

The Jeep Story, 1940 - 1970

In June 1940, the U.S. military informed automakers that it was looking for a “light reconnaissance vehicle” to replace the Army’s motorcycle. The Army had developed a lengthy specification for the vehicle and invited 135 manufacturers to bid on production.

At first Willys-Overland and American Bantam Car Manufacturing Company were the only two companies that showed interest. Soon, however, Ford entered the picture, and a competition began among the three over which company would receive the lucrative government contract.

The companies produced prototypes for testing in record time. Bantam’s chief engineer Karl K. Probst, along with a team of Bantam executives (Roy S. Evan, Francis H. Fenn, Harold Crist and C. H. Payne), worked out a design, and the company built its field car within 49 days. Willys-Overland Vice President of Engineering Delmar G. Roos designed the Willys Quad. Ford developed its Model GP (General Purpose), known as the Pygmy and powered by an adapted Ford/Ferguson tractor. Each of the companies delivered its prototype to the Army in the summer of 1940 and received approval to build 70 sample vehicles. The Army took possession of these in November 1940 at Camp Holabird, Maryland. Each of the three designs exceeded the Army’s specification of 1,300 pounds, but the Army soon realized that that limit was far too low and raised it for the next round of vehicles.

The Army let the next round of contracts in March 1941. Bantam was to produce 1,500 Model 40 BRC, Ford would build 1,500 modified and improved GP Pygmies, and Willys would build 1,500 Quads. Further testing and evaluation led to the Army’s selection of the Willys vehicle as the standard. Subsequently, most of the Bantams and Ford GPs produced were sent to Great Britain and Russia as part of the lend-lease program. In Great Britain, the Ford vehicle was popularly known and the “Blitz Buggy.”

With modifications and improvements, the Willys Quad became the MA, and later the MB. But the Army, and the world, came to know it as the Jeep. Some claimed that the name came from the slurring of the letters *GP*, the military abbreviation for “General Purpose.” Others say the car was named for a popular character called “Eugene the Jeep” in the *Popeye* cartoon strip. Whatever its origin, the name entered into the American lexicon and, for a while, served almost as a generic title for off-road vehicles, while the Jeep itself became an icon of the war. Its ubiquity at the front — Willys-Overland

would build more than 368,000 vehicles, and Ford, under license, some 277,000, for the U.S. Army — saved the company and allowed it to return to passenger car production in a healthier state. The rugged, reliable olive-drab vehicle also helped win a world war.

The Willys MA featured a gearshift on the steering column, low side body cut outs, two circular instrument clusters on the dashboard, and a handbrake on the left side. Willys struggled to get the weight down to the new Army specification of 2,160 pounds, and the MA reached 2,154 pounds. Some of the items removed in order for the MA to reach that goal were reinstalled on the MB, the next generation, and the final weight of this model was about 400 pounds above the spec.

Willys trademarked the name after the war and planned to turn the vehicle into an off-road utility vehicle for the farm, the civilian Universal Jeep. One of Willys' slogans at the time was "The Sun Never Sets on the Might Jeep," and the company set about making sure the world recognized Willys as the creator of the vehicle. American Bantam and Ford, though, had played a role, and in 1948 the Federal Trade Commission ruled at the close of a five-year investigation that Willys was unfairly taking credit for the creation and was thus using unfair methods of competition. The FTC ordered Willys to stop claiming it was the sole creator of the Jeep.

The Jeep served as the starting point for Willys-Overland's creation of the first all-steel station wagon, and station wagons in general became icons of the postwar suburban lifestyle just as the Jeep had been of Army life. Willys also used the Army Jeep as the basis for its inexpensive but sporty Jeepster, a forerunner of today's sport-utility vehicles.

In mid-war, Joseph Frazer left the presidency of Willys and acquired control of Graham Motors. In 1945, Frazer joined shipbuilding tycoon Henry J. Kaiser to launch a new car company. Kaiser Manufacturing, a subsidiary of Kaiser-Frazer, purchased Willys-Overland in 1953 and renamed it Willys Motors. Although Kaiser-Frazer soon foundered, Kaiser expanded the market for the Jeep, and by the 1960s, the vehicle was manufactured in roughly 30 countries and sold in 150. By then, Willys was known as Kaiser Jeep. In 1970, American Motors bought Kaiser Jeep, and the Jeep, with some models hardly distinguishable in looks from the "light reconnaissance vehicle" the Army had purchased in the war, became a staple of that company, just as it would for Chrysler after it bought American Motors.