

TRAIN COLLECTORS ASSOCIATION GRADING STANDARDS

A guide to using the grading standards
on postwar trains and accessories

Introduction

- The Standards PowerPoint program on grading prewar and postwar trains and accessories completes our committee's work on condition grading. This project has been the collaborative effort of many people. However, the main work was done by and credit goes to Charlie Weber and Glenn Stinson. They selected trains in each grading class, photographed them and wrote the text. Glenn spent hours editing and organizing the program .

The program will entertain you and show you specific trains in each grade and explain why they are so graded. You will then be able to effectively grade your trains easily and accurately.



TCA Standards Committee Display
National Toy Train Museum,
Strasburg, Pa.

The grading standards apply to all toy train and related accessory items. They were prepared to act as guidance and to encourage usage of common terminology when describing the category of grading condition for a specific toy train and related items.

Developed by the Standards Committee and approved by the TCA Board of Directors in June 2005 to be effective in April 2006, the Standards apply to the visual appearance and originality of the item and do not consider the operating functionality of the equipment.

Items are graded as they are presented at the time they are examined. Proper rehabilitation and cleaning of an item by a well-experienced collector using proven techniques can improve the condition of an item and the overall grade under these standards. But if the efforts are uneven, or the item shows powder polish residue in the cracks and crevices, the finish is worn on the rivet heads and high spots, and rubber stamped lettering is worn and faint, the grade may be adversely affected.

Plated parts may be cleaned, degreased and lightly polished. But brass parts on most items should not be polished since this strips the original lacquer finish. Brass that is stripped of its original finish, polished and re-lacquered generally would be considered under the TCA's Restoration Grading Standards. The grade of an item can be dramatically lowered if the item is subjected to poor handling or adverse storage conditions.

These standards do not consider the age of an item when assigning a grade except as noted under C-8 relating to age tarnish on brass, aluminum and plated parts.

For an item to be graded at a specific level it cannot exhibit any of the flaws noted in lower grades.

C-10 Mint – Brand New All Original, Unused, and Unblemished

Trains meeting this standard are among the rarest and most sought after. The key to this standard is “unblemished”. The item must be perfect in every manner. This grade could be compared to “proof” coins which are specially made and handled. Most manufacturers did not include such practices in their manufacturing processes.

Some pieces, even if “brand new”, may have box rubs. Common examples are postwar box cars with painted doors where the door handles have paint rubbed off. A caboose or plastic loco cab may also have a little paint missing off of the raised ladders or handrails. This would put the item in the C-9 or, more likely, C-8 category. When grading items of very high quality, it’s not unusual for collectors to use a magnifying lens to check for flaws.

Figures #1, 2 and 3 show a car that is brand new and never used or displayed. It is very close to grade C-10 but very close examination can show flaws to the most discerning collectors.



Figure #1



Figure #2

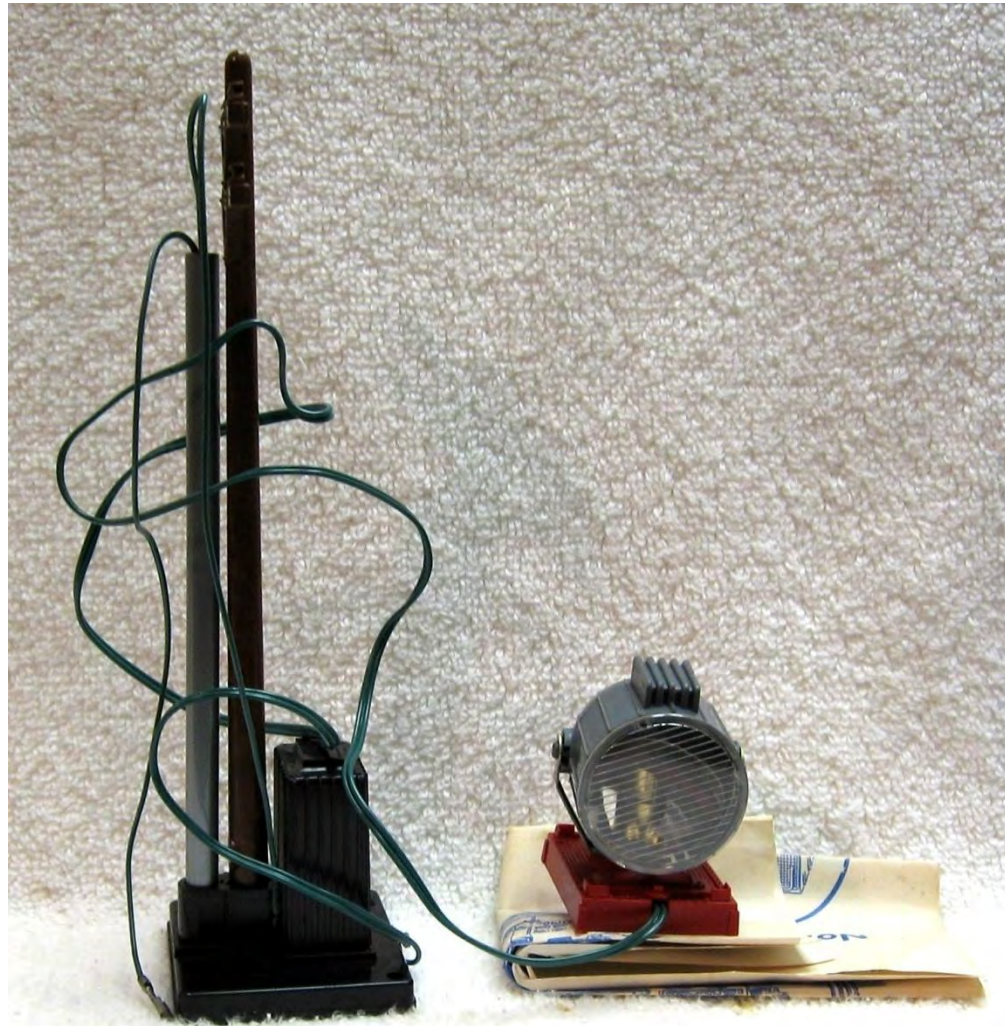


Figure #3

C-9 Factory New - Brand new all original, unused, may evidence factory rubs and the slightest evidence of handling, shipping and having been test run at the factory.

This grade is applicable to the vast majority of “new” items. It is inherent in the manufacturing process that some signs of handling or box rubs will result. Short factory test runs were the norm for many manufacturers. Examination of wheels and pickup rollers may show only the faintest signs of use. Excessive wear may indicate usage after factory test run and would lower grade to at most C-8.

Items still factory sealed in their boxes may not be able to be properly graded without opening the box. (Remember - boxes are graded under a different standard.) In such cases a tentative C 9-10 grade could be applied with the footnote that grading was done on the item while still in the factory sealed box.

But of course the danger of such ratings could be that hidden flaws such as degenerated castings (C-6 or below) or damage to the finish from poor storage conditions (heat, humidity) may not be detected. Some Lionel diesels were packed with the horn battery in its normal location which by now has leaked and caused corrosion to the locomotive innards or frame. Depending on the extent, this type of damage could drop the brand new piece to C-3 or worse. Figure #4 shows slight battery damage to the frame.



Figure #4 – Damage to frame from battery leakage.

Figures 5 and 6 show items that are brand new but exhibit slight flaws as a result of manufacturing processes and subsequent shipping and handling. Figure #5 shows dust or dirt under the painted finish on an Illinois Central “A” unit and a Western Pacific box car roof. Figure #6 shows a depression in the middle of the catwalk caused by the sprue in the mold being removed.



Figure #5 – Imperfections in painted finish.

