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# CANADIAN HOT RODS

Volume 11, Issue 2, 2016

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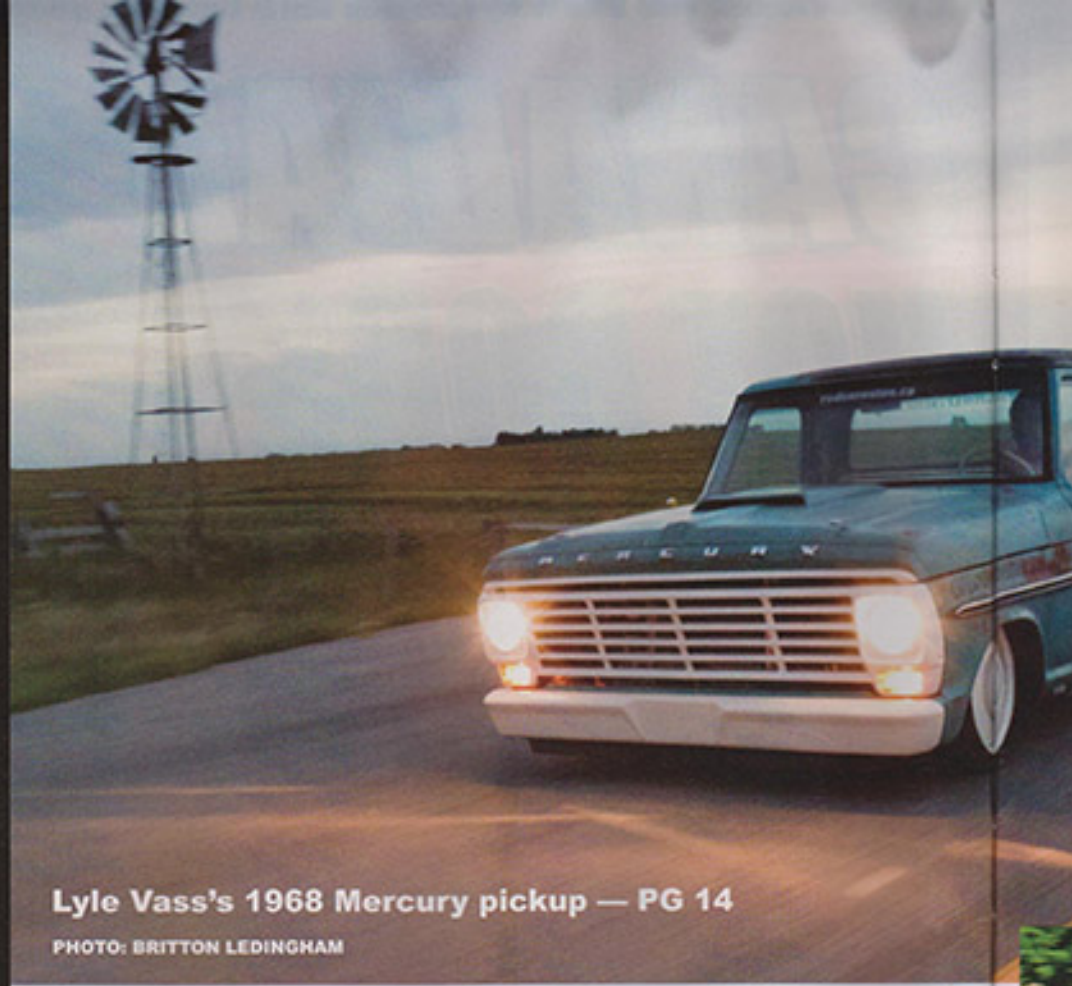
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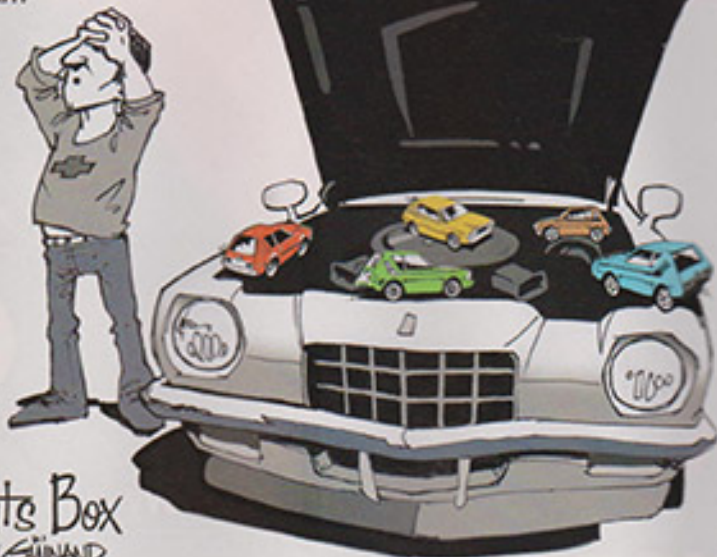
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Lyle Vass's 1968 Mercury pickup — PG 14

