

# TRAIN COLLECTORS ASSOCIATION GRADING STANDARDS

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

# Introduction

- The Standards Power Point 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.



To clean or not to clean? That is the collector's question.

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.



This all brass engine was polished a long time ago removing the original Lionel finish and is graded under the restoration standards.

(The red on this engine may also be refinished.)



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. However, many items from the earliest periods of production are subject to extreme damage by flaking paint. Without preservation, these early treasures will be lost.

Preservation techniques can include application of modern clear finishes sealing the paint. While application of any aftermarket finish over an original finish would normally impact negatively on the grade, in cases where the finish could be expected to suffer significant loss without preservation by overcoating, and it's done in a manner that does not detract from the original appearance (colors and gloss not altered), then the overcoating need not be considered adversely in the final grade.



Clear coating has stopped or slowed the extreme flaking of the original finish. Neutral gloss is hardly noticeable.



Clear coating has preserved the loss of any additional paint but the high gloss is not favored by most collectors.

For an item to be graded at a specific level it cannot exhibit any of the flaws noted in lower grades. No flaw is too small to be considered in grading.



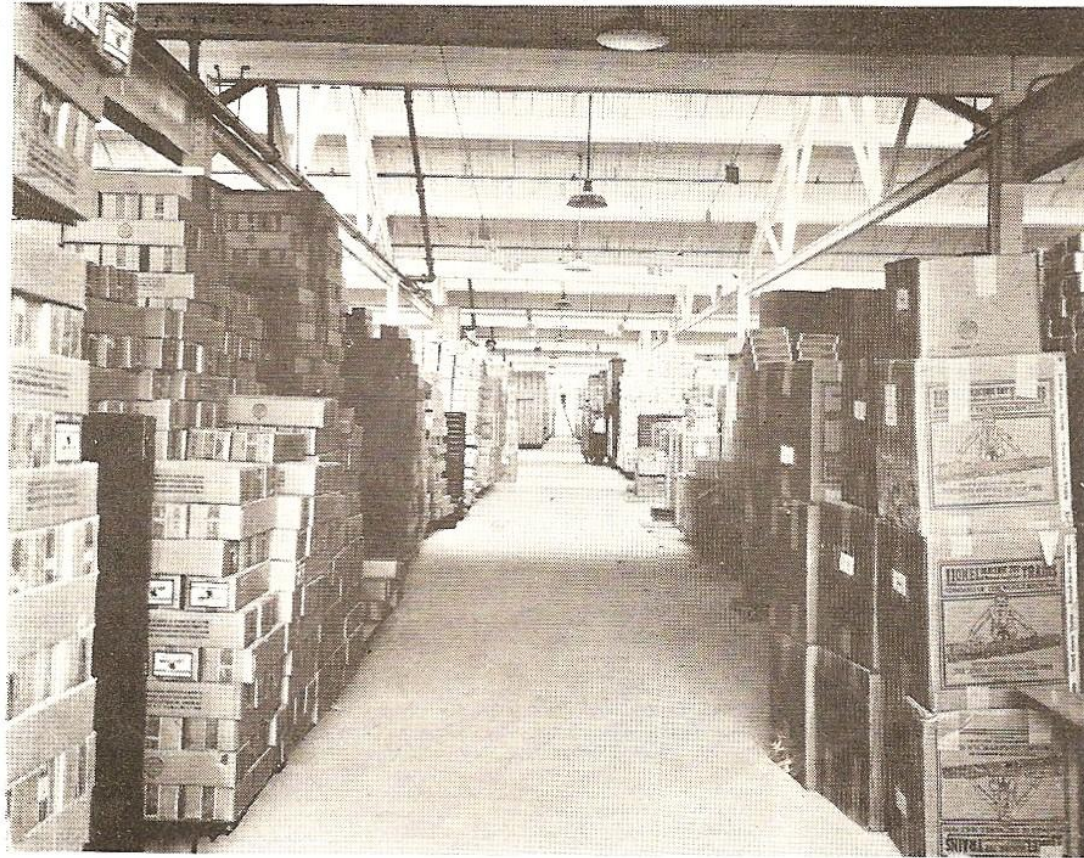
Slight surface rust on the couplers limits this otherwise C-8 car to C-6.

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.

