

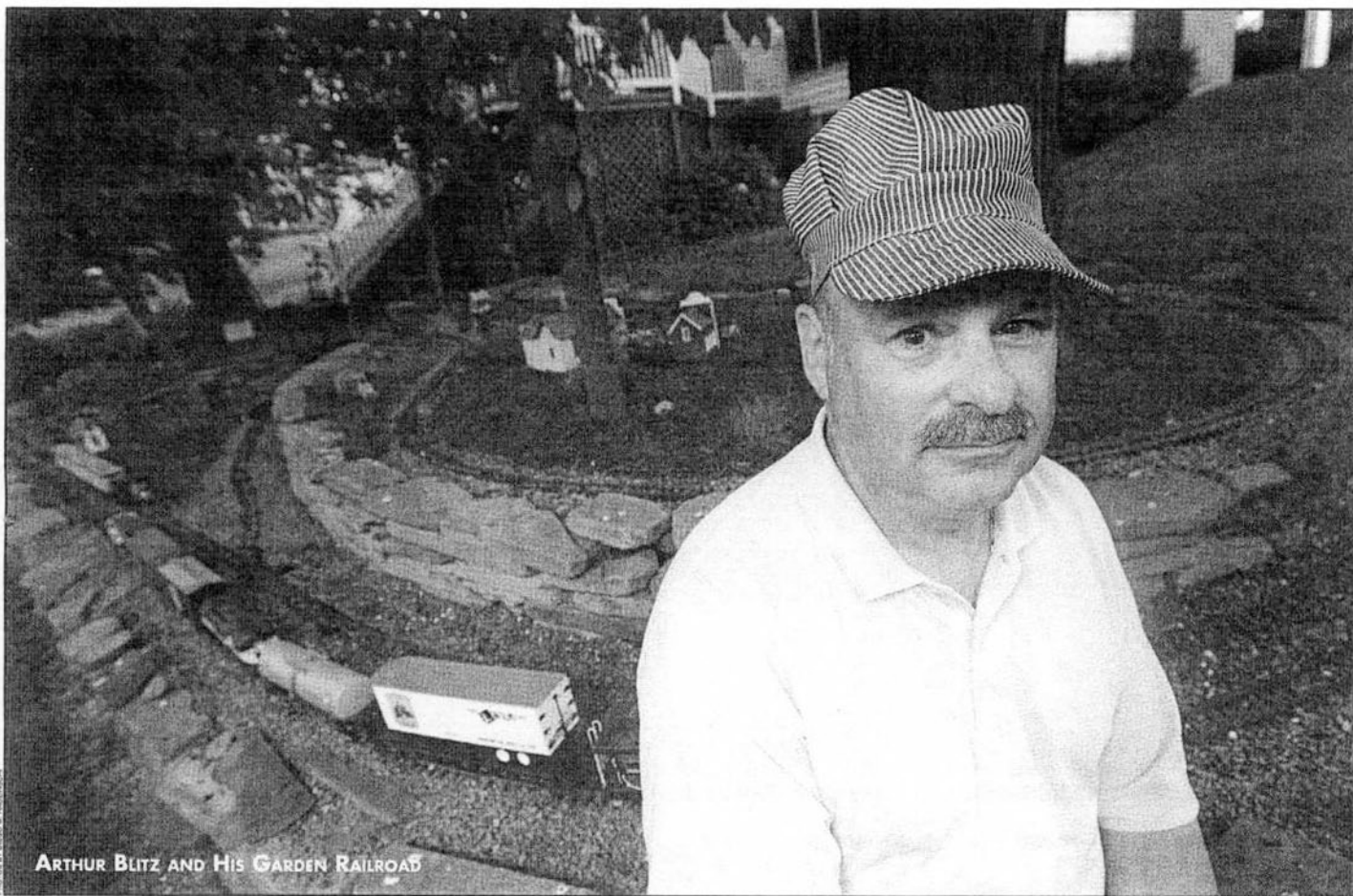
# Legal Times

# After Hours

Books, entertainment, and diversions

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ARTHUR BLITZ AND HIS GARDEN RAILROAD

BY JEFF JEFFREY

## Comin' Round the Backyard

**W**hen Arthur Blitz and his wife, Mimi, built their home in Potomac, Md., 12 years ago, they had a few pieces of furniture in their living room and little else—besides a train set.

