

SLOUCHING TOWARDS TAHOE

Three days across the High Sierra in Jeeps teach us proper planning, technique and the help of friends will get you through every time

By Mark Vaughn

"I have always been dependent upon the kindness of strangers ..."

— Blanche duBois, and others

It should have been crystal clear the night before, sitting on the veranda of the American River Inn browsing through Mark A. Smith's *Guide to Safe, Common-Sense Off-Road Driving*. All you have to do is pay attention to that pocket-sized, staple-bound, clearly illustrated and very unambiguous book and you'll do fine. But the active word there was "browsing." Silly me.

Off-roading, real off-roading, sits so far out of the realm of what you and I might call driving that it's not really driving at all. It's like slow-motion, mechanical ballet.

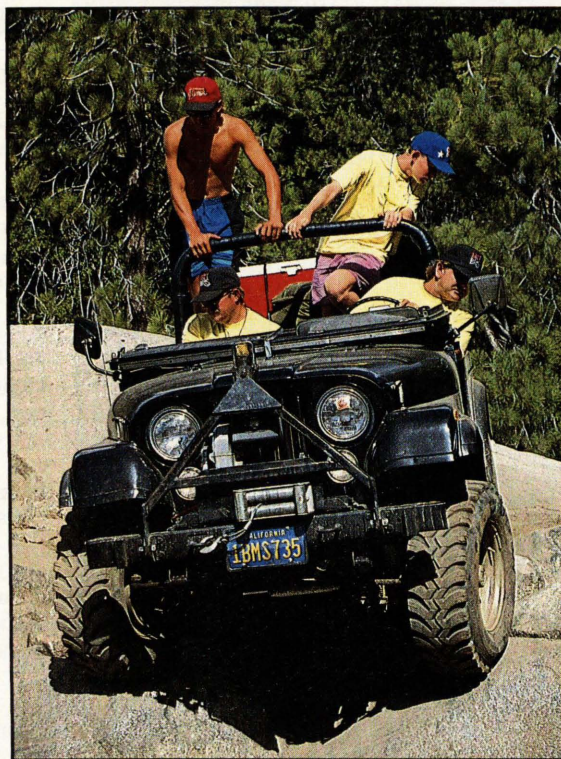
"DRIVE SLOWLY and CRAWL over the rocks and rough terrain," the little book says. "Remember, speed and power are not required."

The Jeepers Jamboree is extreme stuff, double-diamond, sign-the-release seriousness with plenty of "Oh-dearGodNO" situations thrown in. A very slow, contorted version of Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. And you get to be Mr. Toad.

It doesn't sound all that tough on paper. The actual "tough stuff" is only about nine miles long. That's less than 10 minutes on the freeway. Our trip would take three days.

The idea of a Jeepers Jamboree started 40 years ago as a sort of fund-raiser put on by the Georgetown Divide Rotary Club. A small group of businessmen, friends and Rotarians (author Mark A. Smith among them) was looking for a way to bring some money into this small, California Gold Rush town's economy. Since they were all enthusiastic Jeep owners, the idea of a guided off-road trip was a natural.

In the summer of 1952, 12 of them set off in four Jeeps into the mighty Sierra Nevada mountains, gauging a number of routes for their suitability for the tour. They settled on the Rubicon Trail, an old stagecoach route



which itself followed a footpath used by native Americans. It started in Georgetown and wound its way east over the Sierras to Lake Tahoe. Jamboree parties would drive into Rubicon Springs, a sort of earthly version of Paradise, on Friday. Saturday would be a day for goofing off at the Springs, splashing under the waterfalls and hiking around in the hills. Sunday would be spent driving up over the last chunk of Sierra granite and down to Lake Tahoe.

Altogether the route was 71 miles, most of it fairly flat logging roads and even some pavement, with the exception of some approach roads and the fairly flat stuff on the Lake Tahoe side. And there were those nine miles of serious off-roading.

