

The Mystery Prototype Li'l Red Express Truck

The truck was conceived by Tom Hoover, Engineer, and Chrysler's longtime race engine guru. The current, emissions and fuel economy were taking all the fun out of Detroit. He found that the emission regulations were a little more lenient for trucks than they were for cars, and vehicles over 6000# were exempt from most the emission regulations. So, he decided to develop the "Last American Hot Rod", a pickup truck!!

The prototype started life in December 1976, as a red 1977 Dodge Custom 100, Utiline bed truck. This truck was sent to Ted Spehar's Specialized Vehicles, Chrysler's race shop at the time, to be built into the prototype Li'l Red. Tom Hoover gave the project responsibility to Dave Koffel, who was running the drag racing program at that time. Since Ted Spehar's shop was involved with a lot of other projects, Dave Koffel sent the engine buildup project to Gary Ostrich in Nevada, Iowa, who was known for building drag and short track engines in his shop.

Starting with the E-58, 360 police engine, they added W-2-cylinder heads, a '68, 340 automatic purple camshaft, a reworked Edelbrock LD-340 aluminum intake and a big Carter Thermoquad carburetor and a viscous fan drive. The engine was painted "Hemi" orange.

Upon returning the engine to Specialized Vehicles shop, more changes were made. They switched to a Holley aluminum intake topped by a Holley 4160 series carburetor with an electric choke. Dual exhausts were added with a balance tube and big "Hemi" mufflers and vertical exhaust pipes, running behind the cab. The pipes were located at the front of the sidestep, almost touching the back of the cab and the smaller, stainless shields had small vertical slots and round openings, unlike the final production

shields, that had larger horizontal slots only. At first, they had put "Riker" flapper rain guards on the pipes, but the continuous "clanking" noise, was unbearable and they then switched to the chrome turn back tips. Cold air came in through screened openings, where the turn signals would have normally been located. The turn signals were moved to the lower valance, like the '76 model Dodge trucks. An A-727 TorqueFlite transmission (LoadFlite for trucks), with 440 four-barrel (A-134) internals and an A-904 torque converter.

The rear axle was a Chrysler 9 ¼", 3.55, Sure-Grip. For appearance purposes, chrome valve covers, differential cover and air cleaner top were added, along with chrome Western 8" slotted wheels and LR60X15 Good Year, Raised White Outline Letter, GT Radial tires on all 4 wheels.

The prototype truck had the Custom 100 badges on the front fenders, with white rectangular badges, with red "W-2" on them, mounted just below the Custom 100 badges.

There were no door decals, or fender pinstriping and no wood on the bed. The bed floor was varnished oak, with chrome skid strips. The tailgate had the Dodge logo decal, in the center of the gate. There was no rear bumper, and the truck had the round taillights and round backup lights mounted on the bed, like the Warlock.

The mirrors were the 3-legged Jr. West Coast mirrors, rather than the smaller production mirrors. There was no fuel filler neck on the side of the bed. Rather, the truck had a "Charger" style flip-up style cap, mounted on the top of the rear fender, towards the front of the fender. The rear side marker lights were mounted vertically on the rearmost stake pocket housing, instead of being mounted on a bracket, on the side of the bed.

Dodge used the truck for advertising and testing by different magazines. It was featured in the October 1977 of "Street Crusin'" magazine and road tested in the November of 1977 of "Hot Rod" magazine. In the June 1978 issue of "Hot Rod" magazine, they did a road test on a production truck, which was the first time the truck carried the "Adventurer 150" logos.

It was also featured in the November 1977 issue of "Car & Driver" magazine. In this issue, they compared 12 vehicles, from the Corvette to the Porsche 924 and the Li'l Red prototype was the fastest one of the test vehicles, from 0 to 100 MPH, running it in 19.9 seconds. By the time "Car & Driver" tested the truck, the mirrors were the smaller style, like the production truck and the air intakes were switched from the turn signal openings, to behind the grille, and the truck now had clear turn signal lenses. The turn signal lenses in the lower valance, were now painted black. The truck went through many changes, during its conception and eventually it got the door and fender decals, larger stack shields, wood sideboards and the "Adventurer 150" fender emblems.

It has been reported that there were 2 prototype trucks built, however, after personally talking with Dave Koffel, the last surviving engineer involved with this truck, he told me that there was only one prototype truck ever built.

Another interesting fact, the prototype truck was not assigned a VIN plate. The factory normally didn't sell the prototypes, so they just eliminated any VIN number completely.

Now for the best part!!

