroad. Elaine Silets welded the Frank Gehry-designed grid herself. Note the security guard about to use a Segway to the left of The Bean.

Elaine was setting up an exhibit at the Children's Museum when a group of 5-year-olds started calling her *The Train Lady*. “They didn’t know my name, they just knew what I did ... I loved it.”

“absconded with my brother’s train.”

As Elaine grew older, she put away her trains and chased her dream of becoming an artist in Paris. Then along came love, marriage, children and a house in the suburbs. Elaine went to work for her husband, running his law office. “I went planning to stay two weeks to help out,” she says, “and ended up staying 16 years.”

While she outgrew her toys long ago, she never stopped loving trains. She and her husband rode them, real ones, all over Europe and China. In South Africa, the crew even allowed her to drive one.

The Silets, especially Harvey, also loved trees. “Trees are something Harvey didn’t have growing up in the city,” Elaine says. Every Saturday, they haunted the nurseries, buying trees and planting them on their estate. Some of them marked important events in the family’s history: a pink magnolia for her mother’s 100th birthday; a blue fir tree for the Silets’ 40th wedding anniversary; a linden for the life of their son, Jonathan, who died of heart failure when he was 17.

In 1992, Elaine lost her job when Harvey joined a bigger law firm and closed his office. Elaine became a housewife and “started going crazy with boredom.” Her children told her she had to find something to do. She was driving them crazy too. A lifelong gardener, she told her family she was going to build a railroad through her flowers. “Harvey said, ‘Sure, go ahead, amuse yourself,’” Elaine remembers.

No one expected what happened next. Soon, word spread about the

amazing garden railroad at the Silets’ place and it wasn’t long before Huff & Puff Industries was born. One of her clients wanted a layout in his restaurant. Elaine delivered a sweet one: a train passing an exploding chocolate volcano. Then the restaurant went bankrupt and she has no idea where her volcano went. She’d like it back. “The guy still owes me \$10,000,” she says. “Now I write very tight contracts.”

Early in her new career, Elaine was setting up an exhibit at the Children’s Museum when a group of 5-year-olds started calling her *The Train Lady*. “They didn’t know my name, they just knew what I did,” she says. “I loved it.”

She loved it so much, she had the name trademarked. “It really sets me apart from the pack,” she says.

Elaine and her trains were featured on CNN, the Today Show and Oprah. Her children started complaining that they never got to see her. “You’re the ones who told me I needed a job,” she reminded them.

Harvey got a kick out of introducing himself at parties as *The Train Lady’s* husband.

Even before Elaine became a celebrity, Harvey had been bitten by the train bug too. He started collecting rare toy locomotives and trains, displaying them on the bookshelves of his study. He also started lobbying his wife to create a layout for him. They erected a special building, a life-sized replica of Lionel’s famous Rico Station model, to house Harvey’s train set. But the station stood empty for three years. “Harvey was a nonpaying cli-

Continued on page 17

IN THE WEB EDITION:

Take a video ride on Elaine Silets’ RR at chicagotribune.com/trainlady.

and saw the standing-room-only crowd of aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors, I felt confident I could pull it off.

"Good evening," I said, speaking in what I hoped was a Southern drawl. (The prison was set on an island "off the coast" of Tennessee.) "While y'all enjoy a safe and comfortable Christmas, we have to remember that there are men, good men, rotting away in smelly prisons who are having a real sad and lonely Christmas. For some of these poor fellers, human beings all, it might just be their last Christmas ever on God's green Earth. Welcome to the 'Miracle in Cell 307!'" I gravely bowed.

"The Miracle in what?" I heard my father ask. Then I heard him ask, "Is that my chain saw?"

The play proceeded in fits and starts. Despite the fact that my brother, Little Nicky, the sadistic guard, took his sweet time dying after I stabbed him with the shank, (I wisely decided not to use the chain saw), and my father twice tried to stop the play, ("Okay, I think we've seen enough"), we eventually came to the climactic scene.

When my cousin, Big Nicky, the "strangely quiet but nice prisoner," uttered his one line and was led away with a noose tied around his neck (while my sisters and I soulfully sang "Silent Night"), I felt we had triumphed. I stepped forward to once again narrate.

"No one knows to this day who that strangely quiet but nice prisoner was . . . the man who died for another's sins."

"Holy Christ!" my father gasped.

I winked. "Exactly," I said and bowed.

There was applause, but it was less than thunderous. I looked up, confused. I had expected tears, heart-rending sobs, a standing ovation, a spontaneous singing of "Joy to the World." Instead, I heard the sound of muffled laughter. Laughter! Through my growing shock, I saw the faces of my audience, some laughing openly, others doing their best to hide it. When my older sister proclaimed the play stupid and my cousins and brother agreed, I raced off to my room, humiliated.

