

TCA Mission: To preserve an important segment of history – Tinplate Toy Trains – through research, establishment of collecting standards, education, community outreach, fellowship and to promote the growth and enjoyment of the hobby.



Volume 33, No. 8

Desert Division

DISPATCH

ARIZONA • NEW MEXICO • WEST TEXAS



October, 2004

FALL TRAINING SEASON BEGINS!!

What proved to be a very mild summer is behind us, and with the start of September the Desert Division traditionally starts getting into a "toy train frame of mind." The crowd at the Jaycees Hall confirmed that this year would be no exception to the rule that from September to November the intensity of toy train interest is turned up a notch or two.

There is always a significant amount of business to conduct at the September meet, and President Chris Allen ran an efficient meeting. Treasurer Herman reported a savings account balance of \$13,967.70 and checking balance of \$4,685.78. The "Trains 4 Kids" program now has \$179.55 as a result of proceeds from the monthly raffles.

We were graced by a visit from Mr. Jay Keeley, a Lionel representative. Jay set up a display featuring the 2004 end-of-year product line, with the Lionel Polar Express set which will be available prior to the November 9 opening of the movie. Other items, including a less than \$100 0-6-0 locomotive, were well received by the viewing audience. S-gaugers will have the chance to purchase a Lionel/Flyer Mikado with TMCC. Mr. Keeley then left to set up a similar display at Arizona Train Depot in Mesa.

Beth Stange has agreed to serve as chairman of the Election Committee. The Desert Division has a long history of very active elections with a high percentage of members participating. If you have a wish to run for one of the elected offices (President Allen continues in his term through next year) contact Beth (480-947-5663) and offer your name for nomination to her.

With fall comes the annual Desert Division Golf Tournament. This will be contested for the 16th year, making it the oldest continuously held tournament in the TCA. Adding to the fun of the golf is a steak dinner and awards ceremony. A single fee of \$30 covers 18 holes of golf and the dinner at Painted Mountain Country Club in Mesa. How can you beat steak and golf for \$30? It's enough to make you take up golf (since we have all taken up eating!). To make your reservation, contact Gordon Wilson at 480-837-5344 on or before October 23, 2004.

The Turkey Meet is rapidly approaching, and Chet Henry had the auction catalogs available for sale (\$3.00 which serves as auction admission). The tri-fold registration forms will be in the mail soon. Another annual event, the Holiday Party, will be held at a new venue this year. We need more space for serving lines. So on December 12 the Division will celebrate at the Holiday Inn Select on 44th Street and Washington. Cost is \$22 per adult, and \$13 per child. You can download a reservation form, if you wish, from the Division Website, <http://www.tcadd.org>.

National President Paul Wassermann encouraged members to order the TCA 50th anniversary gold coin. The form is published in the National Headquarters News or can be downloaded from the TCA national website.

Long time Desert Division member Jerry Calkins and wife Connie are moving to Wyoming and Colorado. (You will have to ask Jerry why anyone would want to winter in Wyoming.) Jerry has given countless hours of service to our club. His participation was recognized with a special certificate from the Division and we will miss the Calkins family.

COMING UP...

OCTOBER 9	REGULAR DIVISION MEET – JAYCEES HALL, SCOTTDALE – 9 AM
OCTOBER 9-10	RAILFAIR – McCORMICK-STILLMAN PARK, SCOTTSDALE – 9 AM
OCTOBER 14-16	MFGR. SEMINAT & YORK MEET, STRASBURG & YORK, PA – 9 AM
OCTOBER 30	16th ANNUAL GOLF TOURNEY, PAINTED MOUNTAIN, MESA – 11 AM
NOVEMBER 12-14	CAL STEWART MEET, PASADENA, CA – 9 AM

Gordon Wilson opened the educational segment by sharing the new Hallmark Lionelville Christmas Ornament, a miniature layout operated by a tiny ZW. Paul Wassermann displayed a like new, boxed 1935 #45 Lionel Gateman, complete with insulated straight track section. His #49 airplane matt (for use with the Lionel Pylon Airplane) is rare to begin with, but made even more collectable by the original cardboard box! Paul then unveiled the magnificent gold plated Big Boy from Mikes Train House. Offered by MTH in conjunction with the TCA to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the club, the locomotive is just plain breathtaking. Paul then went from the sublime to the ridiculous. He brought a Marx Critter, a diminutive little toy tin tank with a wooden turret. Paul bought an entire Marx Army Train just to get an original wood top for his previously turretless critter.

