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The Fabulous New SUPER STEPSIDE Combines Exotic Lines, Ease of Assembly, Practicality, and Affordability into One Stylish Package.

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## BUILDING THE SUPER STEPSIDE

Don Fuselier's Super Stepside prototype pickup first appeared in the May 2001 issue of Kit Car. As you can see, the lines of the truck are dramatically different, capable of attracting a crowd during a routine fill up. With an aggressive Viper-like front end and a decidedly Corvette-influenced rear, the truck looks intimidating even when parked. But that's only half the story. Underneath the four-piece fiberglass body, there is a full-size four-door, Chevrolet Caprice chassis. Donor cars (Caprice, Bonneville, Olds88 in the years from 1980 to 1990) are readily available and inexpensive. Performance and handling upgrades are easy to accomplish and the long wheelbase gives the completed truck a ride more comfortable than you'd expect from a pickup. But there's more. Pre-installation modifications to the chassis are easy. With the help of a friend, you can prepare the donor car and mount the chassis in a single weekend. It's a simple matter of unbolting the front end and labeling the wires. Unbolt the trunk and rear doors, then cut the rear half of the body with a Sawzall, just behind the front doors. Undo the body mounts and lift off the back half. Save the taillights and the swing down license plate holder for reuse. With the rear half of the body gone, twelve inches are cut from each rear frame rail and a brace welded between them. The gas tank is relocated into the space between the rear axle and the new brace. The modifications are easily accomplished and although they change the looks of the donor ear drastically, because the doors, windshield, and roof are still intact, the car (soon to be a truck!) can still be licensed as an '89 Chevrolet.

With the body removed (you might be able to sell the sheet metal), it is a perfect time to upgrade the Caprice suspension, maybe with a set of air bags or new shock absorbers. It takes about a day to prepare the donor car and another day to mount the four-piece kit to the chassis. As you know, this is warp speed compared to most kits and it comes from the careful engineering built in.

Rocker panels are first, and establish the guidelines for the front end. The tilt forward, one-piece hood is held in place with hinge brackets up front and the original hood latch is relocated-ed just forward of the windshield. Hanger brackets that are supplied in the kit

are bolted to the original bumper mounts and connect to the hinge supports that are laminated into the one-piece front end. Match the curves of the front clip to the lines of the front door by adjusting the hinge brackets. When the cut lines are correct, drill holes in the bracket and add Grade 8 bolts and nylon lock nuts. Mark the location and reinstall the original hood latch.

The rear clip is almost as simple. With a little help from your friends, lift the one-piece fiberglass bed into position with the front portion resting on the sheet metal of the roof. Use 2X4 shims, 10" long, positioned on the frame rails to temporarily support the rear of the clip. Proper alignment is achieved when the lines of the clip match the rear door opening. Special construction hangars supplied with the kit lock the rear of the clip to the frame rails. Epoxy is used to join the front portion of the fiberglass clip to the sheet metal of the roof. Once the rear portion is fitted into place, the rocker panels are trimmed for a precise fit.

Since an elaborate stereo was planned for this kit, the back wall was moved back 5". This provided additional leg room as well as space for the new stereo. In order to seal the rear wall from the elements, a basic pattern was created for the piece of 3/4" plywood. The sheet, mounted just below the back window, is laminated into place and seals the cab. A local glazier came to the shop and cut glass for the rear window.

Final touches include positioning the headlights under the hood. Rather than connecting them inside the front clip they are rigidly mounted on a bar that runs behind the radiator. The lights remain in position when the hood is raised. By using a single Toyota headlamp and housing on each side, we kept the adjustment mechanism and had minimal problems connecting the wiring. The same technique is used for the rear lights. The cut-down Caprice taillight assemblies slip inside the double wall at the rear of truck. 'The light shines through the four Corvette style cut outs and once again the original wiring is simply reconnected. The spring loaded license plate was inset into the Stepside's finished opening. Once it was in place, the gas tank extension tube was trimmed to fit and the cap installed. We added stainless-steel mesh grilles to the air ducts, chose ultra bright LED lenses for the parking lights, and used accessory side marker lights in the rear.