Thanks to those nine miles, the Jeepers Jamboree would come to be known as the toughest, hairiest and most satisfying time you could have in such a vehicle and still have adult supervision.

From relatively humble 1953 beginnings of 55 Jeeps and 155 Jeepers, the Jamboree has grown steadily over the years. Now helicopters supply the campsite at Rubicon Springs and people come from around the world to challenge the trail. Some years the organizing committee has to have a lottery to limit the number of participants. By the time we line up in the big, wide main street of Georgetown, there have been 39 Jamborees (ours will be the 40th anniversary). Over that time almost 25,000 happy campers have been safely transported across the Rubicon Trail.

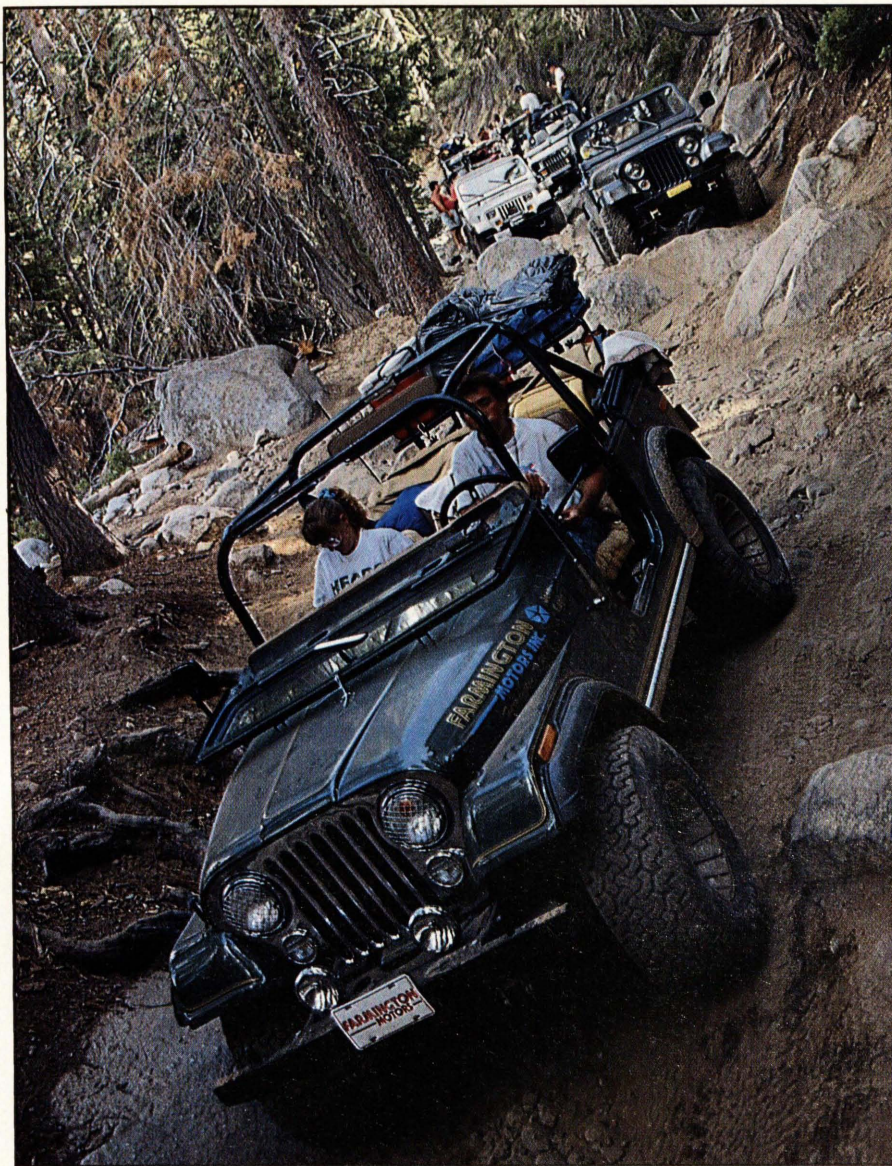
If mornings were apples, this one would be "crisp." Hundreds of fully loaded Jeep Wranglers, flat-fender Jeeps and old Willys vehicles built before "sport/utility" was a phrase await the start. Coffee is sipped, snapshots are snapped and there is much guffawing and back-slapping.