This month's Mystery Greeter was Jerry Sienkiewicz, who named Pat Eiff as the winner of the ten extra raffle tickets. Today's raffle winners were:

Cole Gibbs	Hudson Raffle Ticket
Chris Allen	Lionel Walkout Cantilever Signal (donated to Kids Club)
Ed Micale	Lionel Conrail Flat w/Shovel Kit (1998 TTOS Convention Car)
Keith Swett	Lionel 1992 TCA Convention Car – AM Refrigerator Car
Jerry Calkins	Lionel Station Platform
Gordon Wilson	<u>Fun with Trains</u> book and Watchman's Shanty
Ken Barnes	Lionel 6464-196 Santa Fe Box Car\
Dave Brown	Lionel Girder Bridge Kit
Angelo Lautazi	Rail King Mazeroski World Series Homer Box Car

The Hudson \$100 went to Paul Wassermann.

Desert



Division

NO CHILDHOOD SHOULD BE WITHOUT A TRAIN

KIDS CLUB NEWS

By Rob Davis, John Huber, and Tom Plies

The Zoo Table will be changed to a Halloween theme sometime this month. October brings Railfair. The Desert Division Kids Club helps set up and dismantle the table and runs the module this entire weekend. This year, Railfair is October 9 and 10.

Do you want to enroll someone "FREE" between the ages of 4 through 18 in the Kids Club? Use the form below. Give it to one of the Kids Club Chairs at the Meet on June 12, and we will see to it that it is sent on to the TCA National Business Office.



Kid's Club Registration Form

PLEASE PRINT

Name _____ Date of Birth _____ / _____ / _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP Code _____

SPONSOR INFORMATION

Sponsor Name _____ TCA No. _____

Phone No. _____ Relationship to Kid's Club Member _____

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Greetings to you All!

Because of publishing deadlines, I'm actually writing this on the first day of fall back in September. Looking at the full hall we had at the meet last month, it seems as if everyone is getting into the cooler weather and the fall train season. All of the year-end activities are ramping up and the events look as exciting as ever. The Holiday Party chairs are very excited about the new venue this year. The folks out at the Holiday Inn West did a fantastic job for us the past several years; we just simply outgrew their facilities. Working with a sister property, the Holiday Inn Airport, we now have a larger banquet room and the ability for two additional serving lines. The biggest inconvenience for those attending the Holiday Party has been the length of time it has taken for everyone to get through the serving lines. The larger room and two additional lines should greatly alleviate that. Unfortunately the larger facility also resulted in an increased rental cost. All Desert Division functions must be self-supporting. It is not fair for the Division with over 300 members in three states, to underwrite the Holiday Party, so these increases must be paid by those who attend. Although it is a modest increase, between the Lenox ornament and Barclay figures and your buffet meal, most couples will still eat better and cheaper than you could at any fast food restaurant in town, and have more fun doing it. Look for information on the website and in the newsletter.

The Kid's Club will be running the module at Railfair during our meet. They will need relief Saturday after the meet and we can always use an extra hand on Sunday. Setup will be at the McCormick Stillman Railroad Park at 6:00 AM Saturday, October 9th BEFORE the General Meet. We will also need help to run trains on the module on Sunday and with tear down Sunday afternoon at 4:00 PM. The weather is always beautiful so plan to bring the family out for a great weekend of fun at the park. Can we count on you to give an hour or two of your time either day or to stop by the module and give the ops a quick relief break while you say howdy?

Speaking of Rail Fair, if you missed the meet you also missed the news that long time Desert Division supporter Jerry Calkins and effervescent wife Connie have hitched up their wagon and are heading up the trail to Wyoming. Jerry and Connie's ever present smile and willingness to spend a few hours running long consists on the module will be missed. Those of you who have had the good fortune to work the module when Jerry shows up and proudly announces that he has fresh batteries for his QSI cattle cars know the joy! It's hard to tell who has more fun, Jerry or the kids. But Jerry did more than keep the UP flame burning bright here in the desert long before the merger made that banana yellow so common place. He has worked on various Division committees, was a key chairman during the 1997 National Convention here in Phoenix, and with Connie at his side, livened up many a banquet table. I was proud to give Jerry a well-deserved Desert Division Certificate of Appreciation for all his help through the years. Our best wishes go with Jerry and Connie as they embark on this new chapter of their life. Our loss will be Wyoming's gain.

