

Railroad club's ties with VERSA-LOK go way back



When the St. Croix Railroad built a miniature track near Hudson, Wis., the club didn't anticipate that it would draw enthusiasts from all over to test their scale-model engines on one of the steepest grades in the world. Donated in 1971 by club member Bob Ahrens, the hilly land had many challenges, but the job was made easier in 1987 when the VERSA-LOK retaining wall system was invented. The VERSA-LOK segmental retaining walls there are still doing their job and looking great after 35 years.

"In the fall of 1970, we looked at the 10-acre site and it was depressing," wrote Donald Akins, past club president in a historical article. "The area was so overgrown with trees, brush and ... it also was too hilly. We joked that ... what we really wanted was an abandoned football field or some area that was relatively flat. But nothing else was available so we proceeded."

"The runs were finished in 1994, but there are still areas where we plan to replace old railroad timbers with VERSA-LOK," said Tim Kirby, SCRR president (right). "We've found that VERSA-LOK is great for do-it-yourselfers."



Now in its 51st year, the club tamed the site with tunnels, bridges and railroad tie retaining walls. "Most miniature tracks are flat figure-eights, but this layout has numerous loops and grades," said Tim Kirby, current club president. "The runs were finished in 1994, but there are still areas where we plan to replace old railroad timbers with VERSA-LOK. We've found that VERSA-LOK is great for do-it-yourselfers."

Much like a regular railroad, the club must perform continual upkeep on the track to prevent erosion, to temper grades and create, maintain and repair abutments for tunnel portals and trestles. The miniature locomotives can double as work horses, pulling scale-sized flatbeds loaded with VERSA-LOK units up to the areas where needed. A storage tank next to the track fills hopper wagons that haul gravel to the build. "We recently completed a few new areas of VERSA-LOK, including steps, bridge abutments and a wall run," said Kirby.



As a nonprofit educational organization, St. Croix Railroad opens its club once a month for visitors to ride on live steam, diesel, gasoline and battery-powered locomotives traversing three lines from 7½-inch to 1¼-inch gauges. Membership includes some 150 enthusiasts from all over North America. These special events required visitors to preregister via the organization's Facebook page.

“The track and maintenance for the railroad is so specific that we do not hire typical services,” said Kirby, whose wife and daughter are also members and volunteers. “For example, every hour of public operation requires about four hours of maintenance. There would also be substantial cost involved to hire work done, so members and volunteers do most of the maintenance, including the hardscapes.”

The hilly site creates a very unique and appealing track, thanks in part to the VERSA-LOK retaining wall system. Akins wrote: “What started out as seemingly insurmountable obstacles because of the trees, bush and hills, turned out to be a natural blessing as we simply built tracks around or tunneled through the hills, bridged over or ran through the valleys, and left the terrain in virtually the same shape as we found it.”

Location: Hudson, WI

Owner: St. Croix Railroad

Manufacturer: Willow Creek Concrete Products, Faribault, MN

Solution: VERSA-LOK Standard retaining wall units

Product color: Various colors

Square feet: Various




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VLS-220