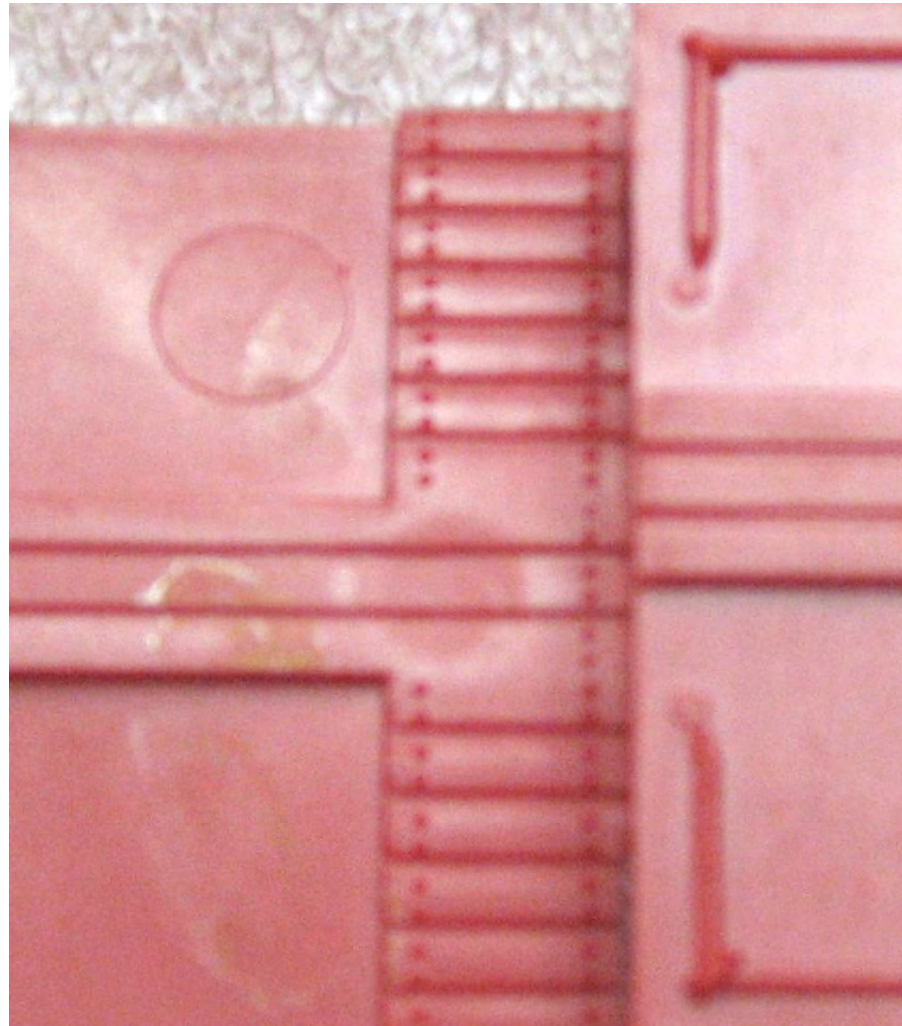


Figure #6 – Sprue mark

C-8 Like New - Complete all original, no rust, no missing parts, may show effects of being on display and or age, and may have been run.

Items meeting this grade are of very high quality, 100% original and authentic with no missing or replacement parts and no after-market alterations.

The item can be a little dusty or show some handling fingerprints from being on display.

Brass, aluminum and plated parts may show slight age tarnish (but no rust) or the item may show slight signs of being run or used.

The item may not show any deterioration of the finish from effects such as crazing, cracking, checking, fading of colors or lettering, or dirt and grime.

It may show slight signs of operation such as light wear on the pick-up rollers and wheels, some wear from trucks rubbing on frame or small nicks and chips around couplers and other moving parts.

The main areas of the item such as roofs, ends and sides should not show any damage to the finish.

Some postwar items, for example Lionel F-3 Illinois Central A-B units, were lightly rubber stamped as produced. Such an item could still be in the C-8 category. However, if selling/trading such an item, the “faded markings” should be noted separately. Without such a notation the item would drop to C-7 or C-6.

An item with “small nicks or chips” can be in the C-8 category if these are “effects of being on display and or age, and may have been run.” Examples include tiny chips at the ends of Lionel GG-1 bodies and the highest points of diesel trucks that represent “box wear”. Depending on the number of such wear spots or chips these flaws could put the item in the C-7 category. It is probable that most items like this should be graded as C-7.

Figures 7 – 10 show a Western Pacific box car of very high quality. Notice that there are no paint chips or nicks and the silver finish and lettering is very vivid. However, close examination of the area around the grab rails shows a brighter finish revealing that the rest of the car has either gotten dirty or dulled over the years.

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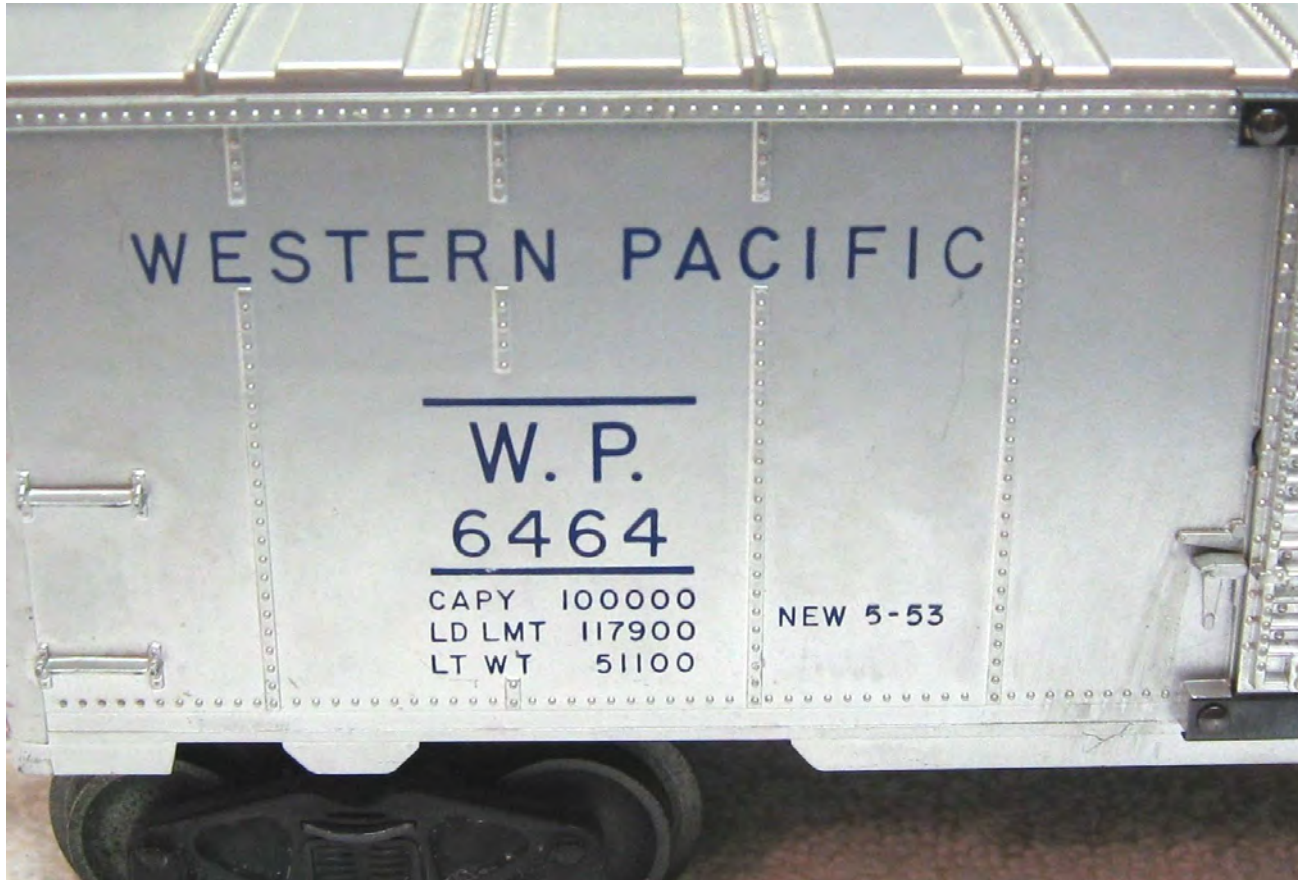


Figure #7



Figure #8



Figure #9



Figure #10

Figures #11 and #12 show a silver tank car that shows slight box rubs on the rivet tops on the dome.