PHOTO: BRITTON LEDINGHAM

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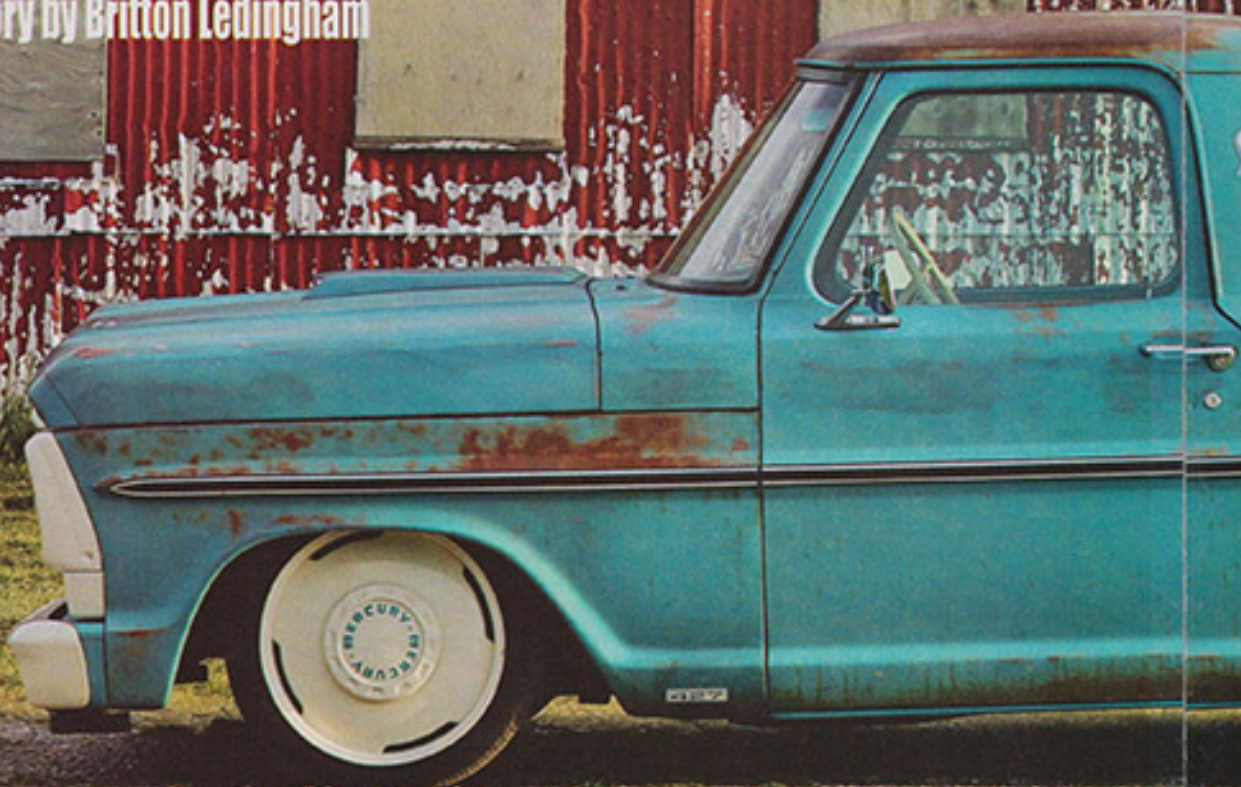
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CHR Volume 11, Issue 2, 2016

# MUSCLE

The muscle car era was in full swing by the time this 1968 Mercury pickup rolled off the assembly line.

