



Another Conversation with Dave Swanson, Model Train Show Promoter

In our November 2005 issue, we published an interview with Dave Swanson concerning the then Great Western & Atlantic Shows (GWAATS). Now with the passing of that show, Trolleyville webmaster George Huckaby had the opportunity to discuss recent events with Dave at the Westin Hotel in Los Angeles early last month. Several topics were discussed and the information was thought to be of interest to our readers. So here is the result:

George: Well about 6 months ago, our reporter, George Jones, interviewed you about train shows. With the events that have recently happened, we'd like to get your prospective?

Dave: Well, it certainly is a mixed review. I have a lot of different feelings, it would probably be best if you asked specific questions, otherwise I will just ramble aimlessly.

George: How did your **World's Greatest Hobby on Tour (WGHoT) Shows** do in their second season?

Dave: That is something I am very happy with. The shows did great. We got excellent support from the industry. We set a new record attendance with over 33,000 people in Houston. We think we really have the concept refined to generate a very high level of customer satisfaction.

George: So nothing at all went wrong?

Dave: Of course not! The biggest issue we had was a massive snow storm which destroyed attendance at our Washington D.C. show on Sunday. You have to look at the bright side. Even with losing almost an entire day, we still had around 20,000 people attend the show. You just can't control the weather. We also had our share of little problems, like someone driving into the overhead door in Saint Paul and doing \$5,000.00 worth of damage, but in the big picture things went great.

George: I recall a similar experience at Long Beach in 2005! Do you have your 2007 schedule yet?

Dave: Not quite, we are getting close and it should be out in early June.

George: How about the **Great Train Expo**?

Dave: Well, I was very pleased for our first season, I thought things went well and we identified some things we can improve upon. I think these shows are a perfect fit for the void that has been developing in the train show industry in the last few years.

George: By that do you mean GWAATS (formerly GATS) or Hobbies Unlimited?

Dave: Absolutely!

George: You know we reported that GWAATS/Hobbies Unlimited was going out of the model train business. Then we heard a rumor that you bought them, and then an even wilder rumor that the former GWAATS ownership is hiding in a cave in the mountains. Can you tell us what really happened?

Dave: Well I can tell you what I know and what I think happened. I think the only ones who could really tell you are Moe, Kathy and John Geoghegan. But here are some things I know to be facts:

1. Hobbies Unlimited/GWAATS was having financial distress!
2. They had reduced their amount of their show advertising!
3. Moe Geoghegan still owed me a mid six-figure amount from when I sold him GATS in 2001!
4. I met with Moe Geoghegan in Boise, ID at his last show to discuss his situation. At that

Trolleyville Library Listing Expanded

To assist modelers in finding specific topics, listings for the Central Electric Railway Association Bulletins, Street Railway Reviews and Traction Heritage magazines have been expanded to allow better search for specific details. This expansion will be continued as time and resources permits. The library listing is updated at least twice annually. No library is ever complete and we realize that there are items that we need to add to the Trolleyville Library. If any readers would like to make items available, please [contact the Trolleyville Library](#).

The Great Western & Atlantic Train Show - a study in management incompetence!

[A Trolleyville Times Editorial]

Last month, we reported the formal death of the Great American Train Show and the apparent successor, the Great Western & Atlantic Train Show. The last days of the Great Western & Atlantic Train Show did not do justice to what was once the greatest traveling model train show on earth. It seems like just yesterday, that model railroaders went to Model Railroader magazine and noted the Great American Train Shows scheduled in their area and made sure that the other activities did not conflict.

When GATS was sold in October 2001, no one expected the end would come less than five years later. The new owners were current participants in the train show business; the new owners had owned a model train shop at one time; it appeared that the new owners had executive experience, and the new owners had been excellent show managers for the Great American Train Show. At the time of the sale, the Trolleyville Times had been told of some of the terms and felt that they were more than fair.

The Trolleyville Times was recently made aware of all terms of the original terms of the deal and without disclosing the terms, we must let you know that they were generous and had the new management followed the example, procedures and business ethics of the previous owner, we would not have seen the premature demise of GATS! In other words, this business failure was not an accident. It was the result of direct action (or lack of it).

In column one of this issue, we interviewed Dave Swanson, whom we have known for some time. He is an honest, personable and fair leader. He values his workers and they are intensely loyal to him. We know that Dave did everything in his power to ensure the success of GATS before, during and after the sale. He would not dare to say all of the really incredible mismanagement that occurred at GATS/GWAATS after the sale to Moe Geoghegan.

In truth, the management incompetence was constant, frequent and consistent. At the time of the sale, the company had experienced and motivated employees working under a goal-oriented, ethical leader. Some stayed after the sale only to be summarily fired without any recognition for their many years of service. The company was in an established location with a well-known respected name. By the time the end came, the company had been inappropriately renamed the Great American Train & Computer Show, then the Great American Toy & Hobby Show, and the Great Western Train and Toy Show. Last summer, the name Hobbies Unlimited appeared along with the name Great Western & Atlantic Train Show, giving the appearance of trying to circumvent creditors. In trying to get into the computer and hobby business, the management of the core train show was almost totally neglected. Then there were the office moves. The original 'lean & mean' Chicago area offices were abandoned for more luxurious offices formerly used by an attorney. Then there was a move to Las Vegas, apparently for non-business reasons, another to Los Angeles and finally the abandonment of any formal offices.