Figure #11



Figure #12

C-7 Excellent – All original, minute scratches and paint nicks, no rust and no missing parts. No distortion to component parts.

This grade requires the item to be 100% original, complete and authentic with no missing or replacement parts and no after-market alterations.

The finish can show the smallest scratches (thin, fine lines) and nicks (small spots or chips). These flaws are not to be concentrated in areas and should not be on prominent areas such as sides or roof.

The item cannot show any rust on plated, painted or lithographed surfaces. Plated surfaces can show a slight dulling of the finish but no rust. Painted or lithographed surfaces cannot exhibit checking, crazing or fine lines under the finish that are normally considered rusting of the metal under the finished surface.

It may show slight signs of dirt and grime.

Component parts including cast parts may not show any deterioration, warping, expansion or metal fatigue (zincpest). This can include frames, steam chests, engine and tender bodies, wheels, headlights. Replacement of these parts with a properly marked replacement part reduces the grade to no greater than C-5 (or assuming the replacement part is painted, then the item would be graded under the Restoration Standards).

All wiring is to be original without deteriorated insulation.

When considering postwar plastic items the major difference between grading an item as C-7, C-6, or C-5 is determined by the flaws in the finish and/or lettering. One must answer (a) how many? (b) how big? and to some extent (c) where are the flaws located?

Figure #13 shows box rubs on the rivet tops plus nicks and chips on the running boards.



Figures 14 – 17 show a box car with relatively bright finish but the lettering is worn in some spots and there are a number of small nicks and chips in the finish.

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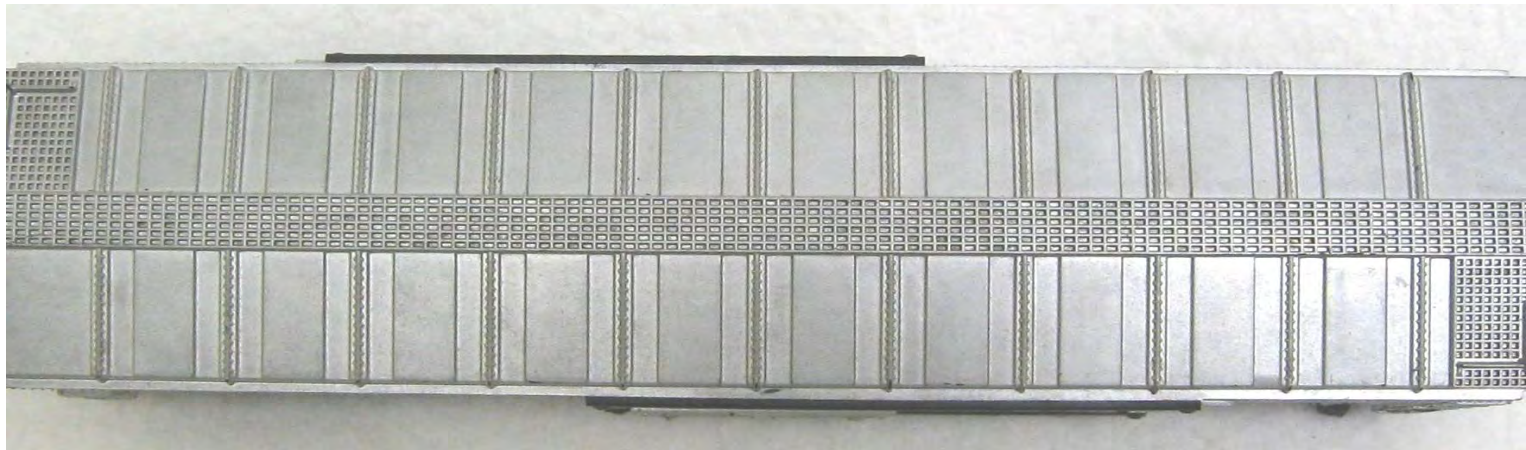
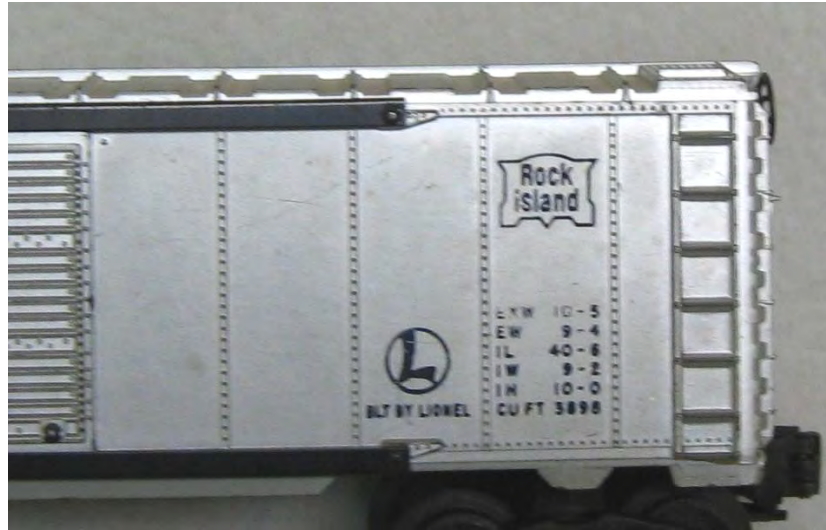




