

By **MARCUS RAUHUT** The (Chambersburg) Public Opinion

CHAMBERSBURG, Pa. (AP) — For many train collectors, it's a passion that is born young and never seems to fade.

Just ask John Nesbit of Mechanicsburg, Pa. He was one of the many collectors gathered at Gateway Gallery Auction in Chambersburg Saturday for an auction of one of the larger train collections in the Northeast.

Nesbit said in all, he has probably been collecting for close to 50 years.

"I had my first train set when I was 8. It got pushed on the back burner, but about 30 years ago I caught the bug," he said.

John Kohler, president of Gateway Gallery Auction, said what makes train collecting so unique is the age at which many start.

"One of the things that is so important in the train arena is we have a real emphasis on developing youth into train collecting.

You don't see that in a lot of the collectible arenas," Kohler said.

"Everyone's trying to figure out: 'How do I get young people interested?' This time of year is very popular to have a train display. It's still somewhat in vogue to have a train under the Christmas tree. You've got that nostalgia," he said.

That nostalgia is exactly how Dave Nichols of Greencastle got into collecting.

Nichols, who attended the auction Saturday, has been collecting for about 25 years.

Nichols said he had a train set when he was younger, but the hobby fell by the wayside after he went to school and had kids.

"Lionel had a store in the early '90s, and they had a series of Christmas cars," he said. "I hadn't been in it for a while, but that sparked a memory of childhood trains."

The trains auctioned Saturday were part of the estate of a Greencastle man who passed away at a young age.

Kohler said what makes the collection unique is not only the number of trains but the quality.

There were more than 300 lots on the auction bloc Saturday, but that represented only a fraction of the collection.

It was the fourth auction in this collection, and Kohler said there will be at least one more, maybe even two more.

"This has a chance to be one of the larger train collections in the Northeast," Kohler said. "This young man had an eye for the best and had the resources to buy that by volumes. As a result, you have not only quantity but you have quality, and that's so important to the buyers."

John McDowell, a consultant for Gateway, said some of the trains date to the 1930s and stretch all the way to the modern era.

"There's something for everyone," McDowell said. "We expect some pretty good buyers. They've come a long way. That tells you there's a lot of interest."

In the parking lot, you could see license plates from several surrounding states. Bidders from anywhere in the world could also bid live via the Internet.

While the passion for trains is often instilled at a young age, it's typically not until adulthood that someone has the wherewithal to buy some of these of trains, particularly the more rare or valuable ones.

In the previous auctions of this collection, some of the sets sold for \$1,000 to \$1,500, while some engines sold for \$1,200 to \$1,500, McDowell said.

"In train collecting, what you find is the true train connoisseur, if they had genuine interest at the age of 10, it usually is pervasive, so they're at the age of 85 and still have that interest," Kohler said. "As they have matured in that arena, they usually are looking for those things that will enhance their collection."

Ed Carr, who drove three hours from his home in Pittsburgh, said he's been collecting "since birth" and was looking to add to his collection on Saturday.

"I was doing business with Dave (Nichols), and I heard about this auction. There was a set I had to have," Carr said.

Kohler believes that so long as children are introduced to trains, there will always be passion for collecting.

"It's something that has the potential to continue to grow and prosper because of this affinity and the nostalgia," he said. "You have to have something to hold onto, and that's one of things you hold onto at Christmas."