Of course, nothing can alienate customers more than inaccessibility. In the last year, no one was there to answer phones. Return phone calls were late if at all. Messages given to one employee were not necessarily acted upon and talking to the principal owner almost required a court order. Most employees, vendors and customers had to get permission from an employee to talk to the principal owner.

Finally, when GATS became GWAATS and the ownership apparently shifted to the son of the original owner, the original owner suddenly reappeared as a show manager. But by this time the die had been cast. Both vendors and the public were dropping the shows at an exponential rate.

time, he stated to me that he did not know what he was going to do!

5. In Boise, we discussed the possibility that he might go out of business and I offered to reduce his debt to me in exchange for his mailing lists and exhibitor lists if he decided to go out of business.

6. In late April, Moe and I reached an agreement for me to purchase his mailing lists in exchange for me writing off his debt.

George: Whoa – you really wrote off a six-figure debt for a mailing list? That must be one heck of a mailing list!

Dave: Well, it was very obvious to me that I was not going to be able to collect the money owed to me anyway. There were no assets to seize in a bankruptcy proceeding. So I decided to obtain the one asset that had some value and an agreement that if he went out of business he would not re-enter the business and attempt to compete against my shows.

George: OK, I'll bite! Why the no-compete agreement?

Dave: It was not a major concern. I just didn't want him to go out of business to get rid of his debt to me and start running train shows with yet another new name and corporation. I basically wanted to make sure him going out of business was not just a creditor dodge.

George: Sounds like the whole GATS sale in 2001 to Moe Geoghegan was a financial disaster to you. Was it as big a disaster as it sounds?

Dave: That's one of your typical blunt questions and I guess the accurate answer is that I lost a 7 figure amount of money. But what was even worse was seeing a profitable company that my staff and I built for over 20 years completely destroyed in less than 5 years. I think there are a lot of words you could use, disaster, train wreck, bad decision, and probably a few words you can't print. I blame only myself. I should have made sure I had got paid up front. It is a lesson in life you learn. I thought I was safe in selling to Moe and getting paid over time, I just didn't anticipate that things could go that wrong.

George: Wait a minute, Dave. We know the company was profitable at the time of sale so I can not see how you can blame yourself. Without rubbing salt in the wound, what do you think went wrong?

Dave: Once again I can't fully judge, I am an outsider but I think you have to say that Moe Geoghegan just wasn't the right guy to run the business. I think he made bad decisions with respect to cost controls, business expansion, and priorities. It is my belief that his biggest mistake is that he did not spend enough time at his own shows. I think you have to be at shows checking up on things, understanding how things are going, talking with exhibitors and attendees. This isn't the General Electric Corporation. The CEO or the person with those responsibilities can't just delegate everything.

George: So what are your plans for the remnants of GWAATS?

Dave: Well, we really don't have any plans for GWAATS, but we do have a plan to fill the void in train shows. We want to expand to insure that venues where large successful shows can be run will be run. We want to expand the Great Train Expo to about 50-60 shows per year by the end of 2007. We want to do this at the right venues, with the right quality and the right organization.

George: So what venues are you thinking of?

Dave: We want to look at top 100 markets. We want to have shows in areas like Detroit, Kansas City, Dallas, San Francisco and Seattle-Tacoma. We are not real interested in one-day shows and our business plan outside of the Chicago area is based on venues that will support two-day shows.

George: I think that our readers would like to know what venues formerly used by GWAATS do you plan to use in the next 12 months?

Dave: Well our shows thru December 2006 will be on the Great Train Expo [web site](#) as of June 1, 2006. We will have our Jan-Apr 2007 schedule there by July 1, 2006. Some new venues for us for the 2nd half of 2006 include: Orlando, FL; San Jose, CA; Winston-Salem, NC; Rock Island, IL; Pleasanton, CA; Tulsa, OK; and Richmond, VA. We will have many more new venues in 2007, like Anaheim, CA.; Portland, OR.; San Francisco, CA.; Rochester, NY; and many others.

George: So what about your organization, what changes are you making?

Dave: I have increased my full time staff to five people. We are continuing our philosophy that the person who handles exhibitor calls, makes the contracts for the show, does the floor plan is the same person who is on site to manage the show. This really seems to cut down on problems. The members of my staff have the following responsibilities:

Randy Bachmann – Chief Operating Officer (COO) – He runs the World's Greatest

The Good News is that the Great Western & Atlantic Train Show is out of business. Even Better News is that the Geoghegan family has exited the train show business. But the Best News is that the Great Train Expo is eventually coming to town.....soon! If you love a good train show, don't miss any of them!