All that remained was preparing the body for paint and redoing the interior. Follow along and see how easily the body is mounted.



The four-piece kit is simplicity itself. Up front there is a tilt forward front clip, the rear is a one piece pickup bed, and a pair of rocker panels join the two. The Chevrolet Caprice donor car used for this project is an '89 but Caprice, Bonneville, and 01ds88 in the years from 1980 to 1990 are readily available and inexpensive.

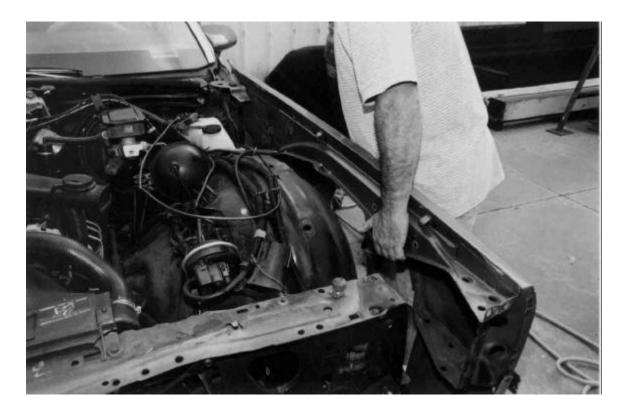




The hood comes off with four bolts and is a two man job. Disconnect the hood light and unplug the headlights and parking lights. To remove the bumper, unbolt the four bolts on each side, the two bolts in the center that hold the bumper to the splash pan, and the bolts on each side that keep the energy-absorbing, shock absorbers in place. Replace the bolts in the brackets once the bumper has been removed. You'll use them later for the tilt-forward hood. To remove the front grille bar, unbolt all the bolts on the top as well as those that hold it to the fenders on the sides.



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Before the fenders are unbolted, all ground wires connected to the inner fenders must be moved to the inner fender panels. Sandpaper a bare spot on the fender panel, then use a self tapping screw to reconnect the wires. Unbolt the fenders by undoing the bolts inside the fender well as well as those visible from inside the engine compartment. There are also two large bolts, top and bottom, that are visible once the front doors are open.



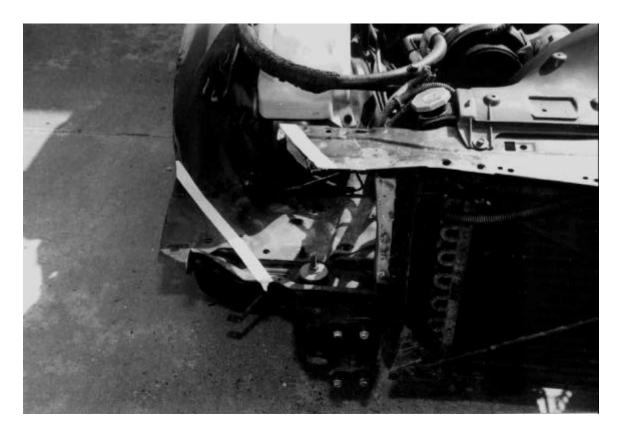
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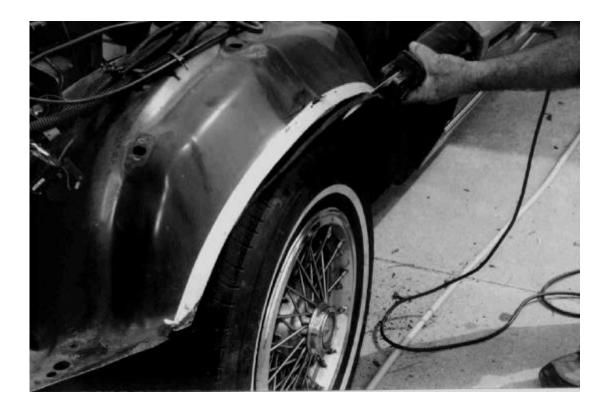
The battery must be relocated to accommodate the tilt forward front end. The tray is removed and will be relocated either on the rear chassis member under the pickup bed or the front fender on the driver's side. The headlight brackets must be trimmed to allow clearance for the tilt-forward hood. An air chisel or Sawzall makes short work of the process but a hacksaw can get the job done.

