

Calendar

Small-Scale Crazy

Model Railroad Swap Meet

Museums mummify, it has been said. "An object in a museum case must suffer the de-natured existence of an animal in the zoo," observes a collector of Meissen porcelain in Bruce Chatwin's novel *Utz*. "Ideally, museums should be looted every 50 years and their collections returned to circulation."

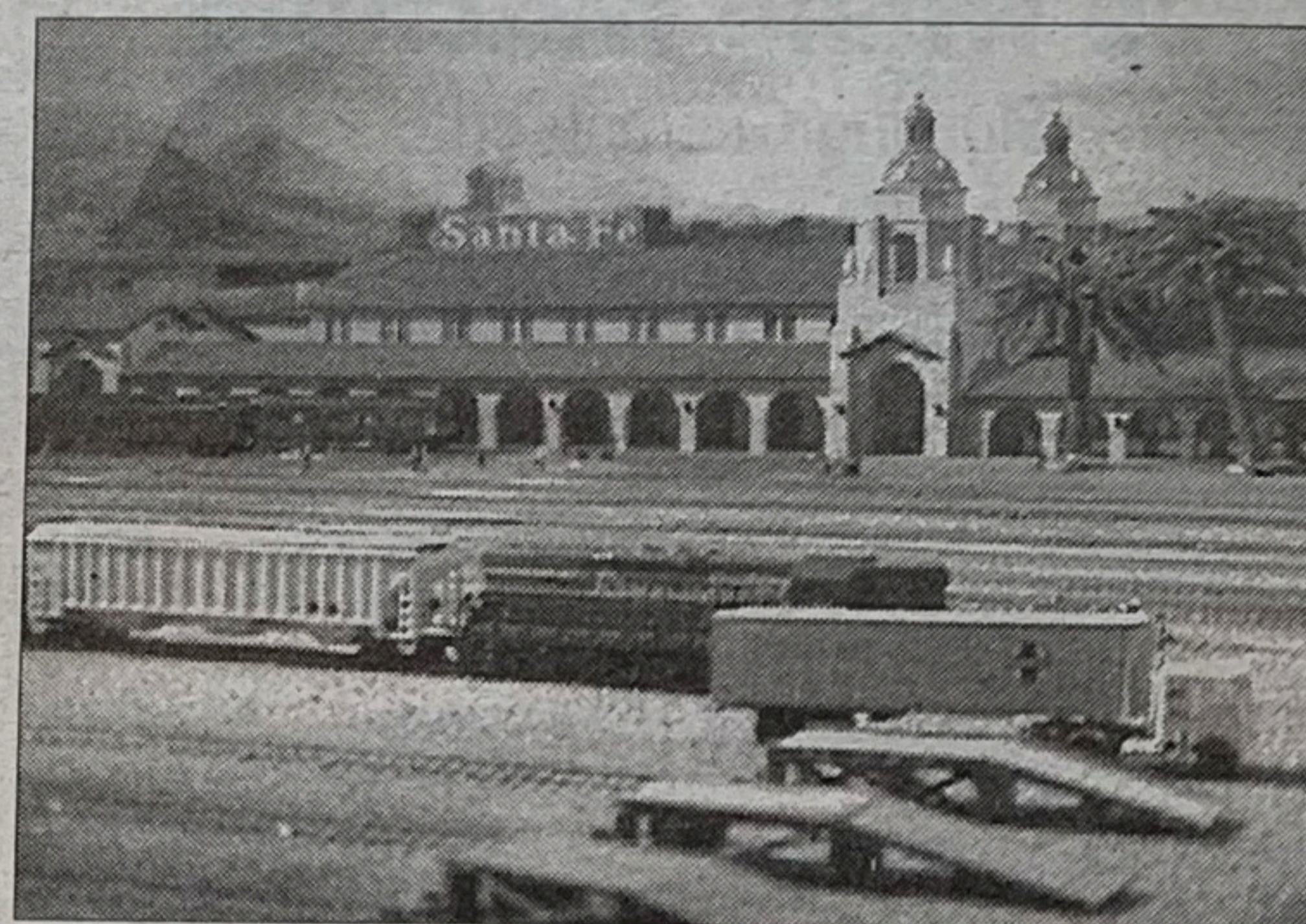
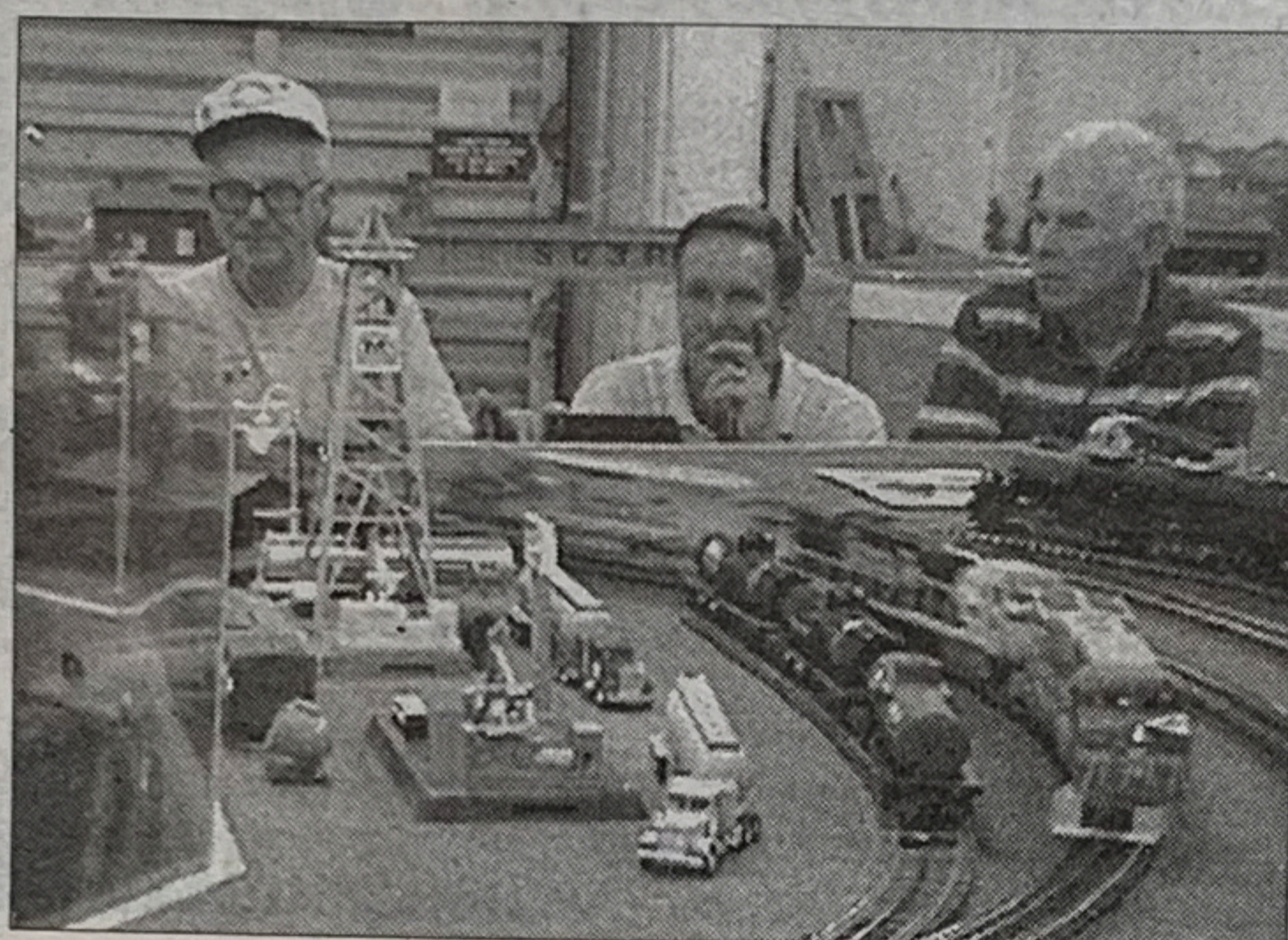
Model trains aren't Meissen, to be sure, but the San Diego Modern Railroad Museum would have warmed the Chatwin character's subversive-collector heart. Three times a year it sponsors a swap meet. For sale are toy trains of all the popular gauges, track, transformers, scenery, and lots of other railroad-hobbyist paraphernalia. Most items are brought in by collectors from the local clubs, whose playground the museum is. But the museum takes a

