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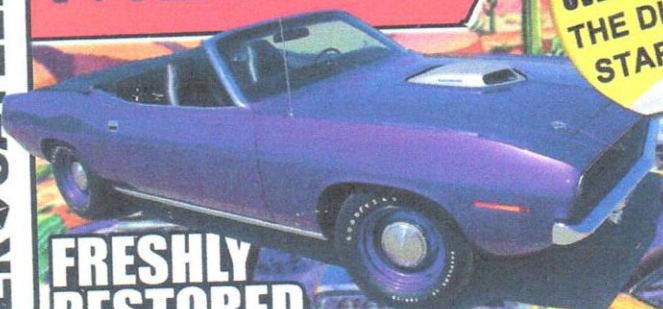
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SUPER RARE TOP HAND PROTOTYPE TRUCK

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August 2011

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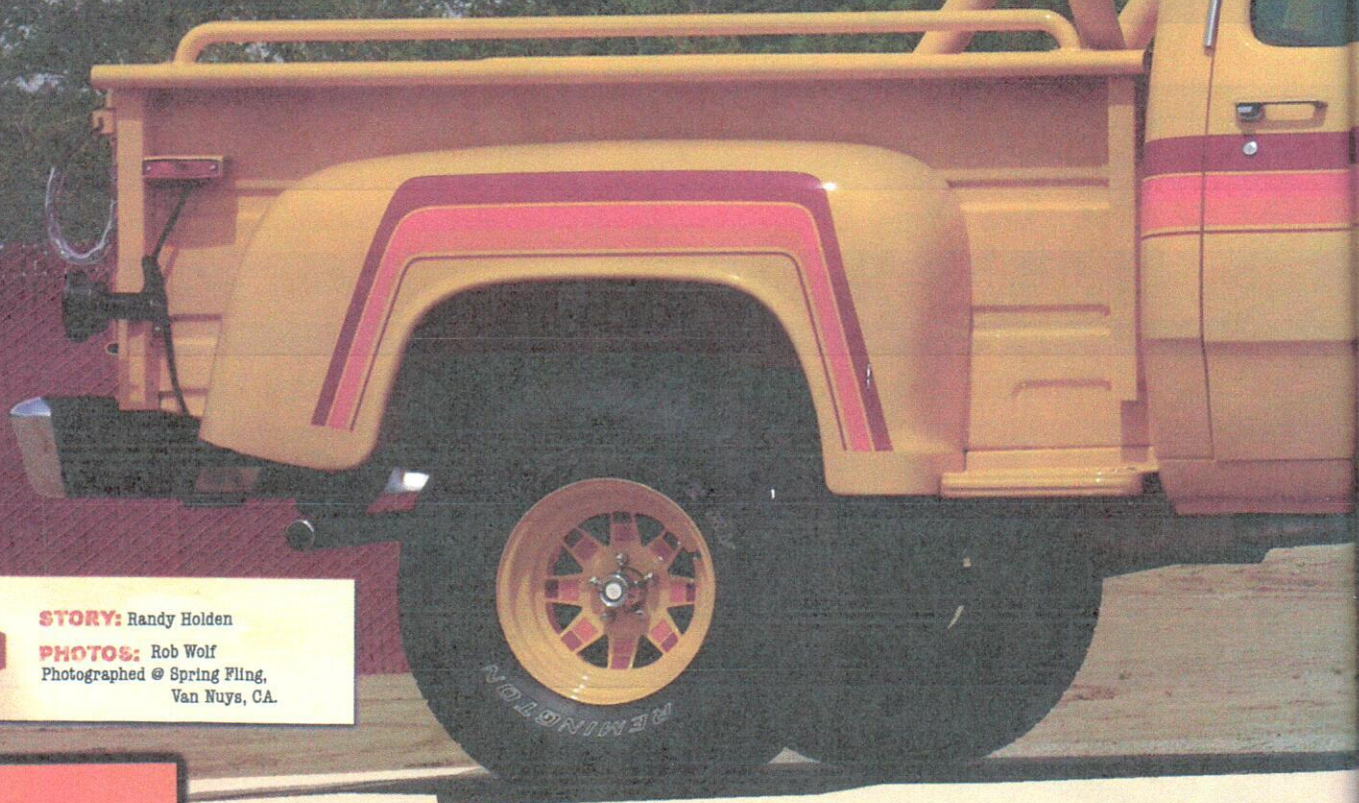
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TOP HAND

PROTOTYPE RESTORED



STORY: Randy Holden

PHOTOS: Rob Wolf
Photographed @ Spring Fling,
Van Nuys, CA.

