

By Damon Lee

Cars from the '50s are fun to look at, but many are not nearly as enjoyable to drive as they could be. Oh sure, the wallowing, bouncy ride quality may offer a few thrills, especially on short jaunts. Over the long haul, however, those early attempts at independent front suspensions can be quite a handful to handle, with enough rocking and rolling to make passengers seasick. And don't even get us started on the brakes.

Thankfully, there are a number of aftermarket remedies available to aid many such suspensions. Dropped spindles, modern shocks, and disc-brake kits can go a long way toward improving the ride, stance, and handling of our favorite '50s flyers. Sometimes, though, mere upgrades aren't enough. For some enthusiasts, and some cars, an entirely new front suspension is the preferred solution.

For decades, rodders have adapted various later-model subframes to their favorite rides, with varying degrees of success depending on the skills of the builder or installer. More recently, Mustang II-style suspensions have become the frontends of choice in roddom. Problem is, many '50s frames are not well suited for adapting a typical Mustang II-style crossmember. That led Fatman Fabrications to develop its line of frame stubs for '50s cars.

Fatman stubs are essentially frame sections that replace most of your car's original frame from the firewall forward. The process is similar in theory to a Camaro or Nova subframe swap, but with several key differences. First, each stub is designed to fit a particular make and model of vehicle (more than 100 applications from the '30s through the '60s), so there's no guesswork in determining where to measure, where to cut, or where to weld. Additionally, Fatman stubs have prefabricated mounts for installing bumpers, radiators, and sheetmetal, making it much easier to reassemble your car. Most Fatman stubs will also lower your car several inches (without dropped spindles), in addition to



Upgrade your IFS with a Fatman frame stub

This old woodie will soon be ready for a lot more beach cruising thanks to its new Fatman frame stub and Mustang II-style front suspension. Similar stubs are available for more than 100 applications.

maintaining a proper track width. This is on top of providing the benefits of Mustang II-style IFS: solid suspension geometry, great aftermarket support, disc brakes, and rack-and-pinion steering.

We recently followed the installation of a Fatman stub and hub-to-hub IFS kit on a '50 Ford woodie at Wheeler's Speed Shop. As you'll see in the accompanying photos, the installation was very straightforward—almost simple. With that said, however, we can't stress enough how important good workmanship is on a project like this. We're talking about your car's foundation, so this is no place for a novice. At the very least, you'll need to make sure you have someone with solid skills doing the welding. Beyond

that, it's important to closely follow the instructions and consult Fatman's tech support team if there are any uncertainties. For now, why don't you take a look at how Wheeler's Andy Humenik performed a bit of clip art on an old surf woodie. **Re3**

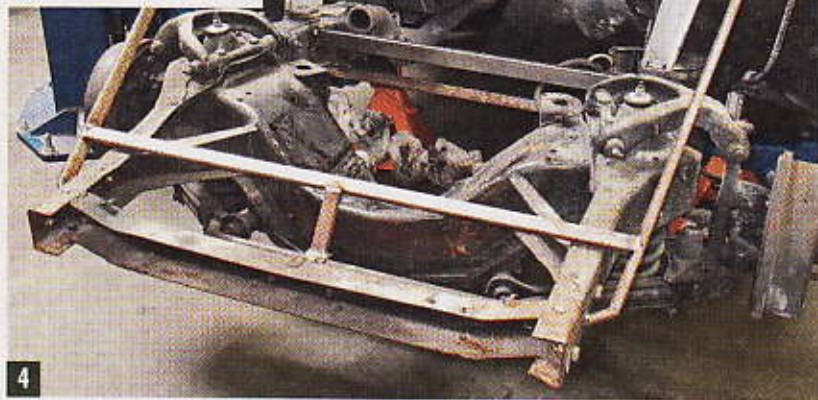


This is the 57-year-old suspension Andy was replacing. At this point, the car was supported on a hoist (jackstands work fine too) and leveled from side to side and front to rear.



It's crucial to record original suspension and frame points as references for the new stub. Fatman recommends using a plumb bob to mark the locations of the axle centerline, bumper bolts, body mounts, and radiator core support on the floor. It's smart to record the height of each reference point too.

► **Clip Art**



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Andy went one step further and welded up a quick jig that could be bolted to the firewall, bumper mounts, and core support for reference.



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Fatman supplies explicit instructions for measuring where to cut the original frame. At this point, it's wise to heed the advice about measuring twice and cutting once, because the next step ...



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... is cutting apart the frame. Andy used a reciprocating saw to slice through the 'rails and made each cut a little long, following up with a grinder to precisely trim the frame to his scribed marks.



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With that, the original frame section was free, and could be wheeled away and discarded appropriately.