I stayed there for awhile, fighting back tears and feeling very misunderstood. "Miracle" had been anything but. I started to cry. This was the worst Christmas ever, I decided.

My mother soon came upstairs and said things mothers are supposed to say, and I eventually felt better. "I thought your play was very interesting," she said. "Though next year, you may just want to sing carols again."

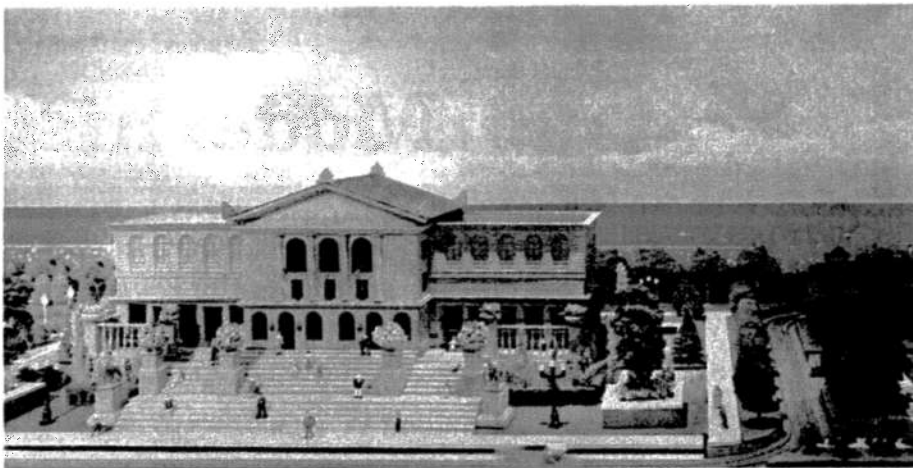
"I wanted to make this Christmas special."

"All Christmases are special. Just having the family together makes them special. So no more violence and no more plays about prisons in Tennessee."

"Okay," I sniffled.

A year later I resisted the urge to write a sequel, "Miracle in North Vietnam" (set in a POW camp in Hanoi) and wrote another Nativty musical instead. It was unremarkable and unmemorable, but everyone liked it, and we all sang "Joy to the World" at the end. □

Chicagoan Jim Kokoris writes frequent humorous essays for the Magazine.



The Art Institute of Chicago gets a somewhat surrealistic treatment along the Wandering Tree layout.

Train Lady

Continued from page 14

ent," Elaine says. "I had a payroll to meet. I still do."

Then one day in August 2004, Harvey walked out of a doctor's exam and into the waiting room. "I could see by the look on his face that something was very, very wrong," Elaine says.

Harvey had cancer. The doctor said he had maybe six months to live.

Elaine went to work almost immediately planning Harvey's railroad. "When he was diagnosed," she says, "I made him a promise that I would build this railroad. It was such a distraction for him and for me."

But in the beginning she wasn't sure what the theme should be. Then one morning, after a restless night, she told Harvey the railroad should be a reflection of his life. "Harvey thought Chicago was the greatest city in the world," she says.

Elaine put her business on hold to concentrate on the project for her nonpaying client. Harvey went back to work and soon began chemotherapy treatments. When he'd get home, he'd climb into a red golf cart and drive over to the Rico Station to see "my latest hare-brained scheme for his layout," Elaine says.

"I thought it would take a year to build," she says. "I was hoping he would live that long. In a way I was saying, 'Don't give up. You're going to run your railroad. You're going to have fun.' Everybody has to deal with whatever comes their way in their own way. That's how I dealt with it."

As one year stretched into two and two into 2½, Harvey was still going to work, spending time with his grandchildren and walking among his trees. Elaine was working on the railroad.

Sometimes she had half a dozen people helping her. "I tried to impress upon everybody who worked on the team we had to get this done because he was going to die," she says. "No one believed me because he didn't act like he was sick."

The team included a man who built the tables that hold the layout, someone else who laid down the thousands of feet of wire and constructed the switches. Elaine herself welded the Gehry-designed trellis over the Pritzker Pavilion. She had a guy hanging wallpaper in the "station," and a muralist painting scenes of the city and the sky. "We went around and around about the clouds," she says.

Finally, Elaine told Harvey the Great Wandering Tree Railroad installation was finished. "You can always do more," she says. "But at some point you have to say it's time to stop."

Harvey stood at the elaborate command console in the control room with the four flat-panel television monitors on the wall. Elaine stood next to him, showing him how to run the trains, and the automobiles down Michigan Avenue. She taught him how to fire the missile and start the movie at the drive-in. "He ran the railroad once or twice," she says, standing in the middle of the layout. "I'll be very ambivalent when it's gone [from the estate]. There is so much of myself and of him in it."

As the cancer began running its deadly course faster and faster, Harvey asked Elaine to return to building railroads as soon as grief would allow. "I'd been out of this business for almost three years while he went through this ghastly stuff," she says. "Now I'm trying to rebuild my business. I learned after my son died that work is my salvation."