For some reason, Dodge had a penchant for naming its cars and trucks with a western theme for the better part of forty years. Why? Well, that's a question best left to the guys who used to work in their marketing department, but we strongly suspect they just thought the name "Dodge" would be subliminally attached to the famed "Dodge City" of the Old West forevermore, and they went with that. Thus, through the years, we've had the

Dodge Sierra, the Matador, the Western Sport Specials, the White Hat Specials, the ad campaigns with "the Dodge Boys," the "good guys wear white," and things such as that. This fascination with all things western was extremely evident, however, in the Dodge truck line, where from its inception into civilian life, the legendary Power Wagon was shown (in advertising) in rugged western settings or handling any number of laborious farm chores. In the sixties, Dodge introduced the "Dude" decor package on its

Dodge pickups, which got the buyer some rather large stripes and a jaunty cowboy hat placed on the rear flanks. This gave way in the seventies to the legendary Little Red Express pickups, the Warlock pickups, and the less-remembered, but equally as impressive, Macho Package Power Wagons, the Prospector package trucks, and the king-of-the-hill (which you possibly haven't heard of), the Top Hand. For those unfamiliar with western ranch lingo, a "top hand" was the guy who could do everything from breaking wild



HICKEY ENTERPRISES DID THE EXTENSIVE MODIFICATIONS TO THE TOP HAND TRUCKS WHEN THEY WERE NEW, AND EACH OF THE TRUCKS RECEIVED ONE OF THESE SMALL WINDOW DECALS TO DOCUMENT HICKEY'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROJECT.

HICKEY
ENTERPRISES INCORPORATED
VENTURA, CALIFORNIA

horses to handling a cattle drive; he was the guy who could do anything you asked of him. And that was the inspiration behind the 1977 Top Hand package - make a truck that could do anything.

We'd like to say the idea for the Top Hand truck originated with the execs at Dodge, but in truth, it didn't. Vic Hickey, out in Ventura, California, is, arguably, the most legendary man in the history of off-road vehicles. After getting out of the Navy in WWII, he settled in Cali and began working

on building customized off-road pickups that could climb rocks and ford rivers with ease. He also built and repaired race cars of all shapes and varieties. It was his hobby and his passion, and it soon became a full-time business. It also got him noticed by General Motors. They went out west to see Hickey's creations and bought the rights to his unstoppable 4x4 pickup, which Hickey had dubbed the "Trailblazer." Sound familiar? GM liked Vic Hickey so much they brought



him home with them, making him a research and development engineer for GM trucks - a job he endured for thirteen years, and which led directly to most all the 4x4 Chevy and GMC trucks we know today. He left GM in 1968 to form Hickey Enterprises in Ventura, where he could devote more time to developing and building high-performance off-road vehicles.

Nobody has dominated one particular field of the automotive realm more than Hickey Enterprises. If you

wanted a hi-po 4x4 truck, or Baja racer, or off-road international Rally car, the parts you typically bought came from Hickey or were developed by Hickey. Vic also took time to work on the side. In the early seventies, he led the group contracted by NASA to design and build the Lunar Rover, and in 1979, he took on the task of designing an all new all-terrain vehicle for the military. That resulted in a little something he called the Hum-Vee. Yes, Vic designed the military Hummer, and needless to say,

the legacy of that creation is gonna' last a very long time indeed. All that aside, way back in 1977, Vic Hickey was

inducted into the Off-Road Motorsports Hall of Fame for his lifetime of achievements. The accolade was nice, but, as usual, Vic was much more interested in product development and actually delivering the goods than he was award banquets. That same year, he pitched the idea to Dodge for the "Top Hand" pickup - envisioned as an ultimate 4x4 that could bring the kids to school, then go plow through six feet of mud or handle zooming across the Baja at 100+ mph.

