

Gang Cars: Is Now The Time To Think BIG?

by Jim Spicer

While on excursions we are often asked about our A-4, Duke. Recently we are seeing more interest in gang cars. Hopefully this article will give you some useful information.

I would like to give you a little background on our gang car experience. In 1999 I had the opportunity to buy a Fairmont A-4-D from Longview Portland & Northern in Gardner, OR. We had a very nice Fairmont MT-14 that I had converted to dual gauge but at times we wished we had a larger car so we could take friends with us. After acquiring the A car, we only used the MT-14 for narrow gauge. Three years ago we decided we liked A-cars so well that I spent the winter rebuilding another A-4 from the ground up as a narrow gauge car. Since the summer of 2000 we have put over ten thousand miles on A-4s.

Several years ago I figured gang cars were the wave of the future for several reasons. At present there are quite a few available and not too expensive. However, as time goes by they are becoming more picked over. They have lots of room, you can take friends, or on long trips lots of baggage. I think the ride is better than smaller cars. However, the main reason I like them is that you have adequate power and gears. As all of you that have an MT know, with an Onan engine and two-speed transmission there are times when the train is moving at the wrong speed. Your engine is racing in low about to float the valves or lugging along in high with chain snatch. Fairmont gang cars have an industrial engine with a four-speed truck transmission. There is never a speed that is a problem; switch gears or adjust the throttle a bit and the car is happy.

There are some down sides to owning a gang car. Most of them are heavy and require a tow vehicle larger than most cars on the road today. For all but the lightest, a two-axle trailer is best. Both of these problems can be over come but need consideration. If you have a pickup or access to one you are almost there. If you have time to shop around, two axle car haulers are available at reasonable prices.

Another problem that can be a challenge is turning a heavy car. You should be prepared to turn your car without asking for outside help. To ask for help lifting a heavy car will soon make you very unpopular. The best way is to have a turntable with a hydraulic lift. Fairmont did build a few A-4s with turntables but they are rare. You can have a custom one built, but they are not inexpensive. Fairmont built, and sold to railroads, a push on portable type that is available. These use two rails that look like skis. There are two centerpieces; one fits on the rails, the other one fits on top of it and turns. The rails fit on the ends of a top movable piece. After getting the rails adjusted so the car balances when on the portable turntable, it is fairly easy to push the car on and turn it. Another method is to have a hard point under the car where you can place a floor jack and lift the car by turning it on the jack head. Any of these methods will work but it is something you need to address.

Gang cars are larger and heavier so are ideal for towing. We tow the port-a-potty a lot. The good news is we know exactly where the potty is and can be first in line. In the past we towed a lot of disabled cars home. As motorcars become more reliable, this is becoming less common. An A-4 can tow an MT car and not even notice it is there. This makes for lots of friends by relieving a MT-19 from having to pull a MT-14. Gang cars came from a lot of different manufacturers; Fairmont, Northwestern, Kalamazoo and others built them. Today, Fairmont's are the only ones readily available. The smallest and lightest of the currently available cars is the A-3, a nice small car with a small Waukesha four cylinder L head engine.

The most popular and most available is the A-4-D. It came in several versions with three different Ford four cylinder engines. If you are going to own a gang car it will probably be an A-4-D. Most likely you will find one with either a 134 CID, OH Valve four cylinder that is commonly referred to as the Tractor Engine. Originally used in the 1953 Ford Golden Jubilee tractor, a very good strong engine, or the industrial version of the Pinto engine, a 2.3 Liter OHC is also a very good strong engine. Parts for both engines are readily available. The other engine is the English Cortina 1.8 Liter or 2.0 Liter OHV. It is rather uncommon but there are a few around.

The A-5 is the same basic car as the A-4 except it has a four-cylinder Waukesha L head engine. There are quite a few of these around and they are still reasonably inexpensive. The earlier versions of both A-4 and A-5 had non-synchromesh four speed truck transmissions. Later cars had synchromesh.

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A-4s and 5s mostly came in two body styles, round roof and peaked roof. The round roof is almost always double ended with glass windshields on both ends. The peaked roof cars usually have a windshield on the front with an open back. There is also a desirable A-4-E that has a wide body; most have doors, very nice cars.

Next is the A-6; a very nice car with coil spring suspension, about 16 inches longer than the A-4. It's a little higher because of the suspension. They have a Ford Six with four-speed transmission. The down side is they weigh more. The one I have weighed 3600 Lb. as received from the railroad. There are a few of these around and the room and ride are worthwhile if you can deal with the size and weight.

There are also a few HUGE A-8s. These cars are rare and heavy; they will weigh nearly 6,000 Lb. The early version had a Ford V-8; later ones had a Ford Big Six with disc brakes.

After we got our first A-4, I took great interest in Fairmont A-cars and have looked at a lot of them very closely. The main thing I have noticed is that no two are exactly alike. If you look at a frame, you notice extra holes everywhere. The frame was predrilled so that any engine, transmission, wheel base combination would bolt right in. It was also predrilled for several gauges. Each car was a custom car built to the railroads specifications.

In summation: If you can deal with the weight and size, go for it. Even though we had a really nice MT-14, we find our A-4 much more enjoyable and do not plan to ever go back.

My next article will be an in-depth look at how to turn gang cars.

