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An revealing interview with Dave Swanson, Model Train Show Promoter!

In our August 2005 issue, we reported the demise of the Great American Train Show (GATS). This national train show had been a major factor in the model train hobby since 1981. We desired to interview the announced successors to GATS, Hobbies Unlimited. We attempted to contact their CEO, John Geoghegan, beginning in July but have been not successful to date. In fact, John has adamantly refused to return any of our calls. Recently, a senior reporter of the Times, George Jones, caught Dave Swanson, the founder of the Great American Train Show and asked him some of the questions that our readers had been asking us. In a highly co-operative, open and friendly manner, Dave talked with George as follows:

George: Dave, When did you first get interested in trains?

Dave: I have loved trains all my life, as a 5 year kid, I would go to the Chicago & Northwestern commuter station with my Dad to pick up my Mom when she got off of work. At age 5, I started to know the difference between an E-8 and a F-7!

George: How did you get started in Model Train Shows?

Dave: A group of us who were the officers of a local model railroad club decided to run a show in 1972. I was 16 at the time. That show is still running every month as the Great Midwest Train Show in suburban Chicago. It is the largest monthly train show in the world!

George: What is your current relationship with GATS?

Dave: I founded GATS in 1981 to bring good train shows nationwide. We did 5 cities in that first year. I managed GATS growth for 20 years and 1000 shows, with a highly competent and dedicated staff, all of which had some interest in model trains. In 2001 after the passing of my father and Bob Brush who was the inspiration for the shows, I decided it was time to retire and I sold GATS to Moe Geoghegan.

George: So you were employed with GATS from 1982 to 2001?

Dave: No, I managed GATS as a part time business during almost of that time, while I worked for IBM from 1978 to 1998 in a variety of technical, marketing, first line management and middle management roles. In 1998, I retired from IBM. I really loved working for IBM and still miss some aspects of that environment. I have a degree in Computer Science and am both a computer geek and a train geek.

George: So if you retired in 2001 from the train show business, what are you doing now?

Dave: Well that's an interesting question. In November 2001, I sold GATS but kept our Chicago (Wheaton) Great Midwest Train Show, our Chicago Computer Show and our advertising agency and 1 full time employee and 1 part time employee...

George (interrupting): Wait.. Wait... Hold It! Advertising agency? Computer show?

Dave: Yes! In support of our train show business, we operated both an advertising agency to promote the shows and a travel agency to reduce our travel costs. In 2000, I had purchased a Chicago computer show to combine my love of computers which I missed since leaving IBM and my love of shows. The computer show was my second attempt at this, as I briefly owned some retail computer stores but quickly decided I liked shows a lot better than retail sales.

George: OK! So you kept the Chicago shows and the advertising agency!

Dave: Yes, along with Bill Grove working full time on the Chicago shows and Kurt Jablonski working part time on the ad agency while he was going to college, I had a nice small relaxing business. Randy Bachmann my most senior employee started his own

iHobby Expo 2005 Comes to Los Angeles!

The iHobby Expo, held for many years in Rosemont, Illinois, came to the Los Angeles Convention Center October 20-23, 2005. There were traction items of interest at the show and the Southern California Traction Club was on hand with their 16' by 22' traction modular display.



Corgi displayed the first two of their new O scale Birney Safety cars, Philadelphia Transportation Company #5 and Steinway Lines #1668. Corgi representatives at the show stated that Corgi eventually plans to make the cars available powered.



Bachmann Industries displayed their new Reversing Trolley Car set. This is a great starter set for the traction beginner.

company at that time, Modeler's Choice. The rest of the employees continued to work for GATS. We were contracted to do media buying for GATS which our Ad agency still does. Our company name CIA Inc reflects that our focus was going to be on the advertising agency. *CIA Inc. stands for Competitive Intelligence Advertising.* I also thought it was cool to work for something called CIA.

George: So your only current involvement is GATS is doing their advertising?

Dave: I actually have two current involvements with GATS. Let me explain each one of them.