**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 of prewar trains did not include such practices in their manufacturing processes. For example, Lionel finish is known for runs and dirt in the paint. However minor, these are flaws that prevent an item’s being graded as C-10.



The stuff that dreams are made of. Lionel warehouse, Hillside NJ. Summer 1931. Should everything shown be graded C-10? Doubtful. Notice crushed box in the lower right corner.



This car was never a grade C-10 due to the run or sag in the painted finish.



This car was never a grade C-10 due to the chip on the frame that occurred during assembly at the factory.

**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.



New and never run. Minute flaws due to manufacturing process. C-9

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.





The grade of this item in a factory sealed box can only be estimated. The condition of the box itself can give many clues as to the content's condition.



Never out of the box and never unwrapped. C-9 or C-10? Odds are it's a C-9 at best due to inherent factory flaws.



The grade of an item is not affected by the presence or absence of boxes, instructions, wrapping paper, etc. Paper items are graded under separate standards.

**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 aftermarket alterations.

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



While this car has been run, the finish is still like it just came from the factory. C-8

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 the 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.

This is a tough category. The item is used but still flawless.



**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 aftermarket 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.



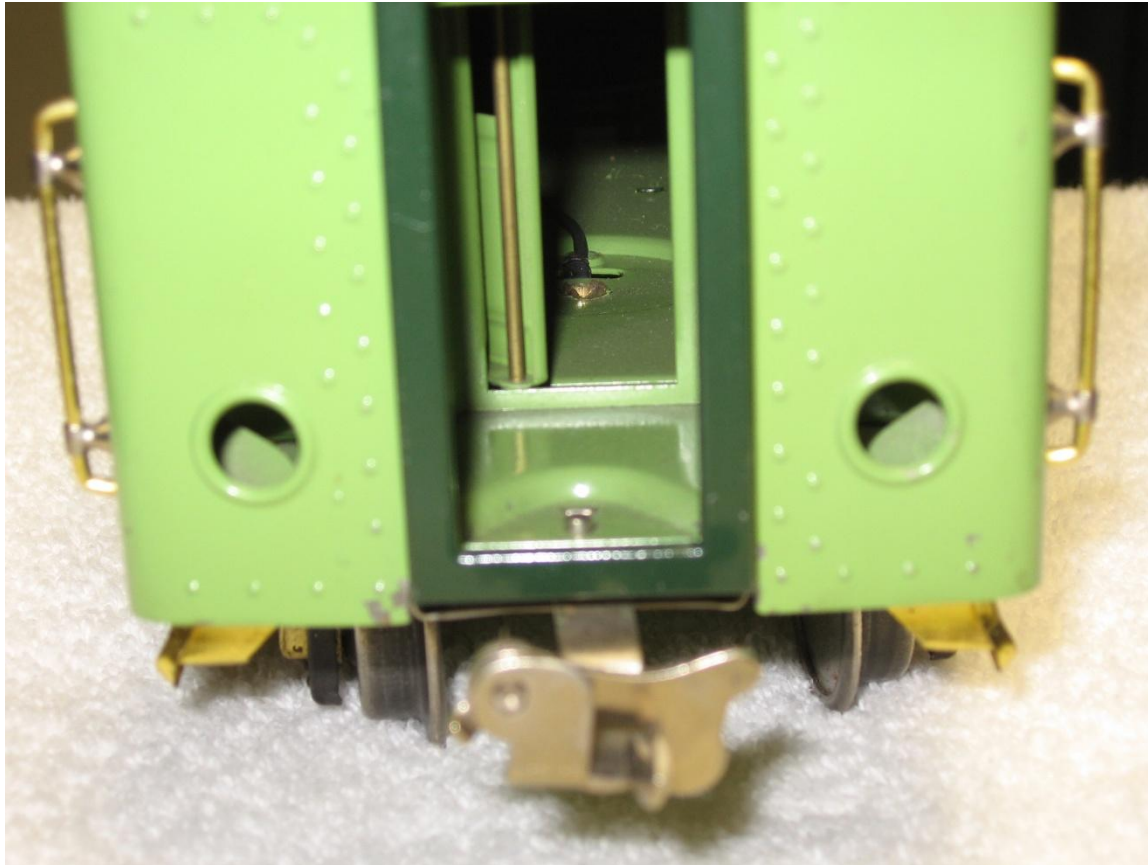
All original, minute scratches and paint nicks, no rust and no missing parts. C-7

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.