Harvey died last January, and Elaine planted a copper beech for him next to her son's linden tree.

She hopes someday soon to plant the Great Wandering Tree Railroad somewhere in Chicago.

"If I can give it to the city, I will have discharged the final thing I can do for Harvey," she says. "He was such a generous man and he loved Chicago so much. He'd be proud if lots of people could enjoy his railroad." □

dterry@tribune.com

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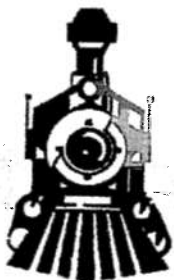
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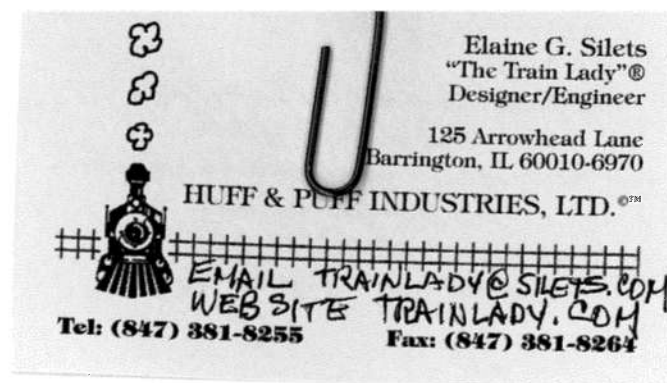
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The Train Lady ®
Huff & Puff Industries, Ltd.
Barrington, Illinois



EJ&E MAP



[Click Here to download Printable Full Size Map in PDF](#)

A Transtar Company



A 'COOL HAND LUKE' CHRISTMAS | LAST-MINUTE GIFT IDEAS

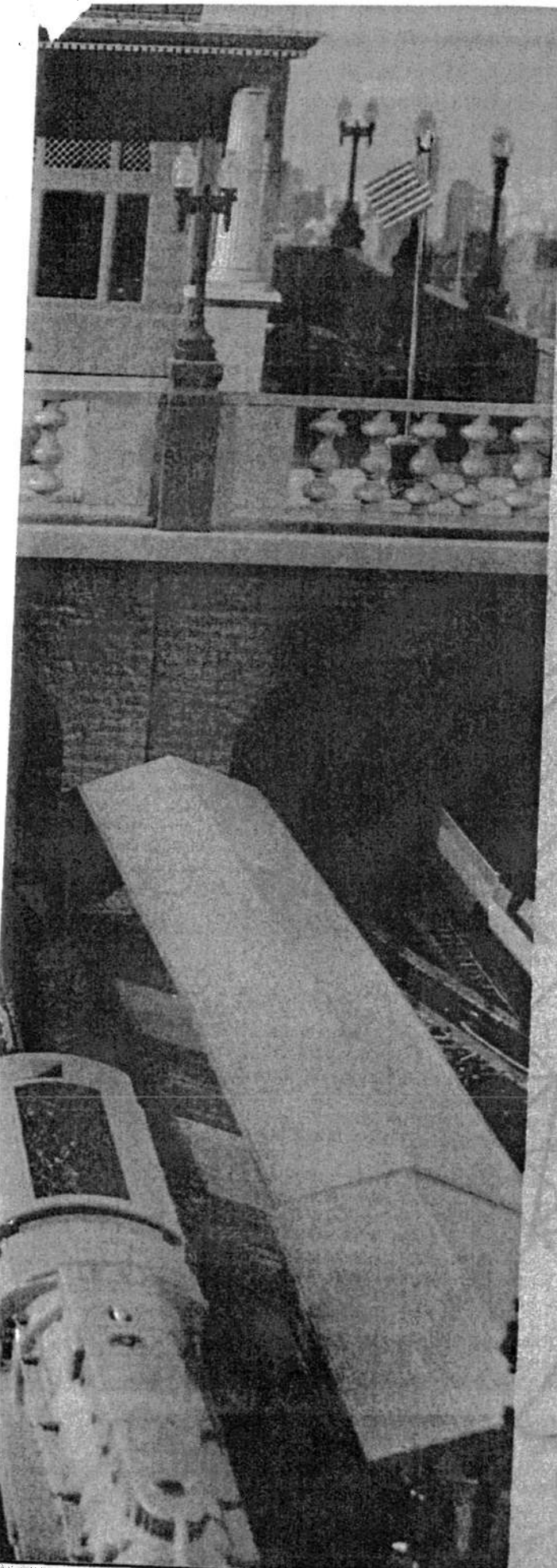
Chicago Tribune Magazine

DECEMBER 23, 2017 • SECTION 10

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Emergencies do come up, like saving Christmas. But ordinarily, Silets doesn't deal in individual pieces of track.