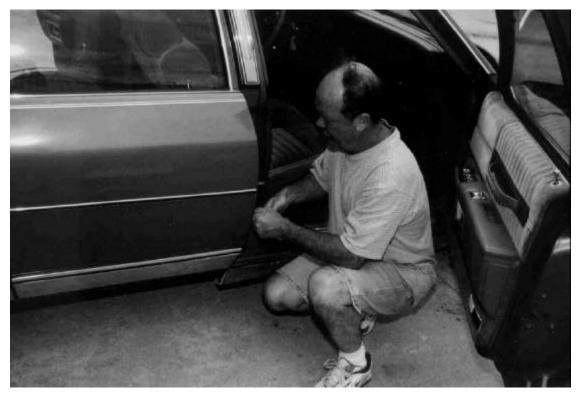


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Mark the upper radiator bracket with a piece of masking tape as shown. Cut the headlight mounting bracket away. Using a similar angle, mark and cut away the lower portion of the inner fender panel. Similar trimming is required on the outside edge of the inner fender panels. Using the holes in the panel as a guide, remove about an inch. Some later trimming may be required when the hood gets its final fitting.





The rear doors are removed after the six bolts that hold them are unscrewed. The wiring that goes through the rubber protective tube is cut, taped off, then stuffed inside the door pillar. A strap is added to the rear door courtesy light switch to keep the switch permanently depressed. (otherwise the dome light will stay on.) After the rear seat belts are removed with a Torx head T-47 socket, remove the rear seats. The rear seat cushion lifts out easily but the seat back must be unbolted. At this point, the main wiring harness will be visible.





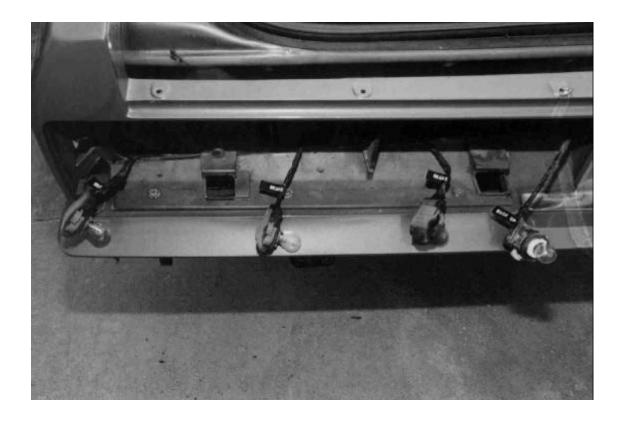
The rear bumper is removed using the same technique as the front bumper. The fold down license plate is detached and saved for later use. It will be reinstalled on the new rear clip.



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The taillight panel has plastic nuts in the trunk that have to be removed. After labeling the bulbs, the rear wiring harness that supplies electricity to all the rear lights is detached from the main harness. The main wiring harness is pulled back through the rear seat opening and secured out of the way when the floor is cut. Plastic ties will secure the wiring harness to the driver's side chassis rail once the rails are cut. The Caprice taillights are removed and saved for reuse later.





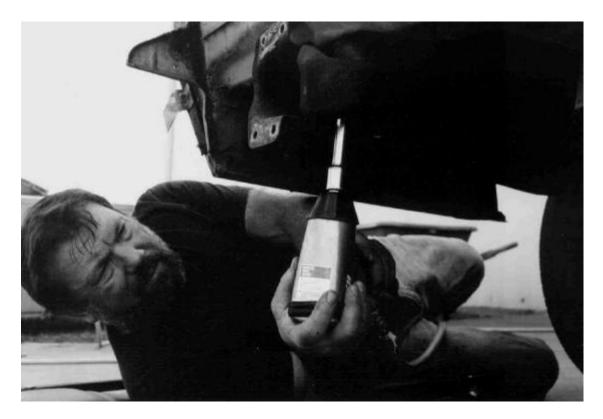
The trunk is unbolted to lighten the load when the rear clip is removed. A strip of masking tape, roughly following the contours of the rear floor pan, is laid in place as a guide for the cut. By following these lines, the body mounting bolts located roughly in the center of the rear door, will remain to ensure that the cab stays rigidly mounted to the chassis.





