

HEMMINGS CLASSIC CAR

Multipurpose Motoring – 1956 Willys Jeep 4×4 wagon

THE PRACTICAL AND VERSATILE 1956 WILLYS JEEP 4X4 UTILITY WAGON

By Thomas A. DeMauro from the June 2019 issue of Hemmings Classic Car



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WILLYS JEEP FOR SALE

1956 Willys Jeep 4x4 wagon

Though its styling resembled the woodies of the era, when the Willys-Overland Jeep station wagon was introduced in July of 1946 it featured a durable, easy-to-maintain, all-steel body. The two-wheel-drive offering was joined by a four-wheel-drive version in 1949. Though modestly updated visually and mechanically over the years, the basic design remained in production well into the 1960s in the U.S. and even longer in South America.

It was marketed as a dual-purpose vehicle that was indispensable on the worksite but just as comfortable scaling hills in four-wheel drive on weekend fishing or hunting trips or negotiating Main Street in two-wheel-drive mode while ferrying the kids to and from school during the week. There was seating for six, hauling capacity was a .5-ton, and cargo space could be expanded by removing the rear seat. The fully washable interior made for easy cleanup after any activity.



The interior metal surfaces are painted to match, with the seats covered in hard-wearing gray and red vinyl.

By 1956, Willys was referring to this 4x4 Jeep as a “utility wagon” and it could be equipped with a 134.2-cu.in. F-head four-cylinder or 226.2-cu.in. L-head six-cylinder engine. A Borg-Warner T90 three-speed manual transmission, a Dana 18 two-speed transfer case, and Dana 25 front and Dana 44 rear differentials (4.88 gears with the six-cylinder engine and 5.38 gears with the four-cylinder engine) were employed. The two-wheel-drive wagon was also still available, and overdrive was optional with it but not the 4x4 at the time.

The “Super-Hurricane” L-head six-cylinder engine produced 105 hp and 190 lb-ft of torque with a 35/16-inch bore and 43/8-inch stroke and a compression ratio of 6.86:1.



Four shifters control the three-speed transmission, overdrive, 2WD-4WD, and transfer case.

Attached to a 104 1/2-inch-wheelbase frame with channel-steel siderails and multiple crossmembers were semi-elliptic multileaf springs, shocks, and 11 x 2-inch drum brakes at the four corners of 4x4 wagons, and a cam-and-lever steering system was used. So equipped, the Jeep proved quite capable in handling various on-road and off-road conditions.

That skillset was a foremost consideration of Margaret O'Neil's dad, Tom, when he bought this Super Hurricane-powered 4x4 utility wagon from a neighbor for \$500 in 1969. Margaret's family owned a vacation home in Grand Lake, Colorado, and Tom

wanted a rugged and reliable 4x4 that could go just about anywhere.



Recalling adventures that could have been depicted in some of Norman Rockwell's most endearing paintings, her extended family enjoyed the vehicle often. "We'd pack into the Jeep and go cut down a Christmas tree to bring back to the house," she recalls. Tom used it to go fly-fishing, and there were family picnics and jaunts to nearby Rocky Mountain National Park to view the elk and deer at sunset.

For younger generations of the family, driving the wagon, which had previously served the U.S. Forest Service but had been later repainted turquoise with small images of animals decorating it, also became a rite of passage in learning how to operate a stick-shift vehicle. Margaret recalls, "If you could drive that Jeep, you could drive anything on earth."



About 100 cubic feet of load space is available with the rear seats removed, and with the tailgate extended the cargo area could sleep two adults according to Willys.

The spare tire is stored where it's accessible, but its intrusion into the storage area is minimal.

Her lesson came when “My cousin Curt and I went out snowshoeing one afternoon and, when we got to a parking lot pretty far from the house, he announced, ‘We aren’t going back until you learn how to drive the Jeep,’ so I did.”

When Margaret’s oldest son, Teddy, came of age, he too had to conquer the Jeep, which had seen better days by then. Margaret says, “I remember that my dad and Teddy took it to the post office one day and it stalled in the lot, and a person walking by jokingly said, ‘I hate it when that happens.’ Our Jeep had become such a familiar sight around town, since we’d had it for so long and people felt like they knew it.”



The Jeep's practical tailgate design allows the rear window to flip up for easy access to the cargo area and packages, in instances when lowering the bottom section of the tailgate isn't necessary.



Wood skid strips ease loading of larger items and protect the floor.

It was still being driven in the early 2000s when the vacation house was purchased by other family members, and a portion of its contents were dispersed among the cousins. One of the items Margaret received was the Jeep. Though her dad had performed routine maintenance on it over the previous decades, she explains, "It was pretty tired by the time I got it."

