

## Running Mini Railroad Pays Off

The Great American Train Company's battery-powered 1/8-scale trains are ideal for money-raising special events or permanent installations. The company says the sturdy equipment easily pays for itself and then some, even at a cost that starts at nearly \$15,000 for a single locomotive.

Built to carry adult passengers, each powder-coated engine can pull as much as 1,600 lbs. up a 3 percent slope. Justin Muller says the mini railroad is a real crowd pleaser.

"We had a holiday party for Southwest Airlines, and they kept the train running until 2 a.m.," recalls Muller. "We charge \$2,000 per corporate event. That includes setting up and tearing down the track and providing an operator and other staff. We can transport the train and track on two trailers."

Muller originally bought the train for himself as a stress reliever. It quickly evolved into its own income stream.

"We have Muller Railroad business cards, hats, overalls, patches and more," he says. "We even issue our own railroad tickets. People love it."

Muller set the train up inside a 15,000 sq. ft. building. "We can carry up to 12 adults, and they often have more fun than

the kids. They wave to their friends and others as they go around the track, like they were on a real train," says Muller, who likes to operate the train himself.

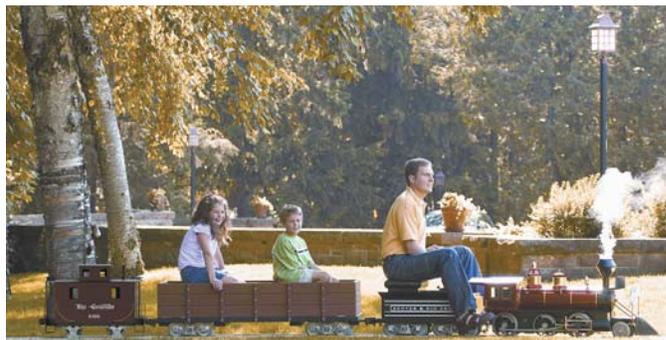
Muller is planning to sell ads on the side of the train and give the sponsorship fees to community outreach. While it's just a small sideline business, he is confident it could be much more.

"I think it could be a full time business for someone who is dedicated to it," he says.

The Great American Train Company says that a train set up with room for 10 passengers could bring in \$240 per hour. If operated 8 hours a day for 60 days a year, the company projects income of \$115,200 per year. That's based on 8 rides per hour and a \$3/person fare. Increase the fare to \$4 and income jumps considerably. They suggest setting up at fairs, festivals and shopping malls as well as special corporate and social events.

Muller says moving the railroad isn't difficult, especially if setting up on level ground. Even with his several hundred feet of track, he says it can be accomplished in four to five hours. Should repairs be needed, the component nature of the design makes swapping out parts easy.

The locomotive is patterned after the 2-



Justin Muller used battery-powered, 1/8-scale trains to start a sideline business. He says the mini railroad is a real crowd pleaser at special events.

6-0 Baldwin locomotive built in the late 1800's and early 1900's. The all-metal construction relies on 6 powered wheels in the middle of the engine driven by four electric motors. Electricity is supplied by 24V DC batteries.

"We chose Great American over others because they are safer and more reliable," says Muller. "They have good quality construction, and the engine has the feel of a real, working locomotive."

A starter package of locomotive, riding tender, gondola riding car (seats two) a Bobber Caboose (seats one) and 228 ft. of track is priced at \$22,995. That's enough track

for a 60 by 80-ft. oval. Extra gondolas are priced at \$2,395 and extra (preassembled) track panels at \$189 each.

Although the train can be run outside and is weather-ready, Muller's train has mostly operated inside, often for hours on end. "We bought extra batteries, but so far we haven't needed them," he says. "We have run it for up to 6 hours without charging."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Great American Train Company, Two Carlson Parkway North, Plymouth, Minn. 55447 (ph 763 476-5140 or 800 486-0553; www.greatamericantrain.com).

## Deck-Building Franchise Catches On

A successful Canadian deck-building franchise is expanding into the U.S. Hickory Dickory Decks CEO and founder Tom Jacques says he has had a lot of interest from farmers looking for a sideline business.

"Many of our customers are also farmers because they generally want to build things that last," Jacques says, noting that his company is a world leader in building low-maintenance decks. About 90 percent of its business is franchise owners installing decks made of composite materials.