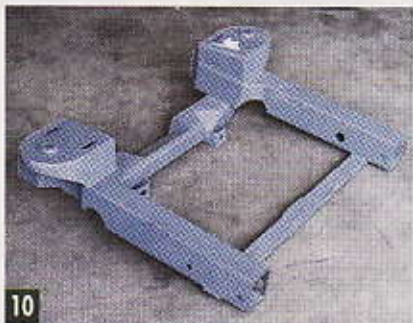
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Fatman includes 1/8-inch steel plate for making internal gussets to help align the stub and support the weld joint. For extra strength, Andy drilled holes in the original frame and the stub so he could plug-weld the gusset plates.



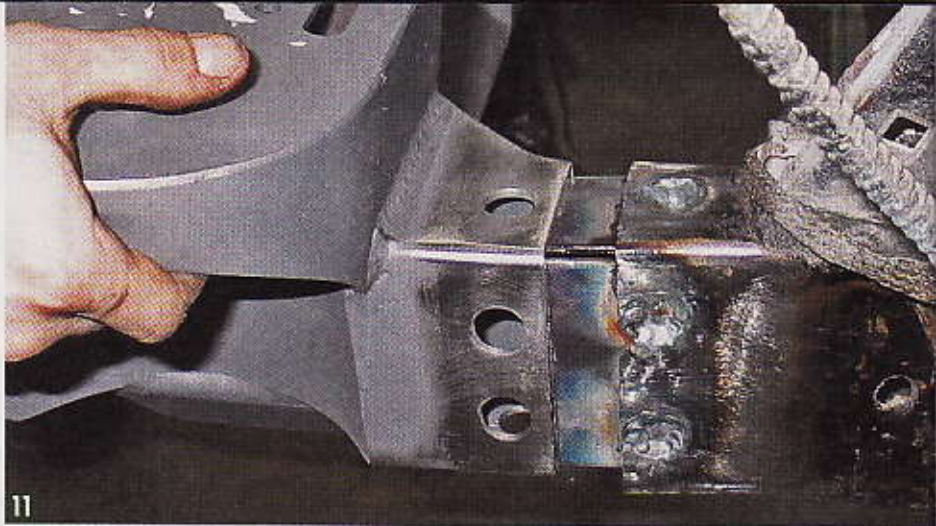
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► Clip Art



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Here's a look at the bare Fatman stub. The company has versions designed to fit dozens of cars from the '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s.



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With a little muscle—and some “convincing” with a hammer—the new stub slid into place over the gussets. Fatman usually allows for a 1/4-inch weld gap between the stub and the original frame.



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Before doing any welding, it's smart to check your reference points and measurements to make sure everything is aligned. Andy used his jig to verify proper positioning. After tack welding the stub in place, Fatman highly recommends double-checking all measurements, trial-fitting the radiator core support and front sheetmetal, and even mocking up the suspension to make sure the wheels are positioned well in their openings. Now is the time to find any problems and make adjustments.



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When he was happy with the fit, Andy proceeded to solidly weld the stub to the frame.



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For extra strength, Andy made external gussets for the sides of the frame joints. For a cleaner appearance, he made small transition plates for the top and bottom where the original frame was slightly taller than the stub.



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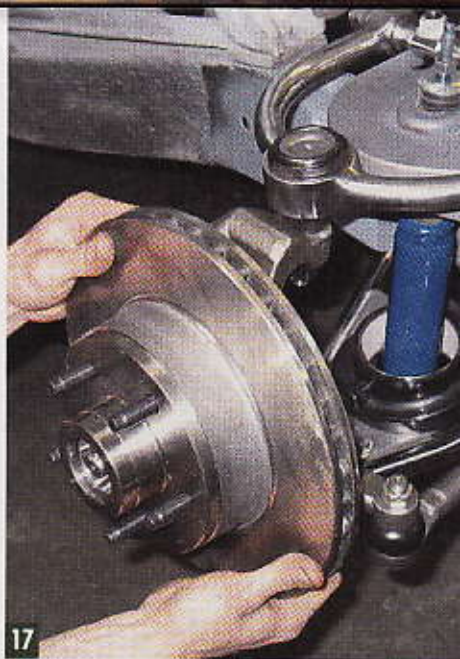
The only other welding necessary was to attach the lower control arm gussets to the crossmember.

► **Clip Art**



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With the stub in place, Andy assembled the suspension. Fatman uses polished stainless steel control arms in all of its new hub-to-hub kits, and includes all necessary parts—brakes, bearings, rack-and-pinion assembly, and so forth—for getting the car back on the ground. The instructions also offered advice on installing engine mounts (which are available from Fatman) and connecting the steering.



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Sources

FATMAN FABRICATIONS
704-545-0369

WHEELER'S SPEED SHOP
Huntington Beach, CA
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