

# IS TODAY'S JEEP STILL A JEEP?

*At age 50, and now a longtime civilian, the latest Wrangler doesn't forget its war vet ancestor. That's both good and bad*

By John Matras



**Conspicuous Target Yellow Wrangler visually assaults Willie and Joe's dogface-mobile**

**S**o the Jeep is 50 years old. For a motor vehicle, or for just about anything else, going strong at age 50 is quite an accomplishment. It's safe to say that just about everything half-a-century old is either lost and forgotten in someone's attic or is protected by some historic trust.

At the ripe old age of 50, the Jeep is now the oldest vehicle model in production. The Citroen 2CV has gone to that big Deux Chevaux pasture in the sky, while the VW Beetle is still being built but only in Mexico, a final refuge from modernity. And

anyway, bona fide production of the Beetle began in postwar years, a survivor of World War II. The Jeep was a product of the war.

Of course, the Jeep is the oldest only if it is indeed the same model that entered production in 1941. Is it only wearing the Jeep name? Has it become something other than what it was originally? Can the vehicle with the stated purpose being "to carry personnel, primarily for reconnaissance; to transport light cargo; to tow 37 mm anti-tank gun" be the same as one that's "the quintessential fun and freedom machine ... for adventurous, image-conscious, outdoor peo-

ple who are looking for the rugged, tough and durable vehicle?"

In other words, is a Jeep still a Jeep?

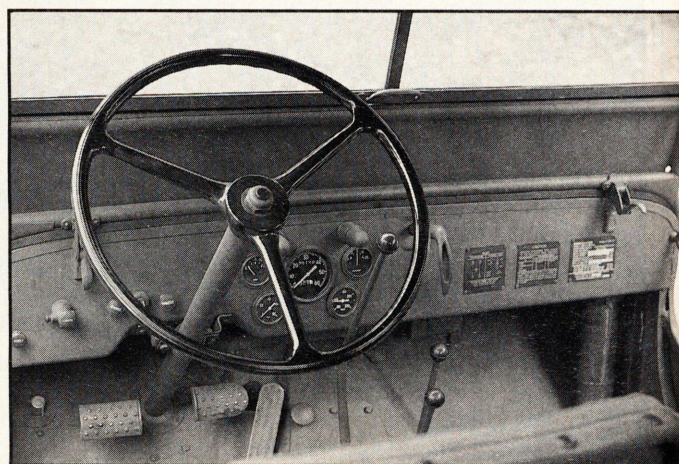
By Jeep, of course, we mean the rough and ready Wrangler, not the Comanche pickup truck nor the relatively plush Cherokee sport/utility nor the Grand Wagoneer, itself a living fossil. Those are rugged and off-road capable, but the Cherokee has power windows optional and they're standard on the Big G.W. The Wrangler—the Jeep—doesn't have windows at all, just side curtains—although that is a step up from the original.

The original Jeep wasn't a Jeep at all. In military parlance it was a "truck, ¼-ton, 4x4." The Jeep name came from either A: the Jeep character in *Popeye* cartoons, or B: the model designation given to those built by Ford Motor Co., which called it GPW (not "General Purpose—Willys," but "G" for "Government," "P" for "80-inch wheelbase reconnaissance car," and "W"





**Instruments are similar, but passengers stay dry in Wrangler and taste road splash in Willys (above right)**



for Willys, per the Ford parts numbering system). The origin matters little because after the war, the Federal Trade Commission gave the Jeep name to Willys, not Bantam, whose "Quad" prototype had established the concept, nor Minneapolis-Moline, who also claimed the name.

Bantam built only a handful of Jeeps, the big contracts going to Ford and Willys. Willys' pilot series of "Jeeps" was designated MA, and the first true production run MB. They were functionally identical to Ford's GPW, though Jeep enthusiasts can easily spot differentiating details such as the round front chassis cross tube on the Willys vs. the channel section on the Ford.