The Train Lady's specialty is wonderment.

Silets, a grandmother of three, is one of the few women in the male-dominated world of high end—very high end—model railroad layout design and construction. Silets and her helpers make everything from tiny, N-scale, table-top layouts that traverse mountains and rivers under glass, to burly outdoor garden railroads at G-scale that wind past waterfalls and trees, chug through snow drifts in winter and through canyons that bloom with impatiens in summer. (N-scale has a ratio of 1:160; something that is 16 feet long in the real world would be a foot in length as a model. The G-scale ratio is 1:20, or roughly 1/2-inch to the foot).



as art," Silets says. And she has suffered for her art. She wore out two knuckles on her right hand building railroads and had to have the joints removed and replaced. (One of her train layouts, which she constructed while healing from the surgery, will be featured as part of "eMotion Pictures: an Exhibition of Orthopaedics in Art," which will be at the Chicago Cultural Center from April 16th through July 22). "I have the grounds for a great employee's-comp case," she says. "The problem is, I'm self-employed."

Beyond the toll on her health, model railroading "can be a cutthroat business," she sighs. Once a competitor sneaked onto her property and photographed her garden train. Then he ran an ad in a model train magazine, saying that he could build the exact same layout.

Her creations have graced the pages of the Neiman Marcus Christmas book and the cover of the Hammacher Schlemmer gift catalog.

Even Silets' least expensive railroads—say, a small holiday setup with flying reindeer, soaring skiers and a train circling beneath the branches of a tinsel tree—can easily cost \$6,000. The prices climb steadily up from there, like the little engine that could. Her company, in fact, is named Huff & Puff Industries.

Over the years, she has built layouts costing tens of thousands of dollars for heiresses, business tycoons, restaurants, the John Hancock Center and the heavily armored home of a deceased suburban politician who was reputed to be on a first-name basis with more than one Chicago mobster. With playmates like that, no wonder the pol lived in a house with steel shutters covering the windows and entrances.

"I couldn't find the front door," Silets says. "He also had two of the fiercest birds I have ever encountered in my life. That gray parrot followed me everywhere. That was one scary job."

But now the Train Lady wants to give her grandest, most expensive creation away as a gift to the people of Chicago. She calls it the Great Wandering Tree Railroad, named after her arboreal 10-acre estate, Wandering Tree.

The stunning, 44-foot by 27-foot multimedia layout is worth well north of \$1.5 million and took her, with a team of six, more than two years to build, racing against death and sorrow.

It is an O-scale (1:48, or 1/4 inch to the foot) interpretation of the city, with freight, passenger and elevated trains running through, over and around the miniature metropolis, the tracks even stretching out to the farmland of a simulated McHenry County. The layout, Silets says, contains 60 switches; two interactive freight and passenger yards; 61 operational miniatures; two custom lift bridges; and a complete working signaling system. It required 36,000 linear feet of wire and is powered by six transformers, which juice 16 trains, two trolleys, two "L" trains, two subway trains and 54 of the working miniatures. There are also tiny cameras installed in four of the engines. The cameras project moving images on four flat screen televisions in the control booth, making it seem as if you're actually driving each train from the cab.

"Her layout ranks right up there with the best in the country," says Tom McComas, whose production company produces videos and books about model railroad layouts across America.

When it's going at full throttle, the Wandering Tree sounds more like a thundering stampede. She has to turn off a few trains and miniature automations so she can be heard. There are bells and whistles, horns and exclamations of awe from first-time visitors.

The trains and trolleys zip past some of Chicago's iconic landmarks, new ones as well as old ones like Wrigley Field, its bleachers packed and a tiny ballplayer running the bases. "If you've ever tried building Wrigley Field," Silets says, "then you know it's no small task."

An "L" train pulls up to the Friendly Confines and a conductor's voice announces, "Addison Street, Wrigley Field." Across the street from the park is a McDonald's restaurant. A car is in the drive-thru and a child's voice pesters his mother for a Happy Meal. Silets says she didn't have room for U.S. Cellular Field, the home of the 2005 World Champion White Sox. But she did put a Sox decal on the side of one of the trains.

There's Union Station, the Art Institute and a merry-go-round in a park. A man is swinging back and forth in a hammock. Push a button and the park slowly rises, revealing a missile silo. Push another button and the missile goes sailing through the air. "That's just something I came up with in the middle of the night," Silets says. "I don't know of a real missile silo in Chicago today."

There's a seedy part of town, with shabby buildings and a group of hobos gathered around a fire. "Children today don't know what hobos are," she says. "I always tell them they are homeless people. Then they get it."