Photos & Story by Britton Ledingham



Vass builds hot rods professionally out of his Rods n' Restos shop located in Strathmore, AB. Modifying sheetmetal is in his blood and his admiration for Ford and Mercury pickups started early in life. The two interests were bound to collide at some point.

When Vass was 14 years old he purchased a 1962 Ford Unibody pickup. He still owns it and hopes to get it back on the road one day but he's been sidetracked by his admiration for crew cab Mercury pickups. "The Mercury truck thing has been a disease of mine," said Vass, while sitting in his office, walls adorned in old magazine ads of 1960s era Mercury and Ford trucks. Vass owns three crew cabs. When he bought this '68 Mercury 3/4 ton pickup

sight unseen out of an Oyen, AB farm yard it was meant to be a parts truck for one of the rarer of the three crew cabs; a 1-of-9 1968 Mercury crew cab. He paid \$800 in January 2012 and the Merc had been parked in the farmer's field beside a combine since the late 1970s. Seems the hood blew off one day and the farmer more-or-less said "to hell with it" and parked it.

After going over the 3/4 ton Merc Vass realized it was pretty solid — too nice to be a donor truck — and began to think he could do a quick-turnaround build.

"I thought we'd drive it as a rat rod," said Vass.

The plan soon expanded to shortening the box and frame 20 inches, and swapping out the defunct drivetrain

# ET TRUCK

the assembly line. It was designed to be a work truck. Lyle Vass thought that was shortsighted.