Southern California Traction Club holds Spring Barbecue

The Los Angeles area HO scale modular traction club held its annual spring barbecue at their clubhouse in Baldwin Hills on Monday, May 29, 2006 at noon. Most members and their immediate families were present for this feast. Shown below, I to r, are Nicole Gurzeler, Georgia Debeers, Fred Gurzeler, Pete Debeers, John McWhirter and George Jones.



These annual spring picnics have become an event each year since they began in 1999. First, there is always some video presentation, then there is the running or testing of trolley cars for the families and, of course, some great food. This year was no exception with George Jones showing rare train movies originally photographed in 1897. The movies were shown despite a balky projector, which was found to have a broken drive belt and sound problems. This year Fred Gurzeler, tested a Bachmann PCC that he bought for his daughter Nicole along with a Hallmark AS-616. The major activity at this picnic is always the food. As is usual, besides the hamburgers and apple pie, there was Korean BBQ provided by Akihisa Saitoh, all of which was grilled to perfection by club member John McWhirter.



John also surprised the club with a carrot cake that he made and decorated. This picture was snapped prior to most of the cake rapidly disappearing. (It was fantastic!)



The club has seven major projects in process including the new subway train module, the two new downtown city modules, two more residential modules and two modules representing the Pacific Electric's Puente Largo Bridge.

Currently under intense effort are three city modules, 060, 061A and 062. Below are shown modules 060 (front) and 062 (rear). The rectangular holes in the forward module are to be entrances to the subway train module, 061A which will be below module 060. The subway will be visible from the front directly under module 060. Under consideration is the employment of Digitrax DCC for the module 060-062 trolley loop. This will be finalized during this month. As of late May, paving of the brick portions of the street had started in the lower left of the below photo.

Hobby on Tour shows and gives guidance/direction to the other staff on office procedures.

Frank Hicks – Show Manager – He will be running all the shows outside of the Northeast and Midwest. Frank is the newest addition to our staff.

Bill Grove – Show Manager – He directs all the Midwest (IL, IA, IN, NE) shows including our monthly Chicago Great Midwest Train Show. Bill is developing a new business for us in the exhibition decorator business, so we can do more things in house.

Paul Jablonski – Show Manager – He directs shows in the Northeast (VA, MD, PA, MA, NY, NJ, NH).

Kurt Jablonski – Chief Marketing and Finance Officer – He manages our advertising agency and does all the media buying for all the shows, as well as onsite Public Relations work.

Each of our show managers will manage 20 to 25 Great Train Expo shows annually. In addition, Randy will manage 4 to 6 World's Greatest Hobby on Tour shows. It is interesting to note that 4 out of 5 of our full time staff worked for me prior to 2001 when I sold GATS to Moe Geoghegan. They have extensive knowledge of the model train show business, enjoy model or prototype trains and love their jobs.

George: Before we leave the subject of GWAATS, there are some people who have said they have had trouble reaching them. Do you have any information on how to reach them?

Dave: No I don't and I do not think it will get any better. I think it is typical that once a business officially folds, there is no easy way to contact anyone, because all the principals and employees are gone and really do not want to talk to anybody anyway.

George: OK, on a new subject, I heard you were going to have something to do with IHobbyExpo

Dave: Yes, IHobbyExpo hired us to be their advertising agency for the consumer portion of the show. We are really looking forward to expanding the public attendance for that show. We really feel honored that the Hobby Manufacturers association had the confidence in us to grant us this assignment.

George: Well it sounds like things are going well and everything is under control?

Dave: I think things are going well but there is a lot of room for improvement. It is going to take time to get everything back under control and up to the quality level that I want. We have a good start and I think my entire staff enjoys the challenges we have in front of us.

George: Anything else you'd like to add?

Dave: My staff and I appreciate the support of the attendees, exhibitors and clubs that make the shows successful. We only provide logistics; it is the people who participate that are the heart and soul of the shows. We will continue to try and make our shows enjoyable for everyone.

Note: This is the second of two interviews with Dave Swanson about the model train show environment. To review the first interview, please [click here](#).



A major announcement concerning the club's future was made at this event. Working with the Association of Modular Model Railroad Operators (AMMRO), the club will embrace the goals of the World's Greatest Hobby initiative by making arrangements for appearances at public areas where model trains are not normally seen. Fifty years ago, when department stores were the centers of shopping, each Christmas season produced huge model train displays in the stores themselves. We are sure that those readers who were around at that time can remember the whistle sounds and the smell of model steam engine smoke that filled the areas around these layouts. Well for the most part, these department stores are gone and shopping malls are now the center of most shoppers plans.

The world is much different today. Society is different. And both model trains and prototype trains have changed. So the placement of layouts in these areas must consider the social and legal environment of these times. As these problems are encountered and solved, the club hopes to make a significant announcement about such appearances within months.

In preparation for these possible Christmas season shows, one club member has prepared two Holiday Streetcars for use during those shows. Both cars are Bachmann Holiday Brill Streetcars, with Bowser 125143 mechanisms, A-line 20040 flywheel kits, reversing headlight diodes, two older Bert Sas trolley poles and two older basket fenders. One of these cars is shown below operating on the club test track.



