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Road Ragin' '56 - 1956 Ford F-100 Panel

Bernie's Daily Driver Runs Wild

By John Gilbert

It's not an unusual story, really; in fact, it's usually how anyone who has ever customized an old [truck](#) ends up. A guy sets out to build himself a clean daily driver, and the next thing he knows he has gone way off the deep end.

For Bernie Gates of Laguna Hills, California, the story of his 1956 [Ford](#) F-100 panel began in the summer of '64 when the 12-year-old learned to do bodywork at his father's Whittier, California, body shop. By the time Bernie turned 16 he and his dad were tearing into a '56 Ford pickup Bernie had bought and cherrying it out. Equipped from the factory with a 223-inch 6-cylinder engine and an overdrive with 4.11:1 rearend gears, the '56 was the perfect high school cruiser.

Although the pretty little '56 pickup was nice, a '56 Ford panel truck would have better suited his dating habits. But once out of high school and working full time at his dad's Whittier body shop, Bernie sold off his '56 pickup and bought a '47 Harley-Davidson Knucklehead. Bernie cut the Knuckle's neck 5/8 inch, hung an 18-over springer frontend, and changed the tank-mount shifter to a jockey-shift with a suicide clutch. Naturally, being a bodyman and painter, Bernie molded the chopped Knuckle's frame and laid on a righteous custom paint job.

The chopped hog was good for making the dating scene, but Bernie still had a '56 panel lodged in the back of his mind. Even in the early '70s, locating a decent '56 Ford panel wasn't all that easy to do. One day while Bernie was at work a customer told him about a '56 Ford pickup he had blown all apart, and after a few years of taking up room in his garage he decided he didn't want to put it back together. When Bernie showed up at the guy's house, he discovered the '56 was a big-window. That's all it took. Bernie loaded it onto a trailer and didn't stop working until the pickup was a dead-sharp lowered mild custom sporting a flawless pure black paint job.

During the course of time Bernie narrowed his dating habits down to one girl and married her. Marriage had a settling effect on Bernie. His aspirations soon turned to following in his father's footsteps. In '84 Bernie and his wife Laurie opened up Prestige [Auto](#) Collision in Mission Viejo, California. The extreme eye for detail Bernie learned from his father, Larry Gates, paid off big-time. Within two weeks of opening Bernie and Laurie had landed the local Mercedes-Benz dealer's collision business. Since then Prestige Auto Collision has grown from 10,000 square feet to 35,000 square feet and is one of the few independent body shops in the United States certified by Mercedes-Benz.

Locating a '56 Ford panel to customize has remained on Bernie's wish list for the past 30 years. "My wife got tired of hearing me whining about finding a '56 panel, so she said, 'Go find one.'" After three years of searching Bernie found a bone-stock '56 Ford panel in Fullerton, California, and drove it home. Well, at least for the first couple of miles, that is. "It was drivable, but only for about two miles. It was the scariest two miles I had ever driven." Bernie ended up calling a wrecker to tow the '56 home.

The next day Bernie and his crew tore the '56 down to the bare frame and discovered that, except for a little rust in the usual spots on the A-pillars, below the fenders, and in the bottom of the doors, it was in great shape. "The first order of business was to haul the body with all of its parts down to Orange County Sandblasting. My wife bought me a rotisserie for my birthday that year, so we included it with the body.

While it was at the sandblaster, I called Walton Fabrication in Upland, California, about building a custom frame. He invited me to take a look at his manufacturing process. I was impressed, and ordered my frame."

Setting the panel's stance was next in line. Bernie had Randy Ward at Rod Benders in Lake Forrest, California, set the Walton chassis up for air-ride suspension. After C-notching the frame, Randy used Air Ride Technologies' Shockwaves to raise and lower the '56's rear half over a Currie 9-inch with 3.73:1 differential gears. For ride adjustability up front Randy modified the A-arms to suspend another pair of Shockwaves. For front brakes the panel currently relies on 11-inch GM discs. Bernie told us in the near future he's going to opt for a disc brake setup that does a better job of stopping the '56 panel. For extracting extended range from the '56's ZZ430 [Chevy](#) motor, Bernie looked to Precision Fabrication in San Clemente, California, for a stainless steel fuel tank that holds a whopping 38 gallons. Thanks to a beefed Bow Tie Overdrive 700-R4 automatic tranny and a fully chromed TPI unit from Street & Performance, the panel returns impressive fuel mileage.

Naturally, the bodywork on Bernie's '56 is absolutely incredible. Prestige Auto Collision's master metal technician Herman Ritchie "spent an unbelievable amount of hours fabricating and fitting everything on the truck. Both my painters, William 'Willie' Wiperman and Alberto Rodriquez, spent hours upon hours prepping and painting the panel." When it came time to paint the '56 Ford F-100 panel, Bernie relied on Color Masters Paint Supply in Laguna Hills, California, for materials. "Mickey Gill helped getting the color right. He spent two days spraying test panels until we were happy with the color--thanks, Mickey!

"I want to say a special thanks to Rob Green. Without Rob's help, my '56 panel would never have been finished or be the very special truck that it is now. Rob turned into the project manager, always researching parts and methods. Rob constantly reminded me that my wife said to build my truck exactly how I really wanted it." Bernie told us that all his old [trucks](#) and street rods in the past have been clean daily drivers, but nothing like how his '56 panel turned out. He spent well in excess of \$100,000 building the truck, and not once did his wife mention how much it cost to build his panel. Bernie told us, "You really gotta love a wife who tells you to build it how you really want it."





A ball-milled billet six-gauge dash cluster from No Limit Engineering lives in front of an ididit tilt-steering column topped with a Billet Specialties leather-wrapped wheel.



Here's an actual photo (not a staged dramatization) of Bernie's Street & Performance fuel-injected ZZ430 small-block complete with Fast Burn heads. Flamed support braces are unique on this truck. The custom radiator is from Mattson.



Jeff Oberman, owner of Styles Pinstriping, pulled super clean "Tommy The Greek" style stripes from the dashboard to the firewall. Billet vents blast ice-cold Vintage Air A/C from San Antonio, Texas.



Thanks to Rob Green, everything is in its place. Alberto Rodriquez and Willie Wipperman tag-teamed painting the '56 from top to bottom. The transmission is a beefed 700-R4 from Bow Tie Overdrive of Hesperia, California.



Louie at Mission Viejo Auto Interiors knocked the panel's leather upholstery out in record time. The front buckets are from a '00 [Chevy](#) pickup, and the overstuffed fold-down rear seat was snagged from a '00 Yukon.



The furthest frontal point of the '56's custom-made Walton Fabrication chassis is a Mustang II power steering rack. Randy Ward adapted the chassis to run Air Ride Technologies' Shockwaves.



7-Tucked 18-inch Boyd Coddington billet wheels shod with Bridgestone tires keep the frame from dragging.



8-A drop-down 17-inch flat screen is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the in-truck entertainment system installed by Pro-Installs. Components include an Alpine head unit, JL 10-inch subs, and 2,000-watts' worth of JL amps with mids and highs from [Boston Acoustics](#).

