



# Family Heirloom

*After a second life as a mild hot rod, and decades of storage, a full restoration is bestowed upon a 1931 Ford Model A Pickup—Part I*

WORDS BY MATTHEW LITWIN • RESTORATION PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KEVIN ALEXANDER

In 1957, Southern California native Paul Alexander purchased a complete, yet slightly aged 1931 Ford Model A Pickup for \$645. The seller handed Paul—still in high school—the keys and title to the closed-cab hauler, as well as dealer paperwork, the latter of which was of little consequence to the young man.

“He threw the paperwork away and fixed up the truck,” recalls Kevin, Paul’s son. And since the Fifties was the golden epoch of the hot-rod movement, the term

“fixing up” had an alternative meaning, as Kevin explains.

“Dad wanted a sleek look, so he removed the side-mount spare and covered the well, and then painted the body in red rust primer. The stock wheels were replaced with modern steelies, and he installed a drop axle that lowered it a bit. My grandfather fitted hydraulic brakes and, later, rebuilt its four-cylinder engine. Newer tear-drop headlamps were bolted on. He even drove it down to Tijuana, Mexico, to have a

new interior installed. It was his hot rod.”

In time, the Ford was parked, yet Paul resisted the temptation to sell it, even after relocating to Las Vegas, Nevada. By March 2015, it was time to downsize the collection and, in keeping with a promise to pass it along, called his son. Kevin, who had driven the Ford—by accident—only once at age five (more about this in Part II), immediately commissioned its restoration. Join us as the first segment of this tale unfolds on the following pages.





Early March 2015, the Ford is relocated from Paul's home in Las Vegas, Nevada, to Kevin's in Chandler, Arizona—after decades of hibernation—still wearing the red rust primer applied in the late Fifties, as well as period post-production add-ons.



The closed-cab pickup, designated model 82-B by Ford, was meticulously evaluated during its disassembly. Looking worse for wear—though in sound, running condition—was its original 201-cu.in. four-cylinder engine, rated for 40 hp at 2,200 rpm.



At the top of this image you'll see the diamond-pattern upholstery installed in Mexico decades prior. The pivot points and slide braces for the front windshield were functional, as was the wiper motor, but the wooden header above showed water stains.



By 1931, the Model A's doors were made entirely of steel. To combat a hollow, tinny noise, a sound-deadening material was sprayed onto the door skin, which is exposed here. The predominantly dry Southwest climate prevented rust from snacking on the metal.



Kevin had some restoration experience from years prior, so he was aware of the need to be organized throughout the process. Parts that required restoration were carefully laid out and documented before being tagged and stored, or delivered to specialists.



After the small parts were removed from the Ford's exterior, the hood, stainless-steel radiator shell—an accessory in 1931—and radiator were removed, allowing easier access to the engine. Several bolt-on parts were taken off the four-cylinder.





Here, the cab has already been separated from the frame and is resting on 2 x 4 studs. Although it would appear as though the cab could be lifted straight off, a few cables need to be disconnected, and then it must be maneuvered around the steering column.



Once the cab's bench seat and basic instrument panel had been removed, the shell was pulled off the chassis and placed on a home-made dolly, at which point the cowl/gas tank was removed. More disassembly was to follow.



1931 was the last year Ford used a gravity-fed fuel system, hence the combination fuel tank/cowl design. This is the underside of the unit, which, upon inspection, was seen to be devoid of corrosion. The tank within required professional cleaning.



Initially, Kevin was undecided as to how far to take the Ford's restoration, which was why the chassis was soda-blasted with the entire driveline secured to the frame. Soon after, the frame was stripped clean and media blasted to bare metal.



Overall, metal damage was exceptionally minimal, but there were a couple concerns to address. These are stress cracks found on the front crossmember where the front semi-elliptic leaf spring is mounted from below. They were rectified via welding.



After opting to restore the pickup to concours standards, large parts—including the differential assembly, front axle, steering column, and support brackets—were sent out for media blasting. Smaller parts were cleaned in the home shop during downtime.





Local Model A Club members recommended that the frame should be checked for straightness and against factory tolerances, which is underway here. Any twisting would have to be corrected before work could continue, but the frame was found to be true.



While the frame was being checked, focus shifted back to the cab. After removing the factory visor, a standard feature, it was discovered that a section of the wood framing—still employed to support the fabric top—had suffered the wrath of dry rot.



