

A FRENCH C

David French's '59 El Camino

By ERIC GEISERT | Photography by THE AUTHOR

Big tailfins helped define a generation of cars, and it's certainly a styling cue that is about as American as it gets. While Ford was content with mini fins and rocket-inspired taillights in the late '50s, and Chrysler dipped its toe into the big-fin pool with their '57 line of New Yorkers, 300-C, and the like, it was General Motors with their '57-'60 line of Chevrolets and '55-'59 Cadillacs that set the high mark of just how big a car's tailfin could actually be.

After Chevy's growing vertical tailfin reached its ultimate height in 1957, it began to get laid over in 1958, then extremely exaggerated in 1959 by basically having a nearly horizontal tailfin stretch from one side of the car to the other. That particular design also spawned another iconic shape used for just one year (1959): the cat's eye taillight. Chevrolet offered 17 different levels of passenger vehicles to the public in 1959, including a first-year offering called the El Camino.

A type of automotive hybrid, the El Camino blurred the line between a true passenger car and a truck, being that it was based on a Brookwood passenger car chassis, but it definitely had a utilitarian bed in which most anything could be hauled, limited only by a small 1,100-pound payload. The first generation El Caminos were produced for only two years (1959 and 1960) and would be reborn two more times in various shapes and sizes over the next three decades: 1964-1967 and 1968-1987.

But those big tailfins of the first-year El Caminos are what people remember most about them, including David French. David says he's a fan of big fins in general, but thinks the ones on a '59 El Camino really make a statement, which is what he was looking to do when he started looking for a hot rod project on the Internet. Finding a likely subject in his home state of Wisconsin, the pickup was in running condition with a 283 V-8 backed to a two-speed automatic trans. The doors and fenders had been replaced along with much of the interior, but the bare bones looked good, so he bought it.



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After picking up the vehicle, David contacted Randy and Peaches Clark at Hot Rods & Custom Stuff (HR&CS) in Escondido, California, to discuss a possible build. David had only two design requests: that the car be a light blue and the motor would have to be a 327 with early Rochester fuel injection. The Clarks liked David's concept and suggested they take the El Camino in a specific direction: what would the '59 GM Design Studio team build if they could see into the future a few years?

Everyone agreed the concept was the right way to go. The basic El Camino design would be left alone, but items such as the brakes,

suspension, and drivetrain would take full benefit of the last years of manufacturing improvements. Soon work began on the chassis, prepping and painting it to a show-level quality.

The factory rearend (3.73:1) with Posi was left in place, and disc brakes from CPP were installed front and rear. CPP also supplied the coil springs, shocks, 2-inch-drop spindles, and 9-inch brake booster. A CPP 500 Series power steering upgrade went in, along with a Flaming River tilt column and a custom-built (by HR&CS) stainless steel gas tank. A set of 30-series Corvette rallye wheels (4- and 5-inch) from Wheel Vintiques were wrapped in BFGoodrich Diamond Back Classics (245/60-15 and 255/60-15) that come with a thin 1.75-inch whitewall.

The original El Caminos came with two engine displacement options in 1959, with several variations of both a 283- or 348-inch available. Though the small-block 327 didn't make its debut in Chevys and Corvettes until 1962, it was the motor used in this project and made to look like it was pulled right out of a fuel-injected '63-'65 Corvette.

HDS Machine in Escondido did the required machining on the V-8, which was assembled at HR&CS with a standard 4-inch GM crank and 3.25-inch





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pistons but at relatively high 11:1 compression ratio. A Rochester mechanical fuel-injection manifold was located and installed, as was a Stewart water pump, a copper 'n' brass four-row radiator, a chrome air cleaner (with blue K&N filter), and a PerTronix-based ignition system.

Other engine components include seven-fin Corvette valve covers, ram's horn headers, a custom 2.125-inch stainless exhaust (by HR&CS), MagnaFlow mufflers, and a Vintage Air FrontRunner belt system. The 327 connects to a 700-R4 transmission that was assembled by Bowtie Overdrives in Hesperia, California, and a driveshaft from PTO Sales.

While the chassis and drivetrain were coming together, every section of the body was undergoing a complete restoration. From the straightening of every panel and stainless steel trim piece to making all of the door and hood gaps perfect, the crew at HR&CS went over the body with a fine-tooth comb. They also fab'd an aluminum tonneau cover that operates electrically and reveals a leather 'n' carpet bed underneath. And though the bumpers are factory items, they were re-chromed at Azteca Polishing and then custom fit close to the body. When the body was ready, HR&CS' Andy Meeh painted the Elky with PPG products, mixing up a custom blue pearl that just glows in the sunlight.



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Complementing the blue pearl exterior is a white leather interior with blue and chrome accents. Armando's Custom Upholstery in San Jacinto, California, stitched up the bench seat with its electric headrests and added blue seatbelts, too. Lizard Skin insulation is also used under the blue pile carpet. Five Classic Instruments gauges are found forward of the 15-inch American Retro '60-type steering wheel (stock is a massive 18 inches in diameter), and a Focal-based stereo system and speakers (including a 10-inch subwoofer) are hidden throughout the cab. If you open the dash's ashtray you'll find one of the vents for the Vintage Air A/C system, and a third brake light was cleverly fabricated and subtly hidden in the Chevy crest above the rear license plate. Around the car you'll also

find multiple uses of the Corvette's familiar crossed flag emblems, though HR&CS tweaked the logo to their own design. They weren't used on the original El Camino but they are an appropriate addition to this ride.

The first time David saw the finished vehicle was at Hot Rods & Custom Stuff's shop, and he says he was overwhelmed. The El Camino sits perfect and even indoor the paint is luminous. Once he got behind the wheel, the fuel-injected 327 gave the truck enough power, and David says the suspension upgrades made the ride comfortable and easy to and handle. And it's a safe bet if the GM design team from 1959 were able to see what HR&CS was able to create out of a '59 El Camino, we bet they wouldn't change a thing!