The constant bombardment on TV and Radio about the upcoming elections may have desensitized you to the fact that the Division elections are right around the corner. Beth Stange will be looking to fill out the local Division ballot. I would like to encourage you to consider running for office. This is in no way a reflection on the present Board of Directors who have continued to work hard this past year running the Division, but rather a way for you too to become involved in the Division. Most of us wear multiple hats, working not only on the Board of Directors but also as chairs for various events and activities. Beth will be looking for you to help round out the ballot or to help on the Election Committee. Make her job easier and volunteer. The bylaws also permit us to take nominations from the floor at the October meet, so come prepared.

With some new working accessories from K-Line Electric Trains, the Zoo Module will get a seasonal facelift of some Halloween haunted houses, pumpkins, and ghosts. We will be doing this to coincide with the "Boo at the Zoo" program that they run in late October. In early November the busy Zoo Crew will remove these Fall Festival additions and add a little "winter flair" to the module for "Zoo Lights," which is the most popular attraction that the zoo runs. With the cooler weather and the returning of many of the heat sensitive animals who chilled out elsewhere during the hot desert summer, attendance figures will jump dramatically during the winter months so the module will start to get a real good work out. We'll post new pictures as they become available.

Looking forward to seeing you soon!



The Dispatch is published monthly except July and December by the Train Collectors Association, Desert Division, 3840 N. Jokake Drive, Scottsdale, AZ 85251. This issue is Volume 33, No. 8 (October, 2004).

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The Bylaws Committee, chaired by Keith Swett, has proposed the following changes to the current Desert Division Bylaws. Please compare the items below with your copy of our current Bylaws. Copies of the current Bylaws will be available at the next Division Meet for your perusal and comparison. These revisions are being published the third and final time in this issue of the newsletter. They will be included on the ballot for your approval in November. What appears below allows for a group of members to petition for Chapter status. It also allows the Division to have a Media/Relations Chairperson.

PROPOSED BYLAW CHANGES

Change Article II Section I to Article II Section 1A.

Add sections B and C to read as follows:

B. A Chapter may be formed by filing a petition to the Desert Division Board of Directors with the geographic boundary, proposed name, and 25 signatures pledging membership as outlined in Article II Section 1A.

C. Final approval of the petition for Chapter formation resides with the Desert Division Board of Directors.

Change Article III Section 3 as follows:

Add the words "all Chapter officers" so that Section B reads as follows:

B. The terms of office for the Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, Directors, and all Chapter officers shall be for one calendar year.

Reletter "C" to "D"

Reletter "D" to "E"

Reletter "E" to "F"

Insert a new section "C" as follows:

C. The elected President of a Chapter becomes a Director on the Desert Division Board of Directors.

Article VII – Add a new Section 3 as follows:

A Media Relations Chairperson shall be appointed by the President for a one-year term. He/She shall promote the growth of the Division through exposure of meets, events, and activities.

16th ANNUAL DESERT DIVISION OPEN GOLF TOURNAMENT

In August we had the “Beat the Heat” train meet for the main purpose of AVOIDING the Valley’s sometimes oppressive summertime heat. Now, however, for the 16th consecutive year, we have our “Match the Temperature” Desert Division Open Golf Tournament. Yes, one of the major prizes to be presented at the Holiday Party is the “coveted” Closest to the Temperature trophy.

Have you ever participated in the Desert Division’s Golf Tourney? You do not have to be an avid golfer or even a proficient one – just have a desire to play and have fun with your fellow Division members and their families. We play on a really fun layout – the Painted Mountain Golf Club located on McKellips Road in Mesa. Starting time is in the 11:00 AM area, which means we will conclude right around dinnertime. What a segue!!

