How-To

Install a Convertible Top

The black top on this '86 GT convertible had seen better days. It was simply toast, and we called on Mike Ambrose Custom Interiors to save the day. It was a big job for a car that needed everything from new top pads to a new glass rear window. After dinner that evening, we had the job completed.

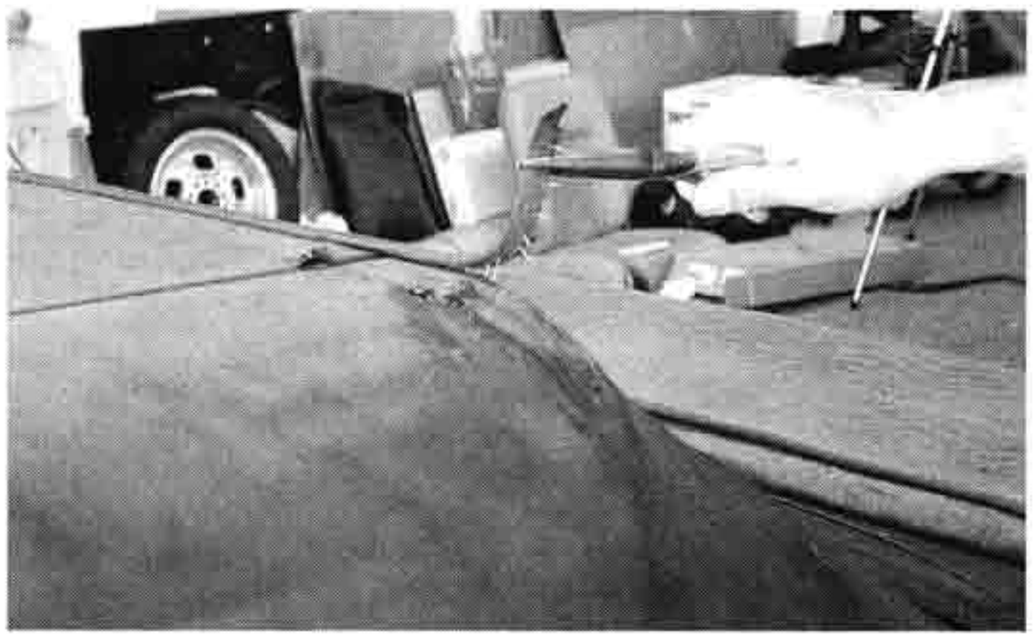
Many Fox-body Mustang Ragtops Are in Need

text and photography by Miles Cook

Now that SN-95 Mustangs have been in production for a full decade, their '79-'93 Fox-body predecessors are getting on in years. No worries, though—these cars are as popular as ever, and the '83-'93 convertible models still have great mass appeal.

As a matter of fact, on the very night we were driving home from shooting the convertible-top installation we present here on an '86 GT convertible, we spotted a great fixer-upper '92 LX drop-top for sale. This car had the perfect bones for an ideal 5.0 street car, including a five-speed manual trans. The price? Just $4,200. Clearly, the effort involved in installing a new top on a keeper 5.0 convertible is worth it, because these cars are quite reasonable to buy at the outset.

There's a lot to cover, so we'll get right to it. So much, in fact, that we're showing you only about half of what's involved with the installation of a top—that's all we have room for. Putting a new top on any convertible is considerably more work than you might think. Mike Ambrose, a seasoned professional who has been working with automotive upholstery for more than 25 years, takes the better part of a day—with shop tech Brian Burke—to correctly install a good-quality top like the one we used here, available from 50 RESTO.



1 *The wire-on strip that runs along the outside of the top at the back (directly above the rear window) is the first thing to be removed. The caps on each end are unscrewed, and the strip is pulled off with pliers, as shown. This is discarded immediately to avoid injury from the nasty staples that hold it to the top.*

2 *Next, the top is folded in the down position to access and remove the weatherstrip that seals the elements at the top of the windshield. Although these can be replaced, they are removed carefully so the weatherstrip can be reused with the new top.*