Few of these Jeeps are fresh off the showroom floor: There are elaborately welded luggage racks that fit four ice chests perfectly; a custom-welded fire extinguisher-holder bolted onto a roll bar looks practically artistic; custom paint jobs with goofy names go side-by-side with Jeeps held together seemingly by their collection of "Jeepers Jamboree" bumper stickers. Water bottles, coolers, sleeping bags, tents and folding chairs are stuffed into every crevice and bungee-corded onto every spare spot.

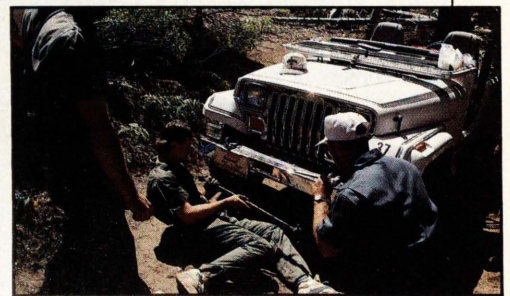
Then, with the sun still low in the trees and jackets still required to fend off the Sierra chill, the convoy sets off.

And it seems like such a piece of cake. The first 43 miles are ridiculously, deceptively easy. They're all taken in two-wheel-drive over paved highways, smoothly graded logging roads and maybe a few slight bumps. Heck, you can still pick up San Francisco radio stations. Eighteen-wheeled logging trucks careen past. At this rate we'll be in Tahoe in time for lunch. What's the big deal about this Rubicon Trail thing?

We find out at mile 43, just past Loon



Speeds on the nine-mile 'serious' section (opposite and left) averaged ½ mph, as we placed the wheels on top of the rocks, like the book says. Some people let air out of the tires (below) though book says it's not necessary. Those who didn't read the book (bottom) paid the price in tie rods



JIM FRENK PHOTOS

Lake dam where, 6100 feet up in the Sierras, the convoy stops. Suddenly, everybody is doing things to their Jeeps. Windshields are folded flat on top of hoods and strapped into place, front hubs are locked, the sound of escaping tire pressure fills the air. There is still guffawing and the back-slapping but now everything else has a purpose.

Something very big and very serious is waiting just ahead on the trail. We fold our windshield flat—just because everybody else is doing it—and proceed, the transfer case still fixed in two-wheel high.

Almost immediately it becomes clear we are in way over our head. The Jeep trails and patches of dirt that, in all past experience, had made up our idea of four-wheeling, are nowhere to be found. There is no trail. There is not even any dirt. Instead, there are acres of granite slab.

Not quite panic, but strong doubt sets in. This is not a place wheeled vehicles belong. Rock climbers would like this place. Glaciers would. Not internal-combustion engines and driveshafts.

But all the other Jeeps are crawling happily along at maybe a half-mile an hour. Some passengers are walking over the gran-

ite taking pictures, chatting, *smiling*. The man driving the Jeep next to us leans out and actually says, "Lovely day, isn't it?"

One of our passengers, a Chrysler representative who invited us along, asks politely why we're not in four-wheel low. We have no good answer. Silently she looks at the other Chrysler-provided Jeeps to assure she'll have a ride out.

Jeeps are scattered across the granite slab, all pointed in roughly the same direction. There seems to be a bottleneck ahead in the trees toward which we are creeping—crawling ahead a few feet, stopping for traffic and crawling some more as the funnel of trees sucks in more Jeeps.

When we get there, a whopping 100 feet into the meaty part of the trip, the fact that it looks a little more like a trail is no consolation. The route is an assemblage of small, granite pyramids surrounded by 10-foot-tall granite boulders. We would have trouble hiking over it, and there is no way we can drive through, despite what the other Jeeps are doing.