Deciding to have it restored some years later, Margaret and her husband searched the internet and found Willys America of Cazadero, California, which has been a parts supplier and Willys Jeep-exclusive restoration facility since 1977. After consulting with shop owner Paul Barry, they shipped the wagon to the Golden State in 2011 for a complete restoration.



Featuring a Carter YF one-barrel carb and four main bearings, the 226.2-cu.in. "Super Hurricane" L-head straight-six engine produces 105 hp and 190 lb-ft of torque.

The wagon was disassembled, and the body was removed from the chassis and stripped of its paint. Rust areas and dings were repaired, PCL two-part epoxy primer was used on the panels, which were block sanded smooth, and a sealer was applied. Three coats of PPG basecoat in Steel Glow Gray Metallic and Glacier White, which are correct for the year and were chosen from a 1956 Willys color chart, were followed by three coats of clear. Then the trim was straightened and polished, and the original bumpers were re-chromed.

The frame and suspension components were media blasted and powder-coated semi-gloss black, wear items were replaced, the braking system was rebuilt, and a set of 215/85R16 LT M&S Michelin tires were mounted on the powder-coated steel wheels.



Willys America also balanced and blueprinted the engine; rebuilt the transmission, transfer case, and differentials; updated the electrical system to 12 volt and replaced the wiring; installed a new clutch; and reassembled the vehicle. A reproduction of the 29-tooth all-range Warn overdrive unit offered in the 1960s, was added for lower-rpm interstate cruising.

“When we got it back in 2013, it looked great, like a different Jeep,” Margaret says. “It did have its familiar scent inside though, which is a good thing, and it sounded similar, but it drives more easily now.”



The presence of locking hubs and the prominent “Jeep 4 Wheel Drive” lettering leave little doubt as to this utility wagon’s intentions.

Having added about 300 miles per year to the odometer, she reports, “Despite the fact that it was marketed as a combination family/utility vehicle that wives could use, the controls are very heavy and imprecise. Shifting is very notchy and not easy to find gears, and it can be confusing with four levers. The brakes were somewhat heavy, but after the rebuild they are now smooth and well balanced, and the steering is more precise. Thanks to the overdrive, the Jeep is more useable at highway speeds.”

HCC associate editor Terry Shea drove the wagon and concurs with Margaret’s findings: “It might be the great-grandfather of the modern, ubiquitous SUV that drives just like a car, but make no mistake about it, the Willys wagon is utilitarian transportation that drives far more like a truck. Nevertheless, getting behind the wheel offers its own unique set of charms, as driving any classic should.



Its smooth Steel Glow Gray Metallic and Glacier White paint were factory-offered colors for 1956.

“Its high-quality restoration aside, the Willys interior is rudimentary, with a flat, 60/40 split bench seat, and a single round panel housing a speedometer, engine temperature, and fuel level readings. The two-spoke steering wheel has a narrow rim, but a wide diameter, helping overcome its lack of power assist. Fortunately, once moving, the Willys steering lightens up considerably, though it could hardly be called ‘accurate,’ with a rather wide-feeling vagueness on center. Acceleration is leisurely, making it the perfect around-town vehicle. With first gear running out quickly, third gear is engaged by 30 to 35 mph.

“The suspension is stiff but forgiving enough. Coming to stoplights, downshifting to first is a clunky affair at first, but the slightest blip of the throttle smooths out the gear change. The Willys is a friendly classic, an honest machine that makes no bones about

what it's for.”



In its 50th year as a member of Margaret’s family, though now in Southern, Arizona, the Jeep’s unique appearance continues to draw considerable attention on the road and delivers an eclectic driving experience. With a new lease on life provided by a meticulous restoration and enthusiastic owners, this Jeep will serve as a pristine and operational example of Willys’ dual-purpose utility wagon for years to come.

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Tommy says: October 28, 2019 9:13 am

What a great restoration!

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jim r says: October 28, 2019 9:46 am

I'd have to dig out my formula for MPH but with 5.38 gears that old F head is going to run about 3k at 45mph. These are great old trucks, tough as nails. A gal that teaches at one of the local collages drove one of these for years till she had knee trouble and could no longer work the clutch.

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Mark H says: October 28, 2019 10:31 am

A buddy bought one of these in Arizona in the 80's and did indeed drive it at 45mph on the interstate when he later moved to Illinois. It took days.

➤ Reply



PHANTOM HAWK says: October 28, 2019 10:17 am

Ah, memories of family trips of long ago...like a weekend jaunt to a state park for a family outing and the kids folding the passenger's seat forward to the dash so we could crawl into the back seat. The two door may have more 'style' but we kids always wished our Willys had four doors, which were special order available but seldom seen...even less so today since Father Time has taken his toll on these old work horses.

