

Feature Vehicle

George “Duke” Mitchell – North Rose, New York

Member #8

1969 Chevelle SS 396



It is one of over 86,000 SS vehicles produced during the '69 build year. There was a strike at GM during that time and the '70 model release date was delayed, so naturally there were more '69 cars Built.

HOW I CAME TO OWN THIS CAR

It seems I've liked Chevrolets forever. I can remember being able to

recognize year/make/model from just seeing the front or the rear and not up close either! In 1969, I graduated from high school and wanted to get a Chevelle SS in the worst way. Dad said no, it was off to college for my savings account and me. That still didn't diminish the desire; it just put it on hold for a while. All through school, I still kept my "motor head" ways and wanted that car. After college came marriage, kids, a house, and all the stuff that goes with responsibility and still no Chevelle. Finally, my wife and I got to a point in our lives where we felt we could justify at least looking for a "toy". The search was on!



Oh, what a time we had for almost 2 yrs. We must have looked at 12-15 different cars. It got to the point where we could look at one from a distance and tell if it was worth a closer look. I remember one in particular; the guy said was an ex-LS6 car that had a different engine but the car itself was "...in pretty good shape."

Right.....pretty good shape for a rust bucket. We

moved on. You could sum it up quite well: too much money or too little car. We got discouraged.



Another time, we went to an address and when we pulled up, we could see the rear of car in the garage doorway, surrounded by "stuff" on every side. We turned around and left, without even checking on the car. It looked rough. Another one of those "decent shape" wonders!

Finally, after almost giving up, it happened. My wife was in line to get some prescriptions filled for the kids reading through one of those national "trader" type magazines and there it was. A '69 for sale that sounded pretty good and better yet, it was in our price range. She brought the book home and called the guy up. She knew what questions to ask. The answers were pretty close so she told me about it. I called the guy to talk with him. This car was in New Hampshire (400 miles away). We decided to take a mini-vacation to check it out. Two days later, we were home and the car was ours! I had my Chevelle, finally!

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I found about 1/3 of the build sheet under one of the front seats. It lists quite a bit of "SS only" RPO's but, unfortunately, it does NOT have the part that lists the VIN. So, for all intents and purposes, my "build sheet" is pretty worthless in terms of the "right" document. I'm still not throwing it away! I have no reason to doubt that the car is a legitimate SS. There are too many of the "right" things about it to think

otherwise, but I will never be able to prove it for sure w/o the POP or the entire build sheet. That doesn't bother me in the least.

Thus, at the end of July 1985, began the "journey" with this car. The car was used mostly for just cruising and such for the next 11 years. When I got it, it had

around 87,000 miles. We drove it 1,000 miles or more each summer. Around here, the "season" starts in late April or early May and goes in to Nov. in some years. I can remember taking the last ride one year in the first week on Dec. and two days later, having 6-8" of snow on the ground.



Maintenance during those years consisted pretty much of washing, waxing, and oil changes. Really, the car was trouble-free. I was lucky to get the factory SS wheels with the car so they were put on after that first abbreviated season. I also had the Hurst shifter rebuilt and it needed it. What a difference that made. I guess I broke maybe 2 or 3 valve springs during those early times. Not sure why since I didn't lean on it THAT hard.

At this point, I probably need to back up just a little and give a little more detail about what this car was when I got it. It was built in Framingham, MA and originally delivered to a dealer in New Hampshire. It went through 3 owners in that state; the third being the guy I bought it from. I'm sure it was "winter driven" in its early years because there was quite a bit of rust underneath. It was also in a front-end collision sometime before I got it. There had been some patch pieces put in above the rear wheel wells and the car was repainted midnight blue metallic (a Ford color, I think). The black vinyl top was replaced with a white one. At some point, the original engine was blown up and replaced with 396 from a '66 Chevelle. The original rear-end was also replaced with the '66 rear. I couldn't get much history from the guy I bought it from and never really tried to find other owners. I wasn't concerned about the whys. Now, we can get back to the story...

Almost immediately after getting this car, I began to do some searching and research about Chevilles and parts. I was lucky to have a good friend who was the parts man in the local Chevy dealership. He said he would help all he could and I would have been lost without him. The first thing I did was get a copy of the assembly manual. There were lots of part #'s in it, but as many of you know, those numbers have been superseded or discontinued. The next thing I got was the 2-volume set of manuals that the parts guys use. One had pictures and the other had numbers. I poured over them and checked off every number in every category that pertained to a '69 Chevelle. Then I started shopping--cha-ching! ! I ordered sheet metal, trim, and lots of other stuff in anticipation of doing something major to this car sometime in the future. With some of the stuff, I even

ordered multiples. Hey, can't have too many parts now, can you? Knowing what I do now, I wish I had gotten more sheet metal. Oh well, it's easy to be smart after you have been dumb. My wife also signed me up in the old NCOA and what a great thing that was. It seemed like almost every issue of the club magazine gave me more info about my car. I have saved every one of them and still refer back to them. Those magazines, while not being perfect, were all the hobby had available then. I also managed to get all the proper factory manuals for the car and I know I nearly wore them out when I restored this car.

When I was first looking for a car, I really thought I wanted to find a "numbers" car. Even back then, those cars was bringing good money and I figured pretty quick that I could never play in that league. Besides, my car wasn't even close to that kind of car and hey, that's OK. Once I got that part figured out, it was easier to move forward with my "plan", and that "plan" came together in 1996.