Tucked into a nylon duffle under the sleeping bags are the following words, repeated throughout *Mark A. Smith's Guide to*

Safe, Common-Sense Off-Road Driving, page three: "When crawling over rocks, speed and power are not necessary ..."

Of course, those words are packed in the duffle bag, and when we'd read them, remember, we were browsing. We power ahead.

Page 10: "If you hear metal and granite scraping, don't panic—the rock is rubbing against the frame or skidplate. It will not hurt the vehicle."

The question is, when does "scraping" stop and "irreparable damage" begin?

Since we're moving at less than a half-mile an hour, our photographer has wandered ahead to take pictures, and the Chrysler representative has discreetly—in the interests of survival, no doubt—slipped off the back of the Wrangler and into the trees.

Amazingly we make it through the first 50 feet of trail to where the "Rock Rollers" await. These, it turns out, are helpful, experienced Jamboree staffers who stand at tough sections of trail to guide drivers through.

At this point the smart thing would have been to lean out the side of the doorless Wrangler and say, "Excuse me, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing." But instead, for some reason, we hear our lips make the word, "Howdy." Just as the Rock Roller is smiling and saying, "Howdy" back, the front end of the Wrangler slams on top of one of the pyramid-shaped rocks and makes a sound that is definitely not scraping.

The top of the rock that just missed the front axle grabs the steering tie rod and bends it into a perfect right angle. Had this been *Sesame Street* you would now hear a voice say, "The letter L." The steering has gone

completely south.

Since this is such a narrow piece of the trail, about 150 Jeeps behind us are now stopped. There is no easy way to get our vehicle out of the way and suddenly, we have caused a High-Sierra traffic jam.

On the Pusatonic Thruway or the George Washington Bridge our fellow commuters would have had little sympathy. But here on the Rubicon, Rock Rollers, Jeeps and a collection of tourists from the road at Loon Lake dam (still just 150 feet away) begin crawling eagerly about. Burly mountain men station themselves at the front corners of our vehicle, grab hold and turn the front wheels *by hand*. A skinny redheaded kid jumps in the driver's seat and gives power when the Rock Rollers tell him to. It is quite a scene.

Within 15 minutes our Jeep has been manhandled out of the way and we are left to contemplate our situation. Obviously, the method we've used in the first 150 feet isn't going to get us over the next 28 miles. To carry on will mean adopting an entirely new way of thinking.

So, with our Jeep parked out of the way, we watch other people do it right; we listen to what experienced people say; we dig out our copy of *Mark A. Smith's Guide to Safe, Common-Sense Off-Road Driving*.

All of which might have gotten us through. But just for insurance, there is the Thorne family, a few Jeeps behind us and several Jeeps long. Gene Thorne, patriarch, pulls out a tool box and hands the properly sized tie-rod-removal wrench to Rock Rollers Rob and Rich Mainwaring, who slither in the dirt beneath the Jeep removing the tie rod. Rob Mainwaring then uses the high-tech method of whacking the tie rod against a fallen log until it is straight. In an emergency, that might have been good enough, but this is the Jeepers Jamboree. In the ultra-organized fashion that seems to be the trademark of the weekend, the tie rod is *helicoptered* out to be reinforced with a piece of angle iron at a repair station halfway to Rubicon Springs.

Lending a wrench is one thing, but Thorne now lends us a human being. His nephew, Russ Thorne, an industrial engineering student at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, is the kind of guy you'd want your sister to marry. He is a polite version of Richie Cunningham. The worst language we'll hear him use all weekend is "Holy

Cats." He is from a town in the Sierra Nevada foothills called (we are not making this up) Rescue. And, best of all, he knows how to drive over rocks.

