

When Schemes Become Dreams:  
Our FJ40 Preservation Project



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The little red Datsun pickup slewed sideways like a tractor trailer on ice, tires squealing as I exited the highway, the heavier 1973 Toyota FJ40 easily pushing the smaller truck into a skid with the towbar. I couldn't have cared less about the dangers of this mismatched arrangement. It was 1978, I was 23 and I was bringing home my first Land Cruiser.

I soon had it running with a small block Chevy V8 and an adapter for the transmission. It was a cumbersome rig but it had more personality than a dozen Corvettes to this budding off-road enthusiast. Every hour beneath the hood yielded many blissful miles rattling through the backcountry of southeastern Oklahoma and south-central Colorado. I had sold it by 1980 and it would be almost 40 years before I had another Land Cruiser.

## "NICE TRUCK. HOW FAR DOES IT GO?"

Three young women stopped me and my wife Susan as we were about to enter the restaurant. We had just stepped out of our faded blue 1976 Toyota FJ40, the long-awaited replacement for my old Chevota.

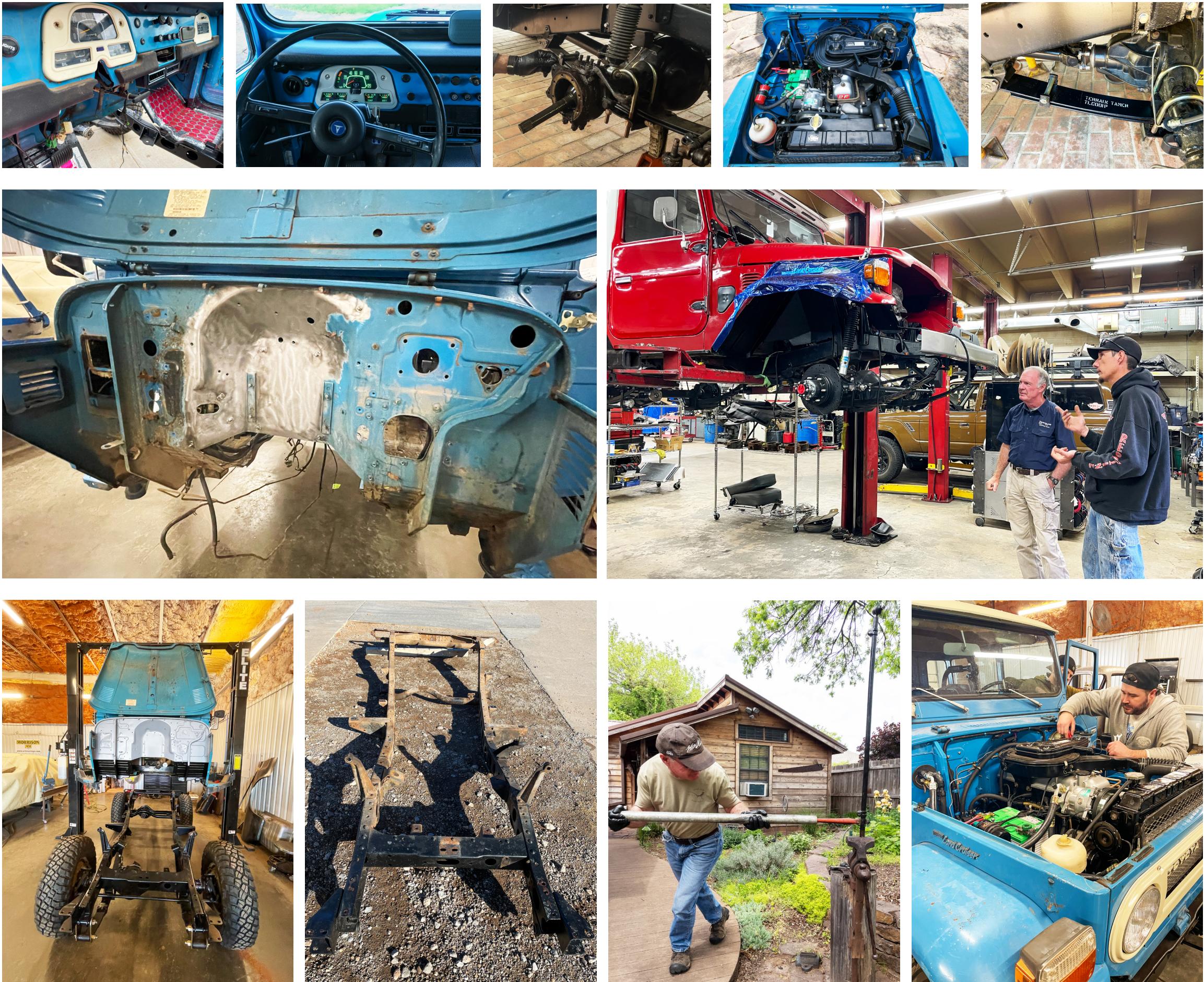
"That's a great question," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I know a lot of people who own them don't drive them very much. They are hard to drive and they break down a lot."

