

1969 Dodge Polara CHP

Words and photography by Jeff Koch

Restoration photography courtesy of Ron Hurwitz

What's this? A police car in the pages of *HMM*? Absolutely. The 1969 Dodge Polara has long been considered the pinnacle of police-car performance: with a 375hp 440 under the hood, heavy-duty suspension, and monstrous brakes, it was more muscle car than a lot of muscle cars were in those days. Plus, as the old saying goes, nothing outruns a radio.

Now, it's one thing to find an old sedan and paint it up. It's another to find an old cop car and restore it to its former glory. It's entirely another thing to find an actual CHP car and restore it to CHP specs. The California Highway Patrol special-ordered its cars in those days, with suspension, handling and trim modifications beyond that of a regular production-spec police Polara; it's roughly the equivalent of a COPO Chevy, where a fleet buyer went in and not only ticked the right boxes, but made some extra demands of his own on top. Dodge built a total of 1,564 '69 Polaras for the department. Any muscle car with that kind of production run, bespoke

tuning and big-block power under the hood is a six-figure auction-buster these days. But a CHP Polara? They maintain a cult following only.

This might be changing, however. Owner Ron Hurwitz is head shaman in the cop-car cult, having owned one just before the first OPEC crisis and, later, a 1966 Belvedere ex-LA Sheriff's car which he says, "if I'd have had my brain screwed on right I would have kept it." Twenty years on, Hurwitz wanted a muscle car, but even after the price drops of the early 1990s, he couldn't swing the bread for the E-body of his dreams. And then it hit him: a CHP Polara should be affordable enough, and offer all of the power he craved.

He knew he would have to wait for a real CHP car to come up so, while he was waiting, he collected parts. As a Mopar tech, he had access to parts locators and a nation's worth of dead shelf stock. His first part was a tailpipe. Cost? Seventeen dollars. Try that with an E-body. "Trim, suspension, headlamp be-

zels, wiring harnesses, you name it, I got it at cost plus ten percent—some at cost just so they could get rid of it. I went to Chryslers at Carlisle one year and visited a dealership out that way. I was in their warehouse across the street from 8 a.m. till 4, looking through masses of parts. They had stacks of NOS De Soto hubcaps in barrels! I pulled probably 20 C-body items—all brand-new stuff. The counter guy looked it over and said, 'how about \$100?' The taillamp assemblies cost me five bucks each!" Visits to the Mopar Nats, held variously in Indianapolis and Columbus, Ohio, netted similar parts scores. "Body moldings, door handles, window cranks and runs, weatherstrip, clips... that car is NOS. It even has the correct water outlet." Remember, Hurwitz didn't even have the car yet.

That came in 1995. "My friend Julius Steuer, from Restorations by Julius, saw an ad in *Hemmings Motor News*: it was \$2,500, and it was located east of Sacramento. I started at 5 a.m. on Sunday, and by 1 a.m. I was back home, car in tow."





Milestone: the rebuilt and detailed engine being lowered into the restored frame; the remaining sheetmetal was then bolted to the car and aligned to fit



Ex-CHP cars were painted other colors as law prohibits black and white being sold to public



Rusty floors not seen by many Californians; Polara footwell sheetmetal can be scarce



Here the body is primed; roof is taped off to avoid overspray; the white paint has been applied and the painter has prepared the door jambs and quarter panels for the black paint to be applied

RESTORATION PROFILE



The police-spec 440 presumably had quite a hard life, judging by the level of neglect apparent here; the correct Carter AVS carburetor was missing



Many hours were spent removing all the parts from the crusty engine bay; car's entire front end was rebuilt; the firewall was stripped and refinished



You can bet many cops sat on this seat spilling coffee and doughnut crumbs; the ivory steering wheel is unique to a correctly restored CHP-spec Polara



NOS seat and floor materials were found; door panels were refurbished and period-correct lighting installed; ivory spotlight handle is also CHP-spec

So what did \$2,500 get you in the early 1990s? "It was rough. The right rear door was open, and four inches of water was sitting there. I took towels and got the water out immediately." (Didn't stop the floor from rusting, though—see photo). "It was also rusted around the back window, the trunk lid was smashed and rusted, there were rat droppings in the engine compartment area... it was a nightmare. Also, the carburetor was wrong—it was for a four-barrel 383." But the tell was the white steering wheel and the fender tag, which read "Special Mask Special Order," meaning that Hurwitz's quest for a real CHP Polara had ended. Did he ever have second thoughts, considering its squalid condition? "No," he said.

While correctness on a factory-built car is one thing, and tons of references are available, period-correct items on a

modified car such as this one are a little harder to pin down. Combine this with a low survival rate—Hurwitz reckons there aren't more than a dozen in the whole country—and you're talking degrees of impossibility, with massive room for fudging. That wasn't good enough for Hurwitz, who reckons he got lucky. "When Spike Helmick was CHP commissioner, they gave me carte blanche. He took me to the photo archives, and we found some 1969 Polara pics. They just gave them to me." Spike would later donate a Vehicle Code book, and autograph the glovebox lid. Hurwitz also credits retired officers Chet Coombs and George Caravas with helping to get the details right.

Other details came as background. "Former commissioner Harold Sullivan told me that in '68, some of the CHP Polaras had air and some didn't. But in

'69, they all had AC. Even though it was a \$175 option, it would cost \$300 per car to pull it off the line to install the different heater box, dash pad, plumbing, all that. They saved \$125 a car—each one cost \$2,327.97." Not bad, for a car that would sticker for \$4,400 normally.

And then he found a sympathetic restorer. "My friend Chris Watson in Grants Pass, Oregon, did a lot of the work. His uncle was a retired captain of the L.A. County motor squad, and he loves cop cars just like I do. He has a couple, and he knows what to do."

