

Vic Huber photos

Jeep CJ-7 and Toyota Land Cruiser

Dying breeds or limited-number necessities?

By Burge Hulett

The late Bill Harrah knew a lot of things. He knew how to make tons of money in Nevada's booming gaming industry. He knew how to feed his sense of automotive history by amassing the world's largest auto collection. And he also knew how to pick the right new cars to sell in various dealerships he owned near Reno.

Out on Mill St. are two large new-car stores. Bill Harrah owned them both until his death. One, Modern Classic Motors, once sold every exotic and prestige car you could name, and now lists an impressive inventory of Rolls-Royces, Mercedeses, Ferraris and Datsuns.

Next door to MCM is another dealership. It now sells AMC products, Renaults and Jeeps. When Harrah had it, Jeeps were the main reason for its existence. Harrah knew a good car when he saw one. It didn't matter if it was a Mercedes 540K, a Ferrari or a Jeep.

People who understand a little about northern Nevada know why Bill Harrah wanted to own and sell Jeeps. Reno is four-wheel-drive country, and it takes only a few minutes driving down Plumb Lane or Virginia St. to know that, even in times of rising gas prices and lighter, more-efficient vehicles, traditional 4x4s will live a long time in Reno.

Looking east or west from just about anywhere in town will tell you why. On one side of Reno, rising to

still snow-capped peaks even in late June are the Sierras and Lake Tahoe. It's hunting and skiing country, boasting some of the finest (read "roughest") four-wheeling country in the West. And if that isn't enough, the rest of land-locked Reno is surrounded by desert; miles and miles of it, enough so that an intrepid four-wheeler can drive as far as his gas cans will take him.

The typical inhabitant of this still uncluttered and rugged country is a hard-core offroader, one who speaks of 4x4s with a passion that comes from hands-on experience. These are back-country adventurers who know what works in Nevada's mountains and deserts. And that's why they revere traditional 4x4s, Jeep CJ-5s and -7s and Toyota Land Cruisers.

Mike Price sells Jeeps. He's general sales manager of the AMC/Jeep/Renault store once owned by Bill Harrah. He's also an occasional desert racer and a man who's done plenty of offroading in a long line of Jeeps. And when Mike Price talks CJ-5 or -7 language, it's good to listen because Mike Price knows of what he speaks.

Says he, "Jeeps are misunderstood. They've gotten some bad publicity, and I can't really comment on that. All I know is that, properly driven, at least in my experience, they are fine, tough transportation."

We're driving along Rock Blvd. in a CJ-7. It's got a six-cylinder engine,

power steering, tilt wheel, accessory wheels and tires and a bunch of other goodies that boost the sticker price to a little more than \$13,000. The ride is smooth compared with the more choppy CJ-5.

"It's the wheelbase that does it," says Price. "The CJ-7 has 10 inches more than the -5, and you can really feel it on the highway."

At that moment, we hit a dip in the road, going about 55 MPH, and the CJ-7 eases over it like any other passenger car. "In my opinion," says Price, "this CJ-7 is one of the finest dual-purpose vehicles for our part of the country. A family can take all the equipment they'll ever need for a weekend of camping either in the mountains or the desert, and know they'll get them in comfort and come back the same way. And during the winter, this thing will go anywhere there's a road, and a few places there isn't."

The basic CJ-7 comes with either a 151-CID four-cylinder engine or an optional 258-CID six. In Reno's thin air, most buyers go for the six. It's got a two-barrel and 8.3:1 compression ratio. Standard are front disc brakes with an optional power assist, a 15-gallon fuel tank (with a 20-gallon option) and a choice of transmissions, including four-speed and five-speed manuals and a three-speed automatic. The 4WD system is part-time with lockable, manual free-wheeling front

hubs coupled to a seven-speed transfer case with a 2.62:1 low-range gear reduction.