For the first few years, that was all they needed. "We were focused on laying track," Mimi says.

The track she's talking about has grown into some 450 feet of rail that snakes around the Blitzs' backyard, crossing bridges and running past a village with a post office, miniature people, and a general store aptly named Arthur & Mimi's. The backyard setup marks the fulfillment of a dream that Arthur first envisioned more than two decades ago.

Like lots of little boys, young Arthur

Blitz had a train set. Then he grew up and put such things behind him. Eventually, he became a senior partner at Paley Rothman and head of the Bethesda, Md.-based firm's real estate and financial services practice groups.

But 25 years ago the trains whistled for him again. A friend gave Arthur and Mimi a starter train set, complete with a couple of small locomotives and a few freight cars. Built by LGB Trains of Munich, Germany, one of the first companies to popularize miniature trains, that set brought Arthur's love for the open rail chugging back and reignited his fascination with train mechanics.

The only trouble, Arthur says, was that their house was a bit too small to keep the trains set up on a permanent basis. Other than occasionally being brought out to run in a circle on the

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Attorney Arthur Blitz  
keeps the trains  
running at home  
all summer.

#### RAILROAD, FROM PAGE 24

living room floor, the trains remained boxed up in storage. So when the Blitzs started looking for a new house, Arthur kept his railroad in mind.

In October 1997, the couple and their twin daughters, Leslie and Robin, moved into the Potomac house, with its large, flat, shady backyard—the perfect place to build a garden railroad. Sheer coincidence, of course.

"It wasn't the reason" they bought this particular lot, says Arthur, "but it had a great yard for a garden railroad, so why not?"

#### ALL ABOARD

These days, the Blitz collection boasts 20 garden-scale passenger, freight, flatbed, and tanker cars, each one about the size of a loaf of bread. Arthur's favorite locomotive is the LGB Denver, South Park & Rio Grande Railroad mogul, a type of steam engine best known as the train robbed by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in the 1969 classic movie starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford. Engine-wise, he also has a model of a Shay-g geared locomotive like the ones built by Lima Locomotive Works, a GP-9 diesel engine that features the Boston & Maine logo, a smaller NW-2 diesel engine, and a Mikado steam engine, which Arthur says is similar to the one Humphrey Bogart catches in "Casablanca" as he leaves Paris ahead

isn't as strong as electric power so you can't pull as many cars." But horsepower isn't a major concern for him because his trains usually pull only about eight cars at a time, depending on the locomotive. Another problem with battery power is that "you have to worry about replacing batteries."

Neither battery power nor electric power is as complicated as using steam-powered models. Yes, there are models that run on steam just like old-fashioned trains. But even avid hobbyists such as Blitz have limits: Those trains can cost thousands of dollars and tend to be temperamental. Blitz says they're too much of a hassle for him.

#### BRAVE NEW WORLD

While Arthur can geek out with the best of them on the technical aspects of the hobby, Mimi, who works in human resources at the National Institutes of Health, says she prefers crafting the look of the village laid out alongside the garden railroad. (Their daughters, Arthur says, "have absolutely no interest in trains.")

"I like the idea of creating a miniature world," Mimi explains. "That's what I find interesting about trains."

The Blitzs' current setup resembles a rural town set off a railway spur in the 1930s or 1940s. About 20 buildings sit in the center of two parallel sets of tracks, which let the Blitzs run two trains at once. An additional single track loops away and back toward the

has yet to offer model railroad proprietors a tax break.

