Disposing of model railway and other train stuff

This is a question I get asked a lot nowadays.
It goes along the lines of:
"I have found this track in the attic … ",
"there is this model railway in the basement that belonged to my (fill in relationship), and we have to get it out of there … "
"I have come across these pieces of … "

Disclaimer – I am neither a qualified evaluator nor an antiquarian, nor an estate disposal expert – just a seasoned observer. Now read on.

The absolute first question is:
What do you have?
The mandatory first step is to prepare an inventory (both for yourself [as a control sheet] and for any prospective buyer):
For trains: Make, Gauge/Scale, Condition (VG very good G good F fair wB with Box) and Quantity.
Everything else: Full description, condition, and as applicable: author, year published, etc.

When bought and how much for, would be helpful but is optional. Any adviser/assessor needs to see what you have before making an informed judgment. Also knowing what you have can influence where and how you might sell it, and how much you might get for it. Needless to say pictures are always a powerful identifying and sales tool.

The second question is:
Are we talking "toy train" or "model railway"?

"Toy train"
A very broad general definition of "toy train" is anything that was made up to around 1960 in Gauges "Standard", 1, S, 0 and early H0/00.

Ives, Lionel, Dorfan, American Flyer, Marx, Märklin, Bing, Bassett-Lowke, Trix, Hornby and Hornby-Dublo (three-rail) are a summary of the better known makes of that era. The predominant material used in their manufacture is tinplate, sometimes cast metal, and generally with applied lithography, although very early items could be hand-painted.

Just because whatever you have is in this category, does not necessarily make it valuable, but it does suggest that you should do some research before disposal. You are in a specialty market, and sale to the right buyer could be very pleasantly rewarding.

If what you have is in this category, you should do some research by contacting a toy train society (if you know the make[s] try to find a society dedicated to that make). Do some surfing on an internet market site such as eBay. Check out some of the larger model railway flea markets and toy antique/collector shows. Diligence and patience will work to your advantage.

Take pictures of what you have, especially if you can't identify the make of what you have.
Bottom line advice is: don't let go of it until you know exactly what you have and until you have canvassed the market place.

Remember that value is, as always, dependent on scarcity, condition, and demand. If it turns out to be a

scarce/rare item, there will undoubtedly be demand. (Any item that is in good to excellent condition and still has its original box usually commands a premium that can be significant.)

But more commonly, it's likely to be "model railway".
Again as a very broad definition, made after 1960 commonly, but not exclusively, in Gauges G, 1, 0, H0/00, TT and N, but likely most commonly in H0 (00 in the UK), or N.

So, most commonly H0 or N. Let's talk about that first:

Three questions up front:

1. Make(s) and approximate age?

The reason this is important is to gauge potential value. Brass locomotives and rollingstock can be valuable. On the other hand if it is "ready-to-run" H0 or N and has been collected from the 60s and 70s, some of it may be of value to a connoisseur model railroader, but for most it is just old equipment, and likely only worth a buck or two per car. Maybe 10-20 bucks for a locomotive.
Type of coupling adds value if it is Kadee/Microtrains.

On the other hand, if it is recent (as in the last two decades or so) or state of the art DCC, there should definitely be value. As in $$.
Condition is always important – and if you still have the original boxes, find them and put the items back in the boxes. (To a collector, an item in a box can double or even triple its value.)
Unmade kits in boxes may have value. So may accessories/scenic items in packages.
Power packs have a resale value, especially if they are in good condition. Some makes, such as Hammant & Morgan™ are much sought after by toy train fans.

