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# New Lenox NEIGHBORS



## LIONEL Club Marks 30 YEARS

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# LIONEL Club Marks 30 YEARS

By John Stein · Photos by Scott Duff

(Pictured L to R back row) Stan Matoska; Ed Zeglicz; and Jeff Mills;  
(front) Jim Ammirati.

In 1994, Herb Koch and his son attended a meeting to help formalize a new Chicago Lionel Train Club. At the end of the meeting, dues were set at \$10 per year and Herb was appointed the club's first President, a position he still holds today as the organization, Chicagoland Lionel Railroad Club (CLRC), celebrates its 30th anniversary.

The CLRC, 1311 Door 4 South Schoolhouse Road in New Lenox, was created to promote model railroading and its allied fields. The Club is organized and operated for the pleasure and recreation of its members as a social club, though it holds monthly open houses to allow the public to view the extensive collection of trains and incredible layout they run on.

"We are well on our way to being a must-go-to location in New Lenox. Ever-changing are the trains that members run. Old Lionel trains from the 1940s and 1950s are run, with more and more modern trains on the tracks," explains Herb. "The new trains are digitally remotely controlled with full sound, dialog, and whistle and bells."

The Club's building is 3,600 square feet, including a Diner, Retail Store, Backshop (Lionel Service Station), and a museum-quality three-rail O-Gauge train layout, which features seven continuous loops with a point-to-point logging line.

"Six of the loops can run more than one train independently of

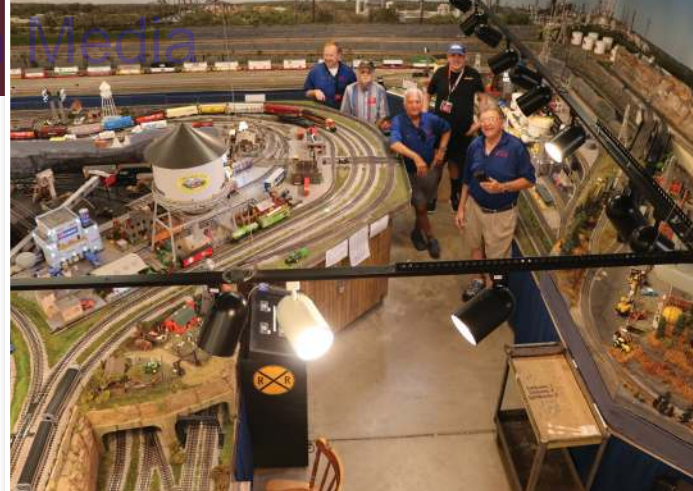
each other. Theoretically, we can run over a dozen trains at one time," says Herb. "We invite our community to our Open Houses to enjoy our facility with its super museum-grade layout, a snack at our Diner and a chance to purchase items at our retail shop."

CLRC Secretary Joe Smolinski says that in September 2006, singer Neal Young took a break from his Chicago concerts and came to the New Lenox facility to test a new digital remote-control system he and engineer Louis Kovak developed for Lionel.

In 2007, the Club built a special traveling modular layout and positioned it on their mezzanine level. Today, it has become permanent, now the home of Thomas the Tank and his Isle of Sodor friends.

In 2011, the Club started to build its permanent layout with its "Beltline" layout on the facility's south wall. It features a 120-foot continuous picture of Chicago's Loop, the community of Lemont with its many church steeples, and Lockport's industry from the Citgo refinery to the big Power Plant.

"We incorporated our layout within this background giving an important three-dimensional experience. It has three loops on two levels," says Herb. "In 2016 we began to build our main layout. We designed it with two levels, each having two complete loops. There is also a point-to-point logging run."



According to Joe, the 2024 /2025 Open House schedule starts September 21. The 2024 schedule is: September 21; October 19; November 16; and December 7 & 14.

"In December, Santa Claus will be there on both dates. Families come to our clubhouse year after year because we have the real Santa Claus. That's what the kids and parents tell us, and we agree. You can check out our website at Chicagoland Lionel Railroad Club for the details," Joe says.

The Club's attention to detail is a source of pride for the members. Herb says, that once you enter the Train Room, you can pull the chord to an actual steam whistle as you view the big mountain. Then you begin your journey to the numerous scenic vignettes that are truly life-like.

"Look lower and you will see the logging/mining run. Does anyone see the seven dwarfs? Now you are in the train room where every turn is a new discovery," says Herb. "We have found that the more you look, the more you will see. Regular guests find new vignettes of interest every time they visit, not realizing that the scene was there the last time they came."

From 2015 to 2019, Lionel conducted a Lionel Ambassador program inviting only 12 Railroad Clubs throughout the U.S. to participate. The purpose of the program was to promote Lionel products and the hobby. The CLRC won the inaugural event, which included a personal visit to the clubhouse from the entire Lionel management team, including CEO Howard Hitchcock. The CLRC went on to win the Ambassador of the Year 2017 through 2019 – making it a 4-peat!

The CLRC recently hosted Lionel in March to test their new Cab 3 remote, which is Lionel's newest controller technology that will be available soon.

In addition to inviting the public for Open Houses, the Club works with the Boy Scouts to earn Railroad Merit Badges every year. CLRC Vice President Ed Carter says in 1998 the Club began an association with the Boy Scouts that continues to this day when it teamed up with the Sauk Trail District to sponsor a Camp-O-Ree and allow the scouts to earn the Railroading Merit Badge.

"Herb Koch worked with the Boy Scouts to create that merit badge program. The annual Camp-O-Rees were held over three days at different Boy Scout camps. Club members stayed at the camps during the Camp-O-Rees, set up the modular layout, operated it, and worked as merit badge counselors. After the Club acquired its clubhouse the Railroading Merit Badge activity was moved there. Since 1998, over 3,000 Scouts have earned a Railroad Merit Badge," says Ed.

"We are fortunate to still have five founding members directing the club," says Joe, who joined the Club in 2014. Those members are: Herb Koch, President; Ed Carter, Vice President; Bob Ciolino, Treasury; Swav Korjo, Director; and Jeff Mills, Director. Rounding out the rest of the CLRC Board are: Joe Smolinski, Secretary; Bill Trzaskus, Director; Jim Ammirati, Director; and Ed Zeglicz, Director.

For more information about the Club visit: [www.clrctrains.com](http://www.clrctrains.com).