Before cutting the floor, the electrical connections to the fuel tank must be disconnected. Two fuel lines are cut and a third is unbolted prior to removing the tank. The straps that hold the gas tank can either be unbolted or cut with an air chisel. We will reposition the tank later.





The four body mounting bolts that hold the rear of the body to the chassis have to be removed. Access them from underneath the frame rails. To start the cut, drill a bole in the floorboard, then hold the Sawzall on an angle to miss the chassis rails that are directly below the sheet metal floor. Always wear eye protection.



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Since the Caprice had a new head liner, we decided to save it. Using a box cutter knife~ we cut the head liner about 14" to the rear of the interior light. Next, we added a taped mark on the roof that went from side to side, just behind the front door pillars. We will keep the front doors and the pillars that support the rear doors, cutting the roof just behind the pillars. As Don cut the roof from above, John held the head liner back, being careful to avoid the saw blade.



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Before the rear half of the body can be lifted off the chassis, the exhaust heat shield from the muffler must he cut away. It's tack welded into place and either the Sawzall from above or the air chisel from below can eliminate the connection. Here's what the Caprice chassis looks like, stripped for action.



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Before the rear of the car is disposed of; Don uses the air chisel to free the two, square threaded washers that will later be used for the body mounting bolts. A grinder or a Sawzall could accomplish the same thing.



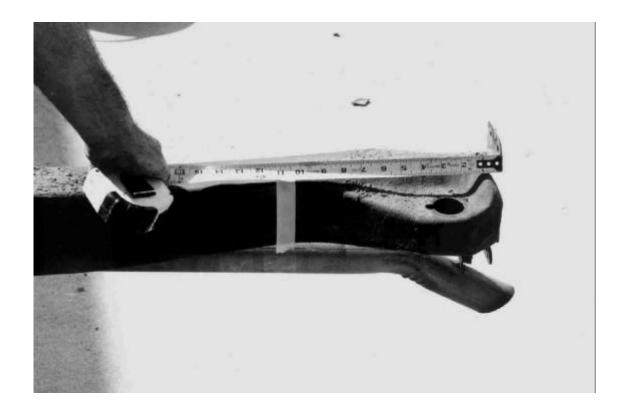
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The HTT- 16 Simpson Strong Tie connecter brackets are actually commercial construction items used in home building. The square threaded washers, previously removed from the underside of the body, fit perfectly inside. Two Simpson connecters are bolted to the rear of the chassis, in the original holes and using the original body mounting bolts. The bed will later be fiberglassed to the connecter brackets.



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In order for the shorter pickup body to fit the Caprice chassis, the rear frame rails are cut with a Sawzall. Approximately 11" are removed from each side



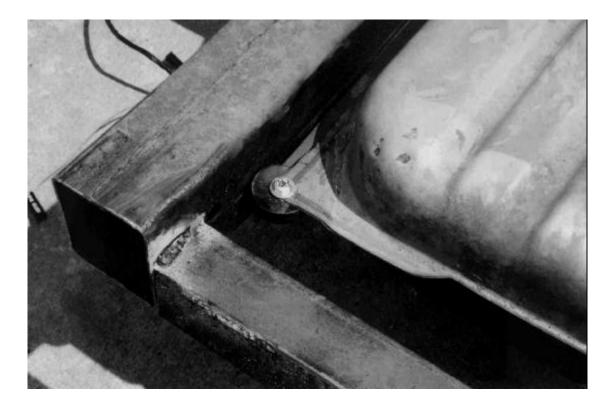
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A section of 2" rectangular steel tubing, about 4" long, is cut to fit the distance between the frame rails Weld it into place making sure that it is aligned with the lower portion of the frame rails to allow clearance for the gas tank filler to pass over the top. Later we will add triangular gussets to further reinforce the frame. The gas tank is repositioned between the frame rails and rests on a  $1.5" \times 1.5"$  angle iron shelf.