Part of the experience connected with this event is the Steak Dinner following play. Between courses, prizes are awarded for such things as “Best Dressed Golfer,” “Longest Worm-Burner,” “Most Creative Shot,” and any other “weird” thing which might be called to our attention. Of course, we do have some SERIOUS golf prizes as well.

Afraid you can’t compete? Don’t! We use the Callaway Handicap System, which evens the playing field very quickly. Believe it or not, this handicap system makes each of us competitive with Tiger Woods and Annika Sorenstam, the world’s No. 1 male and female golfers. That is NOT an exaggeration – it is a fact.

Save Saturday, October 30, from 11:00 AM through dinnertime. The cost for the golf, an electric cart, and your meal will be \$32.00 or less. The more who golf, the less it costs everyone. Please contact Gordon Wilson on or before October 25 with your commitment; however, before October 10 would be much better, as Gordon will be away from the area during the middle of October.

* * * * *

REGISTRATION FORM – GOLF OUTING

____ Yes, sign me up.

Name (Please print) _____ @\$30.00

Playing family members _____ @\$30.00

_____ @\$30.00

_____ @\$30.00

_____ @ \$30.00

Send this form and a check for the total amount to:

Gordon L. Wilson
16231 E. Ocotillo Drive
Fountain Hills, AZ 85268



Make checks payable to TCA – Desert Division.

Start time on October 30 is 11:00 AM.

PADE PROMOTIONS

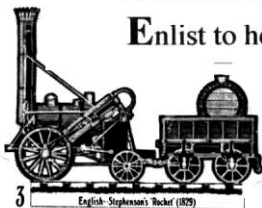
Have You PADE Your Way?

Purchase raffle tickets

Author an article for the Dispatch

Donate something to the club

Enlist to help



The Desert Division thanks everyone who made a PADE donation during the past months. Various members have made contributions to the club this month. Mel Firestone donated a Weaver Central Vermont Reefer. John Bahne gave several items to the Kids Club, as he tore down his module and prepared to move into a smaller home. Chris Allen donated his Raffle Prize to the Kids Club. Also, your raffle purchases have given \$179.55 to the Trains 4 Kids (Holiday) program. Laurel Allen and Denise Micale graced the kitchen this month as volunteers for the Coffee Club.

Your name could appear in this column. You need only do something generous to improve the Division.

RAFFLES AND YOUR PARTICIPATION

by Gordon L. Wilson TCA 76-10233

There is, in my opinion, a huge correlation between the operation methods of a TCA Division and Public Radio. In both cases the perceived "Big Boss" provides absolutely NO financial aid, but demands adherence to all of "Big Boss's" rules and regulations. In simple terms? The Federal Government doesn't finance Public Radio and TCA National provides no financial help to any Division.

You happen to be a member of the Desert Division, one of the most active of all the twenty TCA Divisions. Some major methods of obtaining money to fund all of the membership perks happen through the use of raffles, silent auctions, and donations. Public Radio has fund-raising drives about four times a year. During these "drives" listeners are asked to determine "what the product (PBS Radio) is worth to them" in terms of dollars. The same must be asked of our membership. We pay \$10 a year in dues – nearly every penny of that money goes to support the best monthly newsletter in TCA land, the Dispatch. Actually, that ten dollars doesn't fully cover the cost of office preparation materials, publication, and postage.

So where does that leave us? We used to sell Entertainment Books, but now it seems as though every group sells these books. We used to take our modular layout to large shopping malls and they would pay us a fee for our services. They no longer do that, but want us to now pay them for the privilege of displaying our trains. Members used to donate unwanted trains to the Division, who in turn would sell them and pocket the receipts. Now those unwanted trains are sold on e-Bay and the member pockets the receipts. What does this leave us? Like most of the other Divisions in TCA, we could charge meet admission fees and fees for the tables used for meet sales. We choose NOT to do this for a variety of reasons.

That leaves us raffles, silent auctions, mystery boxes, and donations. All of these methods go right back to the methods employed by Public Radio. What is a Desert Division Meet worth to you?

The hobby of toy trains is not a "poor man's" endeavor. New locomotives cost from a couple hundred dollars to several thousand, regardless of manufacturer. Rolling stock and accessories are less, but rarely below a minimum of \$50 per transaction. We all seem to continue to buy, whatever the cost.

