

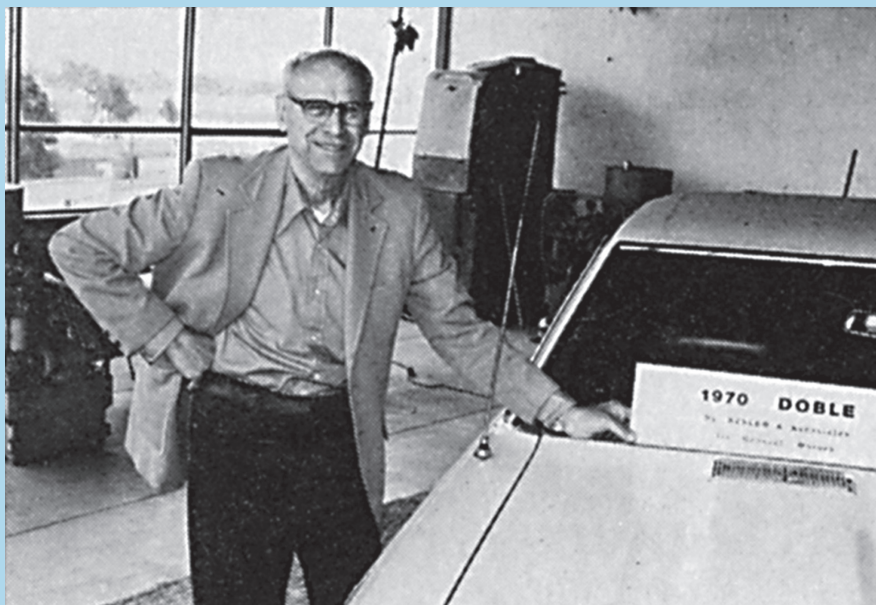
The Chevy Steamer

“In many respects it’s the best steam automobile ever built,” says Bill Besler of the 1969 Chevelle Malibu which his staff at Besler Developments converted at the behest of General Motors. “But it’s not really competitive with the internal combustion engine—for performance, for reliability, for simplicity. And it didn’t come cheap, either!”

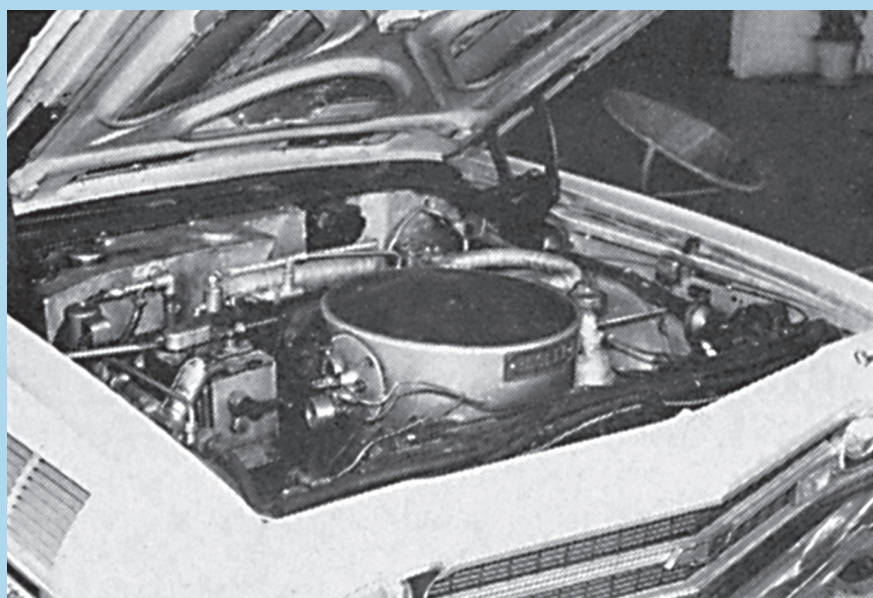
Barney Becker, who was responsible for the bulk of the work on the Malibu steamer, points out that in making the conversion the Besler staff worked under severe space limitations. General Motors decreed that the engine should be in its conventional place under the hood, instead of being mounted, Doble-fashion, on the rear axle. This meant stuffing all of the machinery—burner, boiler, engine, condenser and all the rest of it—into the restricted space of the Chevelle engine compartment. Inevitably, then, the engine was small, a two-cylinder, double-expansion, double-acting job producing something on the order of 50 horsepower. Likewise, according to Barney Becker, the steam-generator (boiler) was of less than optimum size.

The result is that the “Chevy Steamer” is really underpowered. (Not altogether inaccurately, by the way, Becker refers to the car as a “1970 Doble”; for with the exception of the burner, the steam conversion was based entirely upon Doble designs.)

The car operates quite satisfactorily under normal conditions; and Bill Besler and Barney Becker have driven it to destinations as far away as Long Beach, nearly 400 miles to the south of the Besler plant in Emeryville, California. With the Chevrolet three-speed transmission still in place, acceleration and hill-climbing ability are adequate, and the Malibu will cruise without strain at 60 miles an hour. The top end, however, is no more than 65.



Bill Besler, with assistance from Barney Becker, pictured above, designed and built this Chevy steamer for evaluation by GM in 1969. It’s very tight under the hood because GM engineers insisted that both engine and boiler reside there. Mechanics were designed and built on Doble principles.



At first glance it looks like your ordinary, garden-variety Chevelle. But on closer examination the astute observer will note louvers in the hood and front fenders, cut there in order to dissipate the tremendous heat generated by the burner and the boiler. And posted on either side of the car is a neat little chrome-plated badge reading “SE 124” (Steam Engine, 124 cubic inches displacement.)

“About every 30 years there’s a rekindling of interest in steam cars,” observes Bill Besler. “When the ‘clean air’ thing came along the Steam Automobile Club of America pushed it as the answer to the pollution problem. So General Motors tried, they earnestly tried, to develop a good steamer. They built one of their own while we were doing this one for them. Theirs was based on a Pontiac chassis, using a uniflow engine instead of the Doble compound principle that we used.” (At this point in the conversation Barney Becker interjected, “It wasn’t worth a damn!” Besler merely smiled.)

“You know,” Besler continued, “some people actually think that a steamer runs on water! But really, you have to be a ‘nut’ to want to be involved with steam power!”

Then with a wry grin Bill Besler added, “Of course, I’m a nut!”

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