

Restoring on a Budget

by **Steve Helmreich**

We all read of “Land Cruiser barn finds”—usually a 1960’s FJ40, parked in dusty environs, covered with boxes and clutter, sporting original paint, little rust and a fixable mechanical problem. Photos are posted on websites and folks gather virtually around the truck to ooh and ah over this found treasure. The lucky new owner gets the thrill and challenge of a rebuild and a beautiful truck or can pass it on to a restorer.

Does a “yard find” count? A neighbor had a 1989 FJ62 that was languishing in their yard. I had known of this truck for five years and heard that it had slid into the barn on an icy day and suffered some damage. This truck was still licensed and driven occasionally but needed much love. I had only seen it once in passing. They were the original owners, which was a good thing.

By chance, I got to know the family a bit better, so it gave me a reason to examine the truck. The owner said, “Sure, put a battery in it, take it home and look it over.” I snatched a battery from another truck and dropped it into the engine compartment. The truck sputtered to life, although reluctant to awake from hibernation.

I drove it home and the longer it ran, the better it seemed to shift and run. It seemed loud, so I checked for the tailpipe end—none found. No muffler, either. The truck was covered in pine needles



The factory bumper was straightened and actually saved the body from damage.



This original fender was replaced with a rust-free FJ60 fender.



Presentable and clean in spite of high miles and age.



Rust plainly evident in the driver side rear quarter panel.



Fender section welded in place and ready for filler and paint.



Welding skills were helpful with the rehab of this FJ62.



Not good as new but looking much better.

and sap; a window had been left open for several months; a dog had chewed the interior (pieces of each seat were missing and the windows were scratched); and the body had some rust, dents and light hail damage. The rear bumper had been somewhat gently hit and the upper and lower hatch doors were dented. It was a typical twenty-three year old Colorado truck.

The odometer showed 243,000 miles. On the upside, the truck had the head gasket replaced many years back, as well as a new radiator and brakes. Those were big-ticket items I wouldn't have to replace.

I took it home, checked the fluids and then did some offroad testing. The truck needed shocks but the tires were passable and the vacuum operated four-wheel drive system and manual hubs worked properly. The factory toolkit was complete and the spare tire was intact. The factory radio was iffy and the electric antenna was broken. The air conditioning worked but was low on refrigerant.

I once read that, "Chances are good that long before you bought your Land Cruiser, someone stopped loving it." Hmm... this one was still loved a little but needed more affection and a monetary infusion.

I did the mental calculations of, "What is the worst financial thing that could happen if I bought this truck?" I then negotiated a price with the neighbor, handed over the cash and brought it home. I figured that I could part it out or drive it and see if the engine blew and then put the EFI system on my FJ40. I decided that if the transmission blew, I could put a four-speed manual transmission in it. The Land Cruiser mind never sees a reason not to buy a truck, right? You can always do something other than junking it.

I knew this truck wouldn't likely be worth a fortune, since the miles were high and it was a bit weary, so my goal was to rehab it without spending a ton of money and make it a truck of which I could be proud. I created a plan of attack and with the help of TLCA vendors, the Internet and local Cruiserheads, found some great parts in order to start the rehab.

I found a perfect hood and rust-free front fender locally from Redline Land Cruisers in Colorado Springs—it's always nice to find clean, bolt-on body parts. I later went back and bought all the windows from his FJ60. I bought a chunk of a rear fender from a guy in Seattle for \$50. Some shops wanted \$250 for any cut of a rear fender. This piece had a tiny rust hole but I fixed that along the way. I re-glued the barn-hit headlight surround, since those are \$390 new from the dealer. I found a used grille for \$80—those are \$400 new. The grille isn't perfect but is much nicer than what I had. I bought new halogen headlights at Goodwill for \$3.00. I bought used bumper end caps and mud flaps at the Rising Sun Club parts swap in Denver. It took a few months to find these clean body parts; you have to be patient to find the right deals.

I installed an aftermarket stereo that I found in my basement. I found rear seat upholstery (and a front seat bottom) on eBay that were very nice—but \$150. I bought them anyway, since clean OEM brown FJ62 seat upholstery is nearly impossible to find. I bought dirty seats locally just to get the seat foam—another hard to find item

that is bulky to ship. Filthy seats are cheap, fortunately, so combining three seats to make one good seat isn't as expensive as it sounds. I bought a set of hog ring pliers and swapped the upholstery and foam back and forth, which is time consuming but free. I used a soapy scrub brush to clean the seats and a shop vacuum to remove the water, which saved two seatbacks.

The cargo area carpet was trashed, so I ordered an 8'x10' dark brown area rug from Home Depot for a whopping \$18. It was an outdoor-rated Ozite carpet that matches the truck interior perfectly. I installed leftover half-inch thick carpet padding underneath this



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More rust on the passenger side rear fender.



After cutting out the rust, fitting a steel patch to be welded in place.



The rear fender patch, ready to be welded.



The finished product, which can be driven with pride and reliability.

outdoor rug for noise reduction and comfort. The center console was grimy, so I removed it and soaked it in hot soapy water—and cleaned other filthy dash areas.

I adjusted the valves and changed the oil. The coolant looked great but I changed it anyway. The transmission fluid wasn't pink but I've seen worse. I removed the transmission pan, cleaned the screen and refilled it. The differentials were full of clean oil—they can wait. I had an exhaust shop install a muffler and tailpipe. I had an almost-new FZJ80 air filter element in my garage and installed that as well. I found KYB shocks on eBay for less than any local source, so I ordered a set of four.

I used a local paint guy who has worked for me in the past. He gave me some ideas to save money, so I removed the glass from the hatch and a side window and did a lot of rust prep and body repair. I carefully welded in a rear quarter panel patch and repaired two other rusted spots. This required much labor but little material cost. I had him paint the entire front clip (to minimize matching issues), the upper hatch and portions of both rear fenders. Because my replacement fender and hood were dark brown, I painted the underside of the hood and inside of the fender with a close-matching gold automotive aerosol. This trick saved another trip to the paint guy and accomplished a nice looking under hood area for \$15 in paint. After the paintwork, I wet-sanded the hood and front fenders and finished them with a buffer I borrowed from a friend. By doing grunt work before and after a paint job, you can save a lot of money you would have otherwise paid to a shop.

Whether my rehab was a bargain or not depends on whether you're a show-car person or a wielder of spray-bomb paint. I also count my labor as free, which is a silly thing we all may choose to do. Including my paint guy's work, I spent \$1,450 on the body, \$800 on the interior and \$450 on driveline parts and fluids. As for other costs, I taxed my wife's patience by bringing home another refugee truck and disappearing into the garage for hours at a time. I have a total of \$2,700 in parts, on top of the purchase price, but I also have a truck that I think will be attractive and usable for years to come.

My sixteen-year-old daughter loves the commanding visibility of the FJ62 and the timeless funkiness of the body style. Having owned a 1987 FJ60 that met an untimely end, this truck gives me fond memories, along with the sheer luxury of fuel injection. The restoration efforts also filled more holes in my vehicle restoration knowledge base.

I'm not sure if I'll sell it or drive it for a while but after all the work, it deserves a camping trip or some event where memories can be made. Without the memories of either restoring or using a Land Cruiser for fun or work, it's just another truck.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HELMREICH