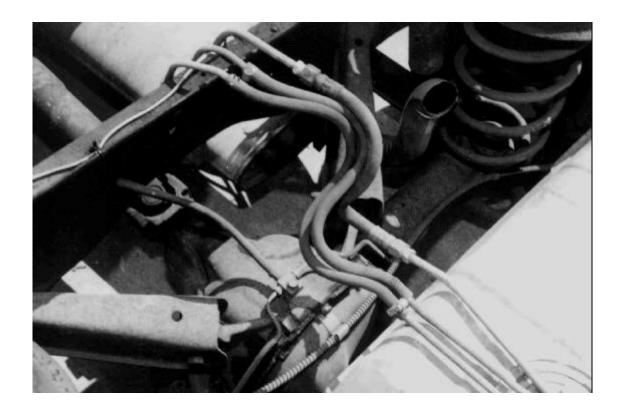


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Small spacers that were used to shim the front fenders are now reused to shim the angle iron for a tight fit against the gas tank. This dimension is fairly critical because if the angle iron does not stick out far enough, h won't support the tank. If it sticks out too far, it will hit against the gas tank. Small round 2" rubber spacers were added to keep the metal gas tank from riding against the metal angle iron. Four bolts hold the gas tank in place. The goose neck on the tank is trimmed and will be refitted later.





Once the gas tank is in place, all three hoses are reconnected. The main wiring harness is securely attached to the driver's side chassis rails with wire ties to keep it safe.



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Before the rear clip is lifted into place, a second roof cut is made, trimming the edges around the door pillar on a 45 degree angle. The edges are ground smooth to ensure the fiberglass clip will slide easily into place.





After removing the Caprice's chrome trim from the drip molding, Don uses a hammer to flatten the rain gutter against the roof. Once it is flat, it will be filled with Bondo and molded into place. Here's an advanced look at what the roof will look like when it is blended to the fiberglass clip.



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Here's a before and after shot to motivate you! Don and John lift the new fiberglass rear clip into place. To establish the correct support for the bed, 2X4 wood spacer blocks, about 10" high, are positioned temporarily on the frame rails. The height of these blocks is slightly variable and the exact size is determined by how well the front edge of the rear clip matches the rear edge of the door.



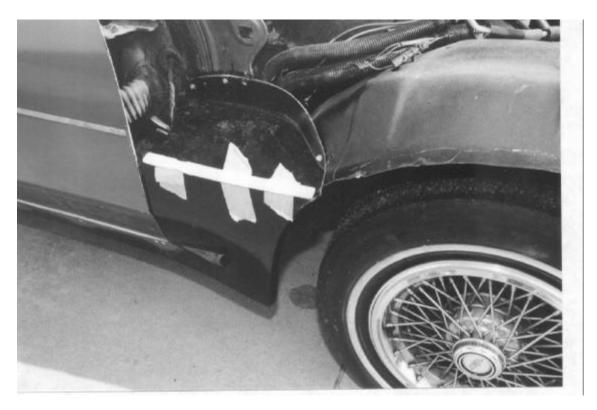
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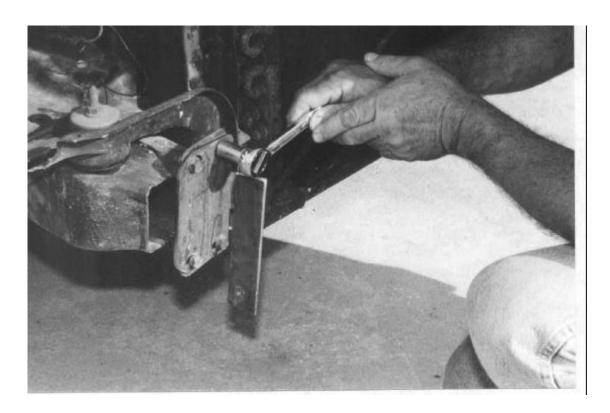
Sheet metal screws temporarily hold the fiberglass rear clip to the metal roof while the wood spacers support the rest. If you see a small gap at the bottom of the door, cut a half inch off the wood spacer block. The rear end is too high. If the gap is at the top of the door, the clip is too low and you'll need a slightly taller block. Once the gap is correct, the connecters are bolted to the chassis from below, through the original rubber insulator, and into the square threaded washer, locking the connector to the chassis. The connectors are then attached to the side of the bed with Bondo and later permanently fiber glassed to the bed.



