



Jeep hits mainstream America with the Willys CJ-2A

text and photography by Rob Reaser

Auto manufacturers spend millions trying to convince the buying public that their particular breed of gasoline-powered four-wheel transportation is The One. When it became obvious that the Axis powers would soon be relegated to the Failed Conquest dustbin of history, the Willys-Overland company realized it had a product that needed no public fanfare. The Jeep had proven its mettle in the worst conditions around the globe and under the most extreme circumstances. The soldiers who relied on this four-wheel drive wonder knew it. The folks on the homefront knew it. Little surprise, then, that even before WWII was over, Willys-Overland had shifted its sights on bringing the Jeep to the civilian populace.

The first of the civilian Jeeps to hit Main Street (or, more appropriately, the back roads) was the CJ-2A—also known as the Jeep Universal. This model, which went into production in late 1945, was preceded by another postwar variation—the CJ-2, commonly referred to as the Agrijeep (a limited-run model built for testing the Jeep for agricultural use).

In keeping with its short-lived heritage, the CJ-2A was undoubtedly the most no-frills, bare-bones commercial vehicle to hit

the market since the Model T. Aside from running gear and sheetmetal, the CJ-2A emerged from Willys-Overland with only the barest essentials—butt-numbing front and rear seats, pedals, shifter levers, steering wheel and only basic instrumentation. Oh, there were a few “upgrades,” such as a fuel filler neck relocated to the outside, a drop-down tailgate, side-mounted spare tire, canvas top, larger headlights, windshield wiper and somewhat street-friendly gearing. Perhaps the most exciting feature was that the Jeep could be purchased in a conservative pallet of colors other than Olive-Drab.

To be fair, however, the Jeep Universal



First Of The Civvies





covers the tub interior; and an aluminum deck plate was inserted between the fender and rocker panel to serve as the running boards.

While just a gnat's whisker over 214,000 units were produced during its five-year production run, and surviving examples of the CJ-2A are not as common as they used to be, Paul doesn't consider his Jeep to be all that special.

"I don't think it's unique," he says, "but when we take it to Jeep shows, people like it. I think it's the small nondirectional tires and the flathead engine. You don't see many stock ones around here." **J**



**Willys-Overland
Jeep Universal CJ-2A**

Model Years 1945-49
Total Production 214,202

Engine

Type..... 4-cyl. L-head
Displacement 134.2ci
Compression 6.48:1
Horsepower 60 @ 4,000 rpm
Torque 106 lbs-ft @ 2,000 rpm
Fuel Delivery Carter 1V carburetor

Driveline

Transmission 3-speed manual
Transfer Case Model 18
Rear Axle semi-floating, Hypoid
Front Axle full-floating, Hypoid
Gear Ratio 5.38:1

Suspension leaf (front and rear)
Steering cam & lever, 14-12-14:1
Wheels 4.50E x 16-inch
Tires 6.00 x 16-inch 4-ply
Brakes drum; 9-inch
Electrical 6-volt; generator
Gross Vehicle Weight 3,500 lbs.

difficult to acquire if you can even find them.

Paul Kraus of East Palestine, Ohio, found his 1948 CJ-2A in 2003, and it took considerable effort to bring this Jeep back to road-worthy status. The body, understandably, wasn't in the best of shape.

According to Paul, "Someone over the years wrapped the body with galvanized tin instead of patching the holes." That served only to keep the rust growing and make the final repair that much more challenging, as did the absence of most all the body support crossmembers. These had been replaced by 1x4 timber. After Paul had corrected all of the previous brazing and pop rivet work, he turned his attention to the support structure.

"I used Power Strut to replace [the body crossmembers]. Electricians use it to hang boxes and conduit. It's light and strong, and welds up well."

As you can tell from that explanation, concours-level restoration wasn't the goal of this project. Rather, it was more of a rescue effort and an excuse to put a long-cherished Jeep back on the street. Thus, you will find a few deviations from the factory on Paul's CJ-2A. For example, he converted the vehicle to 12-volt and replaced the generator with an alternator; the front bumper is homemade; a bedliner

was never intended to be a Sunday driver, or even a marginal substitute for such. The CJ-2A was pitched as a work mule for farmers, contractors, ranchers and outdoor industries. Available equipment such as a capstan winch, power take-off and pulley drive for operating auxiliary machinery and electrical equipment certified the "work it" mantra. Willys-Overland rated the CJ-2A as being capable of hauling a maximum payload (in the back with the rear seating removed) of 800 pounds and a max draw bar pull of 1,200 pounds.

Then you have to consider the drivetrain. Power came from a 134.2 cid four-cylinder L-head engine called the Go-Devil. Horsepower was a massive 60 @ 4,000 rpm, while torque went all-out at 105 lbs-ft @ 2,000 rpm. Of course, with its basic leaf suspension, cam and lever steering system, standard 6.00/16-inch 4-ply tires and high-strung 5.35:1 axle ratio, that was about all the oomph you would want—unless you liked to live on the ragged edge. The maximum suggested speed in high-range was 60 mph. If you could get it there, you were not only doing good, but downright foolish.

Naturally, none of this is to disparage the civilian Jeep's debut effort. On the contrary, its simple, no-nonsense nature is a large part of the CJ-2A's charm, and little wonder that good restorable examples are



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