



## Relay Improvement Association Newsletter

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# Railfanning in St. Denis: A railroad enthusiast tradition

**KAREN SAMPSON HOFFMAN**  
For the Relay Improvement Association

ST. DENIS, Md. – Seventy years ago, young Matt Carson wore his good white Sunday suite down to the train station in St. Denis, walking with his grandfather to watch the coal-powered steam trains rumble by. The trains emitted great plumes of black soot that choked the air as the whistle blew and the wooden station platform shook. The engineer waved from his small window at the front of the train. It was everything a little boy could want.

“I’d come home covered in grey soot,” Mr. Carson said, chuckling at the memory. “Grandma would say, ‘What have you being doing?!’

“We have a generational thing,” he continued. “We have grandfathers, sons and grandsons come here.”

“Here” is the small St. Denis train stop and shelter, only a few feet from where the old train station stood until 1976. Every weekend dozens of railfans gather on either side of the tracks to watch the trains go by, taking scores of photos and waving to the train engineers.

“It’s being a ‘foamer,’” Jim Vechecko explained. “That’s what the train companies call us. We’re foaming,” he said and ran his index fingers down from the sides of his mouth. Mr. Vechecko has been coming to watch the trains for 20 years.



Matt Carson, left, leans out from the train shelter with other railfans to watch a train passing by. Mr. Carson has been coming to watch the trains for 70 years.

Photo by Kurt Hoffman

Railfanners are so excited to see the trains that it is like they are foaming at the mouth.

Two other men gathered by the shelter nodded with grins.

“My dad worked on the railroad, so it’s in my blood,” said Harry, who has also been coming to watch the trains for 20 years.

Mike added back an additional generation. “My granddad worked on the

railroad in Pennsylvania,” he said.

“I’ve seen it from steam to diesel,” Mr. Carson said. He settled in to tell the visitors the local story of railfanning. A grandfather himself now, he wore a lightweight jacket and a ballcap that said “Pop-Pop” across the front. “Parents bring their tots on from 3-6-7, early childhood. Some kids from the high school come out, take pictures. [Their parents] know we more or less watch out for them.”

The other side of the MARC train flag stop is in Relay, named for the horse relay station of the first railroad in the United States – before locomotives, when the horses pulled the passenger cars between Baltimore and Ellicott Mills, today known as Ellicott City.

“The old Main Line is the last one over there,” Mr. Carson said, pointing across the three sets of tracks to the far side in Relay. “[Hurricane] Agnes tore one of the tracks up. Track 4 got washed out from Hollow Field to Washington Boulevard.”

Railfanners enjoy the trains and come to watch them roll by, learning their names and numbers, taking photographs and encouraging the engineers to wave and blow the horns. Many of the men coming to St. Denis have train gardens of their own at home. Mr. Carson points to the men around him, mentioning each man’s profession during the week.

“We’ve got all kinds of people,” he said. “But we all love trains.”

During the conversation, the group of six men and their visitors were joined by a seventh man, walking across the tracks from Relay. “Oh, here comes the mayor,” Mr. Carson announced.

“Mayor” (and Relay resident) Cliff James returned the greeting while the visitors were introduced to him.

Mr. James motioned to the old village behind the St. Denis train

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A CSX train approached the St. Denis platform.

Photo By Kurt Hoffman

shelter. “One time St. Denis was the main town. It had a sheriff, town hall and restaurants. Back in the day, it was a very busy station. It had a big potbelly stove. When it used to snow, the station manager used to let the kids warm up by the potbelly stove.

“I’ve been here 18 years,” Mr. James added. “I wouldn’t trade it. I love it, I love railroads.”

Railfanning as a hobby and a lifestyle are highlighted online, through various community message boards, fan clubs and with hours upon hours of video of trains passing through St. Denis and Relay, along with the thousands of other railfanning sites across the United States. Mostly, it’s smaller gatherings of local railroad enthusiasts, each trying to out-do one another for who can be the biggest kid when it comes to trains.

“I think the neighbors are glad we’re down here,” Mr. Carson said, adding that there are railfanners even in to the early hours of the morning, that there is almost always someone there. “We’ll call the police, CSX (train) police, if something doesn’t look

right.” Noting that vandals burned the then-100-year-old St. Denis railroad station in 1976 that he remembers well from his childhood, Mr. Carson added that they are keeping watch on things and are willing to step in when there is a problem.

“We keep an eye on the place,” Mr. Vechecko said. “We know the cops and we call them if there’s a problem.”

At the St. Denis stop, Mr. Carson said they call themselves the “day” and “night shifts” as the groups who come out to watch the trains. Mostly men, there are a few wives and daughters who occasionally come out.

“You better believe we have fun,” Mr. Carson said after a train came by. The men had all left the shelter to stand on the platform and wave up at the engineer, who replied with a blow of the horn. “That’s what it’s all about.”

*Karen and Kurt Hoffman moved to St. Denis, Md., in August and live at the end of Sutton Avenue, near the railroad tracks.*