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The fiberglass rocker panels are installed temporarily with self-tapping, sheet metal screws since final fitting may require slight repositioning. The paint stick taped to the rocker establishes the proper clearance. Once the rocker panels mate perfectly with the door edges (and later the tilt front end), the screws will be removed and they will be permanently epoxied in place. Mounting the tilt-forward front end begins with the kit-supplied steel brackets that are bolted to the original front bumper mounts using the original bolts.





The tilt front end comes with steel mounting supports built-in. The clip is lifted in place and supported temporarily with a short length of 2X4 laid across the radiator. The rear of the clip is aligned with the front edge of the door and the top edge of the rocker panel. If there's a gap at the bottom of the doors, the 2X4 support needs to be trimmed. If the gap is at the top add shims until the clip matches the door edge evenly.





After ensuring the clip is centered side to side, line up the metal supports glassed into the front clip with the steel bumper brackets, clamp, and mark. Drill the holes and add bolts to act as hinge pins. The hood will now tilt. Add a pair of cables to limit its travel when open. The proto type used a pair of Baer Claw latches on each side to hold the hood in place but in this version, the stock hood release mechanism was adapted to latch the new front end.





Remember that fiberglass is as easy to grind down as it is to build up. It's easy to shape and not at all like metal. There are several trim-able edges intentionally designed into the kit. The area on the rear clip that mates to the rear edge of the door must be carefully shaped for a perfect fit. The rear portion of the front clip is also adjusted to fit the front edge of the doors. Some use a paint stick wrapped in 200 grit paper to get accurate cut lines.

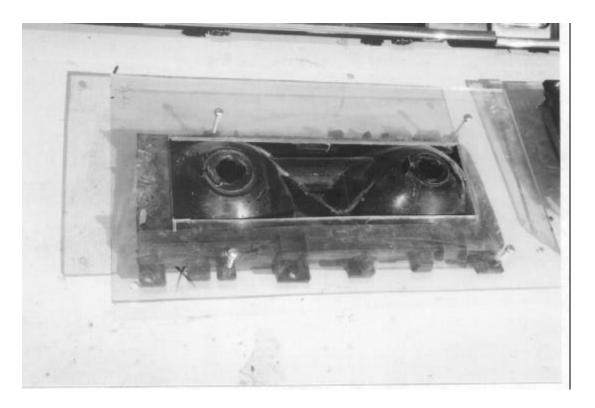




The headlights originally came from a junkyard Toyota. They were originally a four-headlight set up, now cut in half using just the high/low beam units. The headlight tabs on the Toyota buckets bolt to either side of the radiator support bracket. Since the headlights will he behind tinted plastic shields, high intensity driving lights in the grille will augment the head lights.



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The new taillights are 2/3 of the original Caprice taillights (the inner lenses, closest to the center were removed). With a piece of plexiglass added to facilitate mounting, the assemblies are screwed into place inside the double wall of the tailgate. The red lights shine through Corvette-style cutouts in the fiberglass and the original wiring harness is reconnected. We will add backup lights and a license plate light later.





The fold down Caprice licence plate holder is reused. Simply screw it into place in the recessed opening on the rear clip. The stock factory goose neck on the gas filler is trimmed to fit and the original gas cap reinstalled.





The new interior wall has to be glassed in (We used plywood cut to fit.) to close off the rear. This kit has a design change that moved the rear wall of the kit back about 5" compared to the prototype for additional leg room and space for a competition stereo. There is also a storage box built in under the pickup bed floor.





These are the final shots, showing the kit in primer on a set of 15" Centerline wheels. We accomplished the basic body mounting procedures in two six hour days. Starting on Saturday, the front and rear clips were temporarily in place by 2 PM Sunday afternoon. While there was plenty more to do, the basics were in place. The weight savings over the stock Caprice (3820 pounds) was a substantial 700 pounds. The reduction made the stock 305 V-8perform like a big honkin' 350!



## **NOTES**