Figure #14

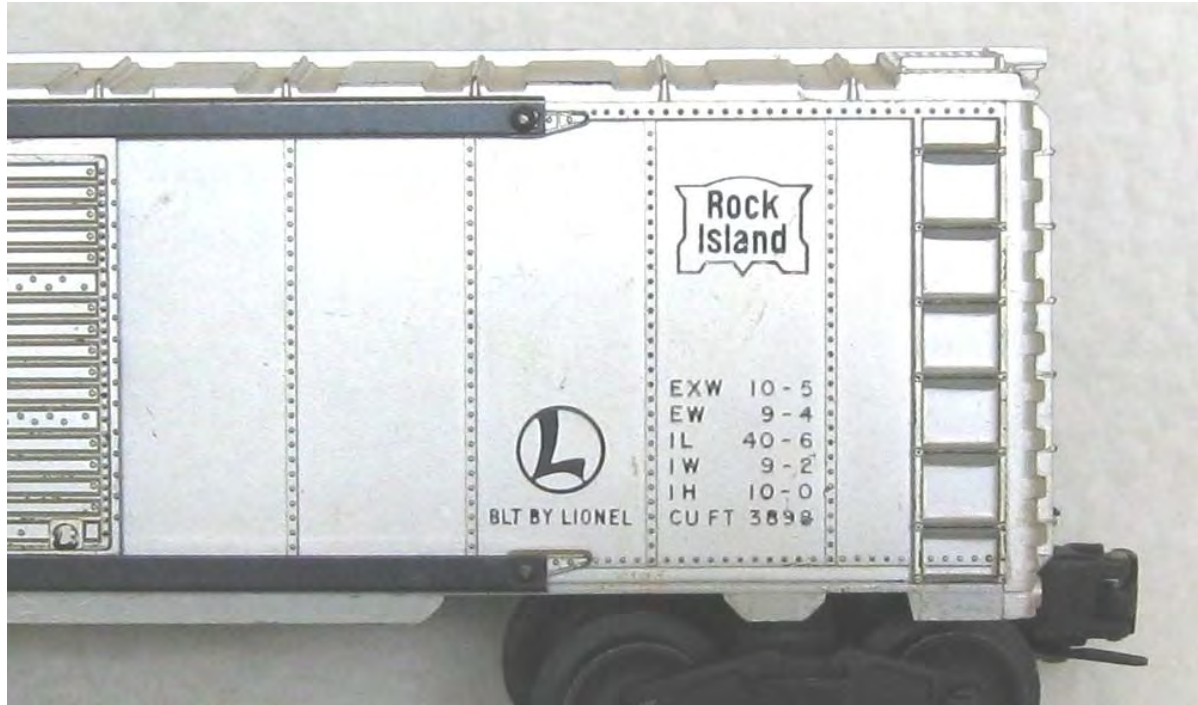


Figure #15

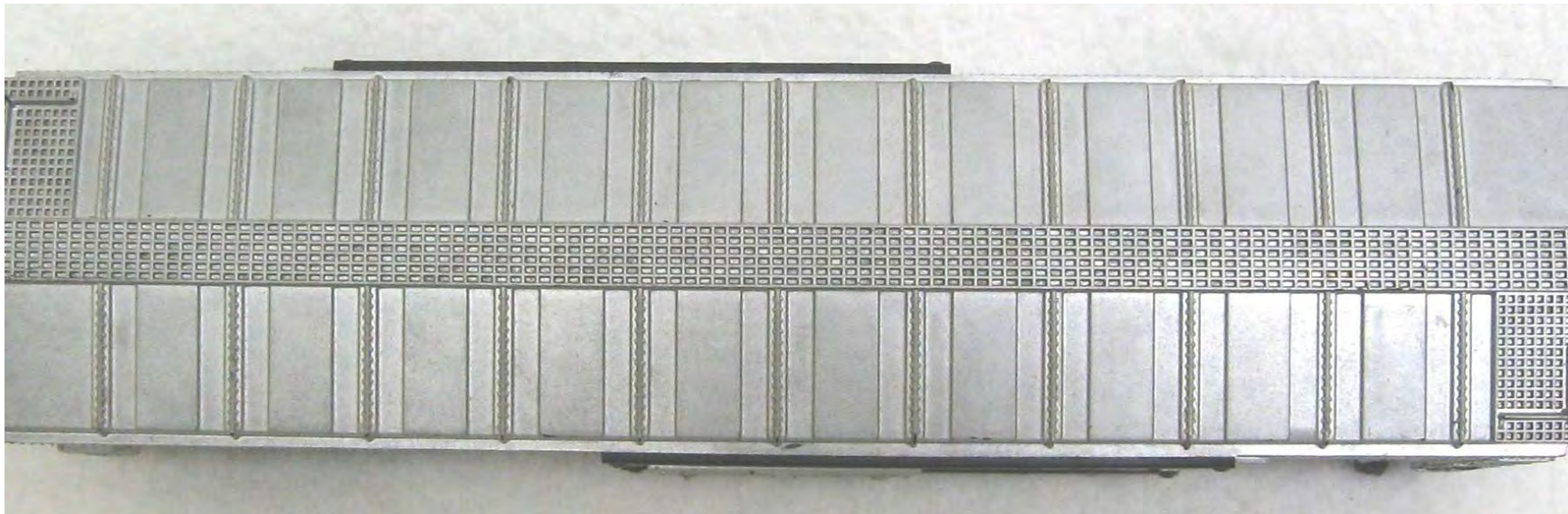


Figure #16



Figure #17

C-6 Very Good - Minor scratches and paint nicks, minor spots of surface rust, free of dents. May have minor parts replaced.

The finish on items meeting this grade can exhibit a limited number of scratches and nicks plus dirt, grime and other flaws that are more concentrated and in more prominent areas than allowed in C-7.

Light surface rust may be allowed on plated parts but rust should not have pitted the metal.

There may not be any dents to the item.

The plastic equivalent to “dents” would be cracks. Minor “expected cracks” could be tolerated in this category. Examples of “expected cracks” are the cracks that commonly occur between the bottom of the end of cab mounting screw and the lower cab edge as shown in figures 18-20. Also, sometimes there are a few “spider web” disfigurations around this screw hole.



Figure #18 – Left hand crack

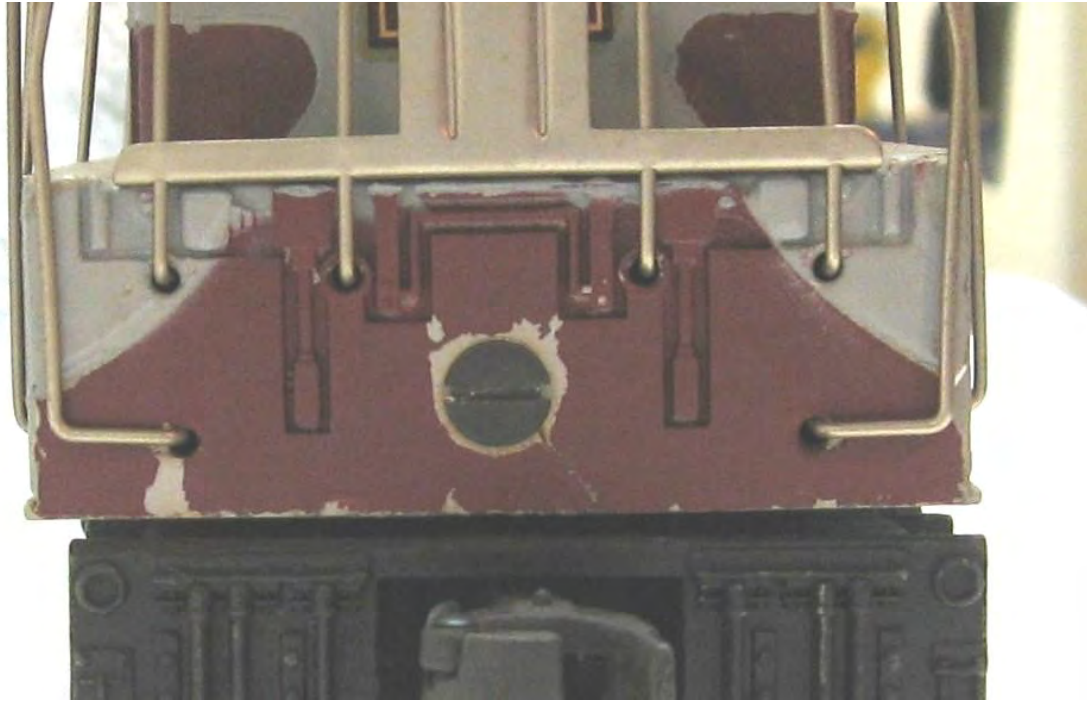


Figure #19 – Rare right hand crack



Figure #20

Minor parts may be replaced with properly marked reproduction parts. Minor parts include trim pieces like headlights, whistles, hand rails, pantographs, couplers, wheels and wiring. Frames, cabs, steam chests, engine and tender bodies, motors, etc. are not considered minor parts.

Figures #21 to 27 show flaws such as minor scratches and paint nicks that would grade these cars at C-6.