Small, minute nicks on non-prominent parts of this car. C-7

**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.



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.



The aftermarket addition of the decal on the left side of this otherwise C-7 car makes it no longer 100% original and reduces the grade to C-6.



The grade of the piece is lowered due to missing handrail and side step. C-6



This nice black 42 is not complete or 100% original due to the missing step and the loss of rubber stamped lettering. C-6



The fine lines under the black are considered rust of the metal under the painted finish. C-6



Minor scratches and light surface rust on plated parts. C-6

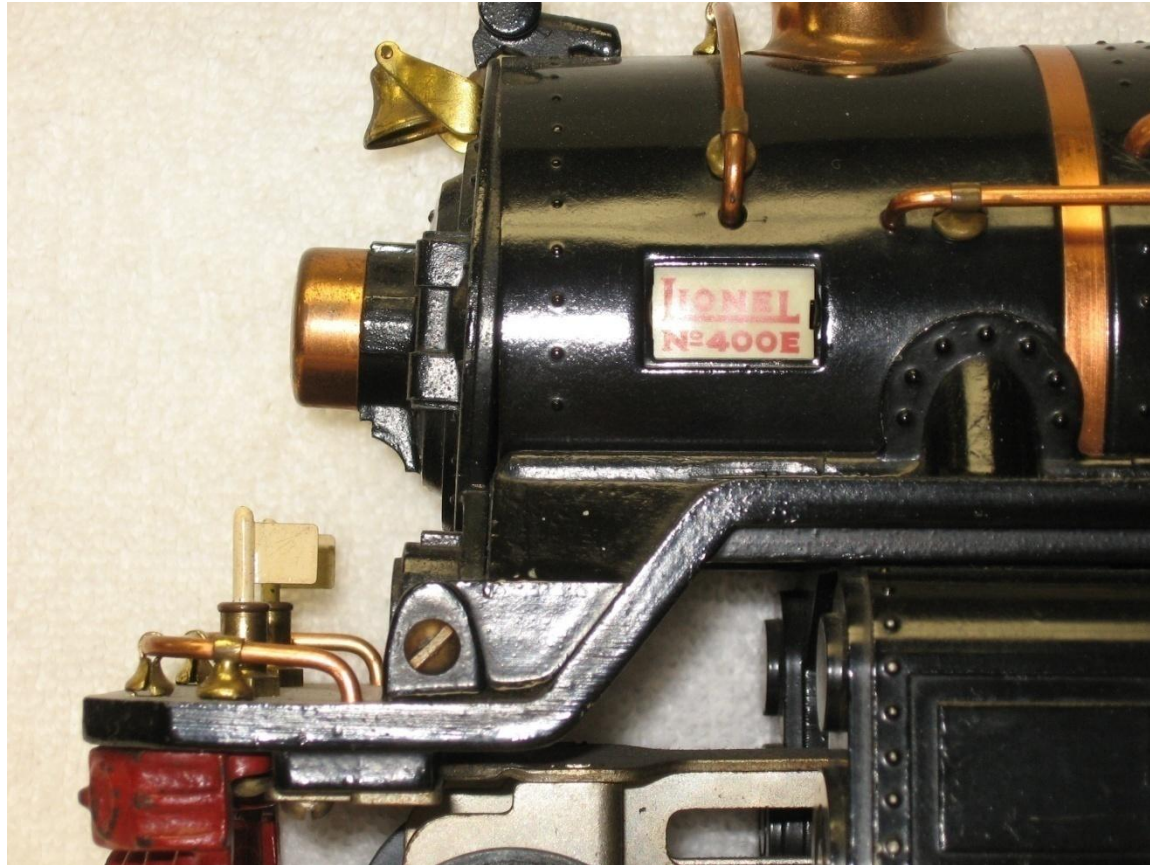


Minor but numerous nicks on non-prominent parts of this car. C-6



Minor nicks on prominent area of car. C-6





Distortion of component parts – frame casting has expanded but is still solid. C-6