The idea was hardly conventional, and in hindsight, it's amazing Dodge actually went for this idea. The trucks wouldn't have Hickey's name on them anywhere, but they would be true hybrid performance vehicles, just as the Shelby Mustangs and Baldwin-Motion Chevies had been. Dodge was



THE UNIQUE EIGHT-SPOKE STEEL WAGON WHEELS USED ON THE TOP HAND WERE TREATED TO SPECIAL TUNONE DECALS ON EACH SPOKE. THESE ARE THE TRUCK'S ORIGINAL WHEELS, AND AMAZINGLY, THOSE ARE NOS DECALS - TRY FINDING A SET OF THOSE TODAY!

enjoying brisk truck sales at that time while the rest of the vehicles made by Chrysler were sitting on the lots gathering dust, so presumably, some executive figured, "Why not?"

The Top Hand was extremely unconventional for 1977 (actually, it's unconventional even by today's standards) in that these were not factory-built trucks, per-se, nor were they built at Vic Hickey's shop in Ventura. Instead, Top Hand trucks were dealership-built trucks. The way it worked was, if a dealership wanted a Top Hand truck, they could order all the factory-approved Top Hand parts and graphics from Hickey Enterprises and install them at the dealership on any new Ramcharger or Power Wagon and the customer would still get a factory warranty. Thus, the customer got the best

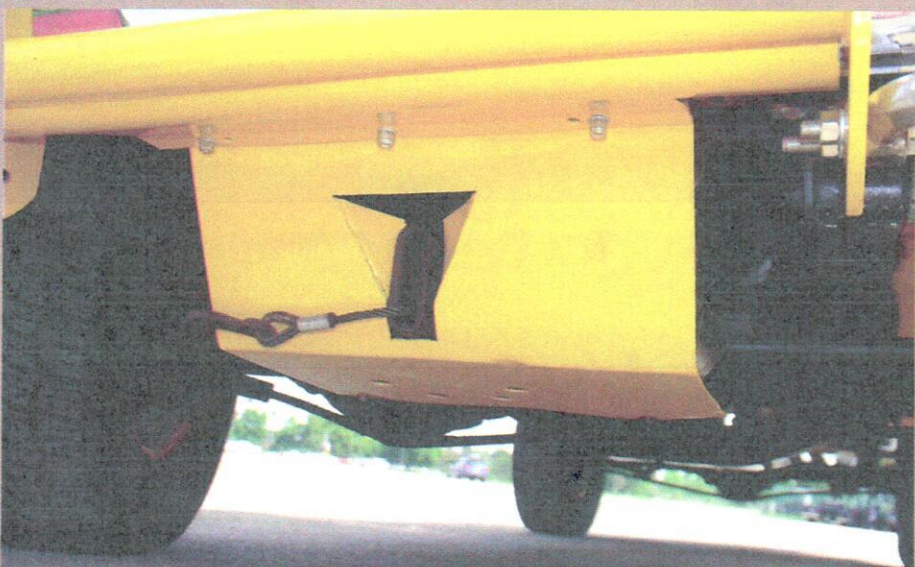
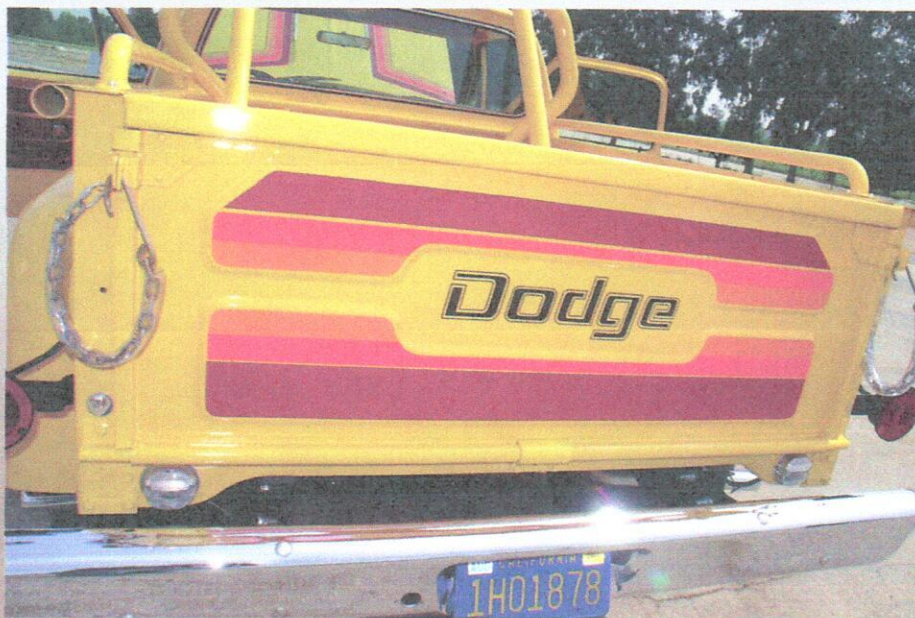
of both worlds, a radically customized off-road truck with a new-car warranty, and the dealership made a tidy profit selling a very expensive truck they'd largely bolted together in their service department - it was a win-win situation all the way around. However, due to the high sticker price of the package and difficulties obtaining the kits from Hickey due to problems with various parts suppliers, it's believed that only