Recently I was contacted by a friend, asking me questions about a Li'l Red he was looking at. He was questioning its validity, because it had different cylinder heads, intake manifold and Holley carb, and no factory VIN plate. All it had was a VIN plate

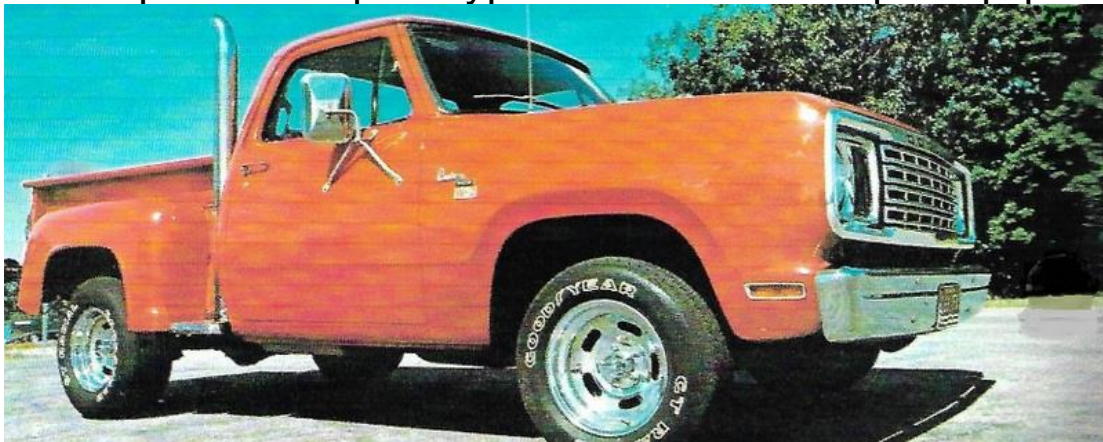
made by that States DMV, to enable the truck to be titled.

At first, I could not believe what I was hearing, “COULD THIS BE THE LOST PROTOTYPE??” After talking to him numerous times, I learned that the owner, a retired Dodge dealer, had told him it was the truck originally used in the Car & Driver article. Upon further investigation, it turns out that the Dodge Truck Division gave him the truck as a gift, for selling the most Dodge trucks, of any Dodge dealer in his State.

Unfortunately, the owner is an elderly man, now in his late 80’s or early 90’s and is in the latter stages of Alzheimer’s disease. After letting my friend look at the truck earlier, he now refuses to let anybody even look at the truck, let alone take pictures. The only hope we have now is his son, who told my friend that he would eventually get him in to take pictures and inspect the truck.

The truck has been stored in a barn for over 30+ years and as you can imagine, not in the best of condition. However, if it turns out to be the actual prototype, it will be virtually priceless!! Hopefully soon, I will be able to verify that it is the prototype. I have been researching this truck for many years and believed it was crushed years ago, because the factory usually doesn’t let the prototypes get into public hands. Keeping my fingers crossed!

Below are pics of the prototype truck and its unique equipment.



One of only 2 color pictures of the prototype, with the W-2 emblems



Truck at Specialized Vehicles in 1977, Front $\frac{3}{4}$ view

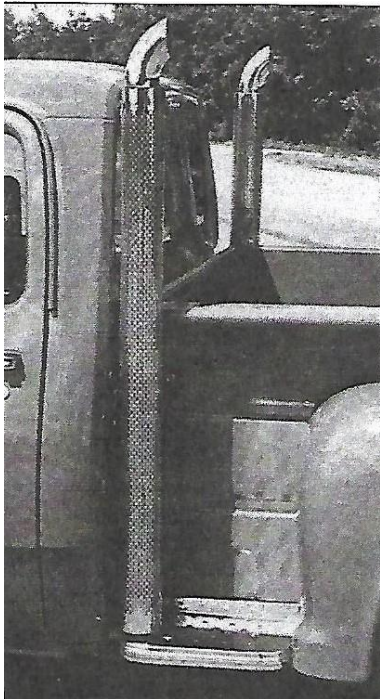


Truck at Specialized Vehicles in 1977, Rear $\frac{3}{4}$ view

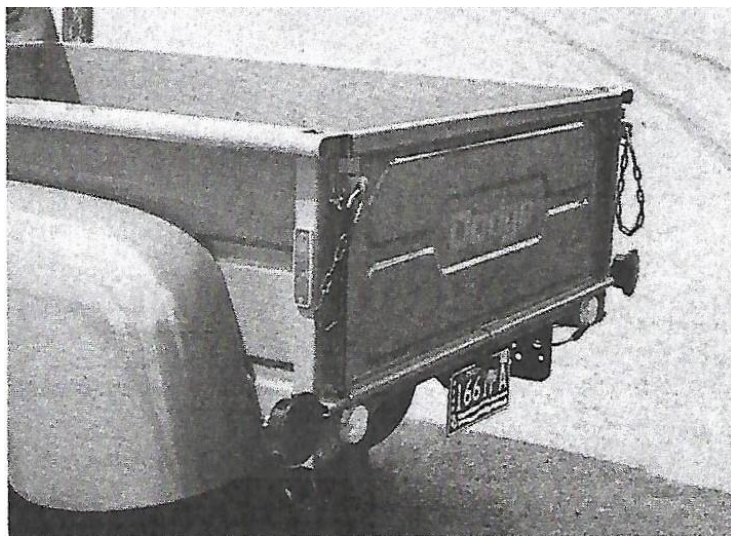
Flip-up "Charger" style fuel cap on top of rear fender