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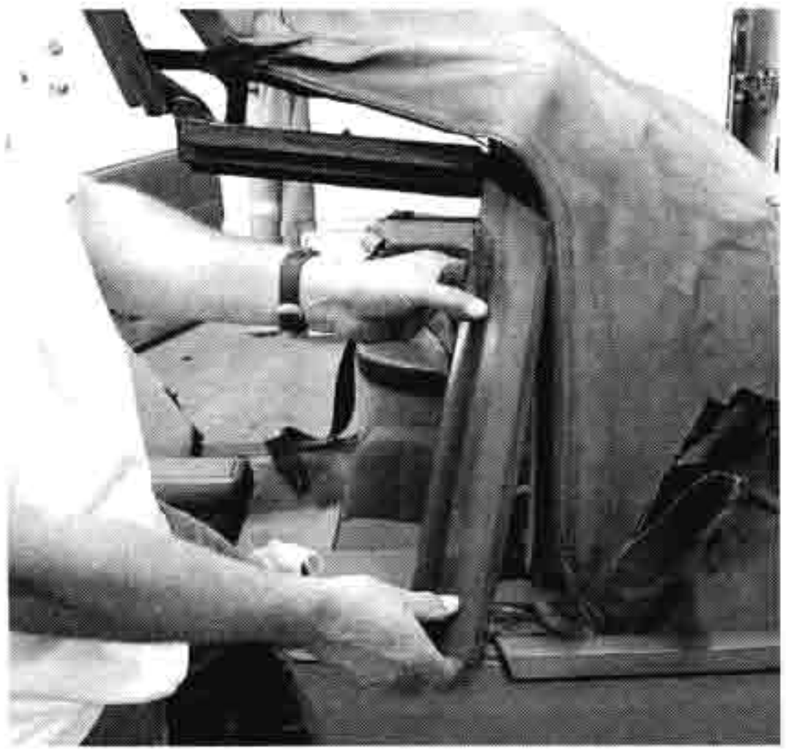
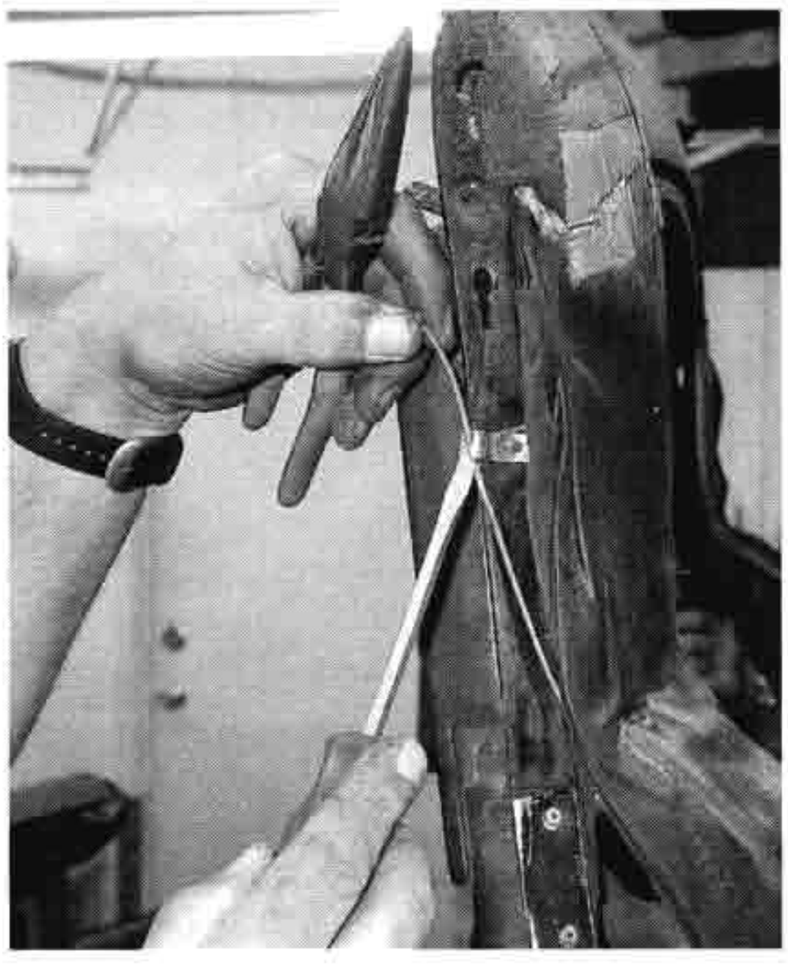
3 *Once all the screws are removed, the weatherstrip that mates to the windshield can be lifted up and removed from the car.*



