

**By Steve Kelly** ■ Each time we go about loading an engine block, gearbox or other bulky item into our two-door's trunk, we're prompted to go "truck hunting." Never fails, though; we come home discouraged. "Cherry" used trucks are scarce, and they all carry big prices. New ones come cheaper than sedans, but we still haven't adjusted to the rougher ride and high seat position of either new or used pickups.

We've got no excuses left, however, since testing Chevy's El Camino. As comfy and as powerful as a comparable Chevelle, it'll take half-ton loads easily and has enough style and class to be parked in front of the Beverly Hilton without embarrassment.

Ride quality was what we favored most in our SS 396 test Camino. Air-booster Delco "Pleasure-lift" shocks are standard and may be pumped up as the load is increased to maintain level attitude. Without a payload, the shocks are dropped to 10-15 psi, and it's back to "boulevard ride" time. A single air valve is secreted between tailgate and bed, accessible by dropping the gate. Maximum pressure should be kept at 90 psi or less, and full pressure with a light load will have the

car reacting as if it were "springless." Applying air to the dual-feed valve brings the tail up quickly, and care has to be used not to raise the back too high or headlights will be aimed too low for night driving. These combination shocks and load-assists were very impressive points of the test, so we mention them first. There's much more, though.

All-around finishing is good. The bed interior is smooth, and protruding fender wells are integrated with the full inner panel. This should prevent rust from developing, a common occurrence with earlier separate wheelhouse panels. Loading is easy, although anything heavy is sure to scratch the glossy paint. A complaint we have here is that large gap between tailgate and bed when the gate's down. Lugging one of those aforementioned engine blocks in by your lonesome, it's almost definite it will try to drop in the gap, against all arm muscle efforts. We wonder if GM has ever taken note of a Chrysler Town & Country wagon. The answer to the "gap" is there. Big Chrysler Corporation wagons have a spring-hinged flap which follows the tailgate down as it's lowered, completely covering the void. Simple and inexpen-

sive, it's still their exclusive. We wish it wasn't, for everyone's sake.

Based on a slide-in load, the maximum width that can be accommodated is 54½ inches. The bed length is nearly 80 inches measured in the center, and the tailgate adds another 22 inches when down. Width narrows to 45 inches between wheelhouses but is 63½ inches wide at the extreme rear. Stylists sure had a ball with this car. The sloping side panels drop from an inside bed height of 16½ inches at the front down to 13½ at the rear. A peculiar thing here is that the side drop doesn't go in a straight line, as we found from talking with canopy and bed cover manufacturers.

Passenger compartment finishes come in two styles. Standard interiors are more than just standard. The bench seat is vinyl-covered and foam-padded. Floor covering is the rubber-mat variety, but still nice. Ordering the custom interior brings pleated vinyl-covered seating, wood-grain trim, carpeting, deluxe steering wheel, electric clock and a glove compartment light. Another bonus is inclusion of concealed windshield wipers going out of sight under the extended hood lip. They charge extra for this on the base Camino. The custom interior option also offers the chance to extra-cost-order bucket seats and center console. We'd be tempted to pass this opportunity in favor

of three-passenger seating, but our test car was equipped in this manner and we did like the inherent comfort.

Interior comfort gets only compliments from us. Quietness prevails even with windows down, and several hundred miles of continuous driving causes about the same degree of rump aches as spending the evening facing a TV set.

Making crank-operated wind wings a standard in Chevelle series cars shows some "good thinking" by Chevy's design works. This group of cars (of which the El Camino is a part) suffered through four years of infancy without this benefit. Inside door releases tucked under the padded armrests are quick to grip, as well as safe from inadvertent releasing. The ventilation system planner isn't going to make lots of friends with air-conditioning marketers. Very few cars—or trucks—have fresh-air vents that usher in as

much outside air as does the Camino setup. The small quarters of the cab may magnify the input, but in any case, we were happy. We'd probably order air on our own Camino just the same. You know: status, prestige, resale value, \$370 more, etc.

Upon our first sight of the '68 El Camino last year, the wide roof pillars had us wondering how seriously they'd impair vision. While vision is lessened somewhat from '67, it's not serious. The pillar isn't way to the rear, so the panel (12 inches wide at door corners, 20 inches at side window line) is in direct side view, not at a rear corner, cutting off view with a greater severity. The wider posts—both front and rear have been scaled up from '67—provide greater protection against top-crushing than last year's design, which is sure to please safety experts.

