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Trains in cyberspace

Napan designs software for railroading enthusiasts

By JULIE GORDON
Register Correspondent

It's model railroading from cyberspace.

Napa resident Jim Dill has developed unique TrainPlayer software that enables people to do armchair model railroading on their computer. The software uses layouts from "101 Track Plans for Model Railroaders" by Linn H. Westcott. Dill also has an agreement with Wisconsin-based Kalmbach Publishing, the largest name in hobby publishing, to use its model railroad layouts on his software.

"The Web is a great way to do business," he said. "It's so easy to put it out there."
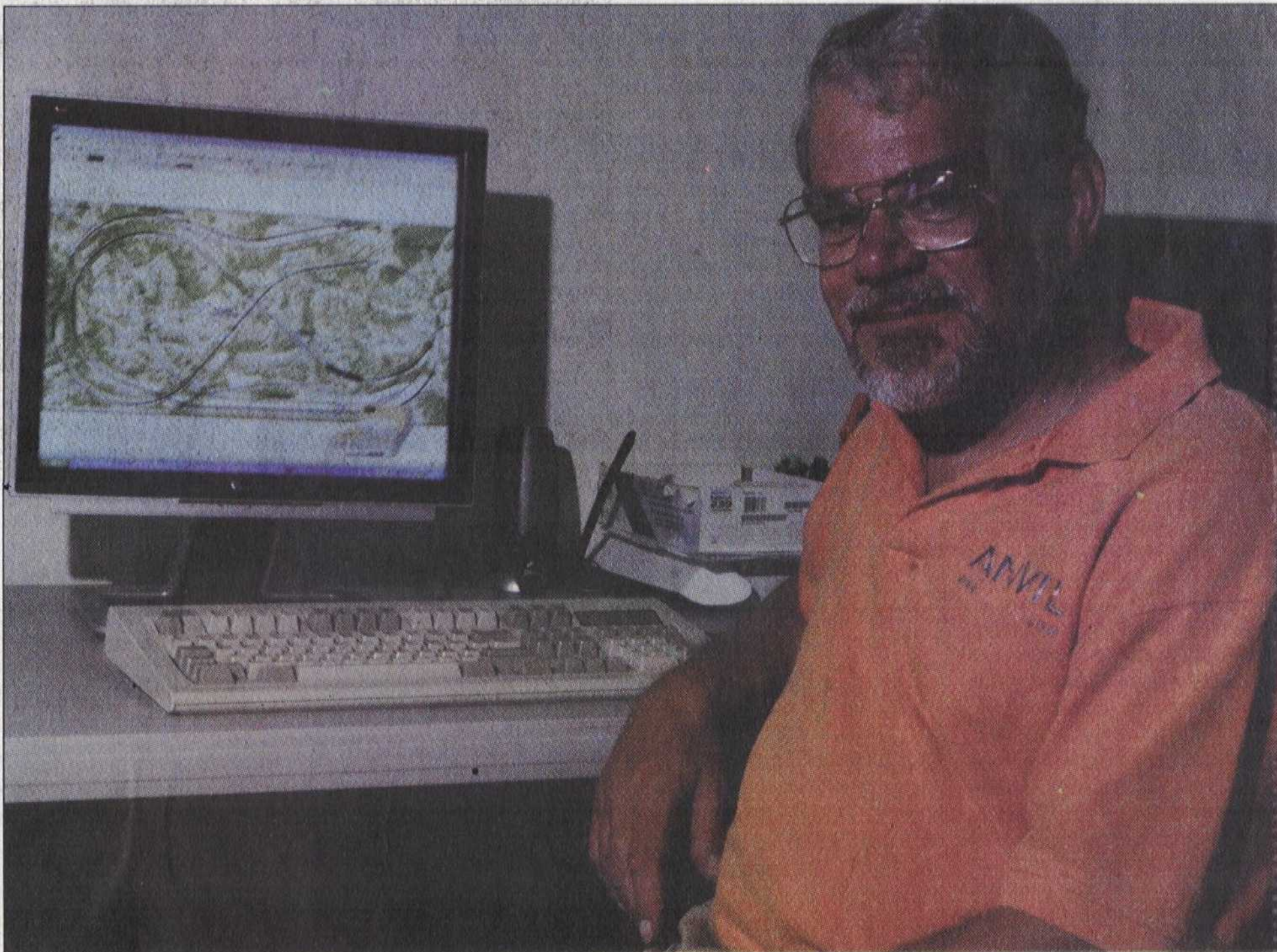
Model railroading is typically a very expensive hobby — some people spend thousands of dollars on their train, track and accessories. Plus, it takes up a large part of the model railroader's home. The TrainPlayer software, though, solves of these problems because it is significantly less expensive and doesn't take up any space, Dill pointed out.