two hundred Top Hand trucks were built in the United States, and a further two examples were built in Canada. This consensus is apparently based on shipping records of the kits shipped to dealers by Hickey Enterprises.

Given the extremely small number of these trucks built, it's highly likely that you've never seen one before. The package consisted of rus-



TO THE LEFT OF THE DASH YOU'LL FIND THE TOGGLE SWITCHES FOR THE BLINDING CIBIE OFF-ROAD LIGHTS THAT CAME STANDARD ON THE TOP HAND MODELS. AS CRUDE AS THIS INSTALLATION LOOKS BY TODAY'S STANDARDS, IT WORKS, AND THIS IS HOW THESE TRUCKS WERE MADE.



LOOKING DOWN LOW UP FRONT, YOU'LL FIND A STEEL SKID PLATE UNDER THE BUMPER THAT HIDES A SIDEWINDER II WINCH. THIS IS SUCH A SLICK ARRANGEMENT IT SHOULD'VE BEEN AN OPTION ON ALL POWER WAGONS BACK THEN.

tic triple-tone stripes with "Top Hand" logos on the fenders, special steel Hickey spoked wheels and oversized Goodyear Tracker tires, a front brush guard, tow hooks, two special sealed beam spotlights, a three-inch roll bar, a three-spoke leather-wrapped steering wheel, Cibie sealed beam lights mounted in the brush guard, and heavy-duty shocks. Optional equipment on top of all that included a Sidewinder II winch up front, bed rails, folding steps under the doors, axle trusses front and rear, and for the ultimate in off-road bravado, you could get a huge spare tire and rim mounted in the bed and dual spare gas cans with special racks. This was not a truck for those who wanted something subtle. And, based on surviving examples, it would appear that most (if not all) Top Hand trucks were painted either white or yellow, and it appears the majority of them came with a 440 engine up front for maximum torque. All that makes a Little Red Express or Warlock seem a bit humble, doesn't it? With all that information in hand, the Top Hand pickup shown here this month is a little more special than the typical example (if there is such a thing as a "typical" example). This one was a legit public relations vehicle and may well have been the first Top Hand pickup built. This truck was featured on the cover of Off Road Magazine in 1977, when Dodge announced the new package, and was the same truck featured in that magazine's story. To get the utmost publicity for the new model, Dodge gave this truck to legendary western actor Chuck Connors (the Rifleman, himself) who was also doing Dodge truck commercials for them at that time. So, you have a magazine public relations truck that's probably the first example built, then it was given away to a legendary Hollywood movie star when new - not a bad claim to fame.

This is a fast truck with a very firm ride, so predictably, it apparently wasn't practical for daily transportation for the aging Hollywood cowboy. Connors reportedly used the truck on his ranch for a short time, then sold it to a friend in Ojai, California. He used the truck quite a bit until 1980, when his friend and serious car fanatic, Kim Brooks, talked him into selling it. Kim had torn down her first engine (out of a Porsche, no less) when she was seventeen and had long been infatuated with '65 and '66 Mustangs, but the big yellow Dodge with the rumbling

exhaust captivated her from the moment she saw it, and this lady knew nothing about its future collectability or rarity, she just knew she liked it. So, in 1980, Kim took the keys and she began running all over the hills and valleys of Ojai and SoCal with this beast - both on and off-road, for the next twenty years. Interestingly, she also took the time to have no-less than five daughters, all of whom through the years used this bright yellow 440-powered monster as their daily driver and going-to-school truck! Yes, this truck lived through five teenage girls driving it on a daily basis and, in all those years, it only received one minor dent in a fender and a small dent in the bumper! That in itself says a lot about the Mopar gods smiling down on this truck from the day it was bolted together!

