

Playing Santa with the Santa Fe

Nothing Says Christmas Like An Electric Train Set. But The One That Elaine Silets Wants To Give The City Of Chicago Is Unlike Anything You've Ever Seen.

December 23, 2007 | BY DON TERRY

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).

"What 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 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 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 "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 client," 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 harebrained 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 2-1/2, 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."