

Model railroad supplier makes stop in Avondale

Litchfield Station specializes in digital command control

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Model railroaders for decades have been known for their fanatical attention to detail and spending hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on their hobby.

The hobby took another step forward several years ago when the industry group National Model Railroading Association adopted standards for electronic control systems that have created realistic operation and sound effects of trains.

A few years later, Bruce Petrarca, owner of Web business Litchfield Station in Avondale, got on board as an installer and, later, as a seller of the electronic systems.

"Like a lot of people, I had the Lionel train setup when I was a kid, but I wasn't really a model railroader," Petrarca said. "I always was interested in electronics; had a ham radio when I was 12."

Petrarca's first encounter with the miniature electronics for trains was in 1998. He was living in the PebbleCreek community in Goodyear, which was seeing the launch of a model railroading club. Known for his background in electronics, Petrarca installed the electronic controls on the club's train layout.

From there, Petrarca's experience with that spread by word of mouth, and the occasional installation job turned into a full-time business by 2001.

Litchfield Station is a mail-order and Web-only business. He initially operated out of his homes in Goodyear and Munds Park, south of Flagstaff. Once he got into sales and service full time, Petrarca operated out of Munds Park for a few years. He moved the business to a better site in February,



LITCHFIELD STATION owner Bruce Petrarca demonstrates the versatile uses of digital command control on a model railroad system. The unit allows control of several engines on the same track.

on Central Avenue a block south of Van Buren Street, in a small office center that "had the right kind of space," he said.

Several manufacturers make the electronic control systems, known as digital command controls. The systems allow the model railroader to control the actions and sounds of several locomotives on the same track simultaneously.

The sounds aren't just generic, either; they're quite specific to the sounds of the various kinds of locomotives. The clacking of a diesel locomotive is different from that of the steam locomotive, the sounds of which include the fireman shoveling coal into the furnace to heat the steam generator. The array of sound effects also includes the sound of the boiler being filled with water when it's pulled up to the water tower. The electric locomotive has a distinctive hum that differs from either diesel or steam.

Business on track

"We have systems that start right around \$100," Petrarca said. "From

there, the sky's the limit on how much you want to spend and how elaborate your layout is."

Another key part of Petrarca's business is installing the decoder models inside the locomotives that weren't originally made for digital command control.

Petrarca's wife, Linda, also pitches in with the business, as she has created a number of stencils to create backdrops for model railroad layouts. Linda, who has a background in art, also has gone offsite to paint backgrounds, including one more than 70 feet long for the basement layout of a model railroader in Prescott. The layout includes streams, waterfalls and foliage.

About 80 percent of Litchfield Station's business is inside the United States. The rest is rather far-flung around the world, although most of the international business is with customers in United Kingdom or its former colonies, Petrarca said. The biggest dollar-volume customer in 2006 lives in Great Britain.

"When I first started, I put the company on the Web and forgot about the 'World Wide' part of that," Petrarca said. "So I had to figure out a lot of things about shipping to countries around the world."

Petrarca figures there are half a million, maybe as many as three-quarters of a million hobbyists worldwide who are serious enough about model railroading to keep him busy for many years.

Litchfield Station's homepage is at <http://www.litchfieldstation.com>. Orders also may be phoned to 623-640-4060 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m. to noon Saturday.