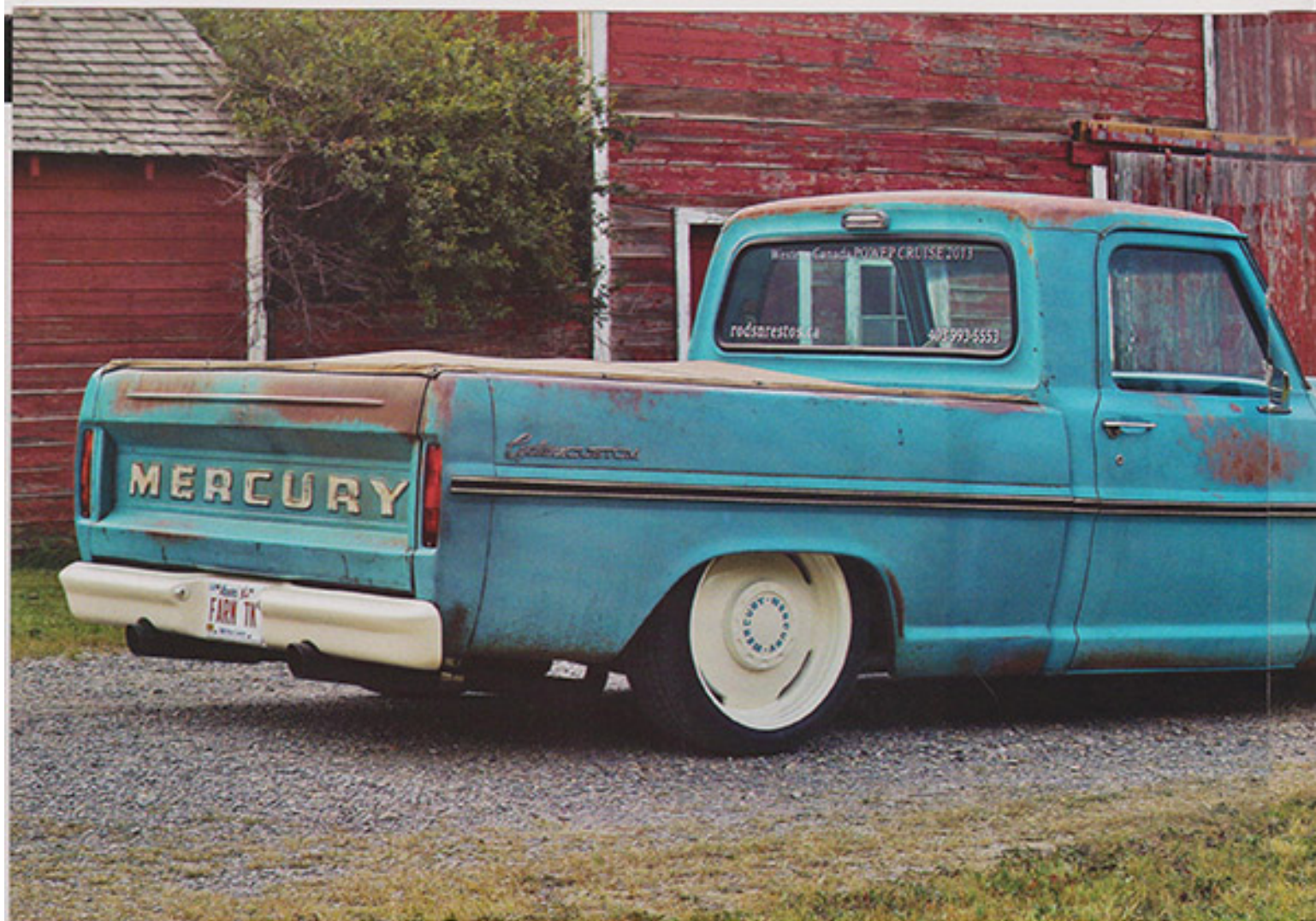


for a rebuilt 390 ci V8 out of a 1969 Ford crew cab and a C6 transmission. "I'm kind of embarrassed to tell you, it's like 185 horse at the rear wheels," said Vass. "The guys were teasing me that their lawn tractor had more horsepower. It was built to be a driver. If I want to do smoke shows, I'll take my 1971 Mustang convertible." (The 351 Cleveland-powered Mustang was featured in CHR's Volume 4/Issue 3).

In keeping with the driver theme, the stock Twin-I beam front suspension was ditched and a 2009 Crown Victoria police interceptor model donated its front clip. This is a sweet, all aluminum unit with A-arm/coil spring suspension unit with 12.5" disc brakes, extra beefy sway bar

and rack and pinion steering. To give the pickup a bit more of a nose down rake, 3.5" was Z'd from the front frame to mount the crossmember a little higher. The original rearend was also swapped out in favour of an 8.8 rearend donated by a low-mile 1995 Crown Vic which, with 3.08 gear ratio gives a better cruising ratio than the original 3/4 ton differential.

Vass did keep the original 3/4 ton leaf springs in the rear, but Z'd the frame 3.5" and boxed it for rigidity, noting it now handles like a slot car with no body roll, which is somewhat surprising. "That little truck looks light, but it's heavy," said Vass, noting the hoist creaks while lifting the Merc.



The wheels, 20x19 out back, 18x8 up front, the Merc rolls are certainly unique. They started with Coker OEM style wheels that were originally 4.5 inches wide but Vass wanted them wider so he cut the centres out and sent them to a machinist who used hoops from generic winter wheels and welded them together to both create the desired width and backspace. The Mercury hubcaps are originals Vass purchased one at a time after placing an ad on Kijiji. "They all came out of Saskatchewan," he says.

The rat rod agenda was set aside when Vass and his team took care of the rusted front fenders and cab corners. A good percentage of the pickup's original Swiss Aqua paint remains. Vass says he only repainted 50-75% of the truck, but it's hard to tell where, with the new patina matching the old. Wimbledon white makes for a great contrast on bumpers and wheels.

He painted a base coat and played around with getting the wear to look the part of a sun-beaten, gravel-driven pickup. "We did the tailgate three times to get the look like that," said Vass.

One patina-paint trick was using acetone to curdle the paint, instead of wet sanding.

"It gives it a more natural look," he said.

Nothing was missed when making the truck look like an authentic 1960s shortbed muscle truck. Vass sand-blasted behind the rear wheels with pebbles to get the

gravel beaten look.