In the summer of '96, we were finally able to build the garage we had always wanted. When we drew up our ideas, one of the big ones was a shop area for me. This gave me a spot to start working on the '69. By now, the body was looking poorly and rust bubbles were showing up more and more. The top was peeling up around the edges and the engine was using oil like crazy. My wife had

hinted that maybe it was time to either do something with this one or get rid of it and start again. Well hey; you don't just throw out a member of the family, do you? Besides, by now I had accumulated quite a stash of parts. Frame off time!

In Nov. 1996, I took my last ride and put the car in the shop and started tearing it apart. I took many pictures (nearly 200) and bought lots of plastic bags in various sizes. I also rounded up some cardboard boxes to store stuff. I tried to keep each sub-assembly together as it came off the car. Oh, the rust I found! I knew it would be rough since the car was from New England, but I didn't think it would be THAT rough. Quarters, rocker panels, trunk drops, lower cowl area, front fenders, outer wheelhouses, you name it. Remarkably, the trunk pan area and the floor pans weren't bad. There was quite a layer of oil and dirt covering almost the entire area. When I got to scraping that off, some original factory color was visible.

I'm not going to go into a lot of detail as far as what and how I did everything. Many of you have already done what I did or at least read about it many times. I will tell you that I didn't do the body and paint work because I didn't dare. That new sheet metal was too valuable for me to screw up. In the end, the only original metal on the car was the top, hood, and floor pans. Like I said, there was plenty of rust and I only wanted to visit those areas once.

The frame was blasted and coated with 2 coats of POR-15. The suspension was completely redone. All new stainless lines were put on. New rolling stock was installed with 15" on the rear and 14" on the front. Hey, I have a "roller" now.



As I said, the engine in the car was from a '66 Chevelle. So I pulled it and sold it to a guy who was doing a '66. I had another big block on hand, a '71 402. It was bored .030 and completely gone through, but nothing exotic. I wanted a street puller, not a high-revving race engine. I kept the stock exhaust manifolds even. Edelbrock supplied the intake, but everything was covered with Chevy

orange. I wanted the engine bay to look stock at first glance and it does.



The interior was completely redone in the factory parchment color. When the old headliner was removed, there was a mouse nest that was up there! Mice just love old cars and mine was no exception. And talk about stink when it was hot! The dash bezel was pulled and replaced. There weren't any re-pops yet, so I was lucky to find one in good shape. The dash pad was also

replaced; you know how those things crack. I managed to find a good pad and a

good steering wheel at Spring Carlisle two years after I bought the car. Then, I thought I was very lucky. Now, just go to the catalog and order it.



Don't think for a minute that this project was just smooth sailing the whole time. It wasn't. I found out early that I had to be in the mood for working on the car. More than once, I would go out to the garage and walk around for a while, sit down in my chair, stare at the car and then get up and go back in the house. It just wasn't the right time. Other times, I would go out and work for hours on end without

being aware of time.

The moral here is: don't be afraid to walk away for a while, whether it means days or weeks. When it's right, you get a more work done. Sometimes, the work stops because you need some parts to continue and sometimes it stops to give you a needed break. Don't worry about it.



Finally, in the spring of 2000, things were really coming together, literally. By summer, I had the engine in, interior done, and had started the car for the first time. What a rush that was. I even drove it down the road without the front clip on it, just to feel it move again and to test the brakes a little (they were fine). The first road test with the complete car came just after Labor Day

and it went well. After nearly 4 years, my "little" project was done and I didn't have too many parts left over!

Since that time, I have managed to blow up the motor and put in another one. There were some errors made at the machine shop and they stood behind the

work. I was very fortunate there. I show the car very little but I drive it a lot, that's what it's for. Many of you have seen it at the CanAm show in Niagara Falls and it will be there again this summer. I never dreamed that this car would (could) look like it does. The compliments I have received are taken to heart. The people I have met through this hobby are great and I have enjoyed my time with them. If any of you are contemplating a restoration, all I can say is plan carefully and go for it. Yes, it's time-consuming and yes, it's VERY expensive but it is fun and, for the most part, rewarding. And it keeps you off the streets, for a while anyway.



At this point, I plan to continue to drive this car. But, I'm beginning to get the itch to do another one. I'm not too sure what direction to take but I'm leaning toward more of a "hot rod" type car. Time will tell and gas prices may have an influence too. I would like to re-do my wife's car (a #'s-matching '72 Nova SS) but she says not right now. Time will tell.

Built in Framingham, MA Fourth week of Nov. '68

Originally:

325 / 396
 4 speed
 3:31 prostration
 Parchment interior w/buckets & console
 AM radio
 Non-gauge dash
 Black vinyl top
 LeMans Blue paint

3:73 positration
 Indigo Blue Metallic
 No vinyl top
 Parchment interior buckets w. console
 AM radio in dash (hidden system elsewhere)

Clubs I am a member in
 CanAm #8
 ACES #3671
 Timeless Classics (A local club in eastern Wayne County)

The Car Today

.030 over 402 Forged pistons
 Steel crank
 Oval port heads w. big valves
 Stock exhaust manifolds
 Edelbrock intake with a Holley carb.
 14x7 wheels on the front 15x8 on the rear

Additional Pictures can be seen at
http://www.leverfamilysite.com/Gorge_Duke_Root_Page.htm