Each month the Desert Division sells raffle tickets for \$1.00 each or 10 for \$5.00. There is a nice prize available to the lucky few whose tickets are selected. The more tickets you buy, the better the chances of winning. Basically I view the raffle

tickets as a monthly donation of \$5.00 to the Desert Division. If one of my tickets is selected, great! If not, I've made a donation to an organization whose ideals and activities I cherish and enjoy. The five dollars is not going to make or break my life style and I honestly don't think it is going to affect any others of us who attend or would like to attend.

As for the Silent Auction item, and out and out donations, just a small explanation is needed. The Silent Auction items are indigenous to the Desert Division – in other words, they are collectible toy train pieces not available at any other meet anywhere in TCA. They are nice pieces for your collection and definitely can be a centerpiece for your layout or special showcase.

Donations to the club are precisely as the word implies, a contribution which is tax deductible, as we are a registered 501c3 organization. Be it money or merchandise, the Division Secretary would be very glad to provide you with an acknowledgment of your donation to put with your tax records.

There you have it – a few ways that you may help the Division financially and also help yourself as well. Your donation is truly a gift that DOES keep on giving.

THE TOY TRAIN CANDIDATE

Not to be confused with THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE

Have you ever had a thought or idea that you were sure would benefit the workings of the Desert Division? For one reason or another, it never surfaced or perhaps was made, but never acted upon. There is one sure fire way to be sure those "gems" are discussed and tried, and that is to be a member of the BOD.

Nominations for all offices except President are now being solicited by Beth Stange, the Chair of the Elections and Nominations Committee. Perhaps you have a special skill or ability which would greatly benefit the operation of the Division. Now is the time to make your candidacy known. Tell all 325 Division members about yourself and your ideas for making the Division grow.

Call Beth (480-9497-5663) and have your name placed in nomination NOW! Don't wait until the October Meeting for a floor nomination – there are many reasons, out of your control, as to why you might not get there. (Car breakdown, highway closure, a sick child or spouse – get the idea?)

As the AARP ad tells us all, "If one person could do it all, there would be no need for the AARP." The same applies to the Desert Division. A few people are left to do almost everything, but that workload could be greatly diminished if you and/or your ideas were present to help out. Get INVOLVED and run for an office – there are six of them available.

MAGNIFICENT MARX

by Paul Wassermann 73-5169

A single visit and a handful of photographs are in no way adequate to cover and describe Jerry and Deborah's magnificent Marx collection. Following the September Division Meet, Irene and I made the now pleasant drive (Thanks 202, 101, and 60) to their Gilbert home. A warm welcome, complete with snacks and soft drinks, greeted us on the first floor. From there a few steps up the stairway to the second floor transported us into a total immersion of Marx trains and toys.

It really doesn't matter what your toy train interest is, you can't help but be in total awe at the quality of the comprehensive, sparkling lithographed display that encompasses at least three rooms of the upper house. From boxed sets to individual items, the presentation stands in mute testament to the varied Marx production. Jerry has accomplished two outstanding goals: he has just about everything important made by Marx in terms of tin trains and the condition of each item is superb. You name it, it is there: Marx Critter Tanks, Bunny Trains, silver Commodore Vanderbilt with matching tender, a corral full of the elusive tin farm animals, play sets, monorails, and (just to vary the manufacturer a bit) sets of beautiful Hafner clockwork trains and Japanese Marx "knockoffs" from Sakai.

Deborah has a collecting specialty of her own. She has accumulated a fabulous collection of Dept 56 North Pole Village items, which are displayed on a layout featuring a Nubrite G scale train. Seeing her fanciful, whimsical village made us realize that the holiday season is only a few short months away. Before we know it Irene and I will be at Stadt's in Pasadena (during the Cal Stewart meet in November) choosing a Snow Village addition for our layout.

Deborah and Jerry possess the quality so typical of many Desert Division members, an eagerness to share their collection and hospitality with others. On behalf of TCA, thank you!

THE ONE AND ONLY HUDSON RAFFLE

by Gordon L. Wilson TCA 76-10233

If you are new to the Division, you may not know what the Hudson Raffle is or how it works. If you've ever had a math course in statistics or bought a Power Ball Lottery Ticket, then you should understand the Laws of Probability.