Performance is a heavily emphasized and checked-out part of our tests, so we'll leave the "domestic" area for a bit here and get down to horsepower. Although we anticipated getting a four-speed-equipped Camino, the Turbo Hydra-Matic test car used in the test worked out just as well—possibly better. And there was no "stock" linkage problem, either.

First attempts at Irwindale Raceway's Top Speed Record (for blue El Caminos on Wednesdays) netted us a 95.33 mph speed and elapsed time of 14.91 seconds. Not bad. Trying again—in the same purely stock condition as we drove it to the track—we didn't do as well. Third

pass—with clenched teeth and determined mind—we clocked a 14.82 e.t. and 95.94 mph speed. Removing the chrome-plated air filter top, but leaving the bottom plate, our best e.t. was a 14.70 and a 96.98 mph speed. We then removed power steering and smog-pump drive belts and loosened the alternator belt slightly. First pass in "belts-off" form saw a 14.57 e.t., and we cut this down on the next quarter-mile foray to a 14.49 e.t. Top speed in this final stage was 98.79 mph. Impressed? You bet!

After experimentation, we developed best clockings hand-shifting the Turbo-Hydro at 5500 rpm. Because of the minor delay, actual gear changes happened at 5600-5700 rpm. All times were obtained with a full gas tank, and this particular car tipped the Toledos at 3930 pounds laden.

Initially we had the air shocks pressured at 55 psi, but jumped to 75 psi, which helped a lot. Wheel hop was slightly evident but smoothed out within 20 feet, and will continue to be a problem on big-engine Chevelle/El Camino series until suitable traction bars are installed. Incidentally, we're working on that now and will let you in on the "how to" very soon. The rear G70x14 Goodyears carried 34 pounds, which we found best, and the fronts had 45 for decreased rolling resistance.

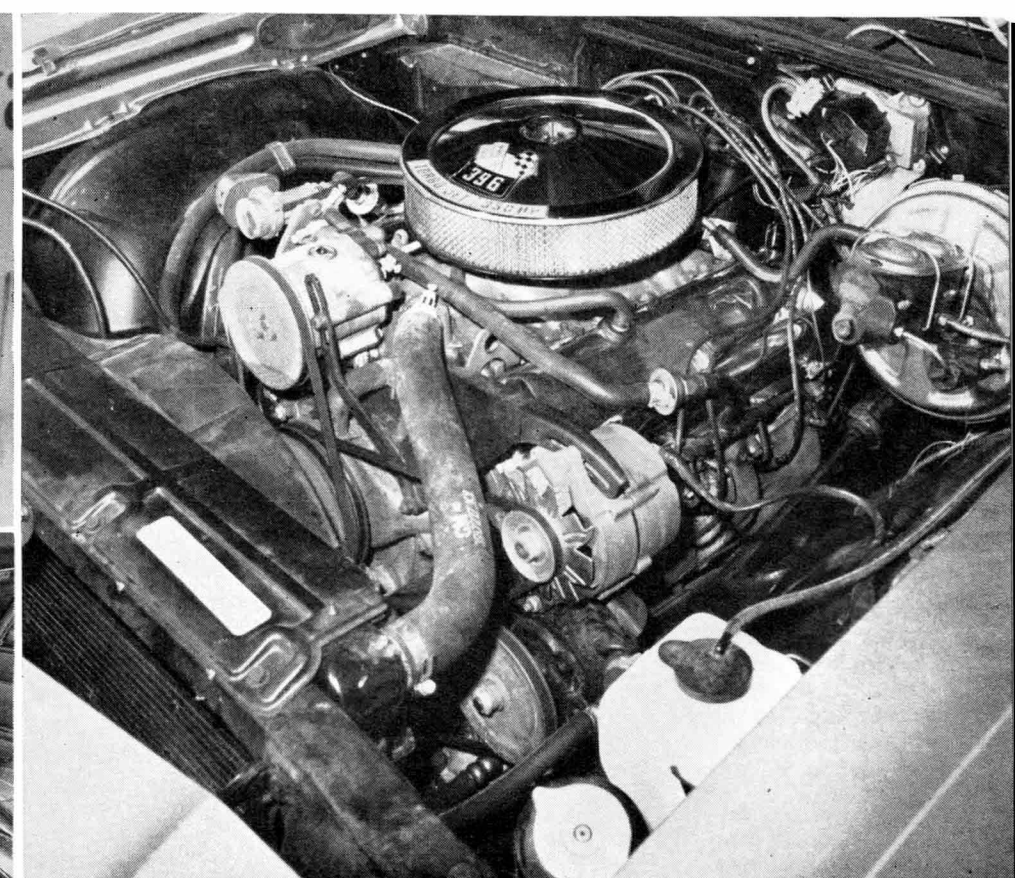
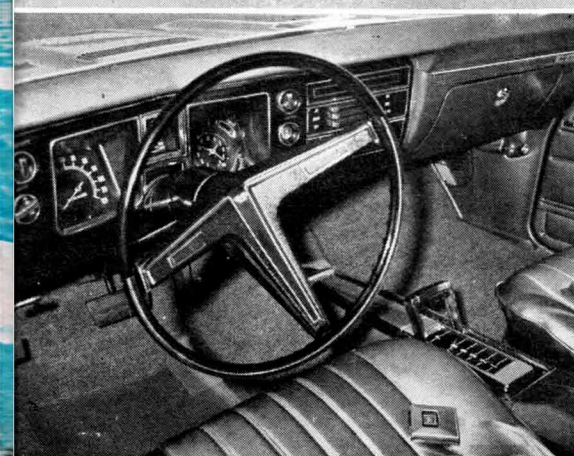
Our sister publication, *Car Craft*, was engaged in experimentation on a four-speed El Camino on this same day, differing only in gearbox from ours, but weighing

