While not the cheapest way to stain and weather stripwood, using drawing inks mixed in alcohol or water is certainly the fastest.

Staining and weathering stripwood

Part 3: Using drawing inks

As I said in Part 1 of this series most of us who have been building craftsman structure kits or scratch building for any length of time have long known about staining and weathering stripwood with black ink mixed into rubbing alcohol. In recent years, however, some of us have started experimenting with a wider variety of ink colors than the basic black in an attempt to recreate a wide range of weathered wood colors.

Using drawing inks to stain stripwood has several advantages over acrylic paint stains. First, there is the savings in time. A batch of wood can be stained in a minute or less with ink and be completely dry within a few more minutes after that. That's as opposed to the usual 18—24 hours needed for staining with acrylic paints plus another 24—36 hours to dry. Additionally, the ink stains are more versatile in use. They can be brushed on individual pieces of wood as needed — something which the acrylic paint stains usually cannot. But they can also be used as a soaking type stain for batches of stripwood in a Ziplock-style bag the same as the craft paint stains.

On the downside, using ink is considerably more expensive than acrylic craft paint. Depending upon source, a 1-ounce bottle may cost between $3 and $7. Drawing inks can also be more difficult to find than craft paints. For example, my local Michaels carries only Higgins Black and no other

colors or brands. While the local Hobby Lobby carries the Dr. P.H. Martin's brand in a few colors, their availability has been spotty at best. As a result, I have had my best luck finding the inks I wanted from online sources such as Dick Blick (www.dickblick.com) and Lyon Art Supply (www.lyonart.com).

I would suggest, however, that in spite of the initial expense, the ink does go a long way and the stains are completely reusable for many applications. So that does offset the cost.

An overview....

In general, the procedure to staining stripwood with ink is not a whole lot different from using craft paint stains. The stain is mixed using one or more ink colors and 70% or 91% alcohol and/or water. The stripwood is placed in a bag, the stain is poured over the wood and allowed to penetrate the wood for 30—60 seconds. The stain is then poured back into the bottle, the wood is removed from the bag and allowed to dry for several minutes on newspaper or paper toweling. And that's it. You're ready to start assembling your model.

Some basic recipes....

By far, the oldest and best known of the ink stains is that of "black alcohol," which is often abbreviated as "A/I." It simply consists of mixing 70% or 91% rubbing alcohol with a small amount of black drawing ink or India ink. When brushed on stripwood, the wood will take on a dull gray or dull gray-brown color, depending upon the actual dilution of the ink and the type of wood being stained (basswood vs. balsa, for example).

While there is no actual "standard" or universally agreed-upon recipe, probably the one most often cited is **1 tsp. of black ink mixed in 1 pint (16 oz.) of 70% alcohol.** The ink can be either non-waterproof drawing ink (Higgins is a common brand) or waterproof India ink — it really doesn't matter, as either type will readily mix in the alcohol.

Of course, there are variations of that basic mix. For a darker stain, many modelers will add 1-1/2 tsp. to a pint of alcohol, and some will even add 2 tsp. to the pint to make a very dark stain. As always, it's a matter of personal preference and modeling need.

Another basic recipe is that of well-known Australian MMR Laurie Green. His recipe goes beyond the basic 1-ink blend and yields a very nice "warm gray" tone: **5 ml of sepia + 5 ml of black mixed into 200 ml of rubbing alcohol.** (Special note: Laurie's website is a treasure trove of modeling information. Be sure to check it out at www.lauriegreen.info)

The important thing to remember is that whether you use one of these basic recipes or one of the others listed below, the resulting stain can be brushed on individual strips of wood, or it can be used as a soaking stain for large batches of wood, or it can even be shot through an airbrush for specialized weathering uses. It's very versatile.

Blend #1: This recipe is a variation of Laurie Green's basic mix (see info above). **To 125 ml of alcohol add 8 ml brown and 4 ml black ink**. Mix well. I used Dr. P.H. Martin's Bombay Brown and Black for this example.

Blend #2: This recipe was developed by Eddie Landreth, one of the moderators at Railroad-Line Forums. It calls for **4 oz. of alcohol + 1/2 tablespoon (TBS) of brown + 1/2 TBS of black**. For this example, I used Daler-Rowney Burnt Umber and Black.

Blend #3: A variation of Eddie's standard mix. **4 oz. 71% alcohol + 2 teaspoons (tsp) Daler-Rowney Sepia + 1 tsp Daler-Rowney Black**. Note that it is slightly redder than the sample above.

Blend #4: 4 oz. 70% alcohol + 1 tsp Bombay Brown + 1 tsp Bombay Black. Note that this imparts a slightly darker and cooler color to the wood.

Blend #5: 4 oz. 70% alcohol + 2 tsp black + 1 tsp Daler-Rowney Burnt Umber. This would make a great color for staining the interior boards of a structure, where age but not weather would be a factor.

✎ A special note about the examples above: while all may appear to look alike, there actually are subtle differences in the overall shade and color between each. Unfortunately, my photographic skills and lighting were not up to the task of capturing the actual differences that each blend causes.

✎ Special instructions for the blends listed below: each of the recipes calls for only 12 oz. of alcohol. This is because 4 oz. of water will be mixed with varying amounts/ colors of ink and then added to the alcohol to make a total of 16 oz. of stain. If you pour 4 oz. of alcohol from a new bottle, be sure to save it in a jar or other bottle as it can be used for other purposes. Then the water blend can added to the new bottle to make up the pint of stain.

Blend #6: 12 oz. 70% alcohol + 3/4 tsp Higgins non-waterproof black ink + (4 oz. water + 1/2 tsp Daler-Rowney Sienna). As noted above, the D-R Sienna and water are mixed separately and then added to the black alcohol.

Blend #7: 12 oz. 70% alcohol + 3/4 tsp Higgins non-waterproof black + (4 oz. water + 1/2 tsp D-R Sienna + 1/2 tsp D-R Burnt Umber)

Blend #8: 12 oz. 70 % alcohol + 3/4 tsp Higgins non-waterproof black + (4 oz. water + 1-1/2 tsp D-R Sienna + 1/2 tsp D-R Burnt Umber)

Blend # 9: This one has become my personal favorite: **12 oz. 91% alcohol + 1 tsp Bombay Black + (4 oz. water + 1 tsp Bombay Brown + 1/2 tsp D-R Burnt Umber + 1/4 tsp Bombay Black)** Note the varying shades, ranging from a warm brown-gray to a cooler brown-gray.

✎ FINAL NOTES....All of the stripwood I use in my scratch building projects and many other modeling endeavors comes from Rusty Stumps (www.rustystumps.com). Rusty buys Northeastern Scale Models stripwood in bulk, so you know the quality of Northeastern is there. But he repackages the wood 15 strips per package. Compare that to the usual 10 or 12 strips from other vendors! And his package prices are generally less than those of other vendors as well. I highly recommend Rusty Stumps for your stripwood needs!

✎ This concludes the series on staining and weathering stripwood. I hope you have learned something from the three articles and possibly have been inspired to experiment on you own. As I said in one of the other articles, this stuff isn't carved in stone - it's only words on electronic pages.