

Pillars of the Community: RAILBRICKS

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Pictures by RAILBRICKS

RAILBRICKS is, undoubtedly, one of the best references in the LEGO® trains world, including for those who are fans of the trains but not of LEGO. They have been publishing their magazine since 2007 and they have recently brought out their issue number 14. Its Editor, Elroy Davis, answers our questions

HispaBrick Magazine: How did the idea of RAILBRICKS come up and what was its original purpose?

RAILBRICKS: RAILBRICKS was initially conceived by Jeramy Spurgeon and others back in early 2007. The original mission statement of the magazine was to "strive to advance the LEGO Train Hobby by providing a FREE online publication created by LEGO Train fans that focuses on various aspects of the LEGO Train Hobby." This goal was to be accomplished by providing articles about builders, clubs and events, construction tips and tricks, instructions that readers could follow, as well as set reviews and various articles about real trains. At the time, RAILBRICKS was also partnered with the International LEGO Train Club Organization (ILTCO) which had a goal of being a sort of information sharing center for LEGO train clubs around the world.

Jeramy, as Senior Editor, assembled a small team of people to produce the first issue in October of 2007. In 2010, at Jeramy's suggestion and with okay from the rest of the group, I took over the editor's role with Issue #7 and continued the magazine using the original guidelines.

HBM: To what degree has that goal been fulfilled?

RB: I think we've done a very good job of fulfilling the magazine's original goals. We continue to publish fan-produced content tailored specifically toward the Trains line of the LEGO hobby. Our content has ranged from instructions for the beginning builder to highly customized solutions for builders who are willing to work with 3rd party electronics or customizations. Our authors live in all parts of the world, and the magazine brings those people together and provides an outlet for sharing information for all levels of builder outside of the usual online formats.

HBM: How many people are working on the magazine and how did you meet?

RB: Our volunteer staff consists of about 17 people, with probably 6 or 7 of us working on the magazine at any one time. Some of the original members of the group have left, and we've brought new people on board. I believe that most of the original members met in person at various events. These days, we have volunteers from a few different countries, and some of us have only met online.

HBM: How do you distribute the work?

RB: Our working style is very loose. Mostly the volunteers of the group look for content to be published, or write articles themselves. Articles are then sent to me as editor. I read over the content, and then work with the authors on corrections or suggestions. Once the authors and I are satisfied with the content, I lay out the articles and images in the magazine's format. After layout work is finished, I'll send a copy of the magazine to our main proof-reader, who also makes some edits. A final proof is then sent to all of our volunteers for a final look before we release the magazine. After all changes are complete, the online version is posted to railbricks.com, and the print-version is sent to our on-demand publisher, Magcloud.com.

HBM: Is it difficult to get material for the magazine articles being about a topic as specific as LEGO trains?

RB: Sometimes it is very difficult to get content. We're sort of a niche of a niche hobby. Also, though we produce the magazine in English, many of our readers are not native English



speakers. As such, those readers sometimes feel that they cannot contribute to the magazine without having perfect English writing skills. This is far from the truth though. We've had many article authors send content that we've translated into English and published. We welcome photos and stories from any of our readers.

HBM: Where the magazine has greater impact? Between LEGO® fans or train fans?

RB: That's an interesting question. The magazine is definitely better known among LEGO fans, but I have heard some feedback from traditional train modellers about how much they enjoy the articles. I do think that traditional train fans, after reading the magazine, have a better appreciation of how deep the hobby is, and that it's not just adults playing with a child's toy.

HBM: Over the years, have you noticed an increase in the number of LEGO train fans? In that case, what do you think it is due to?

RB: I've noticed a lot more interest in LEGO trains from younger people, especially teenagers. I attribute this to the number of LEGO train layout displays that appear at various events, as well as the Power Functions system that LEGO released several years ago. I've also noticed that more people, even if they are not LEGO hobbyists, are more aware than they used to be that LEGO carries train sets.