Ford developed a grille of stamped sheet metal, adopted by Willys in mid-1942, that continues today only slightly changed. All Willys MBs made in 1941 and early '42 had a grille made of vertical bars, such as on an MB belonging to Frank Buck of Mountainhome, Pa., a collector of military vehicles (other Jeeps and trucks and even a tank powered by a five-cylinder radial engine), Packards and '50s Corvettes. Buck's MB is cosmetically and mechanically restored, and is identical to MBs made in 1941. So for a 50-year comparison, we'll overlook the fact that it wasn't built until February 1942. It's close enough, already.

Parking our would-be-'41 Willys MB next to the '91 Jeep Wrangler, two things became very obvious: How similar they were—and how different. Our Wrangler was painted what in '41 would have been Conspicuous Target Yellow, the Willys in a more battle-ready, flat olive drab. The Wrangler was wider, the grille was bent back halfway up, and the hood and fenders were more rounded, following styling trends (if you can say that about Jeeps) established by the CJ-5. (The CJ-5 followed a nomenclature trend that started with the CJ-2A in August 1945, the CJ standing for Civilian Jeep).

The Wrangler's headlights are rectangular instead of round but in the same place relative to the grille, and the parking lights are in the same place as those in the CJ-2A, which replaced the "blackout lights" of the wartime Jeeps.

There's a significant difference in tops.

The military version was a glorified tarp draped over a pair of bows; no side curtains, not even using glass in the rear "window." Canvas inserts were provided for the door cutout which at least helped keep upward-bound liquids from splashing into the laps of occupants, even if slanting rain pelted them from the sides and blew around the windshield. The Wrangler, on the other hand, has a fabric top tight as an otter's tummy and almost as waterproof. Nothing short of a certified hurricane, and maybe not that, will dampen Wrangler riders. And it's snug enough that the heater will keep them warm at 65 mph in single-digit temperatures and cool when the optional air conditioner is used. The only air conditioning for the Willys MB was provided by the enemy, and ditto for heat.

On the other hand, while the Willys' top goes down faster than the Iraqi air force, you need the Corps of Engineers to help with all the snaps, hooks and zippers of the Wranglers' top. Boy Scouts have earned merit badges for less.

The sad expression on Willy and Joe, Bill Maulden's Jeep-loving dogfaces, could have been from what passed for seats in the MB, an unyielding base with a cushion dense enough to stop small-arms fire. That could be useful. The bottom of the driver's seat is the fuel tank. The cushions had one practical feature, a waterproof zipper pouch on the bottom for those secret maps of enemy positions. The back seat wasn't any better, and the rated capacity of five is achievable only if two sit on the "inner fenders" in the back.