The TrainPlayer Deluxe which costs $59.95, comes with all 101 plans, or you can buy the TrainPlayer Software for $29.95, and add a pack of 20 plans for $9.95 or a pack of 40 plans for $19.95.

People can even download the software for free, however it has a 15-day limit, and there are fewer layouts to choose from than if you buy the software. Already, 1,500 people have downloaded the free version, Dill said.

Dill's new software should be successful given that there's a large model railroading market, said Jerry Jinnett, a consultant with the Napa Small Business Development Center, who has helped Dill with his marketing needs.

More than 500,000 American adults enjoy model railroading and they spend $500 million on the hobby annually, according to the Model Railroad Industry Association. The organization

ALLEN BRYANT/REGISTER

Napa computer software designer Jim Dill created "Train Player" for model railroad enthusiasts who don't have the time or space needed for an actual model. The software allows the player to control everything you would on a model set while offering a selection of over 100 tracks.

reports that more than 1,170 model railroaders have volunteered to discuss the hobby at civic and community organizations.

Its outreach program has distributed more than 60,000 booklets, 393 videos and 460 DVDs promoting model railroading.

The average model railroader is a 50-year-old man, according to Dill.

"They seem to have time and interest," he said. "They show it to their grandchildren, too."

The Internet application of model railroading is going to grab the attention of young people who may migrate from it to real model railroading, said

track plan artist George Baustert.

"I think in this business he definitely has a niche," he said. "There aren't a lot of young

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Peter Prunka

*Computer network designer from
Long Island, N.Y.*

people. That's one problem model railroading faces."

Peter Prunka, of Long Island, N.Y., who designs computer networks all over the world for a

living, first met Dill online through a model railroading forum and is now doing most of the beta testing for Dill's TrainPlayer software, as well as his new Track Player software, which will enable people to draw their own track.

"It's completely unique," he said. "It offers the model railroader a message for prototyping and operating a model railroad before he builds it. It's a terrible idea to get two or three years into the construction of a model railroad and then find that it doesn't satisfy your needs. This allows you to test your concepts."

Train

The software enables people to enjoy an expensive layout that they wouldn't be able to build themselves because of the cost, Prunka pointed out.

Prunka, who travels a lot and spends a lot of time on planes and trains, said he uses the software on a daily basis and loves it.

"TrainPlayer is the only hobby software on my computer," he said. "I can operate 101 of the world's most famous layouts inexpensively, intelligently, and accurately."

As a software developer, Dill "responds quickly" and "does a wonderful job for what is essentially a one-man band," Prunka said.

Dill, who built his own model railroad when he was in his 30s, said railroading has been his passion since he was a young adult. "I like to build things," he said. "I like miniatures."

In 1990, he developed software called Design Your Own Railroad for DOS, and a lot of the ideas for TrainPlayer were generated from that program.

Dill, who moved to Napa from Castro Valley about a year ago, officially launched TrainPlayer.com in April. In addition to his work with TrainPlayer.com, Dill does telecommuting work for Cambridge Soft, a Cambridge, Mass.-based company that develops software for the chemical industry.

Dill has been working in the chemical software industry since 1978, when he moved to California from New York, where he was doing post doctoral research. He holds a Ph. D. in chemistry from Princeton and majored in chemistry from Harvard.