Although US production of the Jeep wagon ended in 1964 after being displaced by the Wagoneer, the Jeep enjoyed an extended life in South America. It was built as the IKA Estanciera by Industrias Kaiser Argentina from 1957 to 1970 but production lasted into the late 1970s in Brazil where the venerable Willys was known as the Rural and the pickup version the F-75 with both models powered by an inline-six, the first gasoline engine manufactured in Brazil. By the end of production, both vehicles carried a Ford name tag following Ford's acquisition of the Willys factory in 1967.

Ford ceased Rural production in 1977 while F-75 production continued until 1981.

➔ Reply



Mark H says: October 28, 2019 10:28 am

Beautiful restoration!

➔ Reply



Tom says: October 28, 2019 10:40 am

Beautiful.

➔ Reply



Johnmloghry says: October 28, 2019 10:41 am

I drove a p/u version of this from Missoula Montana to Everett Washington for a nil back in the 70's. He spotted while driving a 18 wheeler through the town. Stopped bought the p/u. I rode with him on his next trip and drove it the long grueling trip back home. It was in January so 4 w/d was needed at times, but mostly it just cruising along at 45 mph. Made the trip with no trouble.

➔ Reply



Dan B. says: October 28, 2019 1:11 pm

Great article and sweet restoration.

Love those old Willys wagons and trucks. The overdrive – works in all gears forward and reverse – is a worthy upgrade.

➔ Reply



jack mueller says: October 28, 2019 2:54 pm

You had a choice with most model years of the Willys Station Wagons. Beginning in 1948 the company rolled out a “Station Sedan” which was a 4x2 with the L-head 6 and overdrive. It could do highway speeds but the box shape told you if you were going too fast in a crosswind. The Station Sedan’s name was changed to Deluxe Station Wagon as dealers didn’t feel it was a classic “sedan” type automobile. Deluxe station wagons were made with the F-head 6

from 1949 to 1955. The standard Jeep Station Wagon was also a 2x4 with overdrive coupled to the "Go-Devil" 4 cylinder between it's introduction as a 1947 model year product through early 1950 when it went over to 4x4 only with an F-head version of the 4.

After 1955 wagons were all 4x4 with some occasional "limited releases" of the 2x4 with a Super Hurricane L-head 6 (the 226 in the wagon "tested". The box continued into the 1963 model year when it was replaced by the Wagoneer and became more of a family car with automatic transmission, etc.

I am no drivetrain engineering expert but have always wondered why Willys Motors (1953-62) and Kaiser Jeep (1963-1969) didn't offer a drive train choice other than management felt (like Ward Canady did in 1945) that survival in the marketplace revolved around a range of 4-wheel drive vehicle types rather than get involved in regular passenger car types.

➔ Reply



PHANTOM HAWK says: October 29, 2019 8:25 am

'Back then' the passenger car was king. I recall how our family was ridiculed for driving a 'truck' [I.E. our two wheel drive Willys wagon.] No one could predict that the market would eventually 'go crazy' to the point where automakers are now considering eliminating sedans and concentrating only on 'station wagon' trucks and SUVs.

➔ Reply



Dan B. says: October 29, 2019 12:16 am

To add to Jack Mueller's great overview, Kaiser did add the 230 OHC Tornado six cylinder starting in May 1962 and continuing through production in 1964 (some 1964 were re-titled at 1965). This is a powerful, torquey engine. The 230 OHC Tornado was intended to be for the full-size Jeep Wagoneer and Gladiators, but since the 230 OHC was done first, the Kaiser management installed it in the Willys Wagon and Truck as they ended the final years of production.

Save the Tornados!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMNr7oGxAAQ>

➔ Reply



Tommy says: October 29, 2019 9:30 am

I've been told that the Tornado engine was junk compared to the Continental flat head by many Jeep enthusiasts.

➔ Reply



Rick B says: October 29, 2019 1:14 pm

Wrong! The Tornado was a wonderful engine, it's added torque allowed 3:54 gears, as opposed to the 4:27s standard in the 226, or 5:38s in the flat head 4. The engine was just misunderstood as it was so ahead of its time. Mechanics of the day couldn't grasp the concept of an overhead cam, hemi head engine.

➔ Reply



Dan B. says: October 29, 2019 11:09 pm

Rick B. is spot on. The Hurricane 226 flathead is a great old motor, but the 230 OHC Tornado is spectacular in comparison. It was used through the 1980s in Argentina, including in racing.

<https://news.pickuptrucks.com/2012/06/classic-engine-jeeps-tornado-straight-six.html>

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