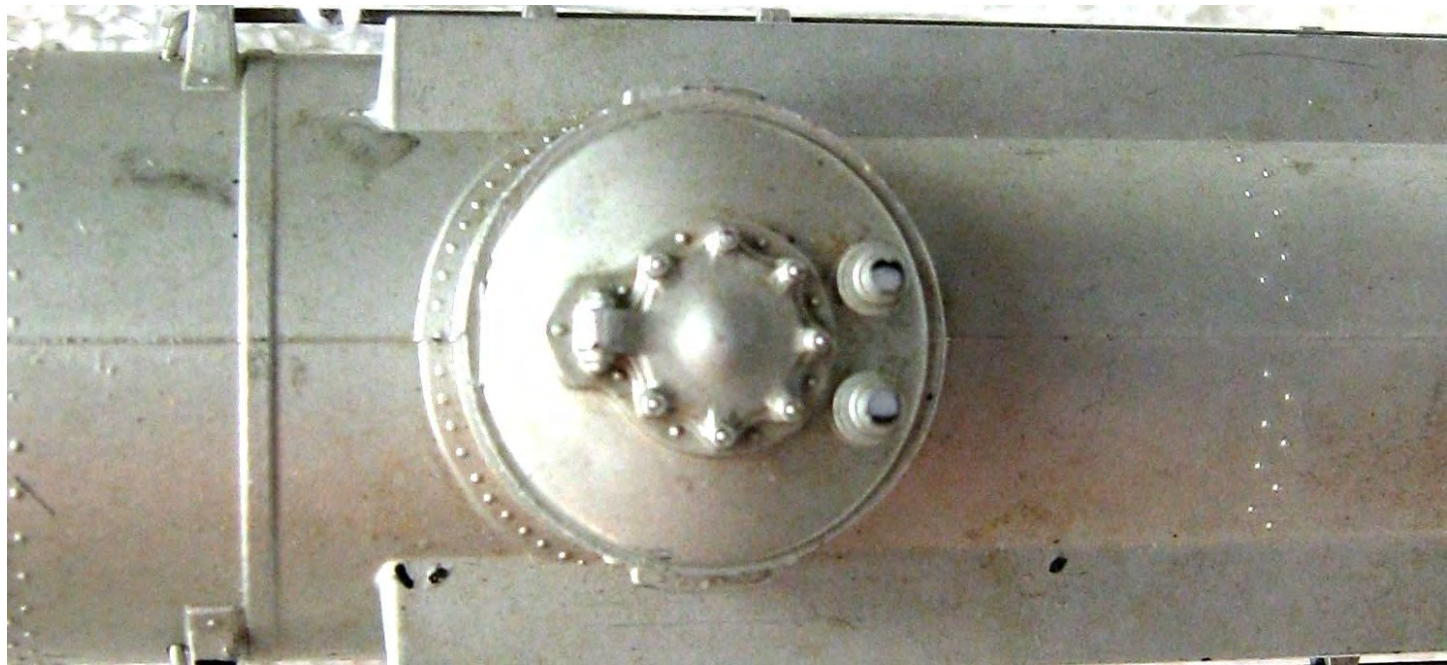


Figure #21

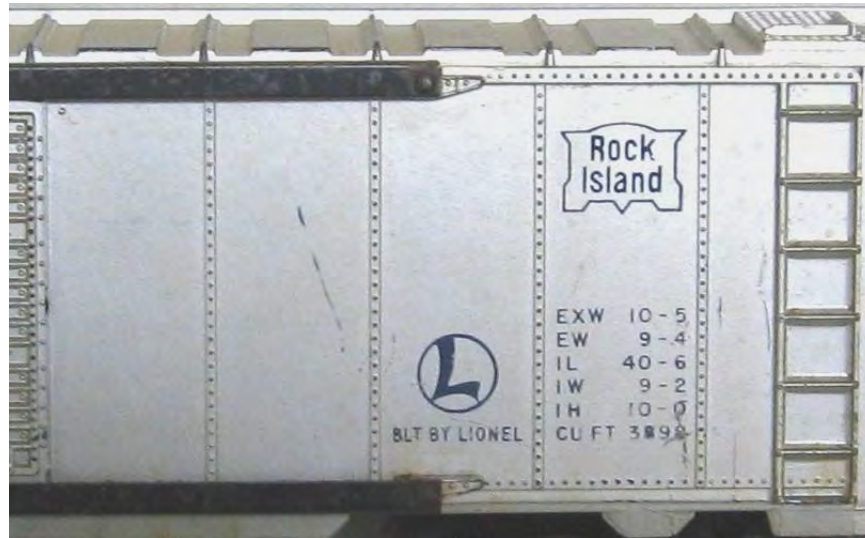


Figure #22

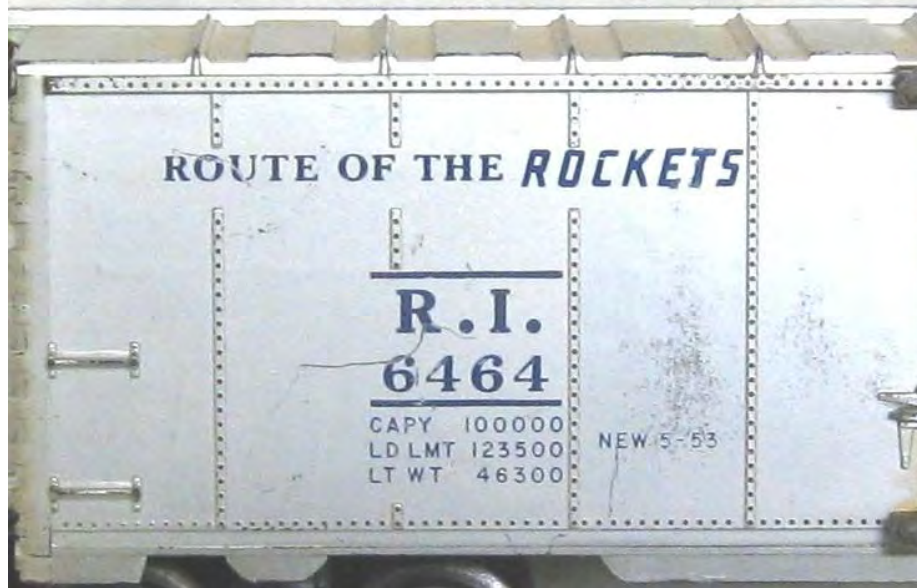


Figure #23



Figure #24



Figure #25



Figure #26

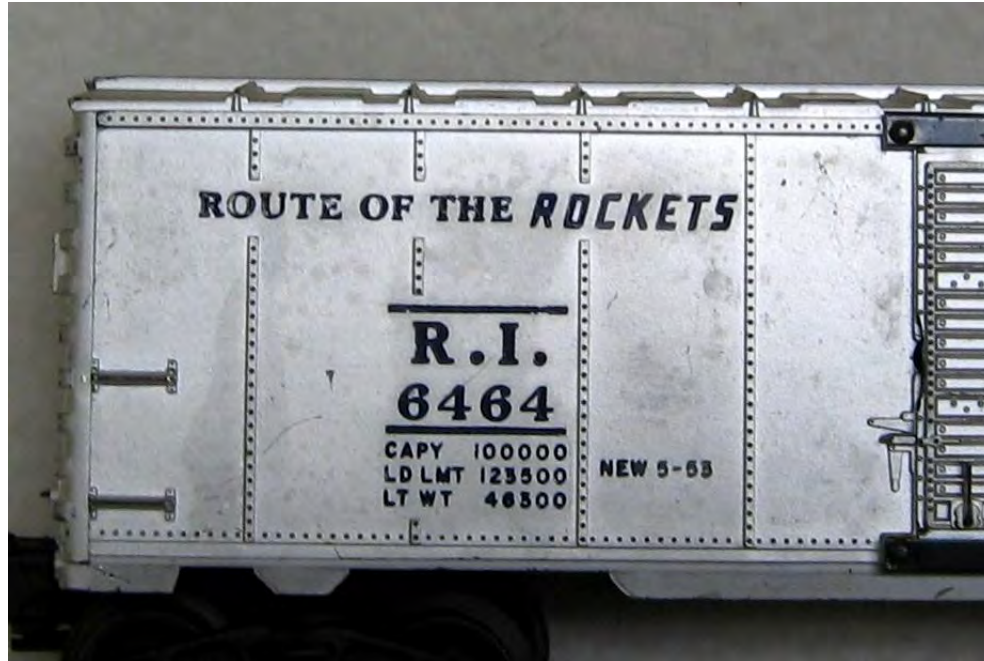


Figure #27

C-5 Good - Signs of play wear with scratches and minor paint loss. Small dents, minor surface rust. Evidence of heavy use.