1. Advertising Agency – We do the media buying for GATS. Moe decides how much he wants to spend on newspaper, TV and radio in a particular market and we spend that money as effectively as we can. Our track record, as shown with the World's Greatest Hobby on Tour (WGHoT) shows, clearly demonstrates that we know how to select and buy media effectively. I sometimes get frustrated as we do not control the GATS media buying budget, so we can only do as good a job as the GATS budget allows us to do. It is sometimes extremely difficult to try to explain to someone that they were good media buys for the money we had to work with and you shouldn't blame us for the poor attendance. While we have nothing to do with the GATS magazine advertising, you can see the magnitude of the reduction in media advertising in looking at their Model Railroader and Classic Toy Train magazine ads which are now 1/6 page instead of a full page. An over 80% reduction in magazine advertising. GATS current focus for attendance promotion has been on direct mail postcards and e-mail which they do in house.

2. Loan – I financed part of the purchase of GATS Limited by Moe Geoghegan. A significant amount of that money is still owed.

George: So, you are retired and not really involved in GATS. Yet, I keep hearing your name mentioned with other shows like Greenberg Shows, World's Greatest Hobby on Tour (WGHoT), Great Train Expo (GTE)?

Dave: Once again this has been an interesting journey. It was not planned it just all sort of happened. Lets take them one at a time.

George: OK, Tell us about Greenberg Shows?

Dave: All thru the 1990s, I tried to persuade Kalmbach Publishing to sell Greenberg Shows to me (i.e. GATS). They always refused but we maintained a cordial and pleasant relationship. To this day I think they are one of the best managed companies I have encountered. In early 2003 they decided to sell Greenberg Shows. I got involved to help broker the deal to sell Greenberg Shows to GATS. During that process it became apparent that GATS didn't have the resources to complete the deal, so I bought Greenberg Shows. This put me in the unusual position of competing against my old company, GATS. I talked with Moe Geoghegan, who now owned GATS, and we laid out some common sense ground rules to insure the shows would not hurt each other or the participants. We are very proud that in the 30 months we have owned Greenberg Shows, they have improved in every critical dimension, attendance, number of exhibitors, customer satisfaction and profit.

George: So, how did you become involved with the World's Greatest Hobby on Tour and the Model Railroad Industry Association.

Dave: In my discussions with the Kalmbach executives, we agreed there was a need for a different type of train show. The hobby needed a show that would be a first class exhibition designed to get new people into the hobby. This show would showcase manufacturers. This seemed a natural extension of the World's Greatest Hobby program that many of the industry leaders funded. So in December 2004 we sponsored the first World's Greatest Hobby on Tour (WGHoT) Show. We are very proud that our first 4 shows had attendance over 100,000 creating thousands of new Model Railroaders. We are planning four more shows for 2006.

George: We hear rumors that a show called the Great Train Expo (GTE) is going to replace Greenberg Shows?

Dave: The Great Train Expo is replacing Greenberg Shows effective January 1, 2006. The sale from Kalmbach to me included use of the Greenberg name for only 3 years, so we are transitioning to the new name.

George: Is the Great Train Expo (GTE) just a name change for Greenberg?

Dave: It is more than just a name change for Greenberg Shows. We are trying to create a better show from our experience having run GATS prior to 2001 and Greenberg for the last 2.5 years. We are creating the preeminent nationwide train show. We plan to be in 40 markets within 2 years. We are also using our experience managing the World's Greatest Hobby on Tour Shows (WGHoT) to enhance the Great Train Expo.



This starter set can be extended by placing additional tracks between the special end sections. Any trolley, doodlebug, rail vehicle or small train can be used on the unit. For the person who has little space, Bachmann just eliminated your last excuse.

The Southern California Traction club unveiled their new "lift-up module 040". This module allows members to enter the interior of their rectangular display without crawling under the 36" high modules.



The basic frame of the unit, as shown below, had been obtained from Michael Barrett in October 2004 after preliminary plans had been developed by the club.



This module was completed from October 2004 until October 2005 and involved considerable engineering considering that the continuity of the overhead wire for pole trolleys had to be maintained through the lift-up section. Shown below is the entire four-foot long module with the lift-up section closed for operation.

George: Why are there Great Train Expos (GTE) in cities where GATS has previously run shows?

Dave: As I mentioned earlier Moe Geoghegan, who purchased GATS in November 2001, had a very significant amount of money still owed to me. Over the four years since the sale, despite refinancing the loan over a longer term, it became apparent that GATS was unable to repay the loan. In order to regain my investment and allow GATS to downsize to a manageable size, I purchased back 20 of the GATS venues. While Moe Geoghegan still owes a significant amount money to me it is 60% less than before.

George: I saw an announcement in July that GATS was going away and being replaced by Hobbies Unlimited sponsoring the Great Western and Atlantic Train Show. Can you shed any light on this?