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*LEFT — Camino styling is complemented by Las Vegas's plush Caesar's Palace. BELOW — Looks good on a drag strip too. Healthy 396 pulled sub-2-ton truck through Irwindale 1320 with near-100-mph speeds and mid-14-second clockings. BOTTOM — Controls and gauges are recessed below surface of glare-free dash, and still easily located. Tilt-wheel is wise option. Bucket seats and console are tops. RIGHT — Access in and around engine compartment should present no problems for routine service. Power steering fill is remotely located on left fender panel.*

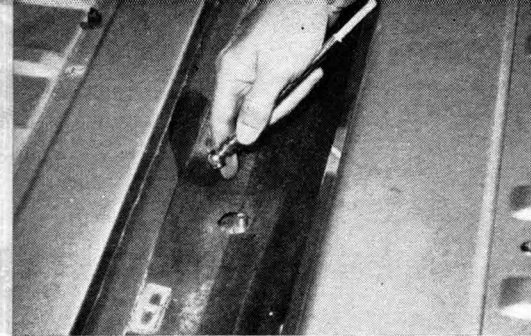
**Potent SS 396 El Camino mixes comfort, utility and performance in near-perfect "Gentleman's hauler"**

## DOUBLE-DUTY PERFORMER

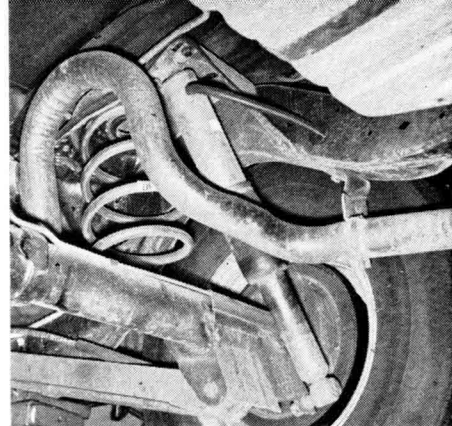


photography: Eric Rickman





*LEFT — Air pressure to rear shocks is controlled at single valve in tailgate "gap." Fold-down plate here would be a big help in loading slide-in items. RIGHT — Fill lines pass through protective frame rails before reaching shocks. Similar units are made to fit most other cars.*



## DOUBLE-DUTY PERFORMER

ing slightly less. Wheel hop plagued driver Terry Cook so badly that we were able to win four out of six "match" races, merely because he wasn't able to come out hard. High-rev starts resulted only in excessive hop, forcing him to shut off. Feathering it out was no good, as the 350-hp V8 didn't grab rpm fast enough to catch our smooth-start lead. Pumping the air shocks to all different pressures didn't bring relief. That's why we figure the Turbo-Hydra was best for us. We like to win now and then.