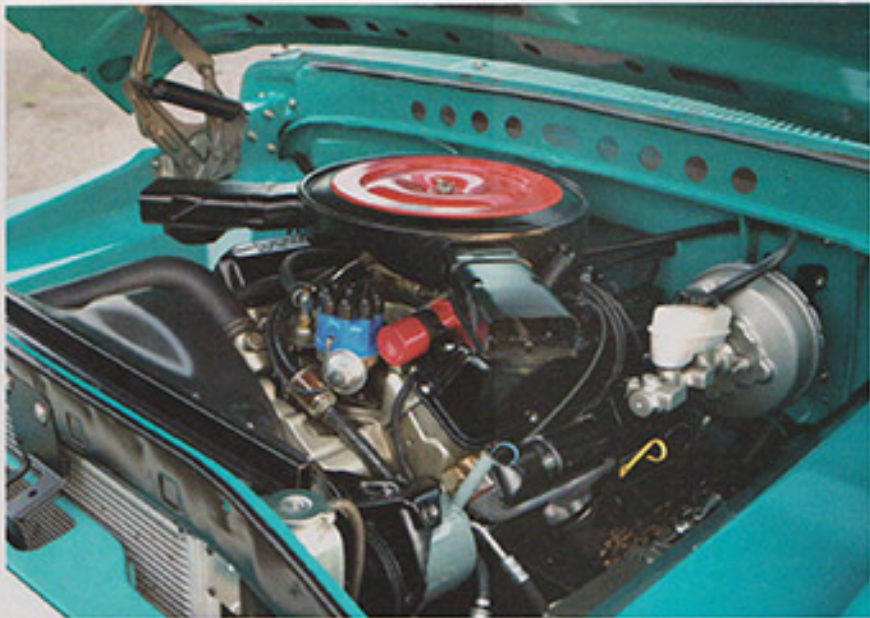
With the truck parked for the winter following the 2012 build, he sprayed the body with table salt daily to rust the exposed metal after the acetone treatment. Vass had to change fasteners to stainless components afterwards – a lesson learned. The underside and interior have been painted and completed to show quality.

He machined 427 badges, gave them the same gravel-blast treatment for ageing as the paint, and placed them on the front fenders.

The 427 stamped valve covers under the hood give the unknowing viewer the same misconception of the truck sporting the legendary big-block.

"We did that as a little poke of fun at Chevy guys," said Vass. "If you go to a car show, you always see all the Camaros and Chevelles have 396 SS badges and 90 per cent of the time they don't have that in them. It's interesting to see if anyone can tell the difference between a real 427 or not. I had a guy in Regina last year... swearing at me and yelling at me. That's not a real 427, I know what one looks like."

Vass said the time and money poured into the truck to finish it in 2012 has paid off with business since, noting 2014 was Rods n' Restos' busiest year, as he worked 10-12 hour days, six to seven days a week from October through June.



## PARTS LIST

Owner: Lyle & Christina Vass, Strathmore, AB  
 Year/Make/Model: 1968 Mercury pickup  
 Builders: Owner and Rods 'n Restos crew

### BODY & PAINT

Truck started as 1/4 ton long box. Box shortened 16" in front and 4" in rear (20" total). Inside of box, floor and crossmembers completely custom built. Tailgate: handle shaved and handle relocated to inside. Inside re-skinned (smooth). Rear bumper shaved and tucked close to body and notched for exhaust (from '80s Bronco). Frame shortened and boxed with dimple die holes. Z'd 3.5" in front and notched 9" above rear axle. Has '71 Mustang rear gas tank and in cab tank. Cab corners replaced. Cab mounts replaced. Large mirrors removed and holes filled. Vent windows removed and one piece door glass installed. Dash shaved. Switches moved under dash, drop down panel built for stereo and a/c switches. Cover made for a/c housing, made from heater box for 46 Ford, widened and rare mercury radio delete welded in. Dash pad removed and holes welded in. Rear bottoms replaced on front fenders and dents removed. Hood has functional hood scoop. Hood scoop from Cougar Eliminator cut down to fit hood. Front bumper narrowed and tucked closer to body. Inner fenders custom built for tire clearance. Fire wall shaved. Holes punched in cowl under hood for heat extraction.

All work performed by Rods n Restos, Lyle Vass, Robert Lee and Kevin Williams. The truck was painted factory colors. Body Swiss Aqua. Bumpers, grille, and wheels whitelinton white. Interior door panels, steering wheel, column and gauges painted parchment. Exterior of truck is 50-75% repainted and aged to look original/patina. Original 1968 Mercury Cyclone emblems placed on box in front of Mercury Custom emblems.