Dave: I would encourage you to get your information directly from Moe Geoghegan, but here is my perspective. Since GATS was significantly downsizing due to the sale of 20 venues to me. Moe thought this was a good opportunity to restructure his business, rename the show and get his son, John Geoghegan, more involved in the decision making of the company. I think they will focus on lower cost venues, and keeping costs low including doing a number of 1 day shows. I certainly want them to succeed with their shows as I want them to be able to pay the monies still owed to me.

George: You said you purchased 20 venues can you tell us which ones they are.

Dave: Yes! We immediately received:

Cincinnati Convention Center (Cincinnati, OH)

Gateway Center (Collinsville, IL)

Ohio Expo Center (Columbus, OH)

Mid-America Center (Council Bluffs, IA)

National Western Complex (Denver, CO)

Fort Worth Convention Center (Fort Worth, TX)

Indiana State Fairgrounds (Indianapolis, IN)

American Royal Complex (Kansas City, MO)

Novi Expo Center (Novi, MI)

Western Washington Fairgrounds (Puyallup, WA)

California Expo & Fairgrounds (Sacramento, CA)

We will receive the following venues on 1/1/06:

Fort Worth Convention Center (Fort Worth, TX)

Florida State Fairgrounds (Tampa, FL).

We will receive the following venues on 6/1/06:

Anaheim Convention Center (Anaheim, CA)

Del Mar Fair (Del Mar, CA)

Kentucky Fair & Expo Center (Louisville, KY)

Central Florida Fair (Orlando, FL)

Alameda County Fairgrounds (Pleasanton, CA)

Portland Metropolitan Exposition Center (Portland, OR)

North Carolina State Fairgrounds (Raleigh, NC)

Utah State Fairpark (Salt Lake City, UT)

George: You run all these shows, the Great Train Expo (GTE) , Great Midwest Chicago Shows, the former Greenberg Show and the World's Greatest Hobby on Tour (WGHoT), plus an advertising agency. You must have a big staff, what can you say about your staff?

Dave: First, I can say I have the greatest staff in the world. They are my friends and are more like family than employees to me. In addition to our full time staff we have a number of part time staff and volunteers who help us. My full time staff consists of:

Randy Bachmann – My friend for over 20 years. He has worked for me since he was 16. He is the owner of a Model Railroad Manufacturing Company called Modeler's Choice, which he works on part time with his wife Holly. He is the most knowledgeable modeler on our staff. He manages the World's Greatest Hobby on Tour Shows.

Bill Grove – He manages our Chicago shows. He has worked for me for 15 years and works very independently. In fact he maintains his office at home and comes to our offices less than once a month.

Kurt Jablonski – Kurt manages the Great Train Expo Shows. Kurt has worked for me for 6 years and while that may not sound like very long, it is 25% of his life as he is only 23. Kurt has a degree in marketing and formerly managed our ad agency.



The next photo shows the module with the lift-up section raised.



George Jones, club member since 1997, designed an electric lock system for the module, which prevents inadvertent raising of the lift section along with electrical lock-outs which prevent trains from entering either adjacent module when the lift-section is raised. The module performed flawlessly during the iHobby Expo and there were no derailments and no dewirements. Railroad Model Craftsman magazine photographed the module and will make its construction the subject of an upcoming article.

As an additional note, most model railroad vendors and clubs, when preparing to attend model railroad and trade shows, usually cringe when the words ...Union Hall... and ...Teamsters... are mentioned in connection with move-in and move-out. So did the Southern California Traction Club when we first heard those words. But, the experience with Los Angeles Teamsters Local 986 in conjunction with Show Ready LLC was anything but that. The experience was so pleasant that they made the show move-in and move-out process most enjoyable. All the members of these organizations were very helpful to us but those we interfaced with most were Richard Cram, Wayne Fontaine, Mark McComb Tony McGinnis, and Mike Talauega. These workers were so pleasant, and professional, that they made the process downright enjoyable. They demonstrated that if you consider them like members of the team and let them do their job, they will do it and do it very well. The club will cringe no more when they hear those words!

The next iHobby Expo will be held during October 2006 in Rosemont, Illinois.

Remotoring the NWSL 1930 Master Unit

In the process of preparing a set of decals for this car, Custom Traxx decided to attempt to update the power chassis for this car, although this was one of the best running streetcars of its day. Northwest Short Line (NWSL) had imported 1000 of these units in 1972 and at this time, Custom Traxx possessed two of them.