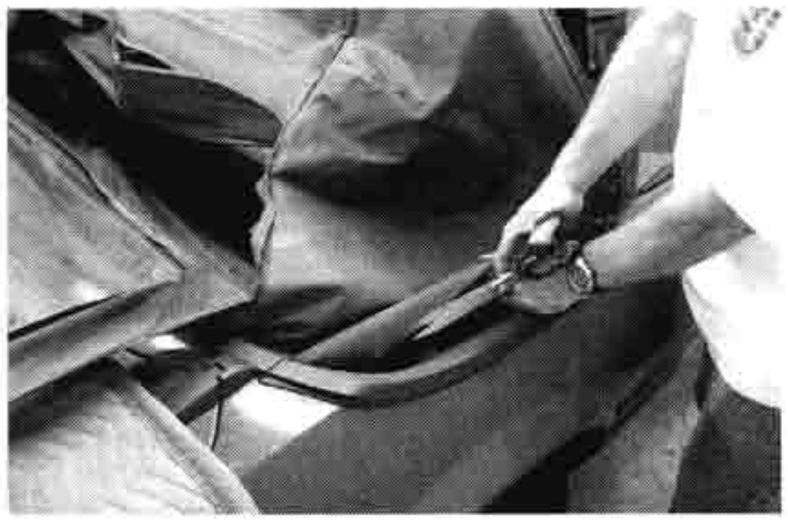
4 *With the top in the halfway position (between fully lowered and raised), these retaining bars need to be removed. The two bolts that hold them to the top (one bar on each side) are accessed from inside the car while sitting in the back seat. These pieces are saved and reinstalled with the new top.*



5 *The top cables on this car are replaced since they are fraying and generally worn out. Near the front, they are disconnected by separating them from these clips that hold them in place. Be careful not to damage the clips, as they need to be reused with the new cables.*

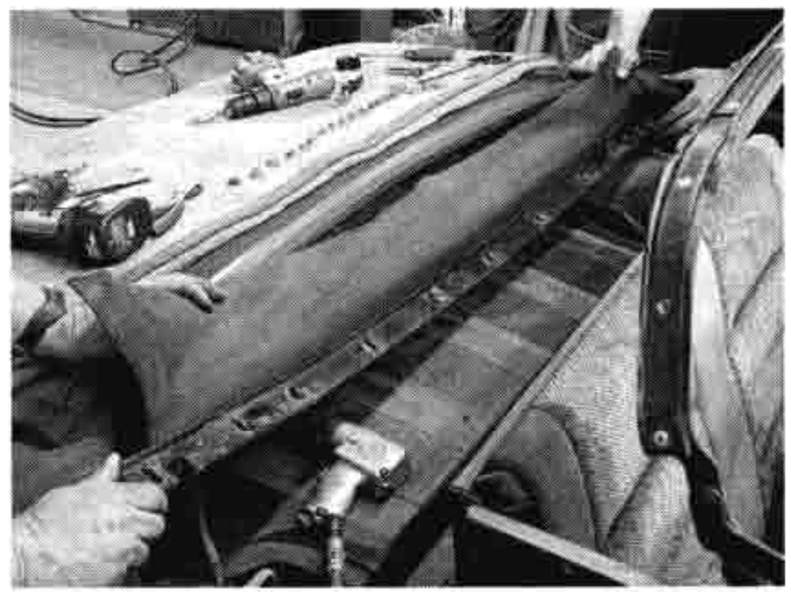
6 *Towards the rear of the top, the old cables are removed by unscrewing these springs. As with the clips shown in the previous photo, the springs are also reused with the new cables.*

7 *Here, Mike Ambrose removes the old worn-out top pad on the driver side while shop tech Brain Burke works on the passenger side. With some cars, you might be able to reuse the pads, but not in this case. They were as toasted as the external skin of the top canvas itself.*



8 *Of course, the old top is junk, so cutting it out of the car isn't a big deal. In fact, it's easier than unbolting the rear staple bar from inside the car. It's hard enough to work inside the car, reinstalling the staple bar with the new top attached.*

9 *With the grungy and crusty old top cut out and on its way to the dumpster, the rear staple bar is unbolted by removing its 19 retaining bolts.*



10 *Once unbolted, the staple bar (or well frame) is removed along with the remnants of the old top. Once out of the car, the staple bar is further disassembled to remove any remaining parts of the old top.*