"There are lots of farmers looking for sideline businesses. They have done carpentry work all their life and enjoy working with their hands and operating equipment and tools," says Jacques, who is a part time farmer himself.

New franchisees take an intensive four-week training course. You must have carpentry skills or bring along a worker

who does. Besides three weeks of hands-on building, the session includes learning how to sell, hire employees, do accounting, and everything else involved in running a business.

"We help you with every aspect and then support you through franchise managers and the internet," Jacques says. "If I had to name one reason to join our team at Hickory Dickory Decks, it would be our websites." Sites include thousands of deck plans and more than 10,000 deck photos to conveniently and quickly generate leads and help clients select what they want.

The company has 50 franchises in Ontario, and recently expanded to Bangor, Maine, and Rochester, N.Y. "We're legal to sell franchises in 36 states, but are actively looking for people throughout North America and will do the necessary registration wherever there's interest."

He invites people looking for deck ideas or who are interested in the franchise to



Farmers interested in a sideline business might consider Hickory Dickory Decks. It sets up turnkey franchises that specialize in decks made of composite materials.

check out his business's website. Cost of a franchise is \$50,000, or less for those who supply their own tools.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Hickory Dickory Decks, 115 Dundas St. W. Hwy.

5, Clappison Corners, Flamborough, Ontario, Canada L9H 7L6 (ph 905 689-4774 or 800-263-4774; www.hickorydickorydecks.com or www.decks.ca).

## Fish Farm Created Bigger Tilapia

Mike Sipe breeds his tilapia to grow bigger, with a 10 to 20 percent higher fillet-to-body weight ratio than other tilapia on the market. He also eliminates the hassle of breeding for males only, as most commercial producers do today. Sipe, both a tilapia breeder and a consultant, has been refining his breeding lines and his system for decades.

"When I started breeding tilapia 35 years ago, the fillet-to-body weight ratio was only 24 percent," recalls Sipe. "Today my hybrids reach 46 to 48 percent ratios."

The secret to his high fillet ratio is an improved body form he calls Black Butterball for its nearly "round" shape. This form was selected over countless generations from *Tilapia honorum*, one of three common tilapia species used in commercial production. Breeding Black Butterball males to females from any of the Mozambique tilapia breeding lines produces a robust and fast growing fingerling.

"It produces a large fish that filets easily

with no bone," says Sipe.

He recommends raising his hybrids in high population density cages. Although the production system depends on highly oxygenated water, Sipe says it allows tilapia producers to avoid the use of hormones or breeding schemes to produce single sex production stock. In commercial breeding operations, all male or hormone-induced male fish are seen as the way to maximize fillet size and prevent overpopulation that can stunt fish and deplete oxygen in the water. While Sipe has breeding colonies that will produce nearly all male hybrids without the use of hormones, he suggests high populations and caging as alternatives.

"With populations of more than four pounds of fish per cubic foot, the fish can't breed," says Sipe. "Even if they do, by using cages made with grids, the eggs fall through, and the female can't pick them up to incubate them in her mouth."

Sipe says that while other breeders suggest that females are significantly slower to

mature than males, his hybrids are the exception. He has found that using his intensive production system, females will reach maturity at 4 1/2 months versus four months for the males. He feels the two-week difference is not worth the use of hormones or the hassle of attempting to breed male only populations.

Sipe says the key to successful cage use is to keep them suspended. He suggests fabricating cages in an 8 by 10 by 4-ft. size. In systems he has designed for producers, the cages are hung in a tank where water quality can be managed.

Another key to quality production is quality feed, adds Sipe. He prefers a high quality fish feed, such as Purina Trout Chow, for its floating nature and for its vegetable protein component.

"It is best not to use any animal fat when feeding fish," Sipe says.

While he has cut back his marketing efforts in recent years, Sipe continues to sell breeding colonies of one male and five



Hybrid tilapia fish have a 10 to 20 percent higher fillet-to-body ratio than other tilapia on the market.

females. A breeding colony is priced at \$500, and he estimates it should produce 1,000 fingerlings per week for up to five years. Sipe maintains multiple breeding lines for research and sale, including Red Butterball and others.

"I only sold about 100 colonies this past year," he says. "I prefer to concentrate on continued research."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Mike Sipe, 447 Old Lake City Terrace, High Springs, Fla. 32643 (ph 386 454-2016; Miketsipe@gmail.com; www.cherry-snapper.com).