Paul Jablonski – Paul is our newest hire and is Kurt's twin brother. Paul is assisting Kurt in managing the Great Train Expos. Paul serves as the regional show manager for most of the former Greenberg Shows. I am currently hiring another person to start in January to assist with our continuing show expansion. At present I do most of our advertising work and give general guidance to the staff. We don't have big staff but we do have a busy staff.

George: How is your show staff organized?

Dave: One of the important things we have learned is that it is important to allow exhibitors to have direct access to a decision maker. We do not have clerical staff. Our show managers perform all aspects of the show. We take the exhibitor orders, they answer exhibitor questions on the phone, they construct the floor plan, they arrange the table company, they send out the show info, they are at the show to run the show and they record exhibitor payments. Our customers have a single point of contact. We think this is very important. We think a major problem with other show organizations is they separate the office staff from the show staff. All our staff does the office work for the shows they are assigned and manages those shows on site to insure no miscommunication

George: Do you have any vision for the future that you can share with us?

Dave: Our immediate future is to fully exploit the potential of our shows. The Chicago shows, the WGHoT and the GTE all have tremendous potential. It is going to take time to bring the Great Train Expos to their full potential. Our primary focus is on continually improving the show.

Our shows have two goals:

- 1) To provide a focal point and marketplace for model and toy train enthusiasts to gather on a regular basis to enjoy the hobby;
- 2) To get new people involved in the hobby by showing them that trains are fun.

While our different shows have different focus. Chicago shows being more focused on goal #1, WGHoT shows being focused on goal #2. All our shows try to accomplish both goals.

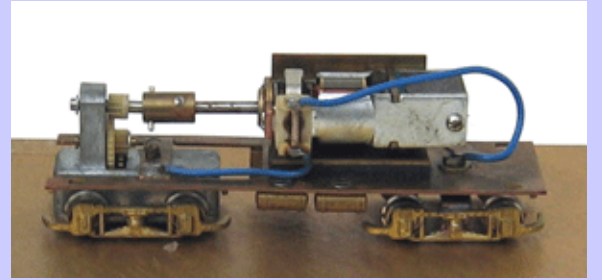
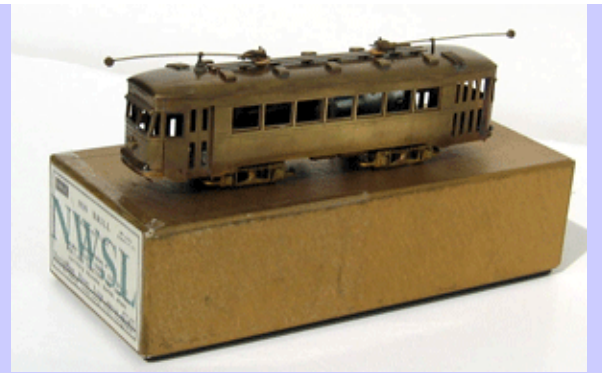
George: So are you ever going to retire like you planned in 2001?

Dave: I think I have to be honest and say no. I am just not the type of guy to be retired, play golf or lay on the beach. I hope that over time I can become less involved in the day-to-day operations, so I can do a little more travel. I'd like to use up some of the one and a half million frequent flyer miles I have accumulated in going to over 1000 train shows.

Editorial Comment: Trolleyville has been familiar with the business objectives and management style of Dave Swanson ever since some of our vendors starting appearing at Great American Train Shows in 1992. There have been many changes in the hobby since that time. The average model railroader is older and they are not being replaced on an one-for-one basis with younger modelers. The general public loves trains just as much as ever but there is much more competition for their discretionary time and money than previously. This forces model train show promoters to increase advertising to the general public to compete for their attention. Different venues require different areas if advertising. The public who can't attend this time might attend next time, if they are reminded through selective but determined advertising. The train lovers and model railroaders in the 20 venues that were acquired by Dave are really fortunate. They will have access to more enjoyable train shows, staffed by professional show personnel, with more professional vendors and operating displays. The model train promoter who only attempts to attract model railroaders and previous show attendees is only going to get an increasing share of a dwindling market. That, as Danny DeVito so well stated in the movie "Other People's Money", is the fastest way to go "down the tubes". We agree with Dave about the success of Dave's advertising strategy. Four of our vendors attended more than one of the WGHoT shows and they were all "impressed". Advertising costs money, but what doesn't! Regardless of any unfavorable experiences that you had at model train shows in the last four years, you need to come out and enjoy a GTE or WGHoT show when it is your area. You will not regret it if you do!