The finish on items meeting this grade can show noticeable scratches and nicks in prominent areas plus dirt, grime and other flaws that are more pronounced than allowed in C-6. The item can have areas with actual paint loss from flaking or other damage.

There can be small dents in the metal parts and some slight rust on plated parts or under painted surfaces.

Generally items meeting this grade show signs of heavy use.

Figures 28 through 31 show box cars where the finish is dull, lettering is washed out and chips and scratches are more significant than C-6 graded items.



Figure #28

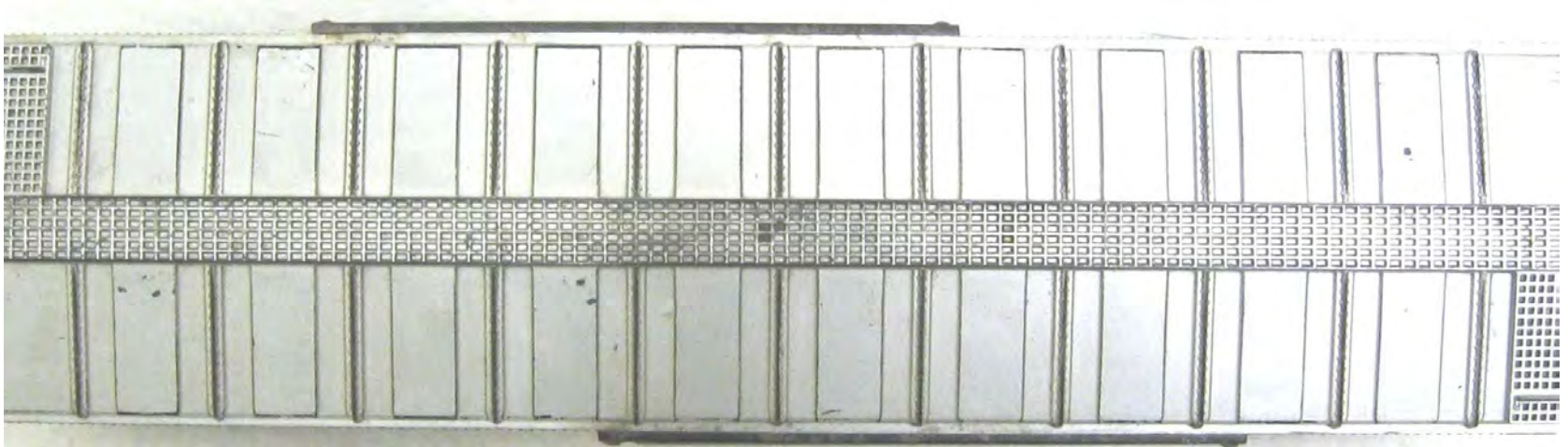


Figure #29

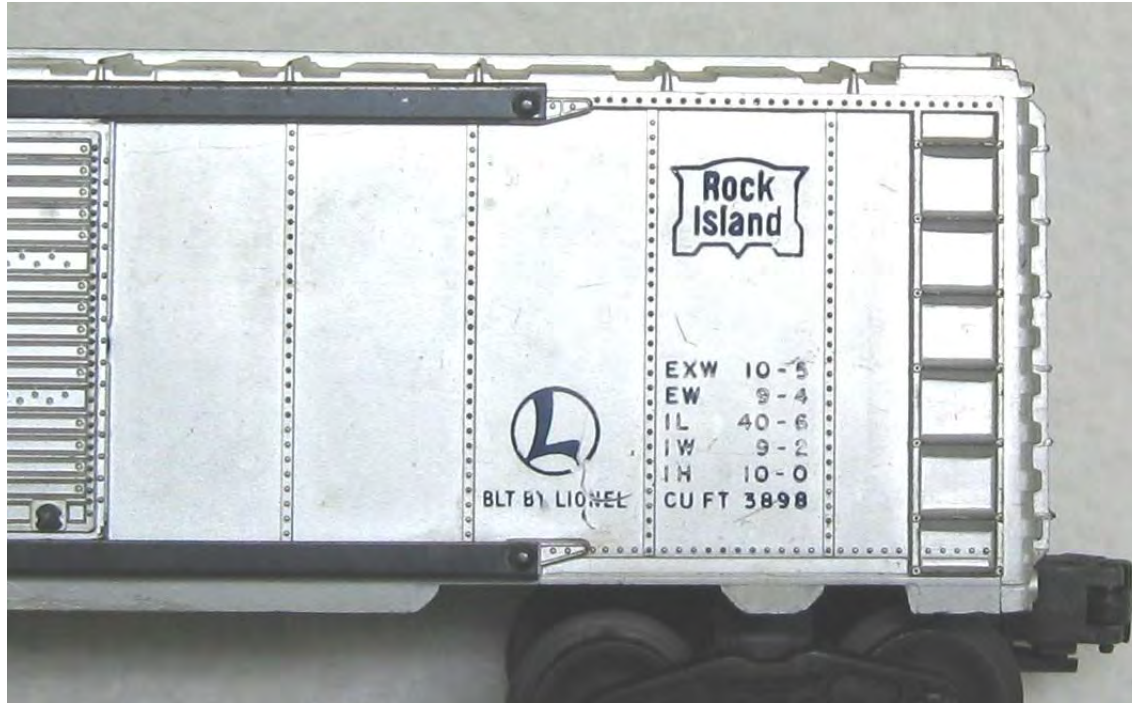


Figure #30

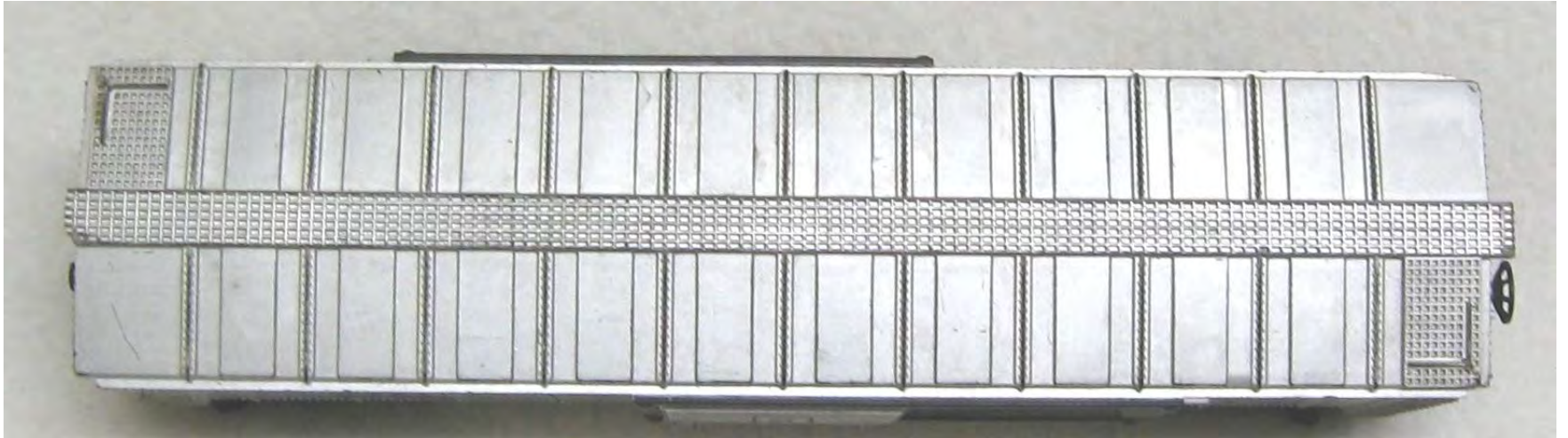


Figure #31

Figures 32 – 34 show numerous chips in prominent areas, heavy wear plus noticeable wear to decals. Grade as C-5.