table, too, says its executive director, John Rotsart.

"When we determine that

the clubs don't need the pieces, we either try to sell them at the swap meet or, if we determine that they can't be sold, we give them to a man who volunteers his time in a program called Trains for Kids. He fixes up old sets and sells them for nominal amounts to families who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford them." Either way, the stuff is back in the world of private collectors once again.

Not all the merchandise at the swap meets is used, says Rotsart. "Hobby shops come to sell off new things that probably aren't moving as well as they had hoped." Those who haven't seen model trains since a long-ago childhood may be surprised by the innovations. "The technology is changing," says Rotsart. "Nowadays we



have bells, whistles, and engine sounds for the smaller scales as well as the larger ones. And all are generated by microchips. We also have digital command control — DCC. That's the wave of the future for this hobby."

Swap-meet coordinator Pete Muñoz has been collecting model trains since he was five years old. A retired railroad engineer who drove trains between Chicago, Denver, and Minneapolis, he'll be 60 this year. Muñoz says that some people will be selling full-scale railroad items on Saturday: "Morse Code stuff, old lanterns, and spikes." In total, Muñoz estimates that there will be 30 to 50 vendors, some with more than one table. But he won't be selling anything himself.

"I don't sell nothing," says the taciturn Muñoz, who estimates his collection is worth \$100,000 and names as his most valuable pieces four brass steam locomotives worth about \$2500 a piece. (With collector-investor pride, he boasts that he bought them new in the 1960s for \$100 a piece.)

The question is asked again: he won't sell one thing? Not ever?

"Well, every now and then, I might

get rid of a couple pieces. Like, if I have two or three of the same thing."

And again: he has hung onto basically everything he's bought since he was five?

"Yeah." He laughs.

Has anybody ever tried to tell him he was crazy?

"My wife tells me all the time."

Does she collect anything?

"Yeah, I got her hooked on it."

She collects railroad stuff, too?

There can't be many other women who enjoy the hobby.

"Not too many. A few other wives. I run into a few ladies at the swap meets now and then, who come by themselves. Mostly it's because they were left the things. Their father died, or their husband."

Do any kids show up? Is there a new generation of five-year-old boys interested in trains?

"Yeah, we have them and ages on up."

Did you and your wife have any kids?

"Yeah, I had six."

And are they interested in trains?

"Two of them are. The rest went the other way."

Which way is that?
"Computers."

Many are called; few are chosen. One Christmas, this reporter and her husband gave their two nephews a set of slot cars. The model train set, their parents' "big" gift to them, was abandoned under the tree as the boys raced their miniature Porsches around another track in a corner of the living room.

Years have passed; even the slot cars have been outgrown. And the train set is a good candidate for a swap meet — or for direct donation to the museum.

— Jeanne Schinto

Model Railroad Swap Meet San Diego Model Railroad Museum

1649 El Prado Balboa Park
Saturday, January 5,
7:00–11:00 a.m.

Enter through museum's back door, accessible from Space Theater Way, off Park Blvd. Buyers: \$2; sellers, \$5 per table. Includes entry to the museum, which opens at 11:00 a.m. 619-293-0162

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