Two 396's can be had in El Caminos, a 325-hp version and the 350-hp job, as in our test car. Both develop 10.25:1 compression, but torque differs, being 410 lbs.-ft. at 3200 rpm on the smaller, and 415 lbs.-ft. at 3400 on the bigger "rat motor." Maximum hp on the 325 is read at 4800 rpm, and the 350 goes to 5200 rpm for its figure. A single Quadrajet 4-bbl is used on both but there's a difference in models (indicated by parts number) between the look-alikes. Primary inlet is 1.38-inch and secondary opening is 2.25 inches for all. Nearly everything inside is identical except the hydraulic lifter cams, and that's where the more potent and hotter-cam 350 picks up the extra ponies.

Either 396 can be mated to a H.D. three-speed (2.41 low) manual, four-speed (2.52 low) floor shift manual, Powerglide automatic (ugh!) or three-speed Turbo Hydra-Matic (yeah!), and all are extra-cost items. Automatics can be either column- or floor-controlled, depending on purchase of a floor console. The 350-horse engine has an additional choice of a four-speed close-ratio (2.20 low) gearbox. Why it isn't offered with the 325, we don't know. Maybe Chevy power-team planners know something we don't. Very likely they do. Rear axle line-up goes from 3.07:1 on up to 4.88:1, with many stops along the way. Close-ratio four-speed-equipped 350's may be assembly-line fitted with a 4.56 or 4.88:1 gear if desired, or one of the others.

The 396 powerplants can only be had in SS 396 models which include special markings, hood trim, wide wheels and tires and H.D. suspension. Other engines range from the base 230 cubic inch, 140-hp six-holer to a 250-inch six-cylinder of 155 hp, a 200-hp 307 cubic inch V8 and three 327 V8's with ratings of 250, 275 and 325 horsepower. None of the under-

396-sized engines can be mated to Turbo-Hydra-Matics. Powerglide two-speeds are the only automatics available. Too bad.

Figuring on higher speeds and quicker e.t.'s from our first outing, we dropped the pickup off to have it "tuned by the book." After all, it had 3500 miles showing and had never received thorough maintenance other than oil changing and other routine items. Also, a pair of Casler 8.55x14's were readied and set aside for the next drag-strip outing.

All this proved to no avail. Specs call for 36 degrees maximum centrifugal advance at five grand. The car came to us with more advance — an accident — than specified, being about 39 degrees total. And this, as we found out, was of considerable help. Replacing it back to "stock" didn't improve or even retain our original times. And the fresh set of AC43N plugs couldn't make up the difference. We used Orange County International Raceway for the second test; it has never proved substantially slower than Irwindale, and often faster.

Quickest we ran in the "after" affair was 14.81 e.t. and speed of 95.33 mph in a "belts-and-air-cleaner-off" condition, the same as when we clocked the 14.49 earlier. Mounting the tall 7-inch-wide slicks cut wheel hop tremendously, due to longer and wider footprint and better "cushion." The slicks cut overall gear ratio, but we did improve "street tire" times, dropping to a 14.70-second e.t., but a lower speed of 95.23 mph. Axle ratio in the car was a 3.31:1, good for normal driving but not quite the setup for quarter-miling. Nothing lower than 3.31 is assembly-line offered with a Turbo Hydra-Matic SS 396, but some lower ratios will fit this housing.

Operational expense really enters into SS 396 Camino ownership, especially on the day-to-day end. Best mileage figure obtained was 13.35 mpg, using a corrected speedometer (odometer was 12% fast per 100 miles; speedometer was 3 mph slow across the board). The poorest "average" driving consumption figure was 9.53 miles per gallon. It goes without saying that only premium fuel should be poured into the 20-gallon tank.

In heavy traffic, the 396 runs well within tolerable heat range. The highest it went was 198 degrees (approx.) in a

15-minute-per-city-block situation. We had no cooling problems while drag-strip testing, although it did warm up as we ran. A slow drive back on the return road always brought the temperature needle to mid-point, where it should be.

Full instrumentation was aboard this car, located in excellent position for quick reading. Even the vertical-face tach recessed in the dash between speedometer and clock pods can be "flash" read. It's incremented in 500-rpm spacings, though, which is fine for average use, but a large-face, closer-marked tachometer is advisable for competition efforts.