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Figure #32



Figure #33



Figure #34

C-4 Fair - Scratches, moderate paint loss, dented missing parts, surface rust. Evidence of heavy use.

This grade would show obvious signs of wear, dirt, grime, use and abuse.

The finish can be dirty, well-worn and show loss of paint in prominent areas.

There can be dents in the metal, parts missing or replaced with properly marked reproduction parts and there can be obvious surface rust.

Figures 35 and 36 show a box car underframe with surface rust.



Figure #35

Figures 35 and 36 show a box car underframe with surface rust.





Figure #36

Figure #37 shows Canadian Pacific diesels with front decals that are yellowed with age and noticeably chipped.



Figure #38 shows a very nice car but the damage to the base of one canister is significant.



Figures 39 to 43 show box cars with scratches, paint loss, chips and evidence of heavy use.

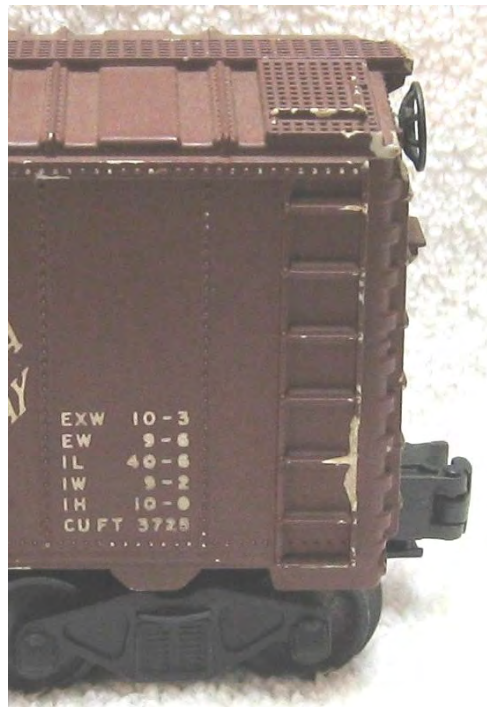
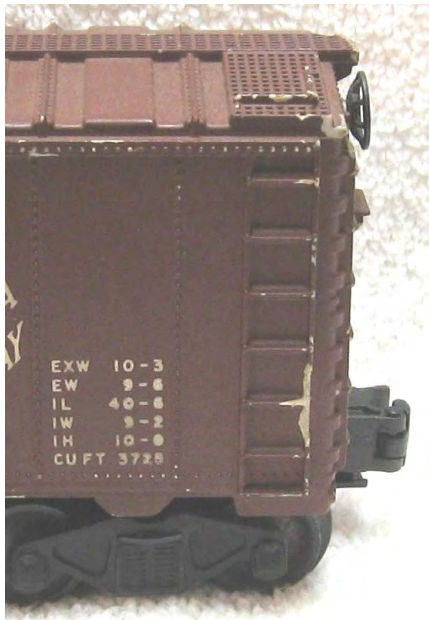


Figure #39

Figures 39 to 43 show box cars with scratches, paint loss, chips and evidence of heavy use.