11 *Good riddance. Shop tech Brain Burke takes the crummy old top off the frame, and we no longer have to look at this eyesore.*

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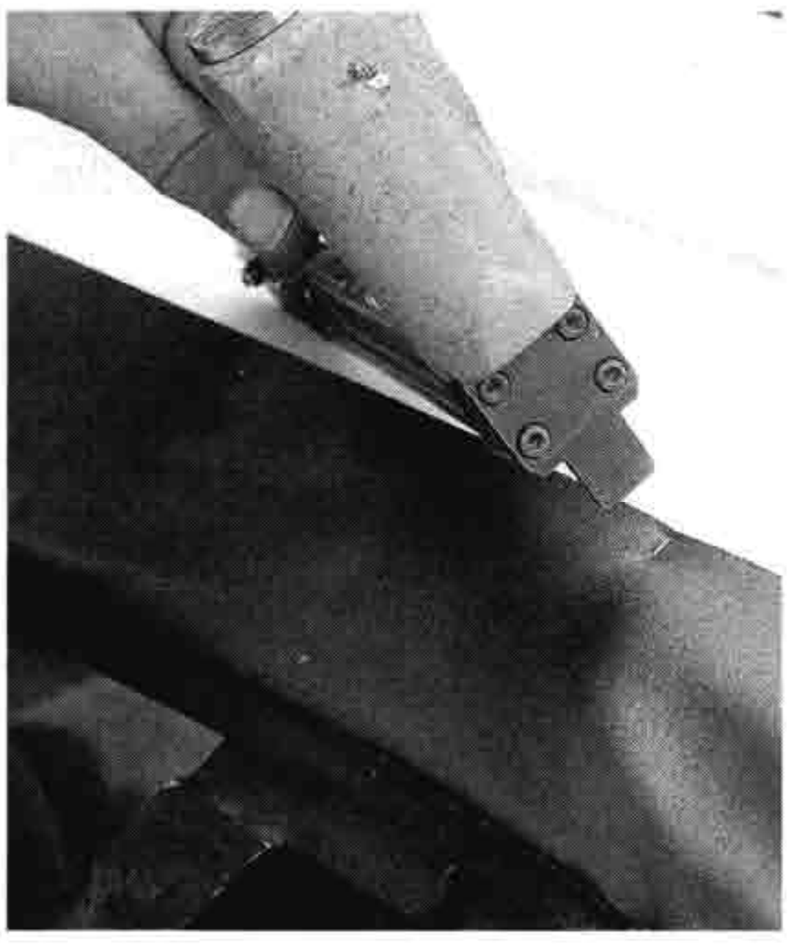
12 *Here's the bare top frame almost ready to accept the new top canvas, pads, cables, and glass rear window. But first it is thoroughly cleaned with a rag and some cleaner. Glass cleaners like Windex or kitchen cleaner like Formula 409 work well. If you desire, the frame can also be repainted.*

13 *With the frame cleaned up, we're ready to install the new materials. Here, Mike sizes up one of the main pads (one on each side) that run alongside the frame above the windows. Some pads are universal and need to be trimmed to fit. This is one area in which the experience of a true upholstery professional is useful.*

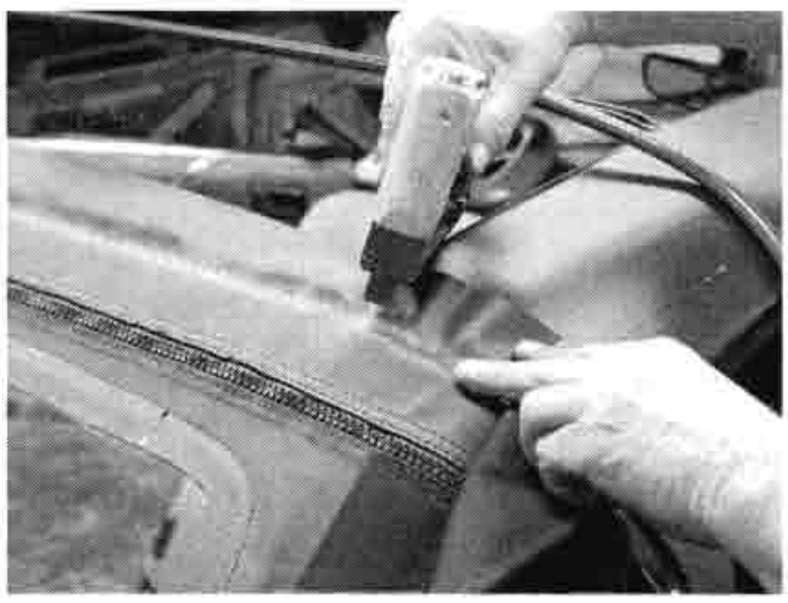


14 *Once the pads are sized and fitted, they're stapled into place on the bows that run across the top frame.*

