

Keeping your Li'l Red in the Black

Over the past 30 plus years, I have observed the restorations of hundreds of Dodge Li'l Red Express Trucks. Probably the biggest mistake I have found and one of my biggest pet peeves is really a very small section. This mistake is not just made by Li'l Red Express owners and restorers; it's made by too many so called Mopar restoration shops. As we all know, the entire engine compartment, of a Mopar product, was painted the same color as the exterior of the vehicle, unlike GM, that painted all the engine compartments black, no matter the color of the vehicle.

Mopar painted the entire engine compartment body color; however, they did vary from that in one other location. This location is the front of the radiator core support, behind the grille and lower valence, of all Chrysler vehicles. This area was painted a lightly textured, satin black, called Organosol, ppg 9355. This is the same paint that they used on the hood of the Dodge Super Bee, tail panels of the Plymouth Cuda, plus numerous other areas on Chrysler performance vehicles.

The paint was applied from a pit below the assembly line and the painter had to shoot up at the vehicle at approximately a 45° angle. The black paint was applied to the front and bottom of these panels, so that no color was visible through the grille or any other areas on the front of the vehicle. Therefore, when you open the hood, the top of the radiator support is still the color of the vehicle. There was some minor overspray that could be found, in and around the engine compartment, because Chrysler was not building collector vehicles, they were just production vehicles, cheap and expensive ones were done the same.

The idea of painting this area black was to draw your eye to the beauty of the grille, headlight bezels, bumper, etc., not to the mechanical pieces

behind the grille, supporting all the front-end equipment. Chrysler always had the vendor that supplied the radiators and A/C condensers, paint them black before shipment, so they did not show through the grille. I see so many “Restored” Li'l reds, that have the red paint on the front of the core support, aluminum radiators and A/C condensers, glaring through the grille work. It really distracts from the beauty of the front of the truck.

You can always tell when a Mopar has been “restored” or repainted, most body shops just leave the color on the front of the radiator core and it sticks out like a sore thumb!! I have seen this done, by so called expert Mopar restoration shops and back yard painters. You can tell when a true Mopar restorer paints a vehicle, such as Legendary Motor Cars, in Canada and Graveyard Cars in Oregon; they always paint these areas a satin black, as the factory had done.

The sad thing about all this is, it is a very easy thing to do. You do not need to purchase the special Organosol paint, to paint these areas. A common flat or satin black rattle can paint will do the job. With the color being behind the grille, you really cannot see the texture of the Organosol paint, anyway. So, all that is required is to unscrew the grille and spray away. (See pics below) Before his passing, I had the privilege to visit with Tom Hoover and questioned him on many aspects of the Li'l Red Express Truck. One of the main items I brought up was the black behind the grille. I wanted to know what Chrysler did and not what somebody had just told me. Most of what I have just written, was told to me by Tom Hoover himself and I'm sure he knew more about how Chrysler operated, than any of the so called, “Mopar Experts”, that are around today.

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Which looks better to you?