NOTICE TO READERS:

From late Friday, November 11, 2005 through late Monday, November 14, 2005, this edition was not available due to technical difficulties arising while the webmaster was unavailable. The situation has been corrected and we apologize for any inconvenience that these problems may have caused.



This unit uses a gear tower similar to that used in the Suidam Pacific Electric PCC and certain CNS&M models. So, the replacement motor has to be mounted in such a manner that the motor shaft is in the same horizontal plane as the shaft of the top gear of the tower. We experimented with the A-line/Mashima 40321 (which is the Southern California Traction Club standard motor for repowerings), the NWSL 12271-9 (12,500 rpm at 12v) and finally the NWSL 20325-9 (9,500 rpm at 12v). The 33 mm height of the 40321 (8,500 rpm at 12v) was too large for the car while the 12271-9 used a 1.5 mm shaft. The 20325-9 seemed to eliminate all of these problems and we happened to have one in stock.

In repowering the model, we first removed the original open frame motor and the replaced our replacement motor in the approximate position that it would be finally placed. We noted that if we placed the A-line 12401 cradle under our NWSL 20325-9 motor, that removing a slight amount of the cradle material would place the motor in the exact position required.

The floor of the model was thoroughly cleaned and cradle was affixed to the floor with Gorilla Glue. Placing the motor leads toward the trailing truck, an A-line 20006 flywheel was placed on the opposite shaft close to the motor.

Note: We use A-line flywheel cement to secure the flywheel to the shaft. Prior to using this cement, we place a drop of light oil on each motor bearing, this will prevent any of this cement from contacting the motor bearing and rendering the motor useless.

With just enough cement to be seen place a small amount on the shaft where the flywheel will be located, being careful not to push the flywheel far enough to contact the motor. The cement will set within minutes.

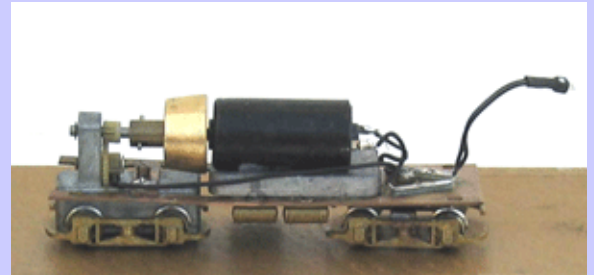
An A-line 12053 sleeve must be used to properly fit the original 2.4mm shaft universal to the 2.0 mm shaft of the NorthWest Short line motor. another small dab of the flywheel cement should be used to secure the sleeve to the shaft and another to secure the universal to the sleeve.

Once this combination is secure, the motor-flywheel -universal combination can be positioned to the power truck tower and cemented with DAP Aquarium Sealer. This sealer will take a few hours to set. So ensure that the position is correct prior to allowing a final set. As a final step, we placed two small sections of printed circuit board behind the motor and fastened them to the floor. We attached one pole of the motor to each of these pieces and one side of a female Miniaturics Two-pin micro-mini connector and were ready to test. The final powered chassis is shown below just prior to being re mated to the body shell.