The Hudson Raffle was the brainstorm of Cole Gibbs, now living in Care Free/Cave Creek. In 1989 his idea and method was adopted by the BOD of the Desert Division. It changed the face of all such ventures in the entire TCA.

The Grand Prize is a Lionel 773 Hudson Locomotive in LN condition. Sometimes it is the 1950 version and sometimes it is the mid-'60's version. In either case, the current price guides call it a premium piece and in that condition value it at \$1,500 minimum.

- The Division prints and sells only 100 raffle tickets, each of them numbered.
- They are available for \$25 each and you may buy as many as you wish. Remember the "Laws of Probability"? Division members may purchase tickets at our meets or from the Division Treasurer.
- Only a TCA member or his/her immediate family may participate in the raffle.
- From February through June, plus September and October, a ticket will be drawn at a meet. The winning ticket holder receives a \$100 bill and the ticket is returned to the drawing bin.
- The member must be present at the meeting to win the \$100.
- Any tickets left unsold after the October Meet will be offered for sale to any TCA member anywhere in the world.
- The Hudson will be awarded at the November Turkey Meet. The winner need not be present to win.

That's all there is to it! Do you have yours yet? Call or write Bob Herman, Treasurer, at 11429 N. 68th Street, Scottsdale, AZ 85254, Phone 480-948-2730.

BOARD MEETING

The next meeting of the Desert Division Board of Directors will be held on Wednesday, October 6, beginning at 7:30 PM at the home of Ed Georgevich. Members are welcome to attend. Please call 623-764-2960 to be sure there are enough chairs.

SEPTEMBER SCENES



President Allen (R) presents Dr. Jerry Calkins with a Division Certificate of Appreciation. Jerry is moving north to Wyoming and Colorado. Best Wishes to Jerry and Connie on their move.



Jay Keeley, Lionel's West Coast "Rep," was a guest at the September "Kick-Off" Meet.



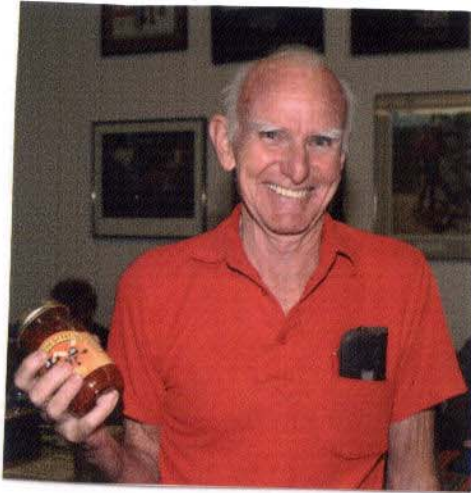
An unidentified manufacturer made the 2 7/8" gondola. In front is MTH's Gold "Big Boy," a celebration of TCA's Golden Anniversary.



Jerry Sienkiewicz stands before one of the many display areas of his "Marx Empire."



Jonathan Peiffer is seen here assisting two young engineers during the Kids Club session in September. Bring your youngster or grandchild or neighbor's "train nut" child with you in October.



Ken Burling holds one of the Sting 'N' Linger Division Salsas given to the TCA Board in June.



An extremely rare Marx barnyard paddock with ALL of the "tin cutout" farm animals.



Bill Mack (L) purchases the very first 2004 Turkey Meet Catalog from Auction Chair Chet Henry.



The "Welcome" sign at the Sienkiewicz home in Gilbert.



Deborah Sienkiewicz with her very complete and extensive collection of Dept 56 buildings as they appear on one of several layouts, surrounded by Marx Tinplate Lithographed trains.