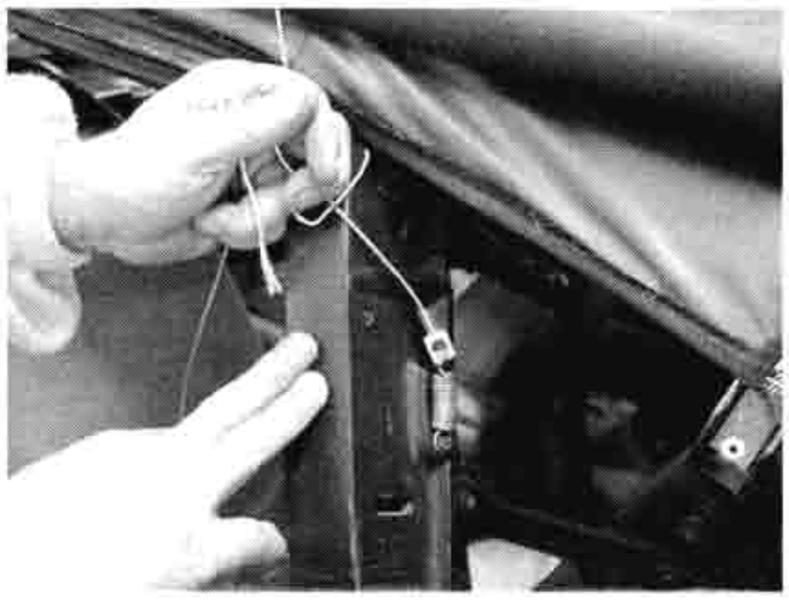
15 *Next, the rear quarter pads are test-fitted and installed. They run from the top bow above the rear window and attach to the car at the rear staple bar.*

16 *As with the main pads, the quarter pads are stapled to the top frame with an air-powered stapler after trimming and final adjustment.*

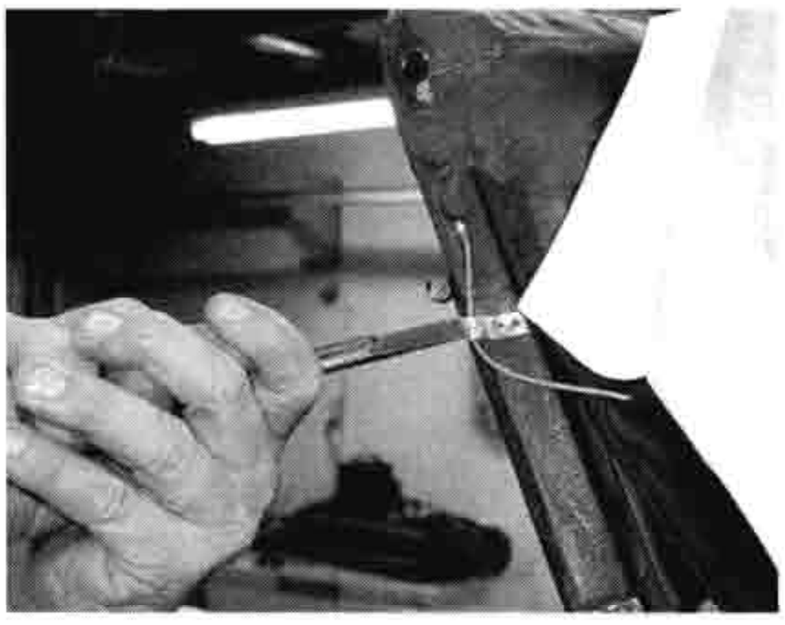
17 *As shown here, the top frame has its full complement of pads already installed on both sides. For the most part, the pads are stapled into place. Upholstery adhesive is used in some places, as well. Size up and fit the glass rear window next, which Mike is doing here. The window has already been installed onto the main rear staple bar, which attaches to the car in the top well, just in front of the trunk lid.*



