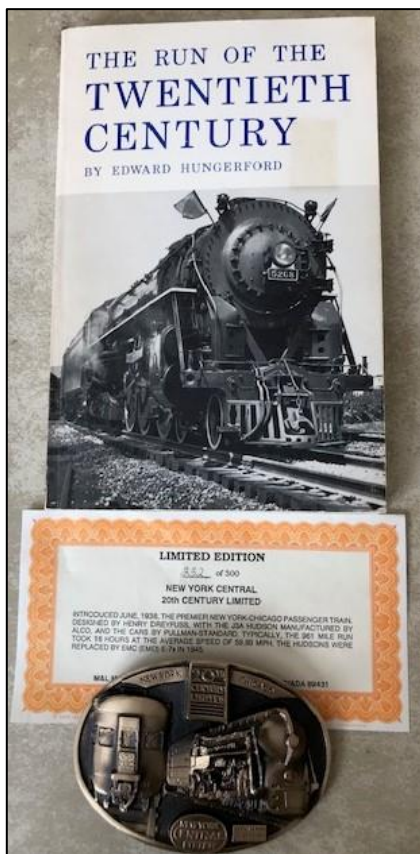


The Famous Trains Issue of 1999

By James Steckley

In early 2019 I bought, at auction, an enlarged picture of the 33¢ Famous Trains issue Scott #3335 known as the 20th Century Limited. One of the trains shown is the streamlined J3A Hudson engine designed by Henry Dreyfuss and introduced by the New York Central Railroad in 1938. To the right of it in the picture is the first “Hudson” engine built by the Alco Co. in New York and made its first run as the 20th Century Limited in 1902 and an iconic train of that era was born. It was the railroad’s “cruise ship” of its time caring for its passengers with the best of everything.



This writing is not a history of the New York Central trains, just my experience after buying the picture and becoming enamored with the train’s design and its history.

Two more items (on the left) came to me over time, a large oval belt buckle commemorating the 20th Century Limited of 1938 (also known as the Empire State Express) with a picture on the front and statistics of the Hudson/Dreyfuss engine on the back. Next was a book written by Edward Hungerford in 1930 and reprinted in 1970, The Run of the Twentieth Century, detailing the 1902 version of the Limited and the train’s operation. Both items were from the Sparks Heritage Museum in Sparks, Nevada.

Later in 2019 I got the plans from Woodsmith magazine, to which I subscribe, for a J3a Hudson engine and tender. It was a must build! A perfect project to add to my collection of pictures, post cards and panes of the stamps of the Hudson/Dreyfuss engine.

Having been a woodworker since the 1970’s, I have the tools necessary to make the small parts and shape the larger ones. The wood used is African mahogany and Western Maple, two woods with good contrast. They are both fairly soft woods, so the shaping and sanding was easy, just time consuming!



When making small parts like the wheels, if I need four, I make eight, if I need six, I make ten. That way I have a few to choose from if I find flaws in the pieces.



In fifteen days or so the 4-6-4 carriage was done. That's railroader-speak for 4 wheels in the front, 6 drivers in the middle and 4 wheels under the firebox and cab.

The engine can't go anywhere without coal and water and the J3a Hudson engine needs a lot of both! The tender is oversized to accommodate 56,000 lbs. of coal and 13,600 gallons of water. This tender needs 14 wheels to carry the load.

46 days later, the project was sort of done...it needed a place to sit. The stand needed to be 27" long and have some track for the engine and tender to sit on and look realistic.

The base is mahogany matching the engine and the ties (54 of them) are of Peruvian walnut, a very dark and dense wood. With all of the ties glued down and the two rails from a strip of O-gauge model train track installed the base was done...two weeks in the making. But who's going to dust it?



It definitely needed a case. The base of the display case is made from Brazilian ironwood, a very dense and very heavy wood. An acrylic top and no dusting required...of the engine and tender, that is. And so, after a few coats of lacquer the project was finished. A total of 60 days to complete it. My next project is a boat...it will probably take a few years.

The last two additions added to my 20th Century Limited collection

are two covers. The first one was a First Day Cover commemorating the first run of the J3a Hudson/Dreyfuss engine on that fateful day December 7, 1941. It didn't get much press because of the attack on the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The second was another first run cover when the diesel engines took over on September 17, 1948. Thanks go to Howard Kadohiro for the cover. He gave it to me at the last meeting.

The last days of the Limited came in 1967 when, due to more air travel, it could no longer sustain itself. For 65 years the 20th Century Limited treated its passengers like kings and queens and then it was over.

James Steckley, our current President and Donations Chair, is a member since 2018. His main collecting interest is U.S. Revenues.