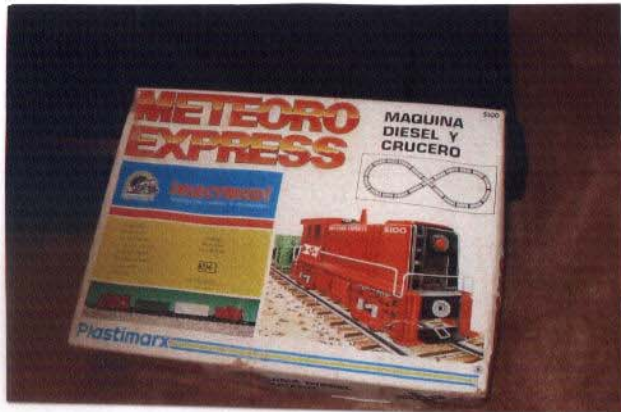
VISIT OUR WEB SITE: www.tcadd.org



A Marx "Critter" Tank -
a truly rare Marx flat car load.



A couple of F-3 battery operated F-Units.
The Santa Fe is on the top shelf, directly
over the rarely ever seen Union Pacific.



Something to look for
"South of the Border."
A Mexican/Marx freight train set.



A complete Freight Station with the rare
(only 2 known to exist) Maroon roof
and Maroon highlighted base.



A Marx Poster attractively displayed
in the Sienkiewicz home.



A wide variety of Pre- and Post-War
Marx rolling stock and floor trains.

VISIT OUR WEB SITE: www.tcadd.org

October's Trivia Question

After last month's troublesome tumbleweed trivia, I had doubts as to what to use this month. Since we have more responses with pictures than my self acknowledged double speak, I'll give you the following photo with this question: This photo was taken inside the boundaries of the Desert Division. You just need to tell me the four "W's" (who, what, where, when).



First correct answer to Chris Allen at 480-820-9559 or email it to me at tcadd.org@cox.net will get you ten free raffle tickets at the October Meet. You do not need to be present to win, if you are not at the meet and your ticket is pulled, the best prize on the table will be sent to you at our cost. This one should go quick, and will be easy for both the internet hounds and for those familiar with the southwest. Remember only one guess per member. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

RUSSIAN THISTLE ! (?)

by Chris Allen TCA 95-40580

Researching trivia questions on the web can be fun, and often I find so much information about a particular subject available that some of my journeys go down some unusual paths. Such was the case with the past two months' trivia question. While researching famous and not so famous train wrecks of the Desert Southwest, I came across a mention of train wrecks and Russian Thistle. Now you will know more about this obnoxious weed than you ever wanted to know.

First off, you and I know Russian Thistle as the common western or prairie tumbleweed, and believe it or not, tumbleweeds are not native to the American continent, and definitely not the Southwest that was made famous by Hollywood. Can you recall a Western movie or TV show that didn't have tumbleweed blowing down a dusty street or in the corners of the OK Corral? Russian Thistle entered the United States in contaminated flax seed in the late 1870's by Ukrainian farmers in South Dakota, and from there the plant spread throughout the West like wildfire. Contaminated seed was shipped or carried by early settlers. There are numerous reports of a "fresh crop" appearing on the sites of train wrecks where boxcars were overturned, and along the wagon train trails where loads were lightened either voluntarily or by raiders. Not that tumbleweeds need any help, the plant itself is most prodigious with an average of 200,000 seeds per plant, and reports indicate that some have traveled more than 50 miles in 24 hours. Since agriculture records were routinely kept, the migration across the plains and into the Southwest have been easily documented. Reports from Arizona had the territory tumbleweed free until 1903 when the first reports came of the trail into and out of Fort Whipple near Prescott becoming impassable due to tumbleweeds blocking the way. So since the first report was in 1903, and the shootout down Tombstone way happened in 1881, all those tumbleweeds you've seen in the movies could not have been there, historically speaking that is. A small anecdote has the Hopi name for this western icon as the "white man's plant."

But let's not stop there. As I said, doing research on the internet can lead you to some unlikely information. I've had a fondness for cowboy western music ever since I grew up listening to Gene Autry and Roy Rogers yodel away a Saturday afternoon at the movie house. It seems that the writer of the song "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," Bob Nolan, had originally written the song in 1932 as "Tumbling Leaves" on a rainy Tucson afternoon. Bob later, as a founding member of the group The Sons of the Pioneers, rewrote the song to better fit the group's Western image and it quickly became their now famous theme song.

Oh yes, one last totally useless bit of tumbleweed trivia. At ground zero in the Nevada desert, the first plant to grow back after an above or below ground nuclear test? You guessed it – Russian Thistle! Pretty ironic, no?