2. Is there a layout?

Here is the bad news. Most layouts themselves do not have a lot of intrinsic value, unless they are exquisite prototypical reproductions, or are built to a reasonably good standard. Even then, you have to be lucky enough to find someone who wants a model railway without the challenge of actually building one. With that unlikely scenario upfront, your best first step is to strip/soak off all the track. Do it carefully. Unless it is an expensive brand such as Peco™, be prepared for the fact that used flex track is not worth much. If it is brass rail, consider it worthless. Modern plastic-based snap track, such as Bachmann™ or Kato™ should however have some value. Track formations such as points, slips, crossovers, three-way turnouts and crossings will almost always have some value. (If by chance the track was hand-laid, definitely consult with a hobby store or a local model railway club or an on-line forum for advice first. Hand-laid track was hours and hours of work for someone, and an effort should be made to find a good home for it. If it was well done, there should be a grateful taker.) Then take off all electrical / electronic equipment, buildings and structures such as trestles, bridges and turntables. What is left – brace yourself – is usually destined for the dump.

3. What prototype (North American, British, European) is it?

If it is North American equipment and you are in North America, no problem. Ditto if it's British/ European prototype and you are in the UK/Europe. If that's not the case, you need to seek out the specialty market for that equipment, because shipping anything across the Pond can be horrendously expensive. So if you're in North America and it's UK or European prototype, you need to find a hobby store or a model railway group that specializes in that prototype and get their advice.

On the other hand, if what you have is Gauge G, modern day Gauge 1 or 0, or "narrow gauge" of any kind, whatever you have is almost bound to have significant value, and it is just a matter of finding an interested buyer. The general outlines and points of advice above still apply, except to note that track for any of these scales and gauges is always expensive and will find a ready buyer with the right exposure and contacts. Consult with a hobby store that specializes in, or at least sells that particular scale or gauge in question. Advertisement in a local paper or a hobby magazine is likely to be more worthwhile. In the case of narrow gauge, contacting a group such as the Narrow Gauge Madness Gang may result in a mutually happy outcome.

OTHER RAILWAY-RELATED ITEMS

Magazines

Train and model railway magazines unfortunately do not have much, if any, value, especially in today's digital age, except perhaps for very old ones or the more recent ones, or for a collector who happens to be looking for a particular year or issue. They are heavy to transport and very expensive to ship. Some clubs will however put them out at their "swap tables" on a donated basis to sell them for a little extra income, or may have their own library that they may wish to augment. More attractive if you can offer them in complete years.

Books

The basic problems with books are these:
(1) their weight and the attendant cost of shipping them anywhere.
(2) competition from on-line booksellers.
(3) Generic books on railways (with titles such as "the end of steam" or "a portrait of steam locomotives") don't usually have a lot of value.

That said, books dealing with specific railways or railway-related topics such as accidents or stations may have considerable value, as they are usually limited-run editions and usually well out of print. Some definitive railway histories are years out of print and may be very hard to obtain. But see noted problems (1) and (2) above.

With these reservations, some of the **General Disposal Options** cited below may apply here, but for books, note that:
(a) Some hobby stores have used book sections
(b) general used book stores usually have a "railway" section, or even if they don't, may make a cash offer, or more likely will offer an in-house credit.
(c) Some hobby shows have used book dealers who specialize in railway history-related books.

If none of these options works out, consider a donation to a railway historical society, an archive, or a reference library. Some local libraries have a "Friends of the Library" group who will be happy to accept them as donations, but in all cases, be sure to understand what you have and what you are prepared to forego. Checking on-line prices first is an easy way to do that.

Railroadiana collectibles (lamps, station name boards, posters, lineside artifacts, dining car items, tickets, timetables etc.)

Primary prospective parties of interest are antique/collectible stores and museums. (An interested museum with CRA charitable status may be your better and more profitable bet.)

Pictures or digital images

Good print and slide prototype images (stations, locomotives, structures etc.) are still in demand with the right group. High end model railway shows such as those specializing in the prototypical aspects of model

railroading, or at model railway conventions or special interest meetings, and railway museums, or if local, even reference libraries are potentially interested parties. Copyright is an issue that may need to be resolved if the potential purchaser has commercial reproduction in mind.
Framed pictures are a specialty market, and interest will depend very much on the painter, subject, and condition. Consult a local art/framing store.

