

So You Want to Paint a Locomotive!

Part II

By David Dewey

Last time we were busy just cleaning the locomotive (paint doesn't stick well to grease and dirt). Let's see how the cosmetic restoration process continues.

Time to find the hose and wash off the roof again. Then, mask off any openings (like windshield holes) that you don't want paint to go into. Climb back off the engine, massage the trick knee, and set up the paint system.

The museum uses a modern paint system known as HVLP (High Volume, Low Pressure) which sprays paint with an eight pound heated air pressure source that puts most of the paint on the locomotive, and very little in the air. We use about fifteen gallons of paint to a locomotive compared to thirty-five gallons by the traditional spraying systems. At a hundred dollars a gallon, this makes for quite a savings besides keeping all that paint out of the air (and other railroad equipment parked nearby!).

The roof takes about a gallon of sealer (actually two gallons once it is mixed for spraying) and a gallon and one-half of color (again, nearly three gallons reduced) and one pair of shoes (we are standing on the surface we're painting). But first you don the "Moon Suit," protective coveralls, head cover, gloves, and approved respirator to protect you from the paint chemicals, but not the strange looks from everyone else around (if there are visitors in the museum, this is NOT the time to yell, "Emergency! Everybody get off the streets!").

It takes about an hour and one-half to paint on the epoxy sealer/primer, which can dry in two hours. This means, if you started early in the morning, you can paint the color right after lunch! (You call a glass of Slim-Fast lunch?!!) Painting the color is trickier than the primer because you want to avoid overspray when you stop to refill the gun. The best place to hide this is the middle of the roof, which few people ever see. The other problem is that right after you mixed all the paint and hardener, the Portola Zephyr arrived. No, not a train, the daily afternoon west wind that doesn't start until after four o'clock on days you're not painting. Well, the paint is mixed and it doesn't keep, so you learn to paint with the wind, not against it! The good part is, with the wind blowing, the gnats and yellow jackets won't be landing on the new paint (I don't know what these insects like about paint, but they swarm around you whenever you're painting!).

About four hours later, two and one-half gallons of paint are now on the roof (and your shoes). After a half-hour's cleaning of the paint gun, you can relax and think about painting the sides. It's sanding time again--oh joy! With the B unit, one of the sanding considerations was to attempt to remove the diagonal stripes. However three coats of diagonal stripe paint left big ridges that just won't go away entirely.

Many days later, you conclude that it's time to paint.

First, the orange stripe goes on--but this requires checking old photos to determine just where the stripe begins and ends. All the windows must be masked, and openable windows

opened so the paint goes around the edges. The roof should be masked too, so that new paint doesn't get some overspray from the orange paint.

The hardest part of painting the sides is the constant climbing up and down the "portable" ladder/scaffold, and moving it. Start at the upwind side and move down the car, three times each side--just about in the middle of all this, your trick knee goes out! Hours later, another two and a half gallons of paint are gone!

Now we strip off the masked windows--it's beginning to look like a WP unit! We wait a few days for the paint to dry, so the new masking tape shouldn't peel off the orange.

Now we cover up all the orange we want to keep with tape and paper, sand the extra orange so the silver will stick to it, and start mixing and painting the silver-gray. To avoid a rough area in the finish where you start and stop painting, we start by painting the ends. This way, when we paint the sides we will start and end at the corner where the overspray won't show. When painting hood units, deciding where to start and stop painting requires lots of planning--using the edges of cabs, grill panels, running boards--whatever will help hide the inevitable spot where already dried paint meets the freshly sprayed paint (This paint sets-up in about 15 minutes, and it takes much longer than that to paint around an engine.).

Well, back to the silver. You've applied the three coats, and are now checking them out. OOOPS, one side looks mottled (a common problem with metallic paint). One more light coat corrects the problem. Clean up time!

Now we peel off the masking and the orange stripe reveals itself--the B unit now looks like a freshly shopped WP engine. All that's left is to mask off the stirrups, pull the unit outside and paint the black undersides and trucks--a four hour job, but no ladders or scaffolding; we get to walk around on the ground and paint.

A little demasking, and it's ready for lettering. Oh, if you want to give Norm a heart attack, you go in and tell him the paint looked so good, you painted those rusty couplers (Paint on couplers is a BIG FRA No-No!).

So do you want to paint another locomotive?

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