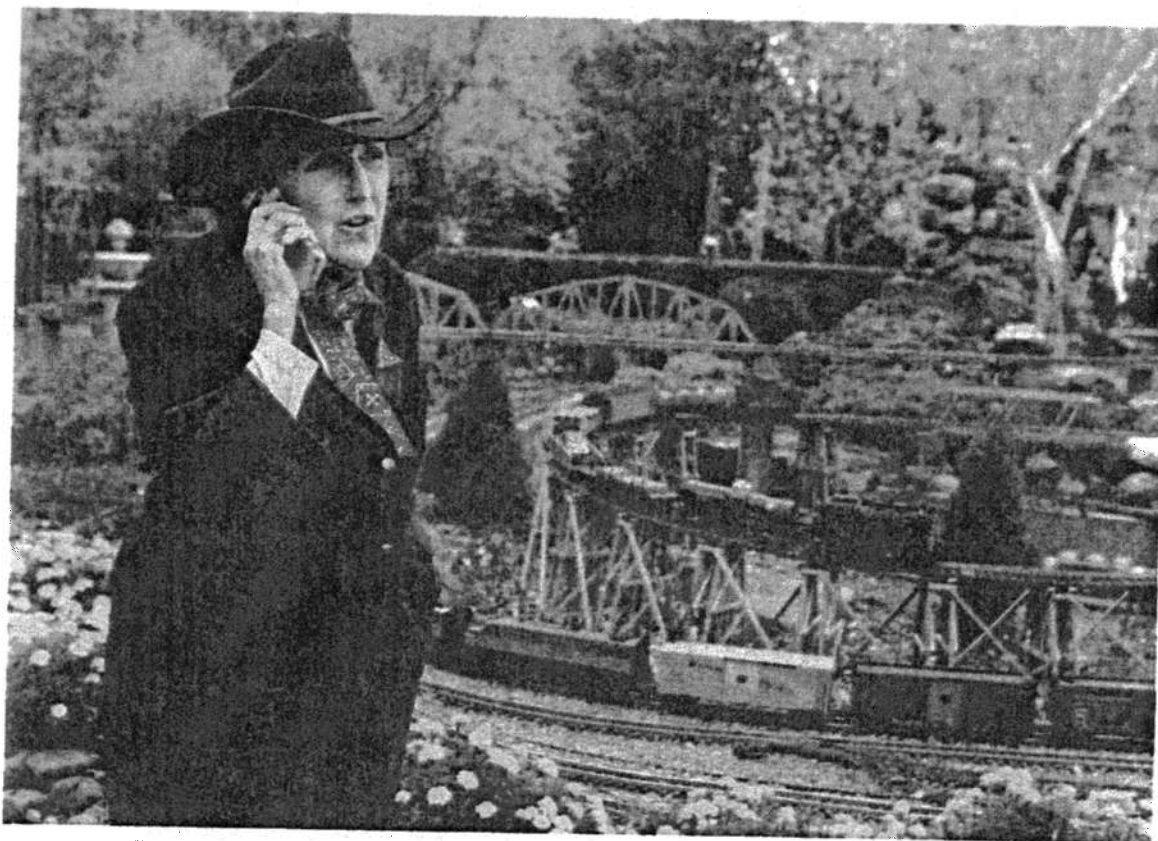
And there's a drive-in movie theater, with a real film playing on the screen, which in The Train Lady's Chicago is run by a portable DVD player. The current feature is "Silver Streak," the Richard Pryor, Gene Wilder action comedy about love and murder on a cross-country train trip.

Down the track, along Michigan Avenue, sits Millennium Park. There's the same billowing steel grid of the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion and the shiny beauty of Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate sculpture, better known around these parts as The Bean.

Neither the real park nor the miniature one would be nearly as much fun without the Crown Fountains, with their huge video screens of ordinary Chicagoans spraying water from their mouths. In Silets' version, her face is on one fountain and the face of her husband, Harvey, is on the other, "spitting at each other," she says, "in perpetuity."

Lois Weisberg, commissioner of cultural affairs for the City of Chicago, traveled to Barrington with two of her assistants recently to see—and hear—the Great Wandering Tree in action. "We all thought it was wonderful," Weisberg says. "In certain ways it's a work of art. It has all these touches of fantasy. It would flow more into the arts category than a model railroad as we think of them."

Since that visit, Weisberg and her staff have been trying to find just the right home for Silets' masterpiece, which currently sits in a specially constructed building on her estate. Weisberg says she is confident it will be placed in a museum or maybe a venue such as Union Station or the



Elaine Silets, "The Train Lady," takes a call in her garden, which is crisscrossed by one of the elaborate outdoor train displays on her Barrington estate.

Garfield Park Conservatory. A delegation from the Museum of Science & Industry is expected to come out and see the railroad this month. The museum has a huge model railroad layout of its own, but it lacks the whimsical touches of the Great Wandering Tree. "We think it's charming," Weisberg says. "The adults will love it and the children will love it. And one of the best attractions is that it is totally about Chicago."