Other phases of operating expense look good for the El Camino. Full coverage insurance is generally lower because of the pickup classification. They carry lower rates than cars, but don't quote us on liability. That's more a reflection of your own driving than anything. Suggested retail price is 50 bucks higher for the SS 396 Camino than a 396 Chevelle coupe, but the two-door Chevelle is a 112-inch wheelbase car, and the Camino is on the wagon and four-door sedan 116-inch wheelbase. The base Camino is priced at \$2,505, with the little six-cylinder.

Some features worth noting here include a storage compartment accessible from right behind the driving seat and big enough to hold small toolboxes and safety gear, a light in the rear of the optional console to shed light on the behind-the-seat space at night, the longer hood with concealed wipers that decreases firewall and wire "washing" when opened in the rain, a twist release instead of pushbutton for the glove box door and a properly vented fuel tank that doesn't help empty a full tank when parked on a hill, as earlier models were prone to do. A few things we'd research and possibly alter are: spare tire and jack location (though better than an under-the-bed situation, a collapsible spare would be a space-saving option, and the current bumper jack position — with a sharp end sticking over the floor tunnel to damage items behind the seat — could be changed to inside the tailgate with access via a key-locked panel); a permanently mounted or reel-cord light to illuminate the bed area in darkness; a tailgate "flap"

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# DOUBLE-DUTY PERFORMER

as mentioned earlier; an accurate pressure gauge for the shocks; and a right-side fresh-air-vent control easily reached by the driver (a good bet for all cars).

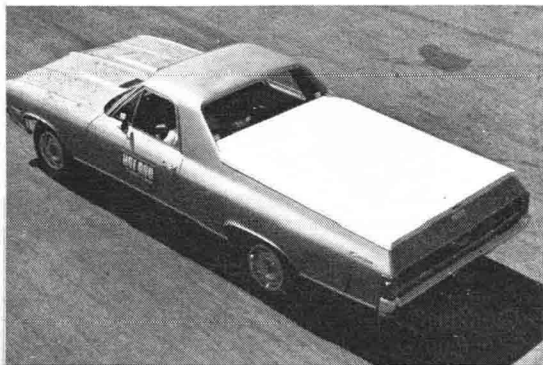
On top of the generous list of factory-installed options is a slug of after-market accessories for Caminos and Rancheros. Our test car came to us fresh from a camping expedition and had a "Protect-O-Top" fiberglass bed cover, the answer for weather and theft protection. There's a lock in center rear, sturdily reinforced. Spring hinges allow easy opening — and balanced "up" position holding. Cotter pins retaining the springs can be pulled, the hinges pushed inward and the entire top removed for hauling big stuff. Aft of the rear window, a panel must be secured

less expensive, the dressier-looking Gaylord top isn't as weather-tight as Protect-O's, nor does it stay open unassisted. While snooping around Gaylord's, we found another desirable Camino add-on: a carpeted package tray cover, spare tire shroud and back panel (bulkhead between interior and bed) cover. All three pieces are packaged together and sell in the \$50 neighborhood. Package tray and rear panel pieces are simply glued to the metal surfaces, and the tire shroud is a slip-on. Dressing up the truck is only part of the deal, as the carpet furthers the already good sound insulation job.

Just prior to relinquishing the Camino, we ran across Lee Stockland of Santa Ana, who's in the business of building some groovy-looking canopy tops for Caminos and Rancheros. Stockland's low-profile roof lines up almost even with the cab roof, enhancing overall looks. It's a two-man job of installation (unless you're the Green Giant) but is held on by four simple "J" bolts hooked into small holes drilled in the inner panels. Takes about 15 minutes altogether. The sticky weather stripping and flush fit are so good that Lee has unknowingly driven for miles with an unsecured top without its budging. Safety glass side windows are standard in the "about \$300" unit, and crank-out windows or solid sides are available.

During our tenure with the El Camino, we developed salesmanship qualities. As with any car appealing to us, we find others equally attracted. Many inquirers came our way asking: "What's it cost?" or "How do ya like it?" and "Does it run as good as it looks?" Often the comments were compliments. Good words came about the high-class interior and general passenger car-like design.