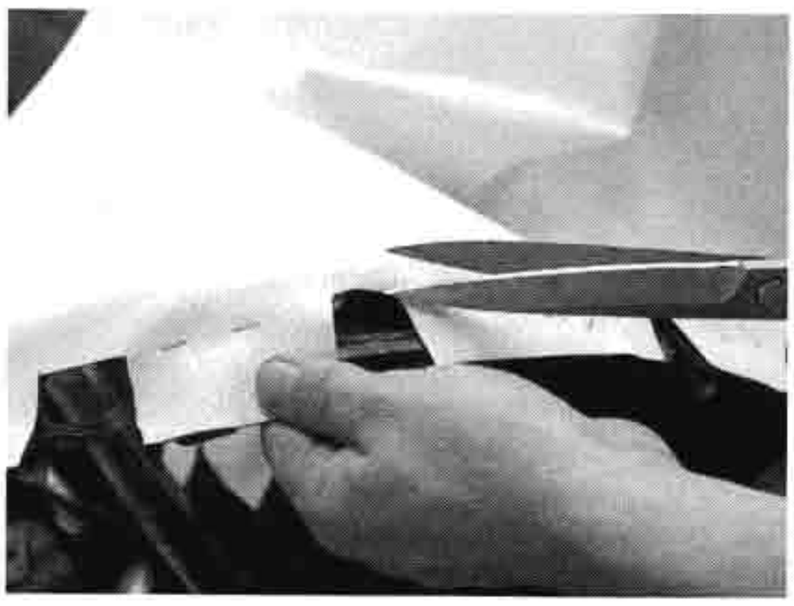
18 *Once the glass window is final-fitted, it's stapled into position. Note also the zipper, which serves two purposes: It allows you to drive with the top up and the window down, and it allows the window to be separated more easily from the top if the window gets broken.*



19 *An important part of the whole installation is refitting the new hold-down cables that keep tension on the top and prevent it from lifting when the car is moving at speed. The new cables attach to the frame's existing springs, as shown here, and are threaded through the new canvas by tying the cable to the strings supplied with the top.*

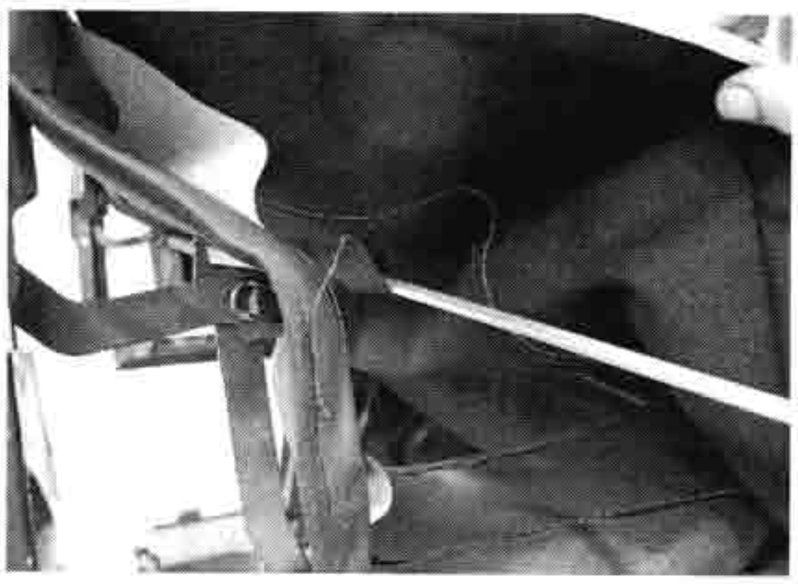


20 *Once the cable (one on each side) is threaded through the top canvas channel, it's attached to the existing clamp that we carefully separated from the old cable in step five. Note that the cable is also reattached to the hole in the frame for the cable and it's held in place by a rubber grommet that was also saved from the old top. At this point, of course, the new canvas has already been set in place over the frame, and the next steps show its final attachment to the car.*