Silets built Wandering Tree for her husband, a grocer's son from Albany Park who grew up to be a nationally renowned tax attorney and ardent arborist. "We were very, very different people," she says. "Harvey was totally un-mechanical and when I was a little girl my mother would ask me to fix the toaster. I loved adventure. He loved accounting. But he was brilliant and the most charming man in the world."

They met in the early 1960s. The Train Lady was Elaine Gordon in those days, a young painter living in Paris. She came home to Chicago to visit her wealthy parents, who threw a cocktail party in her honor. Her father invited an up-and-coming lawyer he had been impressed with after watching him argue a case. Four months later, Harvey and Elaine

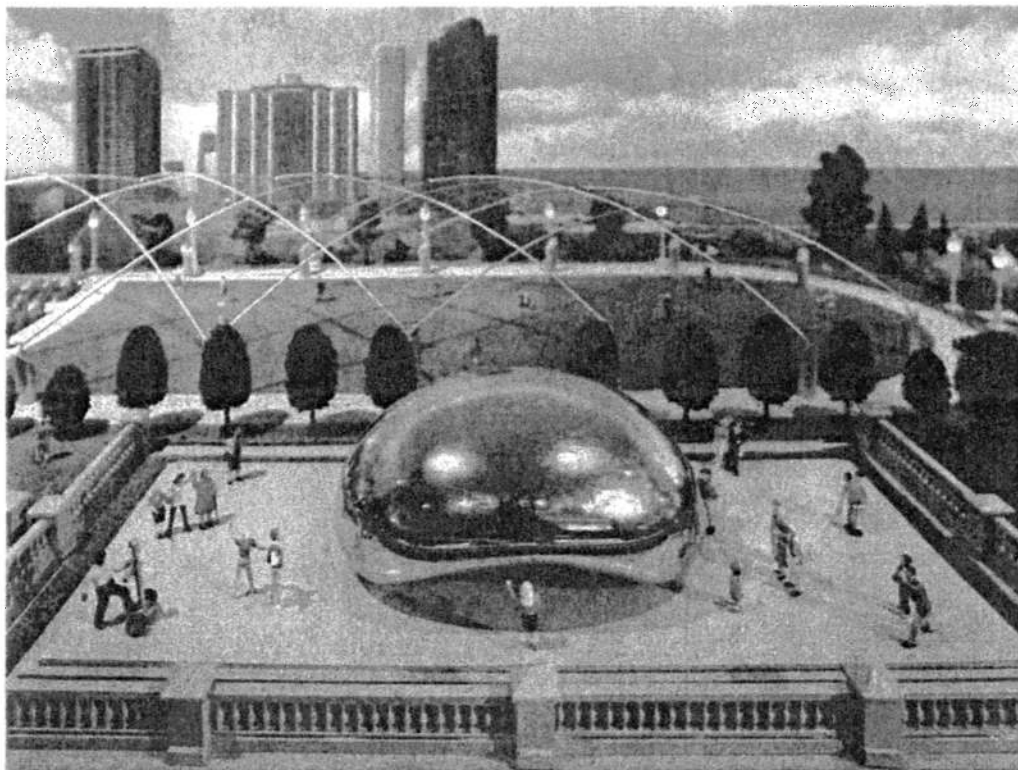
became Mr. and Mrs. Silets. "I never expected to spend my life married to a very conservative lawyer," she says. "It turns out I made absolutely the right choice."

Harvey went to work for the U.S. Attorney's Office, prosecuting tax fraud, and he and Elaine started a family. They had three children, two boys and a girl. Harvey soon went into private practice.

When their sons were 4 and 2, Elaine's parents bought each of the boys a Lionel train set from Marshall Field's. "I had to set them up," Elaine says. "My husband couldn't operate a screwdriver."

Sitting on the floor surrounded by track and locomotives, Elaine was filled with memories of her own childhood. When she was a little girl, her uncle bought her older brother, Sheldon, "a magnificent Lionel Santa Fe Superchief" train set, she says. World War II was blazing across Europe and the Pacific. Toy trains made out of steel were hard to come by because of wartime rationing.

Her uncle handed Elaine what she calls "another ubiquitous doll." But Sheldon, who loved horses and building model airplanes, showed little interest in the train. Elaine was thrilled. She tossed away the doll and



Millennium Park is a major feature of the Wandering Tree Railroad. Elaine Silets welded the Frank Gehry-designed grid herself. Note the security guard about to use a Segway to the left of The Bean.

Elaine was setting up an exhibit at the Children's Museum when a group of 5-year-olds started calling her *The Train Lady*. “They didn’t know my name, they just knew what I did ... I loved it.”

“absconded with my brother’s train.”

As Elaine grew older, she put away her trains and chased her dream of becoming an artist in Paris. Then along came love, marriage, children and a house in the suburbs. Elaine went to work for her husband, running his law office. “I went planning to stay two weeks to help out,” she says, “and ended up staying 16 years.”