Back around 2007, Kim went into the hospital for some relatively minor surgery where things went horribly wrong. Instead of having the quick procedure and recovery she'd expected, Kim ended up literally dying on the table - no joke. She was revived, obviously, then she spent the next forty-five days in the hospital recovering and having follow-up operations to get her stabilized and functional again. It was one of those close calls that none of us expect, but thankfully, Kim Brooks has the energy level of a jackrabbit drinking a case of Red Bull. She's currently seventy-years-young, and we guarantee you, she can run circles around all of us here at the office.

When Kim arrived home from the hospital, she was given orders to take it easy and spend the next year recovering from her nearly fatal incident. In short order, she got bored with that and decided it was time to completely rebuild and restore her faithful Dodge pickup out in the garage. Over all, the truck wasn't in bad shape; the paint had faded quite a bit, a couple of small spots of surface rust could be seen, the interior was a bit tired, and the wood in the bed was white and chalky, but, the truck was solid, still ran okay, and everything was still there. So, Kim sat down on the garage floor (literally), and over the next year, she took the truck apart piece-by-piece, restoring or replacing worn out parts as she went.

Soon enough, she ran into some experts in the field who also became involved in the project. Hensley Motors



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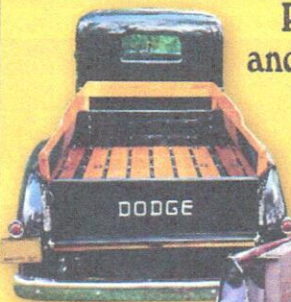
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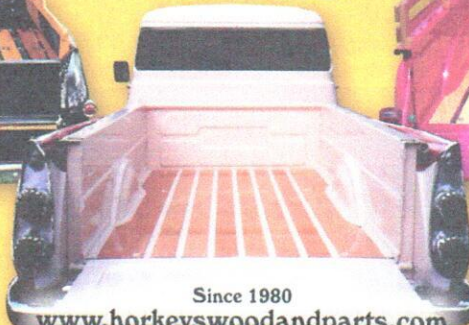
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EACH TOP HAND TRUCK HAD SPECIAL OFF-ROAD HEAVY-DUTY SHOCKS INSTALLED BY HICKEY ENTERPRISES, AND ALL OF THESE TRUCKS CAME WITH SWAY BARS FRONT AND REAR.

got into the act, the guys over at Fine Line did the paint and striping work (all the stripes are now painted on), and The Balance Shop in Racita tore down the original 440 and rebuilt it to stone stock '77 specs. After three years of work, Kim's Top Hand brute emerged looking better than it had back in 1980 when she'd seen it for the first time. And so it was that, in 2010 at the Spring Fling in Van Nuys, the West Coast got to meet Kim and her remarkable Power Wagon.

Since this was something of a pre-production prototype used by the

public relations department, predictably, it has everything that Hickey envisioned on these trucks, except for the spare gas cans and the big Warn winch up front. This one did come with the huge Baja-style spare tire mounted in the bed, but Kim thinks the tire distracts from the look of the truck and she typically leaves the monster spare tire at home in the garage. It has the bed rails, the retractable steps under the doors, the chrome tow hooks, all the Cibie lights, the unique steering wheel, and it has a plethora of creature comforts and luxury items not typically

found on Power Wagons. This one has power steering, power disc brakes, air conditioning, a column-shifted automatic tranny, an AM/FM, and it even has cruise control! When's the last time you saw a '77 4x4 with cruise control? All things considered, this machine has multiple angles to make the claim of being a true one-of-one machine.

Having done all she can do with the truck now over the course of the last thirty years, Kim's decided it's time to sell so she can do some traveling abroad. So, if you want the ultimate "Adult Toy" pickup from Dodge's truck heyday of the late seventies, this is probably as rare and desirable as a truck can get. If you're interested, send Kim an e-mail at actionangel1@yahoo.com. Please be aware, however, she knows what this truck is and she's not anxious to give it away. So, please don't bother her unless you're serious and you have the disposable income to make a serious offer. We can attest to the quality of the truck's restoration, it was done right and it looks like new. This wasn't a cheap truck in 1977 and it's not gonna' be a cheap truck now, but if you want to really set yourself apart from the crowd at Carlisle or the Mopar Nats, this might be just what you're looking for. Giddy yap! ✨

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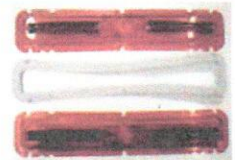
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