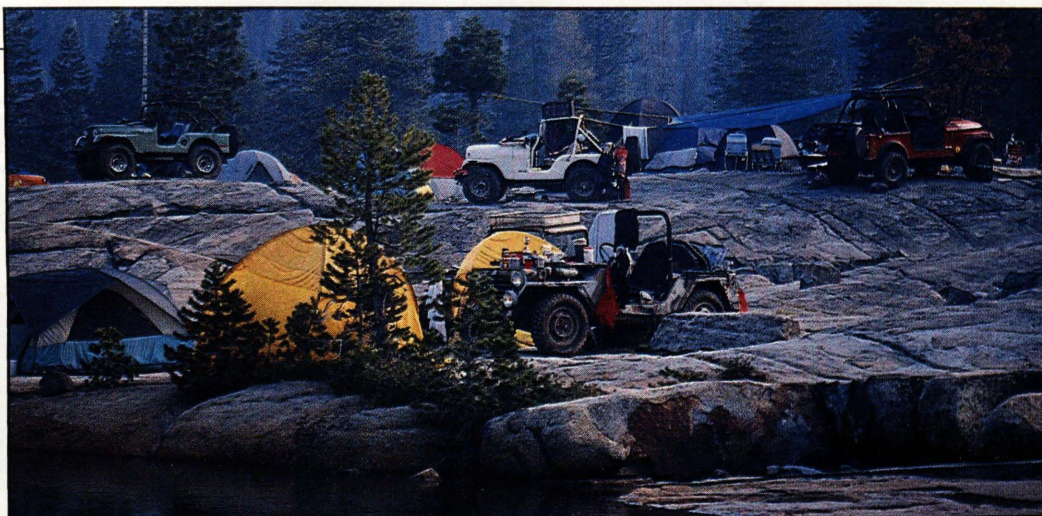
"All you've got to do, really, is keep putting your tires on top of the rocks," Russ Thorne tells us reassuringly. "You'll get the hang of it."

Turns out you have to put the tire *way* up on top of the biggest rock you can find and let the rest of the rocks take care of themselves. We watch the Jeeps go by and find confirmation on page 10: "Don't straddle rocks. A vehicle with six inches of ground clearance is not going over an eight-inch rock."

By the time the helicopter arrives and Dick Celio crawls beneath our Jeep to put the beautifully welded tie rod back in place, off-roading seems a lot easier. We set off, now four, with Russ filling out the company in the very last Jeep on the 40th Jeepers Jamboree, creeping along and placing each tire carefully on top of each rock.

It works.

It's amazing what the Jeep can do. Yuppies driving Wranglers have no idea. We creep up granite slabs steeper than staircases, over boulders the size of small Japanese imports, through standing water up to the doorsills, and as long as we put the tires on top of the rocks we can do anything.



Our Rubicon Springs campground (top), high in the Sierras, where we slept on top of 4000 feet of granite box spring. Russ Thorne (above), dubbed 'Trail god of the Rubicon,' guides our party through. Uncle Gene and brother Scott Thorne (right) chow down at 'Mountain Man Feast.' The Rock Rollers (opposite) were like guardian angels



There isn't even any scraping sound.

We have progressed to the next level.

Soon we catch up with the other Jeeps and realize we're not the only ones to have had problems. Two CJs sit on nature's granite parking lot awaiting distributor repairs, an old Toyota Land Cruiser (one of a handful of non-Jeep vehicles here) rests in the trees missing everything from the rear differential on out, while a '65 Jeep teeters in a gully waiting to be pulled back on all fours.

At each problem site there is no despair, no accusatory rhetoric about whose fault it was, no wailing nor gnashing of teeth. Instead there is always a large group of people standing by earnestly seeking solutions.

We're now part of a column, a modern-day wagon train, and the mood up and down the line is a little beyond jovial. It's a slowly creeping four-wheeled fiesta. In the stop-and-go dustiness the mood is benevolent partying as we all place the tires on top of the boulders. Directly in front of us, Southern Rock is being played at high volume.