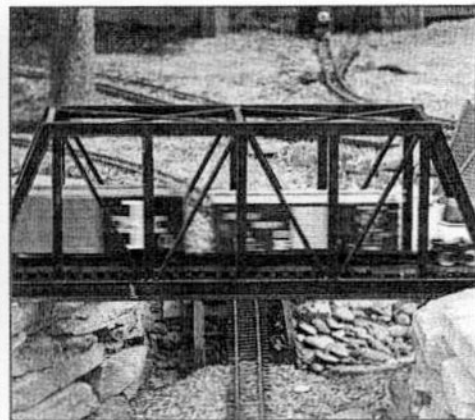
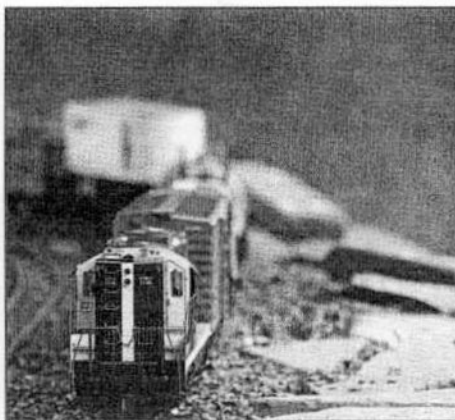
Arthur says he "couldn't even begin to guess" how much he has spent building his private railroad. As with any hobby, it's probably best not to tally up the total cost. Individual cars can range in price from \$40 to \$500, and locomotives can cost anywhere from \$350 to \$4,500. "You can get a Chevy Neon or a Maserati," Blitz says.

#### A GARDEN SOCIETY

The elaborate layout in the Blitzs' backyard requires the help of professional landscapers, which doesn't come cheap, either. Over the years, the couple has used five or six different ones, but these days, they work with Brian Donovan, who runs Alternative Terrains in Silver Spring, Md. Donovan says he charges clients between \$2,000 and \$3,000 for a small start-up garden railroad job. He and Arthur Blitz wouldn't say how much the Blitzs have spent, but their railroad is the largest one Donovan has done so far.

A garden railroader himself, Donovan started designing garden railroads a few years ago. He has two separate railroads in his own backyard, and serves as the immediate past president of the Washington, Virginia & Maryland Garden Railway Society, which has about 160 members.

That means Donovan is intimately familiar with the challenges of backyard trains. He knows, for example,



of the Nazi invasion. The GP-9 is currently pulling four freight cars, a tanker car, and a caboose along a three-wall route in Arthur's law office.

"Clients love it," he says, though he also notes, "Some of my partners think I'm nuts."

All of Blitz's trains run on battery power, which he describes as the most convenient mode of power. A handheld transmitter allows him to stop and start his trains with the push of a button.

"Electric power is too complicated for me. You have to keep the tracks clean so you have good contact. You have to worry about short-circuits because your train will stop and you won't know why in the hell it did," Blitz says.

He concedes that battery power has its drawbacks, too. "Battery power

town at one end. It looks like a nice place to visit, if you happen to be 3 inches tall.

Arthur and Mimi are planning a second village (the couple subscribes to *Garden Railways* magazine for ideas). Mimi says she's leaning toward a 1950s-era town, complete with an amusement park. They plan to put it at the center of the large loop.

But for now they're just getting all the post-winter maintenance out of the way. Winter months can be hard on a garden railroad. As the ground freezes and thaws, the tracks buckle, which prevents the trains from running smoothly. Weeds sprout up, blocking the trains' path. Squirrels and birds drop unpleasant obstacles on the tracks. All in all, garden railroads contend with issues similar to those that plague real railroads, and Congress

that if the grade of the land rises by more than 3 inches over 8 feet, the trains will stop, pardon the pun, in their tracks.

"There are two different types of people who are going to run trains," Donovan says. "The guys who want to go all out on authenticity and the guys who like to sit back, watching the trains run. For me, I always preferred sipping a beer and just watching the trains run."

Just watching the trains run may sound tempting to Arthur Blitz, but he admits he's too busy to get out and play with his railroad all that often.

"I enjoy the idea as much as the reality," he says. "It's just good clean fun."

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