

Restoration News

"RESTORING THE MUSTANG WOODGRAIN STEERING WHEEL"

With few exceptions, a "mint" condition woodgrain wheel is one of the rarest Mustang options to find today. Any of us who have ever tried to find one will surely attest to that, and of course they command quite a high price. Most wheels around have one or more cracks and the finish is worn bare on the gripping areas.

Here is a method of restoration that I have had excellent results with. You will need the following supplies:

- Plastic Wood - Walnut Color
- Coarse and fine sandpaper
- Coarse and fine steel wool
- Masking tape
- Red and black enamel paint
- Antiquing 'Glaze and Stain' - Natural Walnut Color
- Spray urethane varnish - satin finish

I use "Varathane" brand varnish made by Fletco International of Oakland, California. Be sure that the stain and varnish are compatible with one another. The final ingredient, and the most important, is patience. This is a slow process with very long drying times. Figure on seven to ten days -- DON'T TRY TO RUSH IT!!!

First, disassemble the wheel paying attention to how the horn mechanism fits together, this makes re-assembly easier. Fill the cracks with Plastic Wood, building it up in layers...be sure to allow plenty of drying time between applications. Pack the Plastic Wood in good and tight to make a firm patch that won't fall out later on. When the cracks are filled and the Plastic Wood is fully cured, sand the patch with fine sandpaper until it is flush with the rest of the wheel. Be careful not to damage any existing woodgrain left on the wheel.

The next step is surfacing the wheel. Use coarse sandpaper and with sweeping stokers (not back and forth) go over the wheel, avoiding any of the original woodgrain that may remain. This serves two purposes: One, it puts a "grain" in the plastic; and Two, it gives the surface some bite for the stain to adhere to. Go over the entire wheel with a tack rag to remove all dust; check over for evenness of grain and a good job of crack filling.

Now the wheel is ready for staining. Use a rag wrapped around a finger to apply the stain. Do this with sweeping strokes using the stain sparingly, you want somewhat of an uneven pattern to simulate the natural variances in a wood finish. Try to match the existing finish as best as possible without covering much of it up. After the stain has been applied, carefully go back and remove any stain that may have gotten into the rivets. A small Q-tip works pretty well. Set the wheel aside to dry, I use a large glass jar with a wide mouth as a base for the wheel to rest on. It will probably take between one to three days. When the wheel dries, go back and check for missed areas, reapply the stain as needed. From now on, handle the wheel with care, even when dry the stain will rub off if handled roughly.

Now is a good time to work on the chrome parts. Clean all the bright work with 000 or 0000 steel wool and polish with a good chrome polish such as Mother's. Disassemble the center cap and polish the emblem, Mother's works pretty well for this too. With alcohol or another solvent, clean around the lettering on the center cap. When dry, repaint with model car enamel. Don't be afraid to go outside the lines, steel wool will remove any excess paint leaving a very professional-looking job. Clean any grease and dirt from the horn electrical contacts with solvent and polish with steel wool.

When the stain is dry, check the rivets in the wheel. If any are missing or in bad shape, they will need attention. I have a "parts" wheel that I use. The rivets pry out easily and can be installed with "Super Glue". If you're not so lucky, you may try painting the wheel rivets or making one from Mylar tape...the important thing here is that they all match. If you use paint, be sure that it is compatible with the type of varnish you have.

With masking tape, completely cover the three center spokes. Gently wipe down the wheel with a tack rag to clean it prior to spraying the varnish. Again, be careful not to rub off any of the stain. Apply a light coat of varnish to the entire wheel and allow it to dry at room temperature. DON'T APPLY THE SECOND COAT UNTIL THE FIRST IS COMPLETELY DRY! If not, you will find that it takes forever to dry. Don't try to hurry things by baking or setting in the hot sun light, this may cause the varnish to yellow. Between coats, use 0000 steel wool to even out any imperfections. When varnishing is complete, at least three light coats (more if the wheel will see heavy use), completely remove the masking tape. Polish the center spokes with steel wool being careful not to mar the wheel's finish. Reassemble the wheel being sure to get the horn mechanism together properly.

That's all there is to it! It's really a rather simple project. If you are patient and follow all the steps, you will have a first-class woodgrain wheel and the pride and satisfaction of having done it yourself.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The editor appreciates very much Mr. Granger's contribution to this publication and hope sincerely that this detailed restoration tip will be as successful for all of you who attempt your restoration as it has been for Mr. Granger.

CERTAINLY WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM MORE OF OUR MEMBERS OUT THERE WITH MORE IDEAS.