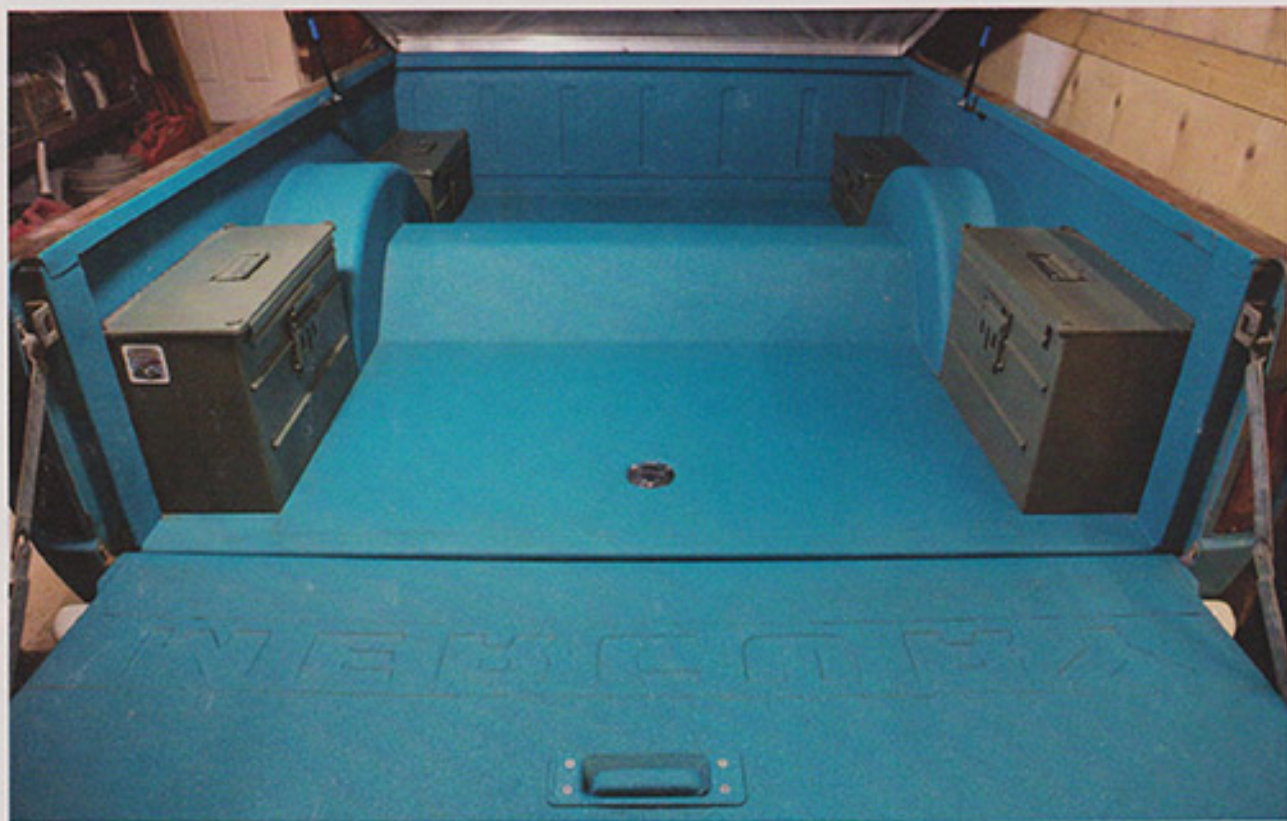
### CHASSIS & SUSPENSION

Frame shortened to short box dimensions (20" shorter). Boxed and dimple die. Z'd 3.5 inches in front and notched 9" above rear axle. Painted 2000 Chevy charcoal. 8.8 rear with factory disc brakes from 1995 Crown Vic. 3.08 gears, limited slip. Painted same charcoal. Front suspension removed from 2000 Crown Vic police car. Front cross member is cast aluminum and bolts in with 4 bolts. Factory disc brakes and coil overs. Rear suspension uses the 1/4 ton springs with a flipped axle and 2.5" lowering blocks. Also uses Crown Vic front and rear sway bar. Crown Vic master cylinder. Original brake booster. 12" rotors on front and 11.25" rear rotors. Front two piston caliper, rear single piston caliper. Front tires 215/45/18 Pirelli pZero. Rear tires 275/25/20 Goodyear run flats. Hub caps are original Mercury hub caps. Rims were custom built using Coler Tire OEM style wheels 4.5 inches wide. We then cut the centers out and used hoops from generic winter wheels and welded them together. Front rims are 15x8 and rear are 20x8.

