The Acme traffic signal dotted the streets of Los Angeles from the 1920s through the 1950s. This Acme is shown here with its original control box.
Robert D. Rentzer

Restoration of the Acme began by having to remove everything from inside and outside the case. That's because the case had been painted and repainted for theatrical use, the last coat of which was rubberized silver roofing paint. (Ugh!) Removing the paint alone proved to be a two-man job. With the help of my friend, John Long, it took us several days, more than a gallon of a caustic paint-removing gel called Strypeeze, a wire wheel on an electric drill and wire brushes wielded by hand to complete the task. Once all the paint was removed — along with some of our skin, where the plastic gloves we wore were eaten away by the chemicals in the gel — the case had to go to a local car wash for a final steam cleaning. But that was just the beginning of what ended up being nearly a two-year project. While the case was at the car wash, we began the task of separating the glass lenses from their external and internal rings. I was fortunate enough to have acquired an Acme with the interior lettering molded into the lenses, which I later learned made the lenses as rare as the Acme itself. Not only did the lenses need to be removed from their housings, but so did the bell mechanism, and all the other metal parts, even screws, were sent out for refinishing.

As I began to remove the dried-out caulking that ran around the inside edge of the lenses, I took a closer look at what at first appeared to be little bumps in the glass. Those bumps turned out to be embossed lettering that read "CORNING REG. U.S. PAT. OFF MADE IN U.S.A. 712 CVX. DIF ROL STOP PAT. 2 2 15". With time on my hands, I decided to undertake a search for that patent itself. It turned out to be #1,126,705 dated Feb. 2, 1915, which was an education in itself. The patent explained that, until then, all glass lenses on traffic signals had been flat, until Corning came up with the idea of making them convex to provide greater reflective brightness. In fact, after I had a pinstripe artist

The Holy Grail of Traffic Signals

After searching for years for an iconic 1924 Acme traffic signal, collector Robert Rentzer is ready to take it apart.
restore the black heat-resistant paint to the inside Stop-and-Go lettering, that convex design presented me with a problem. Laying the lenses on a flat surface caused them to wobble while I attempted to properly apply the rope caulking. My plastic waste basket solved that problem by serving as the perfect stand.

While still waiting for the parts to come back from the plater — and to distract myself from worrying that the plater would lose some irreplaceable part — I began searching for an original pole and pole base on which to mount my Acme. I found that with the very person who made the Disney reproductions. He was even able to meet me at a machine shop where I had several feet of the pole cut off (after all, no vehicles would be driving under the semaphore arms while the Acme sat in my game room). Next came the task of separating the pole from the base so that each could be repainted with baked-on powder coat.

The base and pole were rusted together, and, after destroying several leather strap-type pole wrenches, I finally obtained a huge metal plumber’s wrench, laid the pole and base on its side, had two friends hold the base down and, with a lot of elbow grease and liberal applications of real grease, I managed to free the pole. With that done, the pole had to be stripped of its old paint to be repainted. That was a job I decided to leave to the folks who would do the powder coating, but even that proved to be a major task, because I wanted the pole to sport a black and white zig-zag pattern. I was first told there was no way to do a two-color powder coating, because putting the pole into the 475 degree oven a second time would damage whatever powder coating was done on the first run. Based on that wrong information, I left the pole and base for all-black powder coating, requesting a flat (not glossy) finish to give it a weathered look. It was only after that I learned of a special heat-resistant tape that could be applied, first to mask off the area that would be black and then applied over the white, so as to protect the white when the pole went back into the oven to have the black applied. So, back went the pole to have it sandblasted down to bare metal again for the dual powder-coating process, but at least the pole base was done and could stay at home to wait for its pole to eventually be reinstalled.

Once the black powder coating had been sandblasted off the pole and the bare pole was back home, I took careful measurements to plan for the number of zigzags and for their uniform width. I created cardboard templates to use to mark where the tape would be applied. Aft er pasting the zigzag templates onto the pole, I traced the pattern, removed the templates and applied the special oven-proof tape. Then off I went, once again, to have the pole
first powder coated in white, which I again specified to be flat, not glossy. That came out perfect, allowing me to take the pole home and tape over the white. I then returned it for the black powder coating to be applied, again saying it was to be flat black. To my shock, when I picked up the pole the black had been done in high gloss. I was even more shocked when, after he apologized, the guy who screwed up tried to tell me that, in time, the paint would dull (yeah, right!). So I ended up with a two-texture pole, but at no charge for the job.

As you probably guessed, I was not about to leave the pole half flat white and half gloss black. Yet I was not up for another round of trips to have it sand blasted bare and to start those steps all over again. Besides, I sent off the templates to my friend in New Mexico, in case he wanted to powder coat his pole the same way. That left me with no option except to attempt to dull the high gloss black myself. I masked off the white and tried a clear, flat polyurethane spray, but that didn’t do it, and I knew that it would eventually wear off. I resigned my self to doing what I knew I would need to do: hand sanding. The job took me three solid days using 320-grit sandpaper. That was because the pole surface wasn’t smooth, and sanding resulted in highs and lows, giving the paint a speckled look. After the major sanding was done, I removed the last hints of the gloss paint by using my finger to press 00-grade steel wool into the indentations and rub out the remaining shine in each and every one. Finally, I screwed the pole back onto its base. And, as soon as the parts came back from the plater, I set the empty Acme case on top, to get a feel as to what it would look like.

Hundreds of Acme traffic signals were subject to blackouts during World War II. Here a crew take time to modify an Acme to reduce the chance the lights are seen from the air.

Robert Rentzer started his career as a television actor under the name Bob Dennis and later joined Broadway productions. While raising a family, he launched a successful law career and formerly served as a deputy district attorney and prosecutor in Los Angeles. Now in private practice, Rentzer is credited with taking on high profile cases, including representing Rodney King and participating in both the Los Angeles and Las Vegas O.J. Simpson cases. Rentzer is also an author whose latest book stands ready and waiting for a publisher. He may be contacted via his website, www.lawcal.com.
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