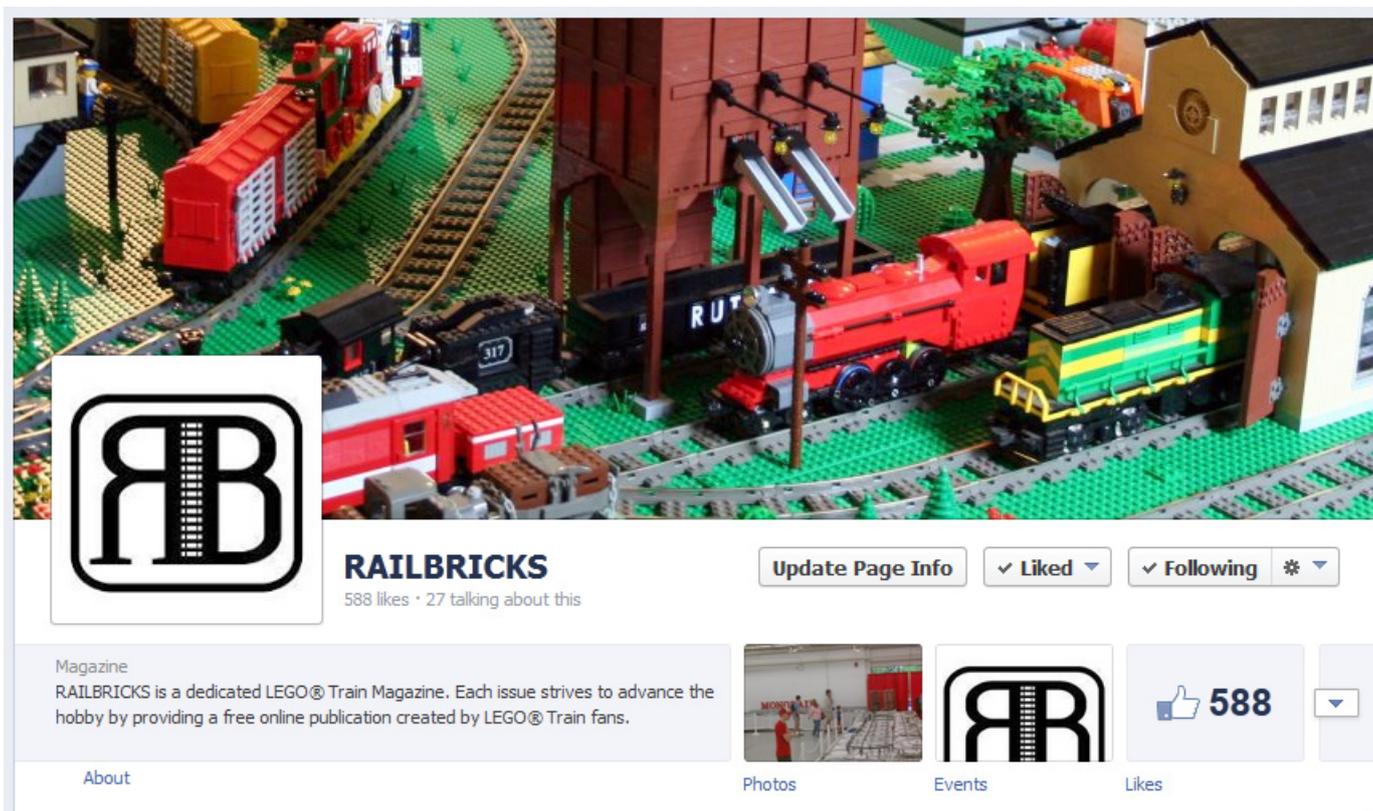
HBM: What is your relationship with TLG?

RB: In the past we haven't really had an established relationship with the LEGO Group. Recently, though, we've reached out to them in regards to creating a partnership of some sort. They've been very receptive. I'm looking forward to working with them in 2014.