We creep a little, then wait in line, creep and wait. The Jeep continues to amaze us.

Halfway to Rubicon Springs we pass the first of many scenes of paradise. Leaping 20 feet from the rocks into the cool, clear water of Buck Island Lake rejuvenates the soul. Suddenly the world is a perfect place

and all who inhabit it are life-long friends.

The infamous crux points of the Rubicon—the Little Sluice Box, the Big Sluice Box, Walker's Rock—can all be overcome by placing the wheels on top of the rocks, just like the book says.

By the time we get to the infamous Big Sluice Box, a short walk from the campsite, we are unfazed. Even the 50 or so Jeepers who have walked up from camp to watch and aim squirt guns at the slowly passing convoy serve as entertainment.

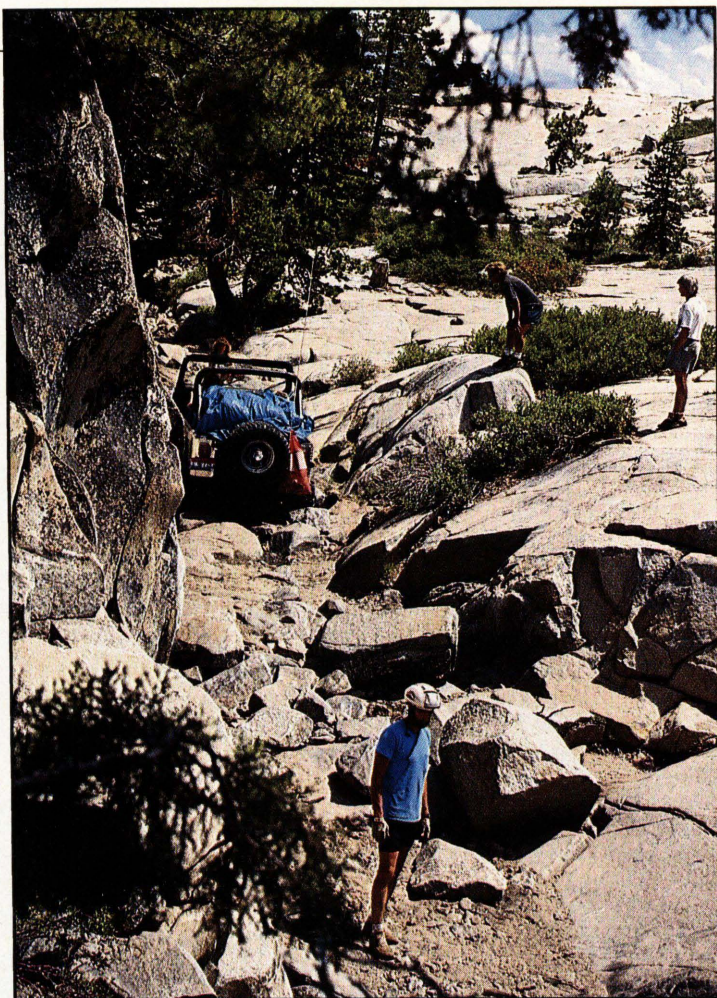
At one point our Jeep does get stuck, balanced perfectly on two diagonally opposed wheels, but a few bystanders and a couple Rock Rollers give a push and we're off. There's no way to avoid the grinding the rear bumper makes across the rock, but like the book says, it doesn't hurt the vehicle. In 10 minutes we're rolling into camp.

From the very beginning, the Jeepers Jamboree was meant to be extravagant. Preparing for that first trip in the early summer of 1953 the planning committee hauled in enough wood for a dance floor in the Rubicon meadow, a generator and a public address system. Later Jamborees would get progressively more opulent. Helicopters shuttled necessities like chicken, steak and Budweiser into the Rubicon Valley and would also bring luxuries like a baby grand piano, real country western stars and even wallpaper for the outhouses. Once they flew in 12 real, live, habit-wearing, singing nuns from St. Cecilia's Chorale in Colbert, Wash. Another year a Chinook helicopter landed in the meadow and delivered the U.S. Air Force Marching Band.

