LIONEL 255-260-26

by Rob English 96-43303 • friscostea

In the last article, we discussed loco and tender liveries and Loco frame Types. These will give the collector a head start when looking at a piece in order to determine "correctness." The clear majority of collectors in the USA, want unmodified and non-touched up (paint wise) trains for their collections. This collecting mentality fits right in with the, "Keep the best, sell the rest," notion that my Uncle Dave instilled in me. This installment deals primarily with changes to trim, plates, boiler fronts, motor types, and finally I hope to shed some light on the 255 variant.

The early 260 variants used copper and brass trim colors until the color change from black and dark "State" green to gunmetal. The locomotive and tender handrails, tender ladder, whistle, bell, cab window frames and air pumps were brass, and the domes, hatches, smoke stack, sand lines, feed water heater pipe, headlight bezel and journal box covers were copper. All handrail stations were nickel in color. The sand lines were run from each dome on the locomotive in a down and forward direction. This is incorrect, as one of those domes would house the throttle on a prototype locomotive, in what would be termed a "steam dome." We occasionally see nickel steam domes that are pushed for the sand line, but not used. These were probably left over from early 255 and 260 gunmetal production. The 255 (gunmetal 260) and 263 variants always have nickel trim. It doesn't matter if they are gunmetal or blue comet liveries. From stem to stern they are nickel. The gunmetal 255 and 260 variants followed, the sand lines were run from each dome on the locomotive in a down and forward direction variation, while the 263s always had both sand lines from a single dome - the sand dome, as it were, and oriented in a split forward and backward one to each driving wheel scheme.