While she outgrew her toys long ago, she never stopped loving trains. She and her husband rode them, real ones, all over Europe and China. In South Africa, the crew even allowed her to drive one.

The Silets, especially Harvey, also loved trees. “Trees are something Harvey didn’t have growing up in the city,” Elaine says. Every Saturday, they haunted the nurseries, buying trees and planting them on their estate. Some of them marked important events in the family’s history: a pink magnolia for her mother’s 100th birthday; a blue fir tree for the Silets’ 40th wedding anniversary; a linden for the life of their son, Jonathan, who died of heart failure when he was 17.

In 1992, Elaine lost her job when Harvey joined a bigger law firm and closed his office. Elaine became a housewife and “started going crazy with boredom.” Her children told her she had to find something to do. She was driving them crazy too. A lifelong gardener, she told her family she was going to build a railroad through her flowers. “Harvey said, ‘Sure, go ahead, amuse yourself,’” Elaine remembers.

No one expected what happened next. Soon, word spread about the

amazing garden railroad at the Silets’ place and it wasn’t long before Huff & Puff Industries was born. One of her clients wanted a layout in his restaurant. Elaine delivered a sweet one: a train passing an exploding chocolate volcano. Then the restaurant went bankrupt and she has no idea where her volcano went. She’d like it back. “The guy still owes me \$10,000,” she says. “Now I write very tight contracts.”

Early in her new career, Elaine was setting up an exhibit at the Children’s Museum when a group of 5-year-olds started calling her *The Train Lady*. “They didn’t know my name, they just knew what I did,” she says. “I loved it.”

She loved it so much, she had the name trademarked. “It really sets me apart from the pack,” she says.

Elaine and her trains were featured on CNN, the Today Show and Oprah. Her children started complaining that they never got to see her. “You’re the ones who told me I needed a job,” she reminded them.

Harvey got a kick out of introducing himself at parties as *The Train Lady*’s husband.

Even before Elaine became a celebrity, Harvey had been bitten by the train bug too. He started collecting rare toy locomotives and trains, displaying them on the bookshelves of his study. He also started lobbying his wife to create a layout for him. They erected a special building, a life-sized replica of Lionel’s famous Rico Station model, to house Harvey’s train set. But the station stood empty for three years. “Harvey was a nonpaying cli-

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IN THE WEB EDITION:
Take a video ride on Elaine Silets’ RR at chicagotribune.com/trainlady.

and saw the standing-room-only crowd of aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors, I felt confident I could pull it off.

"Good evening," I said, speaking in what I hoped was a Southern drawl. (The prison was set on an island "off the coast" of Tennessee.) "While y'all enjoy a safe and comfortable Christmas, we have to remember that there are men, good men, rotting away in smelly prisons who are having a real sad and lonely Christmas. For some of these poor fellers, human beings all, it might just be their last Christmas ever on God's green Earth. Welcome to the 'Miracle in Cell 307!'" I gravely bowed.

"The Miracle in what?" I heard my father ask. Then I heard him ask, "Is that my chain saw?"

The play proceeded in fits and starts. Despite the fact that my brother, Little Nicky, the sadistic guard, took his sweet time dying after I stabbed him with the shank, (I wisely decided not to use the chain saw), and my father twice tried to stop the play, ("Okay, I think we've seen enough"), we eventually came to the climactic scene.

When my cousin, Big Nicky, the "strangely quiet but nice prisoner," uttered his one line and was led away with a noose tied around his neck (while my sisters and I soulfully sang "Silent Night"), I felt we had triumphed. I stepped forward to once again narrate.

"No one knows to this day who that strangely quiet but nice prisoner was... the man who died for another's sins."

"Holy Christ!" my father gasped.

I winked. "Exactly," I said and bowed.

There was applause, but it was less than thunderous. I looked up, confused. I had expected tears, heart-rending sobs, a standing ovation, a spontaneous singing of "Joy to the World." Instead, I heard the sound of muffled laughter. Laughter! Through my growing shock, I saw the faces of my audience, some laughing openly, others doing their best to hide it. When my older sister proclaimed the play stupid and my cousins and brother agreed, I raced off to my room, humiliated.

I stayed there for awhile, fighting back tears and feeling very misunderstood. "Miracle" had been anything but. I started to cry. This was the worst Christmas ever, I decided.

My mother soon came upstairs and said things mothers are supposed to say, and I eventually felt better. "I thought your play was very interesting," she said. "Though next year, you may just want to sing carols again."