I laughed. "Some certainly do. In fact, we've been sorting out a couple of issues on this one but it's getting better. We just returned from a five-state trip out west. It goes pretty far I guess."

Since selling my first FJ40 I've been drawn back to them, hoping someday to have one near stock, with just the right modifications to make it more user-friendly. As for reliability, they were as good as their owners' abilities to maintain them. It's just a matter of performing quality workmanship when making the repairs and upgrades. Most issues are induced by the passage of time and ham-fisted tinkering.

I purchased this truck from Chris Johnson, a good friend who had owned it for more than 30 years. His sons learned to drive behind that big steering wheel and it spent much of its life in a barn in New Mexico. He called her Elsie, a play on the initials LC. Chris kept any significant rust at bay and Elsie was pretty much stock with only 76,000 miles on the odometer when I purchased it, ahem, "her." She ran but the owner before Chris





had driven her without an air cleaner and the engine was shot. Compression was 80 psi and below. Oil consumption nearly rivaled fuel usage, quart for quart.

One ambitious day I borrowed a cherry picker and pulled the engine, launching the mission of preserving this piece of history for a few more decades. I delivered the engine to Folks Machine Shop in our home town of Norman, Oklahoma. Austin Folks and his dad George took a personal interest in the project and embraced my desire to modestly improve the performance, primarily in the lower rpm range. A .070 over bore was required to clean up the cylinder walls. Pistons weren't available in that size so I reached out to Darios Tarman at Ross Pistons for a custom set with a compression ratio of just under 9/1, adding a bit more grunt to the now 264 cu. in. motor (up from 258). Folks also installed .070 oversized valves, new guides and seats from a Chevy 305 V8, then balanced the whole crankshaft assembly. The camshaft went to my friend Faith Zeelenberg at Web Cams who created a special grind for improved torque and smooth operation below 3,000 rpm. Ask Faith for the "Dragoo Adventures" cam profile. Valvoline VR1 10W30 was selected for lubrication. Most modern oils are reducing the amount zinc but this critical element is essential for longevity in these old flat tappet engines. At nearly 3000 ppm, VR1 has nearly double the amount in other oils.

Old Aisan carburetors can be fussy so I opted to upgrade to a Holly Sniper 2300 EFI. Justin Robbins at Redline Land Cruisers was helpful with tips and information on the engine build so it made sense to use their purpose-built adapters and installation kit along with their pointless distributor upgrade, keeping the look of the original but with the benefits of a hotter spark and no more points to adjust or replace. Justin also rebuilt the rocker shaft assembly with new bushings and a re-chromed shaft. These are common wear components for the 2F motor, especially if oil changes are sporadic. Engine parts like gaskets, lifters, timing gears and other necessary workings were sourced from my local dealer, Fowler Toyota; JT Outfitters; FJ Depot; Specter Off Road and a few other suppliers. Thankfully, although expensive, parts are still available. Transfer case seals and gaskets came from Sonny Martinez at Fjparts.com.

We hauled the truck to Cody McClain with McClain's Custom Hot Rods in Goldsby, Oklahoma, for a detailed analysis of body and chassis integrity. My instructions to him were to scrub, inspect and seal the underside, focusing on any areas that could cause issues in the foreseeable future. When I returned a week later, to my surprise, the body hung high overhead on a two-post lift and the rolling chassis sat nearby, about to be sand blasted and powder coated. Although this would add significant cost, Cody, in his quiet, matter-of-fact way stated, "I know what you want and this is the best way to accomplish it."

The die was cast. Mission creep had struck and my mild upgrades had just morphed into a notable time and financial

commitment. A complete wire brushing of the underside and application of a commercial grade of undercoating should secure the long, rust-free life we had set out to accomplish from the start. Before installation of the custom matting from Alex Jimenez of FJ Colusa in Florida, McClain and his business partner Beau installed a layer of sound-deadening, heat-insulating membrane throughout the vehicle. They also installed all-new rubber components from engine and body mounts to door seals. A new Painless wiring harness replaced the original, troublesome rat's nest along with new grommets and rubber boots throughout. The rig is almost air tight and rattle-free now and all the electrics work perfectly.

They also refitted the doors, repairing sprung hinges and fabricating a new ambulance door threshold which showed signs of pitting. New paint inhibits real world use without regrettable damage so we chose to make this a "patina build," keeping the external signs of age, hinting at the stories Chris and his boys could tell about their early adventures with this wise old relic.