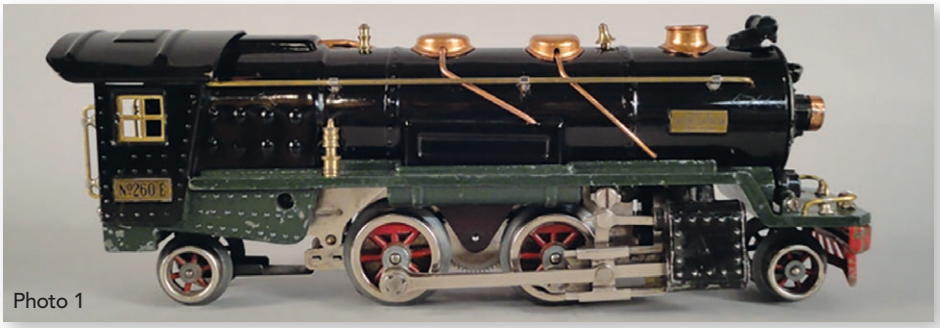

Photo 1

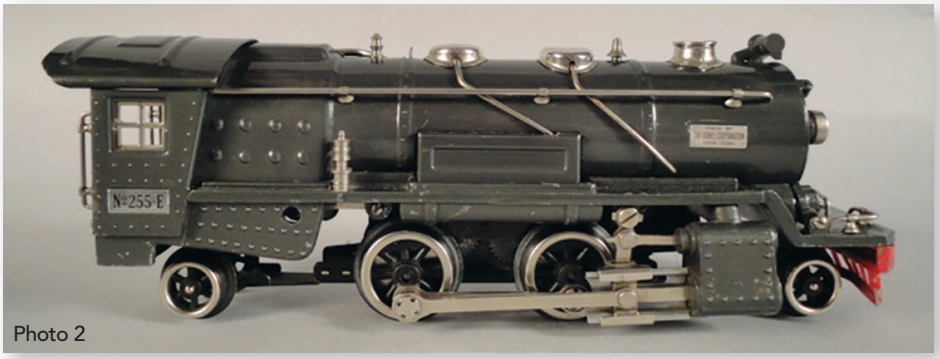

Photo 2

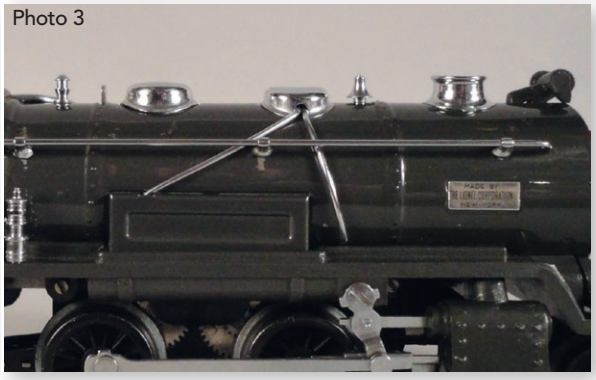
Photo 3

Photo 4

Taking a look at how Lionel identified these locomotives, Photo 1 is a 260E in black and green. Photo 2 is a 255 in gunmetal. Photo 3 shows sander detail. Lionel put attractive, separately applied plates on the vast majority of their pre-WWII locomotives and rolling stock. The plates were etched brass or aluminum (commonly referred to as "nickel" plates) and more often than not, they had black lettering or a black background. For a time, Lionel identified the locomotives that were equipped with electric reverse with a brass plate that had red lettering. Such is the case with the 260 variants. Neither the 255 nor the 263s ever had red lettered plates. There are, of course, exceptions as shown in Photo 4, which is a black lettered 260E. The boiler fronts also changed appearance about the time of the color change. The 260 and 255 variants always have a boiler front with flag staff pockets cast in to the boiler front at the 1 o'clock and 11 o'clock positions like the Standard gauge 390E. They also had two marker lights with celluloid lenses like the 392E or 400E, just above the pilot deck in the saddle area of the steam chest. Incidentally, this is a European affectation. American steam locomotives typically had their classification lights on the top front of the boiler front. The 263s mimicked this configuration with two red plastic class lights applied to the boiler front.

Using *Greenberg's Guide to Lionel Trains 1901-1942, Volume II, O and OO Gauges*, by Bruce C. Greenberg, PhD. as a guide, the 260-255-263 locomotives progressed through motor design and improvement concurrently with their electric outline siblings. The cream stripe 260 had a Type VII motor. The green frame 260 had a Type VIII motor, except in 1934, when a Type IX was installed. The 1935 and later locomotives used the Type 10b motor. The motors were treated to nickel plating on the chassis until 1934, 1935 and later had blackened chassis. The pendulum reverse unit had raw brass

