The data plate sits unnoticed on a propane tank most of the year, until the inspector comes by to check on the plate’s condition. But it is like a birth certificate for a bulk propane storage tank—without a data plate, also called a nameplate, the tank has no pedigree.

The plate allows the tracing of a propane tank back to its origins, providing information such as who made the tank, how it was made, what it was made for, and even where the steel was produced. But the plate has more important functions than simply providing information. Failure to keep the data plate information readable can result in the tank being forced out of service. The LP-Gas Code, NFPA 58, requires data plates to be attached on propane tanks, and the code is clear on what information the plates should contain.

“A propane tank with no data plate is not a propane tank,” Richard Fredenburg said. Fredenburg is an LP-gas engineer for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which is responsible for regulatory and service areas including gas and oil inspection for the state.

One of the department’s duties is to check that propane tanks follow guidelines of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) and NFPA 58, which state that a propane tank must feature certain markings. The NFPA 58, Liquefied Petroleum Gas Code, 2008 edition, states that data for ASME containers must be on a stainless steel metal nameplate attached to the container, although some of the older tanks still in operation have the information stamped directly into the steel of the tank or onto plates of other material. Either way, keeping the data legible can prevent headaches down the road as the tank ages.

As with any equipment, data plates can deteriorate as they age. Some of the older data plates were made of steel and can rust, making them illegible. Or the plate can become unreadable from simply becoming worn down or by something hitting it during shipping. Fredenburg says painting over the data plate can help preserve it, but the paint would need to be removed if someone wanted to read it. A better alternative is to find a good clear varnish to help preserve the data plate.

“There’s no rule against painting it, but if it comes to the point where you have to read it, then you have to scrape off the paint. In the process, you might do something to the plate to make it unreadable, especially if it was borderline when you painted it,” he explained.

What should you do if the data plate comes off? Do not re-attach it. Only the manufacturer or an “authority having jurisdiction” can allow reattachment of the data plate. “Typically that’s by a replacement data plate, because often when the data plate comes off, you don’t know where it is,” Fredenburg stated.

When someone calls his department to install a data plate, Fredenburg brings his kit that includes blank data plates; stamping dies with all the letters and numbers; glue; and tape to hold the plate in place while the glue dries. “Hopefully, they’ve got enough documentation for me to be able to create a replacement,” he said. “That doesn’t always happen.”

His department uses methods such as sanding or rubbing lightly to try and bring numbers out that might be otherwise difficult to read. The department can spend up to a half hour or longer to get information from the data plate. When he installs a replacement plate, he uses glue, “because I’m not allowed to weld on that tank either. I’m not certified.” The department charges $20 to install a replacement data plate, but Fredenburg said he is looking to get that amount increased because the amount doesn’t even cover the mileage, let alone the time and materials.

But you can save yourself the trouble of wondering whether you are replacing a data plate properly—just keep the existing data plate in good shape. Data plates on new tanks must now be stainless steel and attached in such a way as to minimize corrosion. Some plates in the past were aluminum, and many were riveted in place. Fredenburg said NFPA 58 section 5.2.8.3 contains further crucial information about data plates or nameplates.

“It’s still not unusual, actually, for them to corrode behind the data plate and force the data plate right off the tank,” Fredenburg commented. —Daryl Lubinsky