

Half a century of Jeep

50 years of distinguished service for original sport/ute

By William D. Siuru Jr.

It's as immediately recognizable as any BMW or Mercedes-Benz. Its styling has been mimicked as often as any Bimmer or Benz. The Jeep's basic design is 50 years old. And while much has changed, much hasn't.

In the summer of 1940, the Army asked the automotive industry for a "Truck, General Purpose, (or GP, spawning the name Jeep) ¼-ton, 4x4" that weighed 1300 pounds, could carry 600 pounds, had an 80-inch wheelbase, had 85 lb ft of torque and had not only four-wheel drive, but four-wheel steering. And it wanted it now!

Potential manufacturers had to have the first prototype in the Army's hands within 49 days and the rest of the initial lot of 70 within 75 days. Of 135 manufacturers asked to bid, only three responded: Willys-Overland, Ford and tiny American Bantam. Thus the Jeep was created almost overnight.

Karl K. Probst and his associates at American Bantam designed a vehicle that essentially met the Army's specifications, except for weight, in only five days. The company met the deadlines as well, seeing the Jeep as its only means to survive impending bankruptcy. Its tiny Bantam cars, based on the British Austin Seven, were selling at a Yugo-like pace. In all fairness, Bantam had done much homework before specifications were officially issued. It had supplied several stock Bantam convertibles for the Army to field test and even helped the Army's engineers in drawing up the specifications.

The Willys-Overland prototypes (one with two-wheel steering, the other with four-wheel steering) were put together under the guidance of the legendary Barney Roos. With its 61-horsepower "Go Devil" four-cylinder engine, it turned out to be the most successful of the three candidates the Army tested and the design that would eventually be mass produced as the Jeep.

To meet the Army's weight requirements, which were now a more realistic 2160 pounds, Roos put the W-O prototype on a crash diet that included using lighter alloys, thinner-gauge sheet metal, thinner paint and shorter bolts.

Like the other two, Ford used lots of spares from its parts bin including some left over from the Model A. The 40-horsepower engine was from the Fordson tractor. While the Willys' design would be adopted, the Ford's slotted grille would be used. Indeed, this has become a Jeep trademark that is still quite recognizable on the latest Jeeps.



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army

Though Jeep found fame in war, it easily made jump to civilian life

Because the Jeep's overall appearance has really changed so little, archeologists a few centuries down the road may have trouble determining if the Jeep they dug up was a 1940 prototype or a 1990 Wrangler, or maybe a year 2000 model Jeep.

Having the best vehicle and the lowest bid made it easy for the Army to pick Willys-Overland to build the first production increment of 16,000 Jeeps. Due to the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army demanded more Jeeps than W-O could produce. So Ford was brought on board to build Jeeps to the Willys-Overland blueprints.

However, Bantam was too tiny for even that. So after building a few thousand Jeeps, it was given a contract to build Jeep trailers. Most of the Bantam Jeeps were given to the Russians who quickly claimed that *they* had invented the Jeep. The story goes that Henry Ford had the letter "F" placed on bolts after the government no longer let the script "Ford" be placed on the Jeep's tail. This was so the Russians wouldn't make the same claims about Ford-built Jeeps. Others say the "F" bolts insured Ford didn't do warranty work on components that were

Willys-Overland's responsibility.

Between Ford and Willys-Overland, some 650,000 Jeeps were produced before the last one rolled off the Toledo, Ohio, assembly line in October 1945. During the war years, the Jeep was one of the few examples of multi-purpose military hardware that did everything well. It was used for everything from carrying the likes of Roosevelt and Churchill to serving as a light attack vehicle when fitted with a machine gun.

Carrying up to four stretchers, it did what M.A.S.H. helicopters would do in the Korean conflict. It could play locomotive and pull a 25-ton train. Lightweight Jeeps were dropped with paratroopers.

There was even sort of an "adopt-a-Jeep" program where civic-minded citizens and school children could save up \$900, usually through stamp or bond drives, to buy a Jeep to send overseas. The donors got letters telling about "their" Jeep and even lost or missing-in-action notices.

Even though the Jeep was as GI as they come, it became a civilian with remarkable ease. The first civilian CJ-2A "Universal Jeep" was produced only 10 days after the Germans surrendered. After all, conversion was quite simple. Just a couple of cosmetic and minor mechanical changes and the Jeep was ready to make hay, mow a golf course or take a sportsman to his favorite fishing spot. The Jeep was the very first sport/utility vehicle.

While Ford went off to greener postwar pastures, Willys-Overland smartly adopted the Jeep as its own exclusive trademark and capitalized on the huge amount of free advertising. After all, every GI had probably driven one and it was a rare civilian anywhere in the world who had not seen one. The trademark is still one of the most coveted in American history even though it has changed hands several times—Kaiser in 1953, American Motors in 1970 and Chrysler in 1988.

Its current owner, Chrysler, has tried to close bars with names like "Jeeps" and has chastised journalists who have used the word "Jeep" incorrectly. A letter to me is probably in the mail right now.

Except for the Willys Aero sedans, Willys-Overland used the Jeep's easily identifiable features on all its products, from the first all-steel station wagon to Jeepster Phaeton. Even when Jeeps became "in" vehicles loaded with power everything, muscular V8s and wild paint jobs and whose off-road chores were limited to crossing gravel parking lots, the Jeep look was still omnipresent. ■