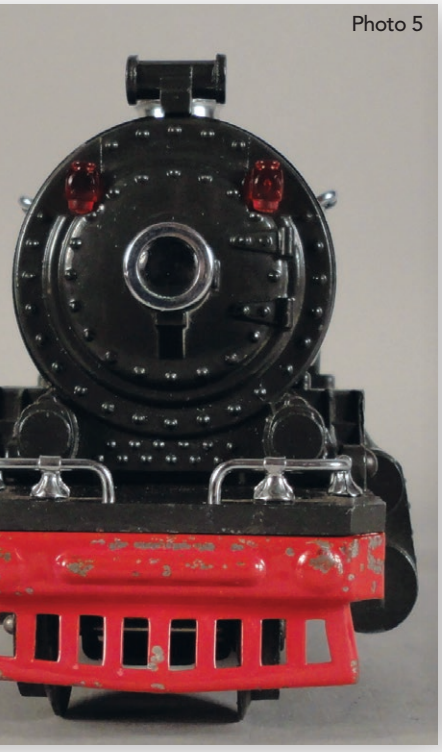

Photo 5

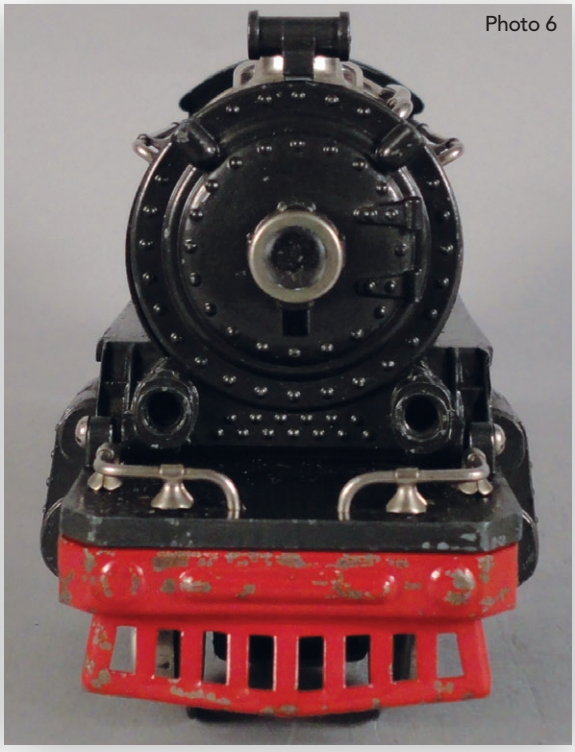

Photo 6

Photo 7

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or nickel plating. These locomotives experienced the obvious changes in coupler from latch, to Type 1 box, and eventually Type 2 box couplers. The wheels changed along with the motor deign from red with nickel rim and tire, to solid black embossed spoke wheels with nickel tires only, to the all solid black embossed spoke wheels with blackened rim and tires. Photo 4 is a black lettered 260E. Photos 5 and 6 show the boiler fronts.

I have a question for the readers. Is there a slot stamped into the boiler band in front of the cab on your 1935 260s? It has been reported to the author that some early 260s from 1935 have no slot and have a clipped e-unit lever and a rotary sequencing switch in the cab (like the chugger or e-unit lockout switches in the black and green 260s). I would like to investigate this and would like pictures sent to my email listed under the byline.

It must have really been something to unbox a fully loaded 260E in 1934. With spiffy new gunmetal paint, a chugger installed for simulated chuffing, a huge new twelve wheel tender that had a remote whistle on board, and a powerful motor controlled by an Ives designed, Lionel modified drum type e-unit… oh boy!

Last, but not least, we come to the 255. Why 255? Well, Lionel reduced the number of features by elimination of the chugger in 1935. Lionel was very sensitive to a model's brand equity, so they would not call it a 260. JLC was shrewd not to have to compare a chugger-less 255 head to head with a 260 equipped with one. They were cataloged together in 1935, but the 255 was lower priced and the problem of model brand equity was solved. Realistically, Lionel was shoe-horned into this 255 number as every number from 252-262 was in use. 263 was already in use in the planning stages and the next available number was 266. Being higher than the 260 and 263, consumers would expect a fuller featured model, not less. So really, Lionel did not have any choice but to use the 255 number.

Regarding the scarcity of these locomotives, Lionel only produced a score of rare production items. I don't count prototype or one-off color samples, as these are not generally seen in the open market. Lionel manufactured in huge numbers. Some models reached a hundred thousand units in their production life! The 260 range was produced in Lionel's prewar heyday. Some variants are readily available in the secondary market today, almost 90-years after they were produced!

One such variant is the dark green and black 260, which is probably a two on a scale of ten in scarcity. Made in large numbers this variant is readily available. The Blue comet liveries are the next most common, probably a four in scarcity, followed closely by the gunmetal 263s, also a four. Next is the black with cream stripe which rates a high 4 (Photo 7). The gunmetal 260 is generally a five scarcity, with the exception of the 1934 dark gunmetal 260E/260T which rates a 6. In the end, the 255 is champion of the scarcity race, with an 8 rating because of the aforementioned frame issue.

To wrap it up, the 260 in all variants was the "Queen of the Ball" of the Lionel line for almost ten years. In the late prewar period, it was ousted by the 700E, and 763E locomotives. One can cover major variations of these engines with just five models or you can dive deep down the rabbit hole and collect 14 or 15 to cover the whole line.

The author would like to thank Bruce C. Greenberg, Glenn McComas, Orville Applebaum, and others for their proofreading, advice and editorial prowess in this two part endeavor. As always, I would appreciate reader input on production variations.