That "what to do" included sectioning in new steel around the rear window and in the floors. "I found a regular Polara sedan in a San Fernando Valley pick-your-part, and just cut out what we needed." The trunklid was sourced here too. Body man Watson stripped away years of paint via the

1969 DODGE POLARA CHP



Donor parts car was chosen for rust-free roof to replace rotted one; hours were spent carefully grafting in used section to seamlessly blend with body



From the top of the rear window to the trunk drain, Watson performed very tricky surgery; he tack-welded the metal into position then ground it to fit



This is the right side of trunk drain; the tin worm had rotted out this piece; Watson, again, precisely cut, carefully welded and made metal fit like new



Here is finished body minus the fenders and radiator support awaiting assembly on a home-made dolly; attention was given to prepping firewall

plastic bead blasting method, and set to work sectioning and re-fitting the rear window; the replacement piece incorporated the trunk drip rail. Similarly, the floor pan was replaced with the donor car piece.

Once Watson stitched up the sheet-metal, he applied three coats of PPG Ditzler primer, blocking with 400-grade paper between coats. Then came three coats of a special blend of white paint: "It's a special CHP-only color," claims Hurwitz. "And they've used it all these years. They're still using it on the Fords they run today. Chris used a color scanner to make the formulation correct." Some careful masking, four coats of wet-sanded Ditzler black later, and suddenly the big Polara was looking more like its former self.

Stan Smith at Cub Machine Shop in North Hollywood, CA, handled the bottom end work (including a .030 over-

bore), and Julius himself performed the mechanical restoration, from rebuilding the engine to adding the factory correct-type overspray to the exhaust manifolds. The Carter 4640 four-barrel carb was a tough piece to find: he bought and later sold off a couple of them because he didn't think they were clean enough.

The rest of our Polara simply took years of careful assembly in Hurwitz's garage. Even the graphics, which you'd think would be the same for most cars, cause a stir: "One of the animals in the picture on the gold star was wrong—it was supposed to be the California state bear, but it had the head of a wolf. That was changed in the late 1980s or early '90s, and finding a star with the wolf's head on it was a challenge." The sole deviation from stock is with the 8.55 x 15-inch tires: they're BF Goodrich Silvertowns, which make the

Polara seem more on tippy-toes than hunkered down, though they're the correct size for a CHP Polara. But the original ran six-ply Goodyear Blue Streaks, which are simply not remanufactured today. "Those were racing tires! They're why these cars felt solid at 115mph driving down El Cajon Pass," he said.

Now that it's completed, Hurwitz takes his big C-body out only to shows and CHP events around the state. And that's only made him more friends: Hurwitz's luck finding parts has extended beyond the parts locator and launched him into lifelong friendships. "After Retirees' Day at the academy last year, one of the retired officers, Don Campbell, approached me and asked for a ride home. When I dropped him off, he went inside, and came back out with a correct radio unit—the right control head, and it was

RESTORATION PROFILE



Right fender tag shows “special order” and “special mask” for paint



Siren, better known as the “growler,” is mounted to the radiator support



“One Adam 12” seems like an appropriate answer



Note “Certified” bar speedometer to 140 mph and period-correct Federal Interceptor police radio



era-correct for the car. I had to rewire some things (I’m not the best soldering guy), I sent the receiving crystals to radio place (I left the transmitting crystals out—I don’t want trouble with the FCC), installed it, and as I was wiring in the connection, a call came out—a reckless driver on the 101 freeway. I called Don

on his cell, and we listened to the radio together. He was floored.” The friendships extend beyond the mere donation of parts, of course, but it’s the Polara, and retired CHP officers’ fond recollections of this never-to-be-repeated machine, that’s the catalyst for such relationships.

From start to finish, it took Hurwitz the

better part of nine years to get everything buttoned up and in the shape you see here, completed roughly one year ago. “If I had to do it again, I’d have some money set aside to make the build go faster, and I’d try to stick to a shorter timetable.” At the same time though, he confesses, “You really can’t rush it, and it really is worth the wait.”



Note the CHP shotgun in its rack, ready to fire



The view most people want to see of a police car like this; car even has correct police license plate

1969 DODGE POLARA CHP



Julius Steuer refinished the neglected 375hp 440 to as-new condition



Restored engine compartment is now correct with high-output alternator



New "wolf's head" graphics were carefully applied



Ivory wheel and spotlight handle CHP-spec only



Dog dish hubcap covers black steel wheel and tire

Hurwitz has fielded some big-money offers from serious cop-car collectors for what is now an immaculate Polara. But he's turned them all down—although he started down the police-car path thanks to a lack of funds, after more than a decade of putting it all together, he's not about to sell out now. He is absolutely steadfast in

his determination to donate this '69 Polara to the soon-to-expand CHP museum once he is no longer able to take care of his baby as it deserves to be treated. In the meantime, he's too busy making friends in his black and white, four-door, 375hp musclecar. And scaring the willies out of anyone going 78 in a 65 zone. 🐾



The car door made famous on popular television shows; collecting police cars is gaining in popularity

OWNER'S VIEW



I have a couple of ex-CHP LT1 Caprices, but the Polara is still the all-time police-car performance king — they had a top speed of over 140mph. I had a hard time finding a correct carburetor, the Leece-Neville alternator, siren, windshield, CHP-spec junction block, and dog dish hubcaps; the most expensive parts were the carb, hubcaps, alternator and A/C belts, and believe it or not, the seats. My advice for anyone who wants to rebuild a car? Get all the pieces together first, and pick someone you can trust and be comfortable with to get it done right. Also, have some money set aside to make it go faster; stick to a timetable shorter than the nine years it took me to build this one. That said, I wouldn't change a thing. — Ron Hurwitz