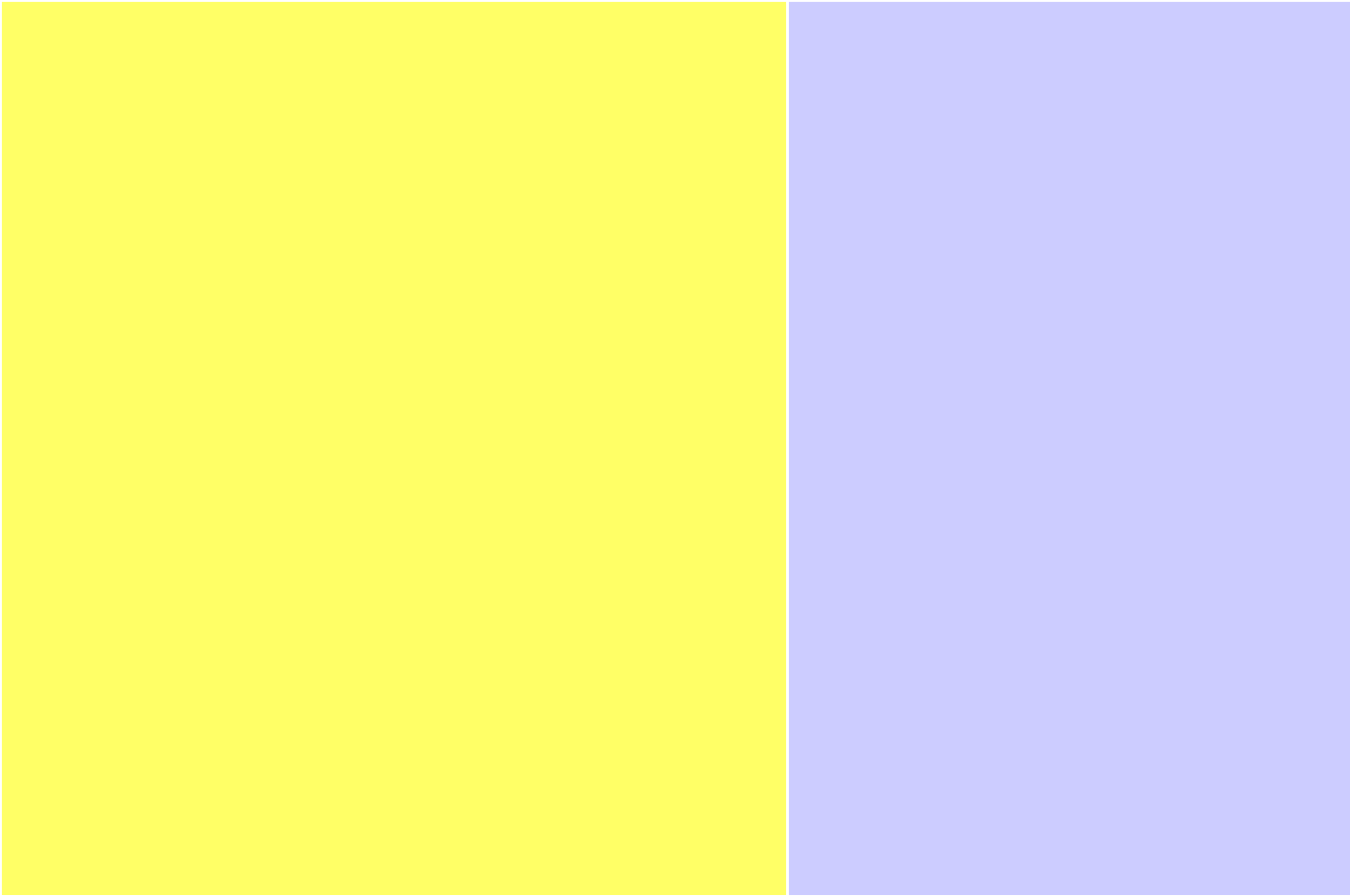


The car was then reassembled. At this time, we found that the top of the motor was contacting a brass "false roof" in the model. We removed this brass using a Dremel tool reassembled the car. The car certified on the Southern California Traction Club web site at 47 scale miles per hour at 7.0 volts and .1 ampere. This car will be painted soon and running on then modules as soon as Custom Traxx manages to get their CN-111 decal set released. But, this was not the end of the story.

When we discussed this repowering method with Fred Martin of NorthWest Short Line, he encouraged us to try his new 1630 (13,000 rpm @ 12v) motor. He felt that the 20325-9 motor was much more power than the little streetcar needed and that a gear jam could result in much more damage to the gears train than if the smaller motor was used. This would be a much more welcome conversion since the modifications to the "false roof" of the body would not have to be made. Since we had another 1930 NWSL Master Unit, we obtained a NWSL 16308-9 Single shaft motor and followed the same steps up to and including installation of the A-line cradle. We did, however, remove 11mm from the motor shaft to allow the proper fit between the motor and gear tower while keeping as much weight on the power truck as feasible. Fortunately, the motor shaft was at the same level of the gear tower shaft. So this appeared to be a much easier re powering. The motor was fastened to the cradle with Aquarium sealer and all electrical connectors were made. The final power chassis is shown below:



The power chassis was then mated to the unpainted body and tested on the same test track. The car also certified at 47 scale miles per hour at 7.0 volts and .1 ampere. Fred appears to have been right. Both cars were run for hours during a swap meet in Pomona on October 8th. The 16308-9 is a less expensive motor; it was easier to install and ran at the same speed.



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