

FREE SAMPLE

The opening pages of

1981 Chevrolet Squarebody Restoration Guide

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RESTORATIONESSENTIALS

Factory-Correct Restoration Reference

1981 Chevrolet Squarebody Restoration Guide

Model Years 1981

Model year	1981 - the facelift; late Squarebody begins
Engines	250, 292 I6; 305, 350 (restricted), 454 V8; 5.7 diesel (final)
VIN	17-digit standardized; 8th digit = engine
4x4	NP208 shift-on-move (new); NP205 on 1-ton
Identifiers	Sloped hood; exposed wipers; horizontal markers

Every specification in this guide was checked against factory literature, marque references, period road tests, and documented survivor vehicles. Where sources disagree or the record is silent, this guide says so rather than guessing.

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How This Guide Works

This is a **single-year restoration** guide for the 1981 Chevrolet and GMC C/K - one year of the Rounded Line (1973-1987 pickups), covered on its own because that is how these trucks were built and how they must be restored. Specifications were checked against the marque model history and powertrain tables, the Raybuck restoration reference, and period sales literature. Where sources disagree, this guide prints the disagreement instead of guessing.

Scope. Covers 1981 C10/C20/C30 (2WD) and K10/K20/K30 (4WD) pickups and chassis-cabs. Blazer/Jimmy and Suburban share this architecture and have their own RestorationEssentials guides. GMC trucks share the platform but carry their own trim names and badging, noted where they differ.

Where 1981 sits in the run

- **Coming in:** the early Squarebody, comprehensively re-skinned and lightened in answer to the 1979 energy crisis.
- **Leaving:** 1982 streamlines: chrome becomes standard, the Cheyenne is dropped, the 6.2 diesel and the 700R4 arrive.

Platform Snapshot

The Rounded Line (the public's 'Squarebody') ran as the C/K pickup from 1973 to 1987, then as the R/V in heavy and SUV roles to 1991. 1981 trucks are late, facelifted trucks: the hoodline is lowered and sloped, wipers park exposed on the cowl, and side markers are horizontal.

Fact	Detail
Model year	1981
Designation	C = 2WD, K = 4WD; 10/20/30 = 1/2-, 3/4-, 1-ton
Wheelbases	117.5 in (short bed), 131.5 in (long bed), 164.5 in (crew cab)
Fuel tanks	Outboard of the frame rails (sidesaddle layout)

The 1981 Register - What Makes a 1981 a 1981

- The mid-cycle redesign: all sheet metal forward of the windshield is reshaped - lowered, sloped hoodline, flatter grille split by a silver/black bar (Chevrolet) or ten squares (GMC), redesigned bumpers, and roughly 300 lb of weight engineered out of the line.
- Wipers are now exposed on the cowl (they hid behind the hood on 1973-80 trucks); side markers move and lie horizontal; fender badging changes from script to block lettering for the first time since 1975. Square headlights are standard - two on base trims, four on upper trims, signals in the bumper.
- Shift-on-the-move 4WD debuts: aluminum NP208 transfer case and automatic locking hubs replace the full-time system on light-duty K-trucks; the NP205 remains on 1-ton trucks.
- Engine shuffle: the 400 is replaced entirely by the 454, which reaches one-ton K-series trucks for the first time; the 305 gains electronic spark control outside California; and the 350 is NOT offered on the US C10 pickup (1981-86) - it returns to the C10 with TBI for 1987.



- The standardized 17-digit VIN arrives (8th digit = engine, 10th = year). The C10 chassis-cab is discontinued. Cheyenne is still offered - its final year.
- Interior is revised with the facelift: seats, door panels, and dashboard are 1981-pattern parts that do not interchange with 1973-80 trucks.

VIN Decoding (17-Digit)

1981 trucks use the standardized 17-digit VIN. The 8th digit is the engine code - the single most important character when verifying a truck's original powertrain - and the 10th digit is the model year. The glovebox SPID label remains the final word on factory options.

8th digit	Engine
T	292 inline-6
G	305 V8, 2-bbl
F / H	305 V8, 4-bbl
P	350 V8, 2-bbl
L / M	350 V8, 4-bbl
W	454 V8, 4-bbl
C	6.2L diesel (1982+)
Z	350 diesel (Oldsmobile LF9, final year)

Engines

The 1981 menu - note the missing 350 on US half-ton 2WD pickups and the final year of the Oldsmobile diesel.

Engine	Output (net)	Notes
250 I6 (LE3)	130 hp; 210 lb-ft	2-bbl Varajet
292 I6 (L25)	120 hp; 215 lb-ft	Heavy-duty six
305 V8 (LG9/LF3)	130-155 hp; 240 lb-ft	2-bbl / CA tune; ESC outside CA
350 V8 (LS9)	175 hp; 275 lb-ft	Not on US C10; K10 CA conditions apply
454 V8 (LE8)	230 hp; 360 lb-ft	Replaces 400; first year on 1-ton K
5.7 diesel (LF9)	120 hp; 220 lb-ft	FINAL year of the Oldsmobile diesel

Reading Chevrolet casting and date codes

- Block casting number: driver's-side rear bellhousing flange. Assembly stamp: front passenger-side deck pad - month/day plus suffix code.
- Decode casting number, casting date, and suffix together; the casting date should precede the truck's build date by weeks.
- Truck suffix tables differ from passenger-car tables, and the format changed around 1970 - decode truck engines with truck references.