We pulled off Rock Blvd. onto a patch of Nevada desert, something easy to find even inside Reno's city limits. It was typical northern Nevada country, tough, laden with rocks and clumps of sage brush and dry and dusty. Price shifted the CJ-7 into low range. "Watch this," he said, and proceeded to let the big CJ-7 climb a series of hills and navigate gullies with the throttle on idle. His foot wasn't even on the gas. "This is what these things do that really amazes me," he said. We were just creeping along with no lurching or fancy manipulating of the controls. The CJ-7 was doing all the work, and we just sat back in air-conditioned comfort and let it happen.

As big a Jeep booster as Mike Price is, it would be a close contest to match his enthusiasm for Jeeps with Marty Harris' feeling for Toyota Land Cruisers. Harris is like Price in that he sells his favorite car and he's an outdoorsman of long standing.

And Harris' product is also misunderstood. He says Toyota 4WD pickup trucks have cut deeply into Land Cruiser sales, something Harris doesn't particularly like. Says he, "There is nothing as tough as a Toyota Land Cruiser. I don't think a Jeep can even compare to one of these. These Toyotas are heavy, rugged, tough, basic 4WD



transportation. They will take you anywhere and bring you back."

Again, like the Jeep, the Land Cruiser remains one of the top choices of those who really live in the back country.

Says Harris, "We sell a lot of these to geologists and miners, people who make their living in the mountains and the desert. Lots of them have been through a lot of other 4x4s, and they almost always end up in a Land Cruiser."

"I've got one of these myself," he says, speaking of a Land Cruiser, "and I'm telling you, I know it'll go anywhere a horse will."

To prove his point, he found his own special demonstration area within Reno's city limits. Part of it had a 40-percent grade, something appearing impossible to negotiate to a person knowing little about the Land Cruiser's abilities. The Toyota walked up the mini-mountain with a lot less effort than it would have taken a horse. It never stumbled, lost traction or gave the impression it wasn't going to ease over the steep crest. What made all this possible was mostly the 4.2-liter, 125-HP inline six-cylinder engine, one that has powered these vehicles since their introduction to these shores. The engine develops 200 lbs. ft. of torque at only 1,800 RPM so it's no wonder that with the two-speed transfer case engaged in low and the four-speed transmission in first, the land Cruiser will go anywhere a horse can. Personally, Marty Harris thinks the Land Cruiser will go some places a horse won't since in a Land Cruiser the driver gives all the commands and the vehicle never balks.

On the road, the Land Cruiser lets you know it would rather be climbing 40-percent grades. It has solid axles and thick leaf springs at all four corners and rides like just what it is: A basic utility vehicle designed for a single purpose. The road ride is jarring and even with the new-style seats, it's an athletic experience.

The wagon offers more creature comforts in addition to 99.3 cubic feet of carpeted cargo area. It has a plastic two-tone dash with more-or-less styling, seats that are plush for this kind of vehicle and 17.5 more inches of wheelbase. It's also longer and higher than the Land Cruiser.

In viewing the Toyota wagon, it seems to fall somewhere between Jeep's CJ-7 and the up-line Wagoneer. It has Toyota's four-speed transmission, the same two-speed transfer case and the same six-cylinder engine. What you get in the Wagon is a larger vehicle, a little styling, more storage and cargo area, four doors and some comfort.

You could tell something was bothering Marty Harris when he described the vehicles he so strongly believes in. He's a private man, not one to blurt out what's really on his mind, but as we spent more time together, talking about Land Cruisers—what they'll do, and who likes and dislikes them—he finally told me what was troubling him.

It seems there's a rumor going around Toyota dealer circles that the Land Cruiser and the Wagon won't be part of Toyota's 1983 model line.

"I just can't understand it," says Marty, "I know these things haven't been selling particularly well—even our sales are off—and of course I know the company has to move them to make money. It's just that so many people in this area really depend on Land Cruisers; I don't know what they'd do without them. I've got customers who have driven Land Cruisers for as long as they've been in the back country. And I've got friends who depend on them for their recreation, and use them every weekend during hunting season."