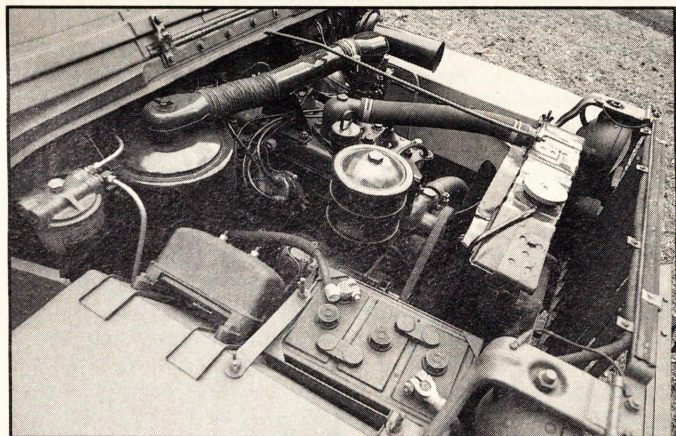
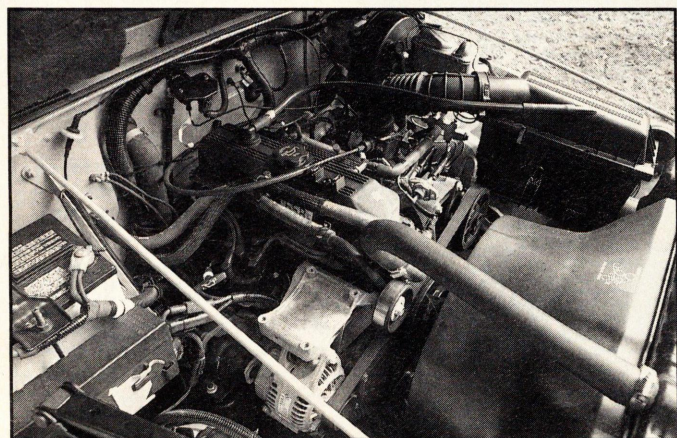
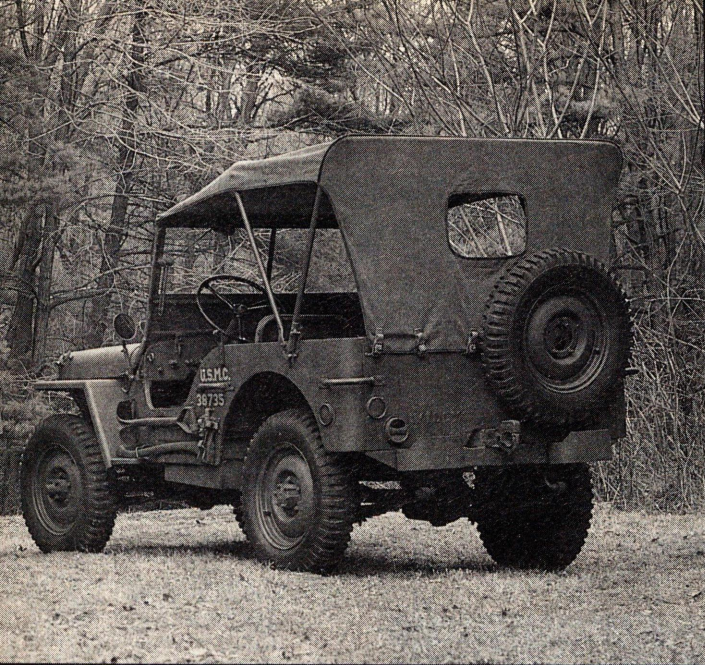
The Wrangler's high-back bucket seats are

surprisingly comfortable and equipped with three-point belts that hook into a sturdy "sport bar"—roll is a dirty word at Jeep. Rear passengers get lap belts. Safety devices on the MB ran to things like an M1 in the scabbard across the dash, helmets on passengers and a canvas bag to prevent reflections off a lowered windshield. The windshield on today's Jeep Wrangler still folds down, but it's as difficult as dropping the top.

The Wrangler's dash is made of plastics not yet invented in 1941 but it doesn't supply much more information than the MB: Both have a speedometer, fuel, oil pressure and temperature gauges, the Wrangler a voltmeter, the MB an ammeter, while only the Wrangler has a tachometer, clock and tripmeter. The Wrangler also can be equipped with an AM-FM/cassette stereo. The radio in the Willys, if any, was a two-way short wave and the only way to get stereo was to park two next to each other.

Underneath, the Wrangler and the MB are remarkably similar. Both are body-on-frame construction and the Wrangler clings stubbornly to the solid axle, four-leaf-spring suspension that has been around since the first Bantam Quad. Wheelbase and track have both increased, which should improve ride and handling, but the Wrangler rides like a kangaroo and doesn't corner but





caroms. In fact, several times in the same curve, more if the pavement is bumpy. The MB has apparently stiffer springs, advantageous in that it bounces less, but it sure wallops that first bump.

There's an apocryphal World War II story that has Germans trying to masquerade their way through Allied lines in American uniforms and a captured Jeep, but being found out by a Belgian who noted that had the impostors been genuine, the officer would have been driving, not riding in the back where one gets hemorrhoids. Apocryphal but believable. Some things never change, even if you want them to.

mental impact" meant incoming rounds.

The Wrangler's performance with the four is quite adequate, even spunky. It's available only with a five-speed overdrive manual transmission (the six has an optional three-speed automatic) and a 4.11:1 final drive ratio. The Willys has only a three-speed manual with only the top two gears almost synchronized. With a 4.88:1 rear gear, it feels in third gear like there should be two more gears to go.