Distortion of component parts – frame casting has disintegrated. C-6

**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.



Major noticeable scratch on prominent side of car. C-5



Crazing or cracking of a painted finish. Can lead to paint flaking. C-5



Crazing or cracking of a painted finish. Can lead to paint flaking. C-5



Flaking paint in prominent areas. C-5





Flaking paint in prominent areas. C-5



Flaking paint in prominent areas –  
over tin plated metal. C-5



Flaking paint in prominent area preserved with clear coat. C-5



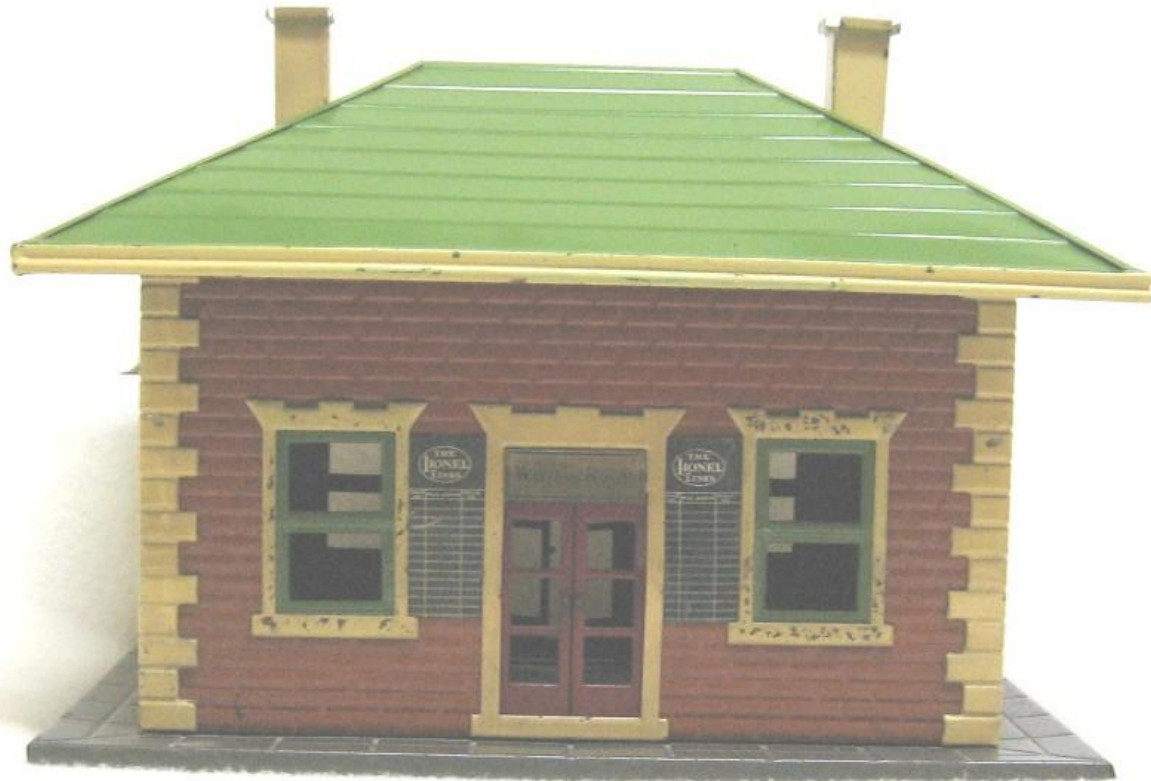
Faded painted finish is considered as paint loss. C-5

**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, major parts missing or replaced with properly marked reproduction parts and there can be obvious surface rust. Major parts are those that if missing seriously detract from the appearance of an item. Included are frames, cabs, bodies, motors, etc.



This station shows moderate loss of paint on the prominent window and roof edge areas. C-4



Significant nicks and scratches. C-4





Obvious signs of wear, dirt, grime, use and abuse, surface rust, repainted roof. C-4

**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.



Major wear to the finish, body damage, rust. C-3



Paint finish shows heavy signs of play wear. But due to rare color, piece still has significant collector value despite condition. C-3

**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.



This Lionel #11 flat car would normally be a prime candidate for total restoration. However, the unusual additional original rubber stamping on the bottom makes it worthy of preservation as an oddity.





Despite great care by the owner to protect the engine while in storage, dampness caused significant rust. C-2



This poorly repainted set is complete and needs little body work, making it a candidate for an easy restoration. C-2

# **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.



Believed to be factory paint touch-up common on many 392 tenders.

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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