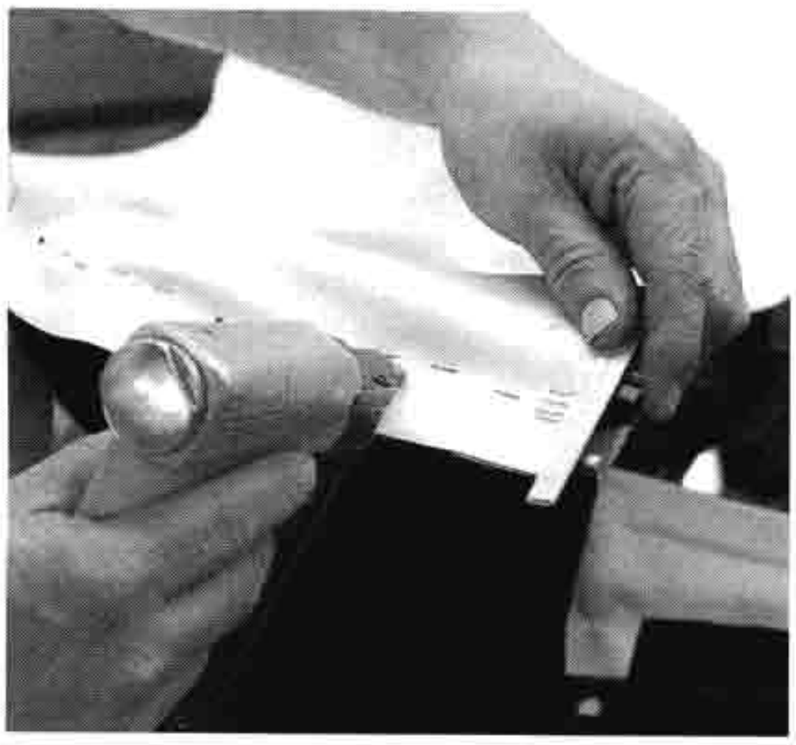


21 *The rear part of the top is stapled in place onto the staple bar. The top also needs to be trimmed so the studs in the car can protrude through the bar and the nuts can be reinstalled. Before the top is attached to the bar, it also needs to be precisely measured to fit the car.*

24 *Back at the front of the top frame, the top is glued into place after it's trimmed and final-fitted. Once glued, it's finally secured into place by reinstalling the weatherstrip that was removed to access and remove the old top canvas.*