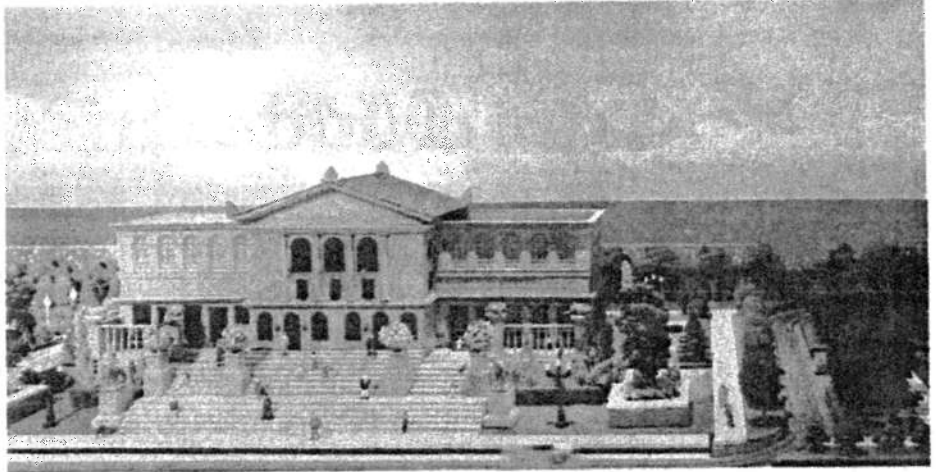
"I wanted to make this Christmas special."

"All Christmases are special. Just having the family together makes them special. So no more violence and no more plays about prisons in Tennessee."

"Okay," I sniffled.

A year later I resisted the urge to write a sequel, "Miracle in North Vietnam" (set in a POW camp in Hanoi) and wrote another Nativity musical instead. It was unremarkable and unmemorable, but everyone liked it, and we all sang "Joy to the World" at the end. □

Chicagoan Jim Kokoris writes frequent humorous essays for the Magazine.



The Art Institute of Chicago gets a somewhat surrealistic treatment along the Wandering Tree layout.

Train Lady

Continued from page 14

ent," Elaine says. "I had a payroll to meet. I still do."

Then one day in August 2004, Harvey walked out of a doctor's exam and into the waiting room. "I could see by the look on his face that something was very, very wrong," Elaine says.

Harvey had cancer. The doctor said he had maybe six months to live.

Elaine went to work almost immediately planning Harvey's railroad. "When he was diagnosed," she says, "I made him a promise that I would build this railroad. It was such a distraction for him and for me."

But in the beginning she wasn't sure what the theme should be. Then one morning, after a restless night, she told Harvey the railroad should be a reflection of his life. "Harvey thought Chicago was the greatest city in the world," she says.

Elaine put her business on hold to concentrate on the project for her nonpaying client. Harvey went back to work and soon began chemotherapy treatments. When he'd get home, he'd climb into a red golf cart and drive over to the Rico Station to see "my latest hare-brained scheme for his layout," Elaine says.

"I thought it would take a year to build," she says. "I was hoping he would live that long. In a way I was saying, 'Don't give up. You're going to run your railroad. You're going to have fun.' Everybody has to deal with whatever comes their way in their own way. That's how I dealt with it."

As one year stretched into two and two into 2½, Harvey was still going to work, spending time with his grandchildren and walking among his trees. Elaine was working on the railroad.

Sometimes she had half a dozen people helping her. "I tried to impress upon everybody who worked on the team we had to get this done because he was going to die," she says. "No one believed me because he didn't act like he was sick."

The team included a man who built the tables that hold the layout, someone else who laid down the thousands of feet of wire and constructed the switches. Elaine herself welded the Gehry-designed trellis over the Pritzker Pavilion. She had a guy hanging wallpaper in the "station," and a muralist painting scenes of the city and the sky. "We went around and around about the clouds," she says.

Finally, Elaine told Harvey the Great Wandering Tree Railroad installation was finished. "You can always do more," she says. "But at some point you have to say it's time to stop."

Harvey stood at the elaborate command console in the control room with the four flat-panel television monitors on the wall. Elaine stood next to him, showing him how to run the trains, and the automobiles down Michigan Avenue. She taught him how to fire the missile and start the movie at the drive-in. "He ran the railroad once or twice," she says, standing in the middle of the layout. "I'll be very ambivalent when it's gone [from the estate]. There is so much of myself and of him in it."

As the cancer began running its deadly course faster and faster, Harvey asked Elaine to return to building railroads as soon as grief would allow. "I'd been out of this business for almost three years while he went through this ghastly stuff," she says. "Now I'm trying to rebuild my business. I learned after my son died that work is my salvation."

Harvey died last January, and Elaine planted a copper beech for him next to her son's linden tree.

She hopes someday soon to plant the Great Wandering Tree Railroad somewhere in Chicago.

"If I can give it to the city, I will have discharged the final thing I can do for Harvey," she says. "He was such a generous man and he loved Chicago so much. He'd be proud if lots of people could enjoy his railroad." □
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