### ENGINE & TRANSMISSION

Rebuilt stock 390 engine removed from 1970 Ford crew cab (parts truck). Stock Ford O6 transmission. Engine was already rebuilt when purchased. Engine was sanded smooth and painted satin nickel. Polished Edelbrock Performer RPM Intake painted satin nickel. Stock heads Comp Cams lift .2720 duration .050 installed by Muscle Motors. Stock crank, pistons and rods. 750 Holley, vac secondaries, built by Ryan Brown. He also rebuilt the stock distributor with a Pertronix electronic ignition upgrade and Flame Thrower coil. Rare factory rear sump oil pan. Were only available on 4x4s Polished Edelbrock high flow water pump. I built all the engine accessory brackets, modified them to tuck accessories close to engine and put a/c down low out of view. Sanden a/c pump, stock 40 amp alternator. Stock power steering pump. Dakota digital cruise control. Stock air cleaner with second snorkel added. Rare 427 Mercury valve covers. Buick nail head plug covers added to hide burnt paint on exhaust ports. Stock exhaust manifolds ceramic coated satin silver by TopGun coatings. Couldn't find headers that would fit because of Z'd frame and Crown Vic cross member. 2.5" dual mandral bent steel exhaust. Painted with flat black barbecue paint. With 3" black powder coated exhaust tips. Built by Rods 'n Restos. Stock replacement plug wires.





The Cyclone script is from a 1968 Mercury Cyclone. Tonneau cover is tent canvas.



#### INTERIOR

Seat from 93 Ford XLT truck. Reupholstered in stock 1968 pattern by Steve Ottens at Old Iron Customs and Upholstery. Seat and 1/4" MDF head liner stitched in parchment (original color) vinyl. Seal replacement carpet from ACC. Steve made firewall carpet from floor mats. Door panels, dash etc all steel painted factory Swiss Aqua. Factory steel door panels painted parchment with 1980s Mustang power window and lock switches. Doors have one piece glass (no vent) and Electric Life power windows and Mustang power locks. Column is stock column shift unit, originally black now painted parchment. Factory steering wheel with Falcon horn ring. Mercury emblem in center found at swap meet. Dash shaved. All switches, radio and heater controls removed. Switches mounted under dash. Stereo and a/c controls mounted in drop down panel under dash. Gauge panel painted parchment and a/c vents installed. Gauges painted and rescreened by Acorn Graphics in Calgary. Kenwood deck, amp, 6" 3way speakers and one 10" sub under seat.

With over 11,000 miles since the build was completed, the truck has lived up to being a driver.

It has travelled from the Strathmore to the West Coast and Spokane, WA a couple times. Vass kept comfortable with air conditioning, cruise and a stereo tucked up under the dash on a hideaway hinge.

"It's like driving a new car," said Vass who adds nobody parks beside the Merc and he has owned vehicles with perfect paint that got less respect.

The quality of builds by the small-town Saskatchewan boy, raised by a father with an auto body shop north of Regina, are seen in the various award plaques on his office walls.

Vass didn't immediately follow in his dad's footsteps as he earned an engineering degree and worked in the oil field for about a decade.

When his son was born in December, 2007 he quit work-

ing in the oil patch that week, desiring to work close to his growing family.

He debuted his new business at the 2008 Calgary World of Wheels with his bare-metal '71 Mustang garnering lots of attention.

Today client builds are sprinkled among his own projects at his shop south of Strathmore.

Some of his own project trucks include a 1949 Mercury crew cab and a 1953 Mercury regular cab pickup. The '53 Merc has already had extensive metal work and is sitting straight and bare on the lift above his 1968 Mercury pickup.

"It's looking like it will be the next one," said Vass, of the '53 Mercury adding it will likely sit on a tube frame with an LS1 borrowed from a low mileage 2000 C5 Corvette sitting sans body in his lower shop.

We can't wait.