A Summary of General Disposal Options:
Most people want to sell in one job lot - to save time, hassle, and not getting cherry-picked.
So here in order of probable preference (A = advantages D = disadvantages):

1. Cash sale and/or Consignment to a (local) hobby shop
A: Least effort – job lot sale of readily-resalable items – secure payment
D: Likely maximum 25 per cent cash sale on equipment in good condition – no interest likely in anything not readily saleable.

2. Rent a table at a model railway flea market or antique/collectible store/show as applicable
A: Social interaction – flexibility in pricing and sales – no retail handling and shipping – possible interest in items not normally found in a hobby store.
D: Table and travel cost – left-overs – time consuming to pack and price for show – possible time interval in having to wait for an appropriate show – insecure cheque payments.

3. eBay or other internet market (if of real potential antiquarian value, a reputable auction house)
A: No transportation/travel/table costs – no cherry-picking – no left-overs – prospect of better than 25 per cent return – secure payment.
D: Competitiveness – shipping cost is a major buyer consideration – packaging has to be done very carefully: if anything arrives broken or bent, there will be adjustment hassle. Original boxes will be helpful. Couplings, air horns, etc, are especially vulnerable – time interval, may have to put items back up for sale/auction one or more times – time of the year sensitive.
Also requires:
Internet skills
Marketing skills – presentation/bundling of items
Packing skills
Knowledge of internet vendor rules and options, shipping options
Necessary or desirable financial instruments – US currency account – Paypal account
Communication skills with buyer

4. Consult a dealer at a model railway show, flea market, antique show, or a collectibles store
A: Possibility of a job lot sale
D: Dickering for a fair price (likely low return) – uncertainty of any interest – likelihood of left-overs.

5. Contact a local model railway club
A: Community-mindedness – possibility of referral to buyers of interest
D. Cherry-picking – fragmented/sporadic sales – likelihood of left-overs – payment insecurity.

6. Advertisement in model railway magazines:
A: Reach targeted circulation audience
D: Packing and shipping handling – payment insecurity – advertising cost – likely sporadic interest depending on items for sale.

7. Donation to museum or similar entity for income tax donation receipt
A: Community mindedness – fair valuation – one job lot disposition.
D: Donee interest – valuation expense.

8. Advertisement in local papers:
A: Reach relatively large circulation audience – timing likely best in months before Christmas season.
D: Payment/personal insecurity – advertising cost – dickering – likely sporadic interest depending on items for sale.

9. Garage/yard sale
A: Potentially quick disposal of items at modest prices
D: Not viable for larger collections – minimal financial return – left-overs > dump.

10. Donation to local charity (shop) or to a Boys and Girls Club (or similar organization), or to "a good home".
A: community-mindedness
D: Little or no financial return.

Finally:
1. All Options involve a degree of:

- energy expenditure
- time investment tolerance
- price/proceeds-tolerance
- risk tolerance

2. Bear in mind there is a lot of used equipment going on the market nowadays and the hobby is going through a renewal challenge.

3. If you have time on your side and you can find a target of interest for the equipment, that is the best chance for some $$.

4. Please note that some model railway clubs, hobby stores, specialty dealers, toy train societies, and so forth, are listed on my **Links** page. Scroll down to "Railway Modelling".

5. The Platelayers Society™ has given estate disposal some thought and has some advice. It is oriented towards UK prototype modelling, but the principles of its advice are still relevant.

6. If all else fails - be philosophical - tell yourself that your grandad/husband/brother/dad/uncle/son had his fun with it - close your eyes and take it to the dump. But that should be an absolute last resort - you should be able to get one or more of the options above to work for you. It may not get you a ton of money, but you will have the solace of knowing that it has gone to a good home, and it's always a comfort to know that the memory of it lives on somewhere, and someone else is now enjoying it.

Charles Cooper's Railway Pages
https://www.railwaypages.com/disposing-of-model-railway-and-other-train-stuff

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