"Tools & Tips #2"

By Gary Butts, MMR

Easy Control Panel Construction

A couple of months ago while watching my wife, Sandy, nearing the completion a two track staging and turnout installation on our G&SRR layout (she is working on her Golden Spike requirements) I was thinking about the need for some kind of small control panel for this staging yard that would be easy to make, look great, be easy to clean and be relatively inert to the common abuses control panels are subjected to. Our main turnout control panel was done many years ago and has worked out pretty well but it was a real pain to make. It was printed and covered with a self stick clear Mylar (polycarbonate) overlay, no longer available.

It dawned on me that maybe printed artwork could somehow be laminated to the back of a piece of normal Plexiglas or polycarbonate. Both hold up well to most cleaning solvents and resist scratching. I thought of canopy glue which dries clear, so I gave it a try.

First, I tested artwork on photo paper which failed miserably because the glue dried around the edges but refused to dry in the center. The photo emulsion on the paper sealed the air from the glue. The answer was easy, just use plain old printer paper printed on a laser printer. I don't think an ink jet printer would work because the gluemay dissolve the ink, but I didn't try it. My second test with regular paper worked out great! With this method any panel that can be conceived can be easily reproduced with any graphics program using curves, text and colors to replace the normal "stick" white lines and stickon lettering often found on layout panels.

Follow along the steps I used to produce our little panel.

We needed a self supporting panel for this staging yard so I took a scrap piece of 1/4" thick panel for a test and printed up some random patterns in color to see what effect the glue might have on the finished panel. Somewhat to my surprise, the colors remained virtually unchanged and the art remained crisp and clear.

Test Sample

I'm sure that the panel thickness could be anything that is required and I found that by simply spreading the canopy glue generously around on the bottom of the cleaned Plexiglas back side, then pressing the artwork into the glue, kneeding with my fingers as necessary to insure complete glue coverage worked fine. After the glue had been spread relatively evenly (it's easy to see the glue spread from the front of the Plexi-glas) I took a small scrap of straight edge plastic to "squeegee" the back of the artwork to form a uniform glue thickness. I'm sure a credit card would work

Canopy Glue

Laminating the art-

At this point the glue has white color but don't let this con-cern you. It will dry completely clear after a few hours and you will have a beautiful panel to show for it. Drill any required switch and mounting holes in the plastic before laminating to prevent tearing the art with your drill bit. Cut out the artwork around the holes and edges after it dries with an X-Acto blade.

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