The remaining wooden roof structure appeared to be sound; however, after consulting knowledgeable Model A enthusiasts, it was recommended that all the wood within the cab be replaced with new pieces. Fortunately, dry rot had not affected the steel supports.



A rotisserie was not available while the pickup was being disassembled, so the underside of the cab—small and lightweight compared to that of other vehicles—was inspected by simply tipping it onto its back. The floor and mounting points were devoid of damage.



Unlike Ford's 1931 passenger-car line, the pickups, and other commercial vehicles, utilized two-piece splash aprons and all-steel running boards, which are in the process of being separated from each other and the fenders in this image.



Friend and fellow club member John Cook began the task of examining the 201-cu.in. four-cylinder after it was secured to an engine stand. The three-speed manual transmission has already been removed; the clutch and pressure plate are next.





After its removal from the block, the cylinder head was inspected for cracks; several were found within the L-head. Minor corrosion seen within the water passages could be eliminated, but the fractures forced the search for a replacement.



Further engine disassembly continued with the removal of the oil pan, exposing the crankshaft and associated babbitt bearings. Although the prior rebuild was decades old, only 2,000 miles were traveled prior to its decades-long slumber, so wear was minimal.



As with any project, there were many opportunities to manage the restoration of smaller subassemblies. Such was the case with the multi-leaf springs. Each leaf was cleaned, inspected, and re-arched, and with the aid of several clamps, bolted together.



When Paul altered the pickup 60 years ago, he saved the parts, including the original solid front axle. It was powder coated in gloss black with the rest of the front-end parts, save for the front spring assembly, which was painted by conventional means.

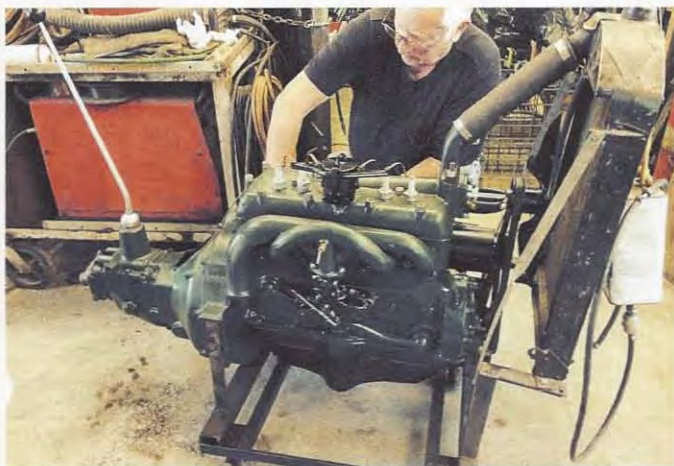


Model A's were fitted with four-wheel mechanical brakes when new, but this one had received a hydraulic system retrofitted after 1957. During the restoration, an upgraded hydraulic brake system was installed; this was the only noteworthy deviation from stock.



After media blasting, repairing the front crossmember, and checking frame geometry, the steel structure was finished in gloss black via powder coating, which tends to offer more durability and shorter cure times. It's also a more cost-effective method.





A major step in the Ford's restoration is about to be accomplished here with the test of the fully rebuilt engine and transmission. The former of the two now wears a high-compression L-head; its only modification. The latter required new bearings and seals.



To help facilitate the first stages of chassis reassembly, the front axle and basic suspension were installed as a subassembly. So, too, were the rear suspension and differential. Before proceeding further, the Ford's 103.5-inch-wheelbase dimension was verified.



Tests of the engine and transmission were successful, permitting their installation to the chassis. Additionally, the steering box and column were installed, along with a new exhaust system. The steel wheels were a temporary means of providing mobility.



As the chassis received its restoration work, the body was tended to by an associate. One task was returning the spare tire well to the left-front fender. A reproduction piece was welded into place. After sanding, a skim coat of filler hid the seam.



Media blasting uncovered nary a trace of corrosion throughout the body. The fenders, cab, and pickup box were sealed in epoxy primer, before receiving a skim coat of filler. After sanding, the body was given a final coat of primer and was sanded yet again.



Although the body was now ready for paint—note that new wood has been installed as well—the cab, doors, and fenders were returned to Kevin's home shop for one critical step. Join us next month as we convey the final stages of the Model A's restoration.