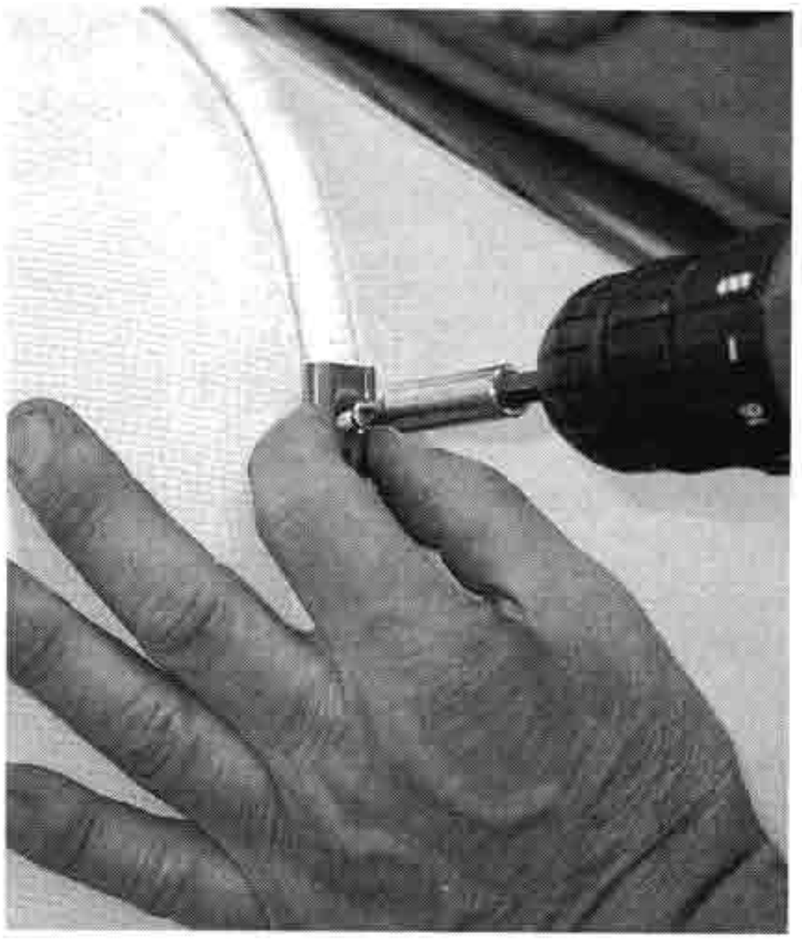


27 *With the top frame halfway raised to relieve the tension on the canvas, the metal support ribs are reinstalled into the sewn-in channels on the underside of the top canvas. These ribs are screwed into place with the channel material sandwiched in between, thus holding the top in place. The ribs were removed from the original top and are reused with the new top.*



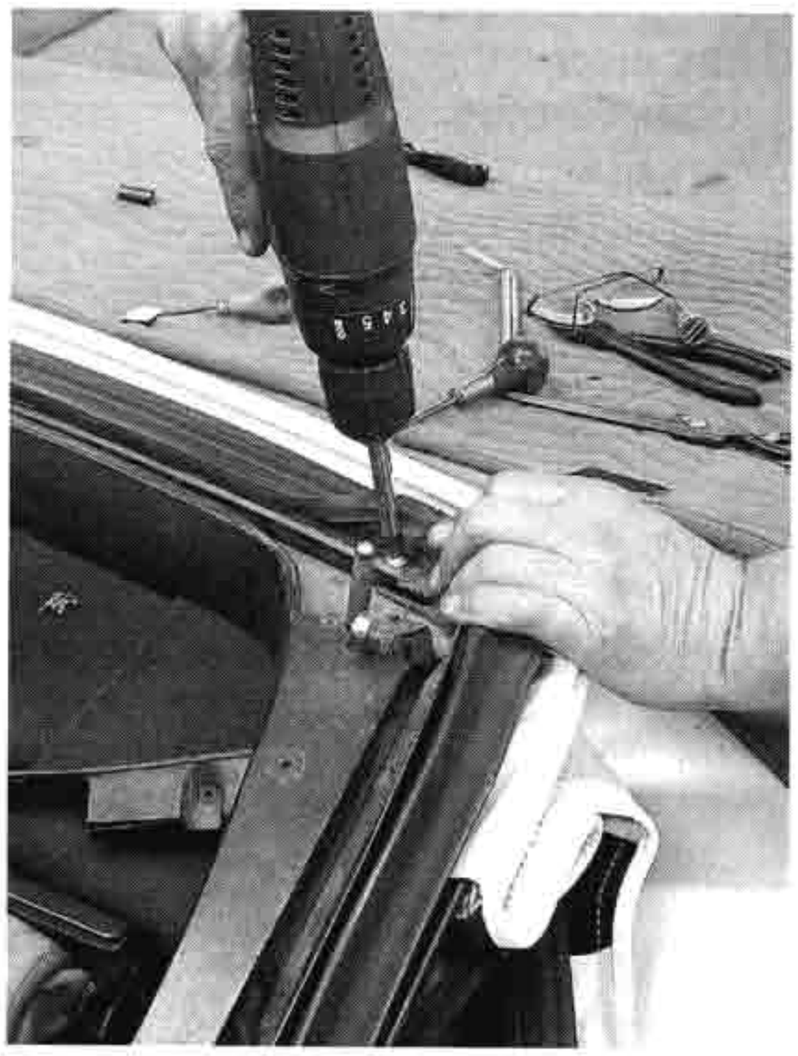
22 *The staple bar, or well frame, as it's also known, is made up of three pieces—two corners and the main bar shown in step 10. Here, the top canvas is stapled to the driver-side corner of the well frame.*

25 *The retaining bars (shown being removed in step four) are reinstalled after the top is glued into place underneath where they mount to the frame. The top is fully attached where it joins the car.*



28 *The final step is to install the new wire-on strip that comes with the new canvas. It's first stapled into place with long staples, then trimmed to size. Next, it's folded in half and tapped down with a hammer before the ends are screwed into place, as shown.*

23 *This is one of the trickier parts of the installation. The rear quarter pads (shown in step 15), the window, and the top canvas are all installed at the same time at the back of the car. They are also all connected to the staple bar. Once attached, most of the remaining installation is at the front half of the top.*



26 *With the front of the canvas attached to the frame, the weatherstrip is reinstalled.*