In addition to a live band at night and serenades from the baby grand during the evening meals, our edition of the Jamboree features "The Cameron Bagpipe Band" from Sacramento, Calif., marching out of the woods in full regalia playing *Scotland The Brave*. How do you write an environmental impact statement for that?

Saturday is the day of rest and relaxation. Jeepers examine each others' vehicles, hike up the sides of the valley or simply flop about in the warm stream that flows through the Rubicon Valley. At noon there are mud races through a specially saturated section of dirt road on the edge of the main meadow.

After the races, Russ guides our party up the river to another paradisiacal swimming grotto complete with waterfalls, cliff-diving



and large, flat, sun-warmed slabs of granite.

That night we eat like crazed weasels at the bacchanalian steak- and corn-on-the-cob-laden "Mountain Man Feast" after which we could easily die contented.

But we live to discover a bar with the name "Amos's Place," apparently an institution on the Jamboree.

"Do you have Beck's Dark?" asks a first-timer.

"Sure," says the amiable host, placing a can of Budweiser in front of him. We wander through the exuberant crowd and meet Ron Duncan, director of Environmental Management for El Dorado County, who went on his first Jeepers Jamboree 23 years ago. Duncan was the human pylon around which the mud racers raced. We ask him about it.

"I think I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," Duncan says about his pylon role. "Being a pylon is less exciting than you may think."

He is wearing a strange, thatch-woven border-guard-type hat and a patently obscene tie. He has traditionally come into the Rubicon four or five times a year with work parties readying the trail and camping area for the Jamboree.

"It's always been well-organized," Duncan continues. "It's something to do with your family."

Nearby is Voo Ken Yin, secretary of the Kinabalu 4wd Club in East Malaysia, who is driving in his first Jamboree courtesy of

(who else?) Gene Thorne. Thorne has "loaned" his old yellow Willys to Yin for the weekend.

"We've got a deal," Yin says. "He gets to come over to Malaysia and smash up one of our trucks."

On the meadow, activity is peaking. The huge cement dance floor is packed, a band is playing, people are hooting. Someone grabs the mike and tries to get Mark A. Smith, founder of the Jamboree, Jeepmaster for the last 40 years and author of our favorite book, to sing some Elvis. He declines.

Yin's co-driver, a Malaysian lawyer named Mohamed Anuar Bin Datuk Ghani, sidles up and hands us two more Budweisers. We have trouble with his name and so we dub him, "The Gan Man." We ask how he likes the Jamboree.

"Crazy Americans," he says, smiling and shaking his head. "In our country, only a few crazy men. In America, many crazy men."

We tell him we agree.

Rob and Rich Mainwaring, third-generation Jamboreers, are standing near a bonfire big enough to be seen by Shuttle astronauts. Their grandfather, Syd Mainwaring, was one of the founders of the Jamboree. Their father, Dan Mainwaring, has worked on Jamborees for decades. They like being Rock Rollers.

"Our policy is we don't leave anybody on the trail," says Rich. "We (Rock Rollers) haven't left anybody on the trail in 40 years." We thank them profusely.

On top of Flamingo Rock overlooking the meadow we find Patrick Larsen and his son, Erick. Patrick has come on six Jamborees and Erick on five.

"It's great," says Patrick. "It's the best four-wheel-drive trip in the world. Anything else would be weenie."

The band finally stops playing a little after one o'clock in the morning. At about two, walking back to our camp through spiny granite illuminated by the penlight of the only forward-thinking person in our group, we begin to understand what the Jamboree may be all about.

It is surely the hardest, non-competitive, organized 4wd trip in the world. Creeping 7100 feet up Cadillac Hill the next morning as the sun pours over the Eastern Sierra and the handiwork of the last ice age spills out below us, we realize how much we rely on our fellow human beings and upon the kindness of strangers. ■