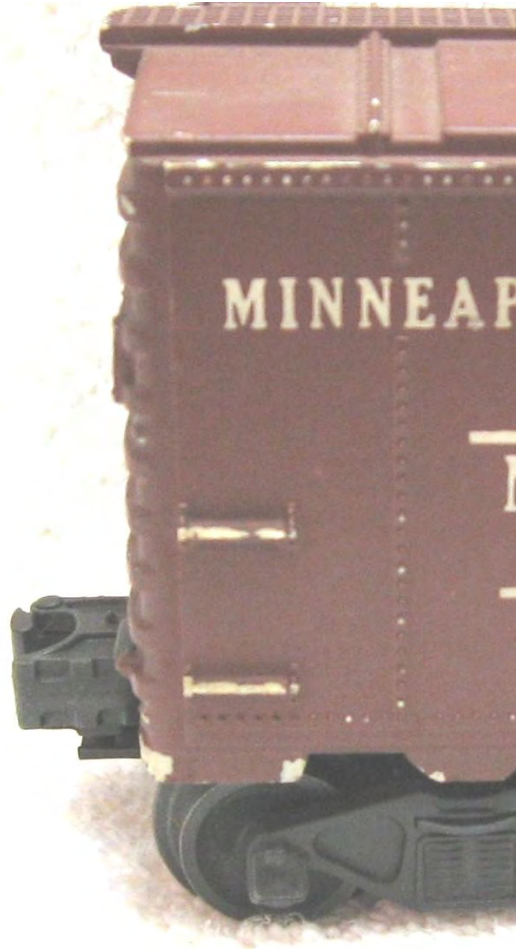


Figure #40



Figure #41

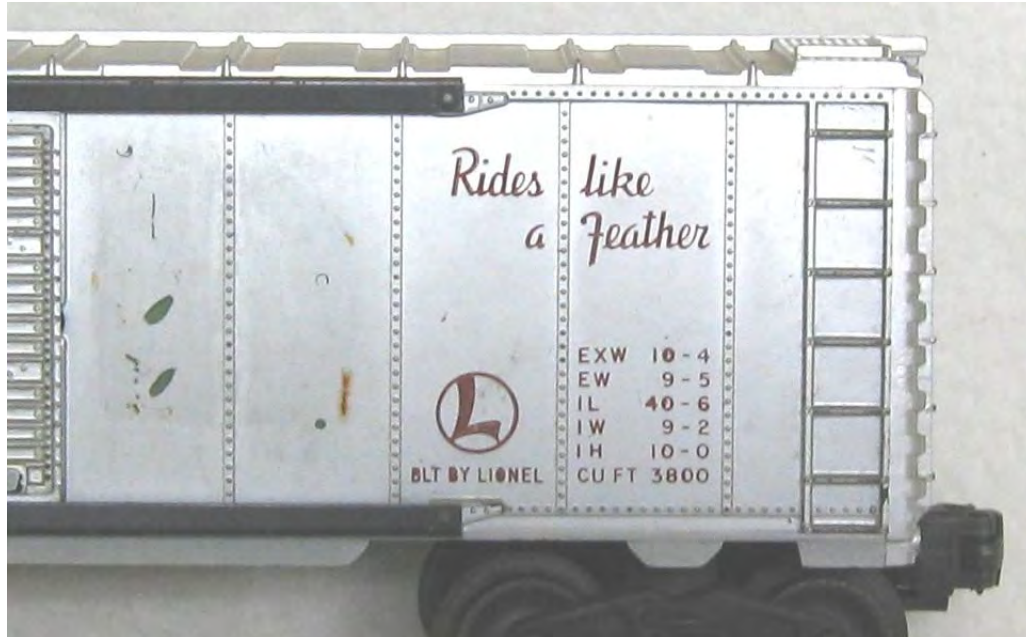


Figure #42

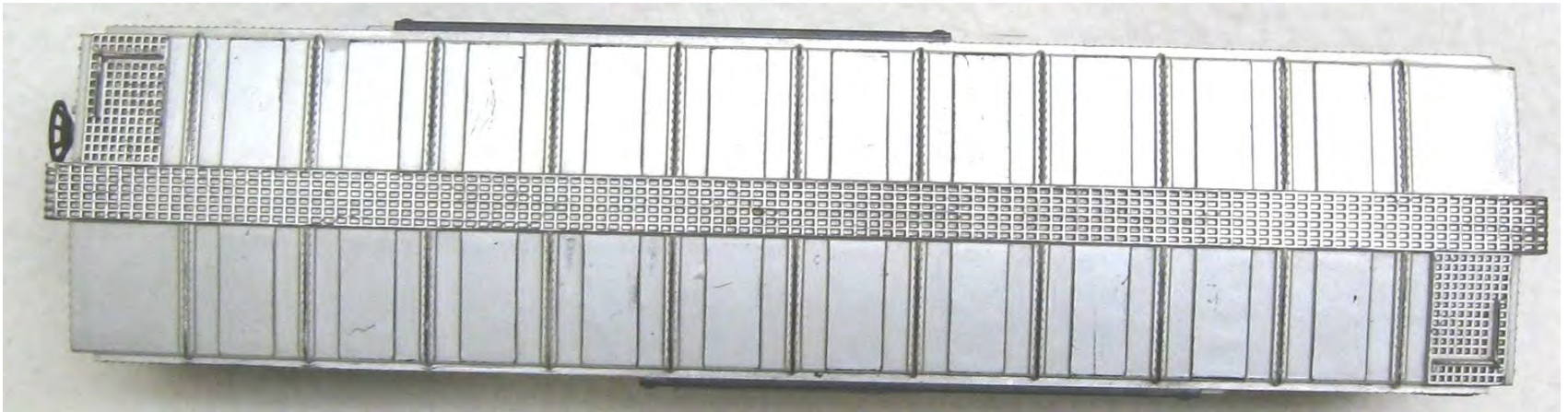


Figure #43

C-3 Poor - Requires major body repair. Heavily scratched, major rust and missing parts. Restoration candidate.

Items meeting this grade are of low collector quality.

The finish is significantly distressed showing prominent scratches, nicks, dirt and other damage.

Sheet metal parts can be dented with major repair work needed.

Rust can be prominent and may have caused pitting in the metal.

Figures 44 and 45 show a serious warp on the side of the car.



Figure #44



Figure #45

Figures 46 and 47 show major lettering loss on the side of the car.



Figure #46

Figures 46 and 47 show major lettering loss on the side of the car.





Figure #47

Figures 48 and 49 show mold on plastic parts.



Figure #48



Figure #49

Figures 50 and 51 show a Marx flat car with rust, scratches, dirt, and missing parts - clearly C-3 at best. But since the car is so common, many collectors would treat this as C-2 or C-1.



Figure #50



Figure #51

C-2 Restoration required

C-1 Junk, parts value only

Items in these grades are of low collector value except for total restoration or for parts to fix better items. A factor that may be considered in these grades is the rarity of the item being graded. A very rare item may have greater collector interest and be worthy of saving much more than a common item.

Figure #52 shows deep, prominent rust.

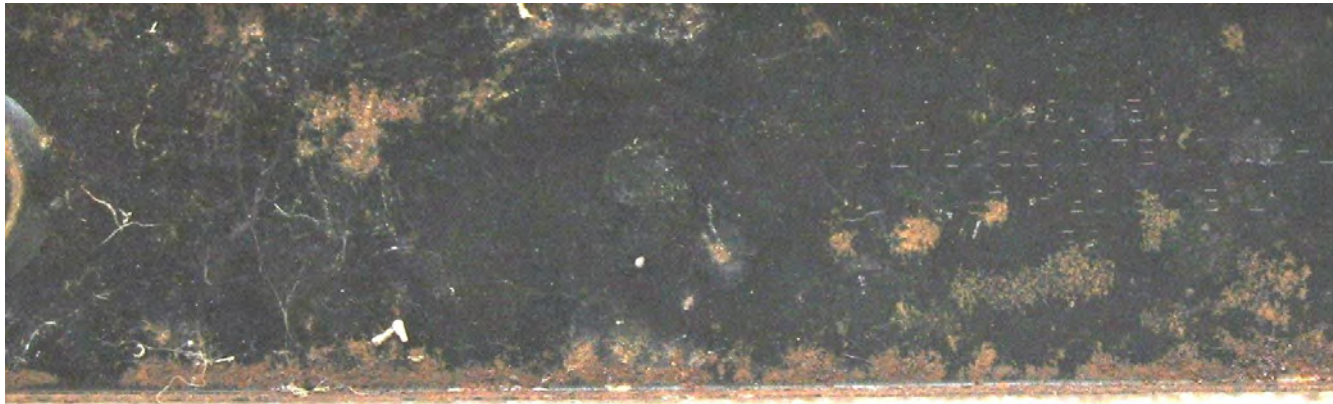


Figure #52

Figure #53 shows a car with poor lettering and partial repaint.



Figure #53

Figure #54 shows a car that suffered significant heat damage resulting in warping. Good only for a few parts.



Figure #54

General comments and guidance

Use of the grading standards is subjective at best. It is important and logical that wishful thinking not be allowed to influence the choice of grade. It is the nature of the market for a seller to see an item in a very positive light and to assign the most favorable description while a buyer may see the item in a less favorable light.

When evaluating the significance of scratches and nicks on an item, not only the size of these flaws must be considered but also the location on the item and their size in relation to the item's size.

The proper determination of an item's originality and authenticity is critical to these standards. It can be a very difficult determination to make and requires an experienced and knowledgeable individual. Close examination of the finish comparing colors, textures, patina, and other details is necessary. If the paint finish on an item has been touched up, its grade cannot be higher than C-6; many collectors feel that touching up an item could never improve the grade and may actually lower the grade.

The overall condition of an item needs to be considered with the most severe flaw(s) being the limiting grading factor. However, the grade of an item need not be a single grade. For example, it is acceptable to grade an item as C-6 due to minor missing parts but otherwise C-8. When grading a multiple item set, it is advisable to grade each item individually.

Knowledgeable Standards Committee members are available at every TCA-sponsored train meet to assist members on questions of originality, authenticity, and condition by offering relevant opinions.

When considering a non-person-to-person transaction such as through the TCA Interchange or the internet, a written narrative that details the condition of an item and its flaws should be provided. Statements claiming that “Photos describe condition” should be taken with extreme caution.

There can be items that will require some degree of disassembly in order to offer an accurate grading opinion. While these standards specifically exclude the operating functionality of an item, parts needed for operation (such as internal motor parts) are not excluded from the standards for completeness and originality.

When a Standards Committee member is asked for an opinion on an item, he/she may need to handle the item in order to properly examine it. It is of utmost importance that the committee member handles the item with extreme care and respect. Remember that your actions represent the TCA. Neither the Association nor an individual committee member can risk liability associated with accidental damage.

Proceed with the same care for a C-1 item as for a C-10 item. If possible, sit down at a table that is covered with a soft towel or blanket. If you need to pick up the item, hold it over the table at a minimum height off the table. Beware of loose pieces that might fall off. Always use both hands to lift an item. Place hands on the items in strategic locations (such as ends rather than the sides) so as to minimize handprints or damage to the finish. Handle the item as little as possible and return possession to the owner quickly.

Prepared by the
Train Collectors Association
National Standards Committee
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Robert C. Robinson, Chairman