According to specifications, top operational speed of the Willys MB was 65 mph. But the engine felt uncomfortable much over 40 mph and directional integrity

	1941 Willys MB	1991 Wrangler Base
Base Price:	\$739	\$12,259
Wheelbase, (in):	80.0	93.4
Height, (in):	69.75 w/ top	72.0
Length/width, (in):	127.0/62.0	153.0/66.0
Curb weight (lb):	2453	2953
Powertrain:	Front-longitudinal, L-head, 1-bbl downdraft carbureted 2.2-liter/134.2 cid inline four, cast-iron block and head, 60 hp @ n/a rpm, n/a lb ft @ n/a rpm, rear/full-time 4wd w/ two-speed transfer case, three-speed manual	Front-longitudinal, ohv, multi-point injected 2.4-liter/150.4 cid inline four, cast-iron block and head, 123 hp @ 5250 rpm, 148 lb ft @ 3000 rpm, rear/full-time 4wd w/ two-speed transfer case, five-speed manual w/od
Suspension:	Live axle front, leaf springs; rear live axle, leaf springs	Live axle front, leaf springs, shocks, antiroll bar; rear live axle, leaf springs, shocks
Brakes (F/R):	Drums/drums	11.02 in discs/9 in drums
Tires/Wheels:	6.00x16 six-ply bias / 16x4.5 in.	P215/75R15 / 15x7

**Both engines are inline fours. The Wrangler's (left) touts multi-point injection, while the carbureted Willys' (below) can run on fuels rated as low as 68 octane**

Jeeps have been fitted with a great variety of engines, often based as much on what was available—for a while even the American Motors 304 V8 in the CJ-7. The '91 Wrangler has an optional 4.0-liter fuel-injected six, but the Wrangler's base engine, like the MB, has four cylinders. But instead of Willys' tough but simple Go-Devil, a 60-hp flathead with a single-throat downdraft carburetor, the 1991 Wrangler's 2.4-liter, 123-hp four has electronic port fuel injection and overhead valves. It even has a catalytic converter.

The MB has a short tailpipe that exits in front of the right-rear wheel. In those days, the term "environ-

is not very impressive either.

Both old and new Jeeps have two-speed transfer cases and four-wheel-drive, though the MB has a lever for each function while they're combined on the Wrangler. The Wrangler also has full-time four-wheel-drive as an option for when the going is only semi-rough. Locked-differential, part-time four-wheel-drive is reserved for authentic off-roading or the deepest snow.

Probably the greatest difference lies in the braking system, the disc/drum setup of the Wrangler far superior to the all-drum system of the MB. At least panic braking in the Wrangler only requires dealing with peculiar contributions of the suspension. The MB adds excitement by varying the effectiveness of each drum every time the brake pedal is used. Throw in suspension dynamics and you have a thrill ride beyond any amusement park.

Of course, itemizing detail differences is missing the point. It's examining each tree while missing the proverbial forest. And from a forest standpoint, a Jeep is still the best way to four-wheel through the woods. Our "off-roading" in these two was limited to some damp, grassy slopes. Buck's MB done its duty in the muck long ago and anyway, those slopes were challenge enough. The low range in both will let you scream along at a walking pace, if that's what you want, or plunk along at a traction-preserving rate. Both have minimum clearance of more than eight inches and short wheelbases and overhangs to make crests and ditches less of a worry.

As everyday transportation, both are as practical as black leather jackets in August. Neither has any security. Well, the Willys has whatever armament may be mounted. The Wrangler has locking doors but also zipper panels in the fabric top with the pull tab on the outside. Locking yourself out of either nominates your ethnic group for the butt of jokes. Actually, early wartime Jeeps came with ignition keys, but all were the same, making them good only for getting lost. Later military Jeeps had a starter button.

How old is the Jeep? Well, the old bulldog is ugly, kind of rough around the edges and not particularly fleet of foot. He's just as he always was. The bite's still there, the Jeep's still a Jeep, and you've not seen the last of this old dog yet. ■