As Harris talked, leaning on one of the last two Land Cruisers he expected to see on Reno Toyota's lot, you could see the disappointment on his face. And also a little anger. What was making him hurt and angry was a loss, not of sales commissions, but of something he believes in.

AutoWeek called Toyota Motor Sales in Torrance, Calif., and double-checked the rumor that was troubling Marty Harris. Said the company spokesman, "Land Cruisers will definitely be part of Toyota's product line in 1983. We know how good they are, and we'll sell them next year."

It's difficult to speculate, but the Land Cruiser is an old-timer among a group of fast-trackers heading into a newer 4x4 world, and one may wonder how long even the die-hards will stick with them. No doubt the Marty Harrises of the world, and the owners and users of Land Cruisers are more competent to answer.

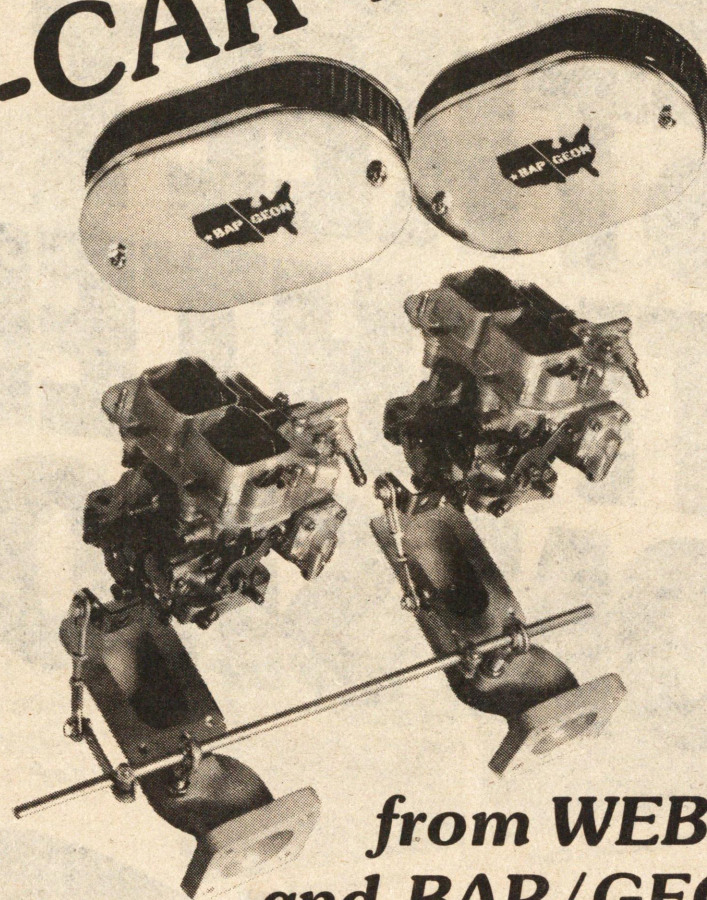
It's interesting to think about Jeeps and Land Cruisers together. They obviously suffer from some common problems mostly stemming from being old designs, upgraded for a rapidly changing offroad world—a world where new technology and conservation constraints have pushed car makers' thinking in unimagined directions.

But Jeeps and Land Cruisers still endure, at least with older buyers, those who believe their vehicles should pass personal tests of time and use. Obviously there must be a cutoff point somewhere, or sometime. Jeep and Land Cruiser traditionalists, the same people who refuse to use pocket calculators and digital watches, hope it's a long way off.

One other interesting note: For 30 years, the Jeep Corp. has sponsored an event called the Jeepers' Jamboree. What it is is a convention of the Jeep faithful for a trip to renew their faith, assuming it needed renewing in the first place—sort of like an offroad Porsche Parade. The Jeep people are kind; they invite owners of other 4x4s to their party. Not just any 4x4, only those that can cut it in country no novice should even consider. Even a horse would balk at some of the trails used in the Jeepers' Jamboree.

And what's invited? Jeeps, naturally, plus Land Rovers and Toyota Land Cruisers. Nothing else allowed.

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