The engine bay was treated with kid gloves, stripping and repainting every inch with the factory Sky Blue. The new engine and wiring harness played nicely against this background, leaving a clean, semi-custom look displaying the magnificent Redline Land Cruiser Holly Sniper install kit, newly rebuilt motor and other necessary mods. McClain's attention to detail was revealed here as wiring and hose layout were show quality.

Stainless steel brake lines went on before the body was reinstalled, along with a new brake and clutch master cylinder. Once back home I installed new front brake calipers and rear wheel cylinders, cleaning and painting each component group with two coats of POR 15 to prevent rust and improve surface durability. POR 15 was also used on axle housings and steering links.

I had broken a finger a few years back, driving in the rough with the old manual steering. The steering wheel got loose and spun, nailing my pinky with a spoke, a painful reminder of the value of power steering. JT Outfitters helped me come up with a fine Toyota Mini Truck steering box bracket and GM-style pump.

Air conditioning was a must if we were to use the truck during our Oklahoma summers so I contacted Joe Neel at Old Air for his advice on a kit that would not be as obtrusive as some of the under-dash offerings. Their Hurricane heater and AC system tucks in behind the dash. For clearance, we fabricated a miniature glove box which still provides room for a few essentials. We chose to install round, factory-style vent louvers in the corners of the dash and two small rectangular vents in the middle. This configuration frees up the transmission tunnel and a solid steel Tuffy Console provides an armrest and plenty of extra storage, plus a secure home for a two-way or conventional radio. We used a Vintage Air AC/Alternator bracket and their 140 amp, one-wire alternator hangs under the compressor to run the Sniper EFI and keep the battery charged while using the Warn 8274 Winch.



The result was exactly what we had hoped for. My wife and I drove the truck more than 3,000 miles throughout the American West with the only concerns being the need for proper front-end alignment and elevated engine temperatures, an issue we are in the process of correcting by adding a heavy-duty, four-core radiator from Redline Land Cruisers. Ride quality is now civilized, and performance, especially low-end torque, is better than any 2F Land Cruiser I've had the pleasure of driving. The balanced motor runs incredibly smooth and

A Dakota Digital instrument cluster replaced the original speedometer setup. This amazing bit of technology gives us not only visible gauges and lighting color options, but also a trip gauge, fuel mileage counter, on-board speedometer calibration and other amenities, hidden beneath its period appearance.

Some parts were like hen's teeth to find but Mike Denison and Adam Weeks at Cruiser Corps came through with a much-needed radiator shroud, used OEM air cleaner setup, rear door latch and countless other hard-to-find bits and pieces. Cool Cruisers became a go-to for hardware kits, motor mounts, rubber door seals and a headliner. Classic Cruisers in Colorado provided a perfect replica of the fiberglass top, replacing the old, blue caved-in original.

Other specialty parts such as door panels, exhaust manifold rings, rubber grommets, pass-through boots and priceless technical advice came from John at Specter Off Road in California. His counsel and direction to correct parts proved critical on more than one occasion.

Our old suspension was stiff, to say the least. I was interviewed by a friend for a story on overlanding while driving the truck off road in Arkansas and the whole time we laughed at how incredibly rough this rig was to drive. Terrain Tamer came to the rescue with their incredibly soft riding parabolic springs, shipped straight from Australia. I also used Terrain Tamer's heavy duty tie rod ends to replace the originals. I since learned that Georg Esterer at Cruiser Brothers in Stockton, California is a Terrain Tamer dealer. Georg became another valuable asset with his depth of knowledge including alignment and drivability.

power delivery is incredible. Thanks to AC and power steering, this truck has become my go-to, everyday driver. Indeed, it does go far and if schemes can become dreams come true, I expect Elsie to take us with her for many more years. **X4**

## BILL DRAGO

### AUTHOR BIO



Bill embraces adventure travel in many forms – two-wheeled, four-wheeled, and on foot. As long as it involves experiencing more of the great outdoors he is hard-pressed to resist an opportunity. When Bill's not tackling the toughest trails in the Rockies on his adventure motorcycle he's busy exploring with his wife, Susan, in their Toyota 4Runner, the "GS of Trucks".

Among his many pursuits, Bill is an MSF-certified riding instructor and BMW Motorrad Certified Off Road Instructor, and owns/operates the DART (Dragoo Adventure Rider Training) school near the Dragoo's hometown of Norman. Bill was a member of the 2010 BMW GS Trophy team, representing the United States in competition in Africa.

You can join Bill for one of his training classes by visiting [WWW.BILLDRAOO.COM](http://WWW.BILLDRAOO.COM).



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