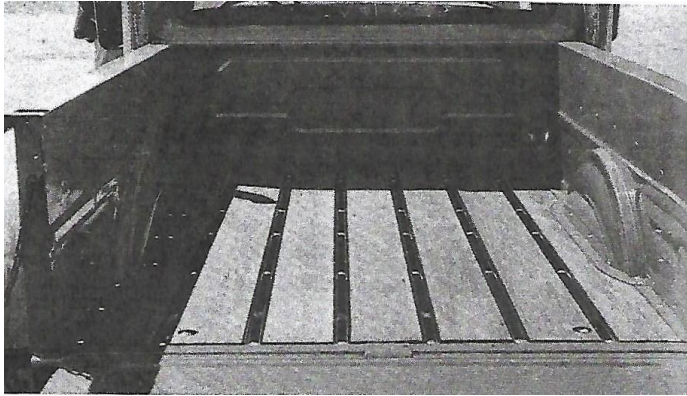
"Hot Rod" magazine test pictures, November 1977



Exhaust Stacks
mounted forward on steps
No bedside wood



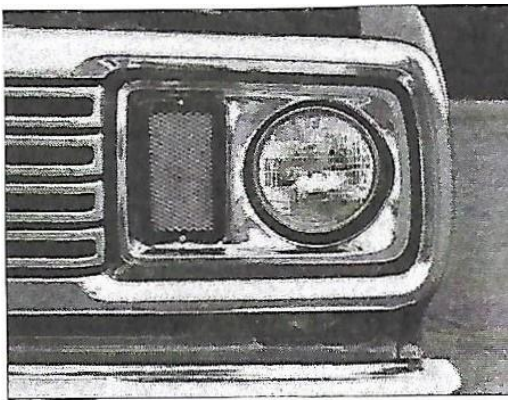
Rear end with round lights
side marker light, vertical on bed
Tailgate with Dodge Logo



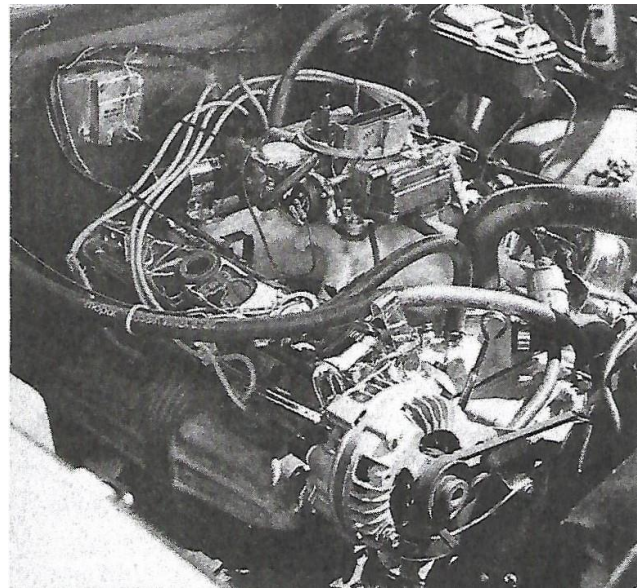
Oak Floor with chrome skid strips



15'X 8" Wheel
Good Year LR60X15 Tire



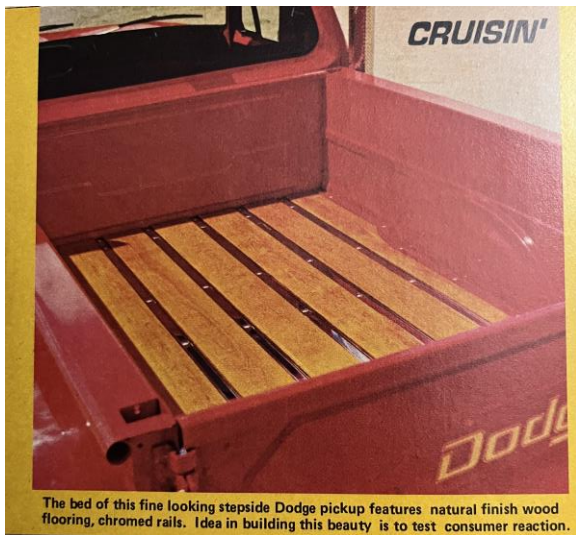
Screened Air Intake
Lower Valve Turn Signal
carb



Engine with W-2 heads
Holley intake and Holley 4160



Color pics from "Street Crusin'" magazine, October 1977 (notice "Charger style" fuel filler cap on top of rear fender & side marker lights on rear bed stake pocket, small stainless shields on exhaust.)



John C. Roberts (Lil Red Dad)
Co-Founder, President & Senior Judge, NALRETO