HBM: During these years of daily following the LEGO community, which do you think are the main changes that have occurred in the AFOL community?

RB: The biggest change that I've seen is the fragmentation of the AFOL community into smaller, more specialized groups. When I first came out of my Dark Ages, LUGNET, BrickShelf, and Peeron were the main AFOL sites. No matter what line you were interested in, trains, space, castle or whatever, you could go to LUGNET for discussion, BrickShelf for images, and Peeron for set information. There was a lot of cross-sharing of information. Train fans could get ideas by reading about techniques being used by Space fans, Town fans would get ideas from Castle fans and so forth. When specialized sites started popping up, I think we lost some of that. As a Train fan, I mostly read train sites now, and very rarely venture into sites catering to other themes. My local LUG also has its own web forum where we discuss our hobby, so I don't often read about what other LUGs are doing unless I make a conscious effort to visit their sites. RAILBRICKS has actually helped me in that aspect, as I now interact with AFOLs all over the world on a regular basis. It's fun to see how different clubs and different events work.

HBM: Have you done any activities in "real life"? Can you explain them?



RAILBRICKS
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RAILBRICKS is a dedicated LEGO® Train Magazine. Each issue strives to advance the hobby by providing a free online publication created by LEGO® Train fans.

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RB: I've done a lot of shows with my local LUG, the New England LEGO® Users Group (NELUG). We've created displays at many train shows throughout New England. We've also taken part in some very large events like the first LEGO Kidsfest in Hartford, CT, and the National Train Show in 2009. I love these types of events where individual builders bring their creations together to create one giant display. It's a lot of fun to work together with other AFOLs, and then to see the reactions of visitors when they see what can be done with a simple building toy. I especially enjoy watching children as they view our displays, and talking to them about how they can use their imaginations to create anything that they would like create.

Outside of NELUG, I've also set up a couple of smaller displays with other AFOLs to help raise money for railway preservation groups and museums. These displays tend to have less direct interaction with the public, but are more tailored to the venue where they are being displayed.

HBM: Can you explain any interesting anecdotes related to RAILBRICKS?

RB: One of my favourite moments was when an older gentleman, probably in his mid to late 70s, came up to our display at a train show. It was obvious by the items that he was carrying that he was a traditional model railroader. He leaned over the display and pointed at our LEGO trains. "Have you ever heard of a magazine for these?" he asked. "RAILBRICKS?" I said. The man smiled. "That's the one," he said, "Great magazine. You should read it if you don't already." It was really nice to know that someone outside of the LEGO hobby appreciated all the work that we put into the magazine.

HBM: In your opinion, which is the key point for RAILBRICKS to become a reference magazine in the AFOL Community?

RB: I think that a lot of builders use RAILBRICKS as a reference already. I see mentions of the magazine on the Eurobricks forum fairly regularly and I know of a few readers, myself included, who order the print version of the magazine when each new issue is released so that they can keep it on a bookshelf near their building areas. As long as we keep publishing content by fans, and those fans keep coming up with great building techniques and models, I feel like we'll always be a useful resource.

HBM: How much time do you spend to keep RAILBRICKS running?

RB: Lots! The time that I spend varies, but on average it's at least a few hours each week. The largest block of time is dedicated to editing and page layout, as the magazine is our focus, but we also have a website (railbricks.com) and a Facebook page that we keep up. In addition to the magazine work, I spend a lot of time emailing other AFOLs, or reading web forums to try to keep up on what's happening in the community.

HBM: How do you see the future of RAILBRICKS?

RB: The future of RAILBRICKS really depends on the readers of RAILBRICKS. We look to them to provide content for us to publish. The magazine really is a community effort, created by fans, for fans. We've created a structure for LEGO® Train enthusiasts to share their work with the world, in a format that is more permanent than a website forum. As long as fans continue to support us, and we have volunteers to work on the magazine, we'll continue to publish, and keep the magazine free and available for everyone to read.

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