That first question — "What's it cost?" — was hard to answer without qualifying. Not to defend it or play it down, it's just that this car had a 19-item option list and carried a suggested list of \$4,178.25. Far from inexpensive, when equipped like this. Hacking away at the price would be easy, as we told the spouse after she saw the invoice and knew how ready we were to go the El Camino route. The 396 engine might not show up on our order form (but maybe it would), cutting the figure considerably. And we'd be more tempted to add air-conditioning instead of the buckets and console. Sure looked good though in test-car form. Maybe we can set up a secret bank account and then she'll never know the full tab if we do order a Camino. Besides, she's got the '61, and one of these days we'll get the '56 runnin' again, and well... the roadster can wait a little longer. Now that's practical thinking. ■ ■



*Protect-O-Top addition provides weatherproof and lockable bed area. Also goes well with Camino styling*

to the body and weather-sealed to insure tightness. Once fitted, the top almost totally weatherproofs the bed, and even high-pressure spray of a car wash failed to create leaks. Small loads may be carried on it, and it'll support a man's weight for picture shooting, or whatever.

Another "plus" found was a reduction in wind drag from an open bed, assisting gas mileage, stability and top speed. Doesn't hurt performance much, as it weighs only 40 pounds, and it's all on the back end. Better than draggin' with the tailgate down.

Gaylord's Custom Tops in Lynwood, California, has also developed a 'glass covering, but with a "grain" finish to match custom tops, and they even have a custom top covering with additional material for upper rear fenders. Though

## VEHICLE

SS 396 El Camino

## PRICE

Base .....\$2949.00  
As tested .....\$4178.25

## ENGINE

Type .....OHV 90° V8  
Cylinders .....8  
Bore & stroke .....4.09 x 3.76 in.  
Displacement .....396 cu. in.  
Compression ratio .....10.25:1  
Horsepower .....350 @ 5200 rpm  
Torque .....415 lbs.-ft. @ 3400 rpm  
Valves: Intake .....2.065 in. dia.  
Exhaust .....1.720 in. dia.  
Cams: Lift ......4614 intake, .4800 exhaust  
Duration .....300° intake & exhaust  
Overlap .....72°  
Tappets .....Hydraulic  
Carburetion .....Rochester 4-bbl  
Exhaust system .....Dual; 2.50 in. dia. main pipe; 2.25 in. tailpipe

## TRANSMISSION

Type .....Turbo Hydra-Matic, torque converter with planetary gears, 3-speed  
Ratios: 1st .....2.48:1  
2nd .....1.48:1  
3rd .....1.00:1

## DIFFERENTIAL

Type .....Semi-floating, overhung hypoid pinion and ring gear, Positraction limited-slip  
Ring gear diameter .....8.875 in.  
Final drive ratio .....3.31:1

## BRAKES

Type .....Front vented disc/rear drum with power assist  
Dimensions: Front disc .....10.6 in.  
Rear drum .....9.5 in.  
Total swept area .....332.4 sq. in.  
Effective area .....112.4 sq. in.  
Percent brake effectiveness front 58.8%

## SUSPENSION

Front .....Independent with coil spring  
Rear .....Salisbury axle, single-unit housing with control arm location, Coil spring suspended  
Shocks .....Direct-acting tubular type  
Stabilizer .....Front only, link type, .927 in. dia.  
Tires .....G70x14 wide pattern  
Wheel rim width .....6 in.  
Steering: Type .....Semi-reversible, recirculating ball nut with coaxial power assist  
Gear ratio .....17.5:1  
Overall ratio .....20.4:1  
Turning circle .....41.0 ft., curb to curb  
Wheel diameter .....16.5 in.  
Wheel turns lock to lock .....4.0

## PERFORMANCE

Standing start quarter-mile (best) .....14.49 sec., 98.79 mph

## FUEL CONSUMPTION

Best reading .....13.35 mpg  
Poorest .....9.53 mpg  
Average .....12.34 mpg  
Recommended fuel .....Premium

## DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase .....116.0 in.  
Front Track .....59.0 in.  
Rear Track .....59.0 in.  
Overall height .....55.2 in.  
Overall width .....75.7 in.  
Overall length .....207.1 in.  
Test weight .....3930 lb.  
Body/frame construction .....Separate perimeter frame  
Crankcase capacity w/filter .....5 qt.  
Cooling system .....24 qt.  
Fuel tank .....20 gal.  
NOTE: Data listed is for car tested, and reflects optional equipment in some cases.