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MAY/JUNE 2022 | VOL. 45, NO. 3

# Pennsylvania

magazine



MAY/JUNE 2022 \$5.95



0 74820 00012 0



# 'It's a Jeep Thing'

*Enthusiasts find adventure, comradery  
at the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival*

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(left) Lady Jeeps who are new to offroading participate in a "Babes of Bantam" trail ride.  
(right) Thousands of Jeep enthusiasts from across the country descend on downtown Butler for a "Jeep invasion" party.

smaller groups and be driven deep into the woods for Bantam Night Ops Mission, a staple of the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival, an event started more than a decade ago to celebrate "all things Jeep."

## **An Exhilarating Ride**

**I HAVE COME TO** the festival to figure out what that famous saying "It's a Jeep thing" means and to explore why Jeep owners are so overwhelmingly passionate about their rides. My exploration begins with a rousing night ops trail ride. As I jump into the cramped passenger quarters of the lead trail guide's 1998 Jeep Wrangler TJ, my adrenaline starts to climb.

"This might be a little bumpy, so put on your seatbelt and hold on to your camera," Kristin Gaydosh warns.

For the off-road guides and other volunteers at the trail ride, safety is the number-one priority (having fun is a close second). Prior to our trail run, Gaydosh walks the line to meet the drivers, inspect their equipment and

**A**S DARKNESS FALLS, JEEPS are starting to line up in the staging lane on the picturesque hilltop overlooking Cooper's Lake Campground in Slippery Rock, Butler County. Although the day is fading fast, you wouldn't know it by looking at the hazy blanket of smoke that is starting to

envelop the hillside, much like a scene from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

In the center of the meetup area, a bonfire is raging, stoked with diesel fuel, and the scene is made more otherworldly by the numerous Jeep LEDs that are projecting light beams in every direction. Soon, a few hundred Jeeps will break out into











ascertain off-road skill levels.

Before long, we are leading a group of 10 Jeeps into the pitch-black forest. As an extra safety measure, a trail guide, positioned as the tail gunner, follows the pack in case participants run into any issues along the course. Spotters deployed on many of the more technically advanced trails on and off the property help participants navigate obstacles, and trained recovery teams are on hand in case anyone gets stuck.

There is something exhilarating about

weaving in and out of a densely packed cluster of trees with only your headlights to guide you. It's a balancing act to try to maintain control and steady forward momentum on the muddy ruts of the trail.

"Keep it 4-low, slow and steady," Gaydosh cautions. As we come within inches of sideswiping trees, she reminds me to keep my arms and legs inside the Jeep. I don't disagree.

For Jeep off-roaders, controlled chaos is par for the course. Navigating the trail feels like riding a rickety old wooden roller

coaster on rails—one that will shake you in every which way. You slip, slide, rock, roll and buck—almost letting the Jeep take control. Gunning the gas, slamming on the brakes or overcompensating on the steering will only get you into trouble. Instead, you must trust your Jeep and let it find its own way. More experienced off-roaders understand this philosophy and have developed strong muscle memory and intuition to know exactly what driving inputs they need to harness in any given situation.





While I don't own a Jeep myself, I've always wanted one. My older brother had a bright red Jeep when I was growing up, and I've never quite forgotten that feeling of freedom and sense of adventure that can only come from driving such a capable machine with the top down. Outside observers may scratch their heads trying to understand the intoxicating allure of owning and driving a Jeep, but it only takes a few experiences like this before it's in your blood.



## History of Jeep

**A FAMILY-FRIENDLY EVENT** HELD on the second weekend of every June, the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival takes place at Cooper's Lake Campground, about an hour's drive north of Pittsburgh. Last year marked the 10-year anniversary of the festival, a noteworthy milestone in its

(left) A fan favorite, the Jeep playground challenges drivers and their vehicles with obstacles, including a mud pit and rock piles. (right, top) An overhead view shows the scale of the Bantam Jeep Festival, one of the largest Jeep-only events in the country. (right, bottom) Dedicated history exhibits and a WWII encampment area give reenactors (like this father/daughter duo) opportunities to showcase their period vehicles.









storied history. The event is planned and executed by the Friends of the Bantam Jeep Association, a nonprofit organization comprised of volunteers and enthusiasts committed to preserving and promoting the father of all Jeeps, the Bantam Reconnaissance Car (BRC).

To understand the allure of a Jeep, it helps to know how the vehicle came into existence, and it starts with the BRC. Groundbreaking in its design and function, this original prototype would eventually go on to become the inspiration and impetus for the legendary Jeep that helped the Allies win World War II.

Widely considered the world's first Jeep, the BRC was built in late summer 1940 by the American Bantam Car Company, a small auto manufacturer based in Butler and located a stone's throw from the festival grounds. Although multiple companies eventually were involved in the final evolution of the Jeep as we know it—including Bantam, Willys-Overland and Ford—the concept originated squarely within the small town of Butler.

Dave Turner knows that story like the back of his hand. His father, Ralph Turner, worked at the Butler Bantam plant and was a key member of the original design team that helped create and build the first-ever Jeep prototype. He was there when the Bantam pilot vehicle rolled out of the plant on September 21, 1940.

Turner has driven his 1939 Bantam Coupe (that was made at the very same plant) from Virginia to the festival. To honor his father, he paid a visit to the original factory.

"It was nice to stand where my dad did almost 81 years ago," he says. "It was a great memory."

According to award-winning Jeep author Paul R. Bruno, "Bantam is one of the great

**Jeep owners value the opportunity to have the assistance of a trained spotter to guide their modified Jeeps down special terrain, like this steep embankment on one of the festival's more extreme (black) off-road trails. (right, top) Ralph Turner (pictured directly behind the driver) was one of the key members of the original design team that envisioned the first-ever (Jeep) prototype. (right, bottom) Dave Turner visits the same plant where his father, Ralph, once worked 81 years earlier.**



stories of American automotive ingenuity and military history." In 1940, the army sought a lightweight scouting vehicle that would replace the mule for transporting light payloads and troops. The War Department asked numerous companies to submit bids for a vehicle that would meet these needs, and Bantam ultimately won the bid to construct the first Jeep. The Pennsylvania company built its revolutionary prototype vehicle in 49 days.

"Jeeps were built to do what they were supposed to do, and they did them exceptionally well," Bruno notes. "The spirit, talent and DNA of those individuals that

built the first Bantam, the first Willys, the first Ford has carried down for over 80 years. The Wrangler especially remains the closest model and look to the original WWII Jeep. The Jeep is an American icon that has been accepted around the world and is respected for its ability to go literally anywhere—from subzero to the jungle."

### **Community and Connection**

**ALMOST A CENTURY HAS** passed since the first Jeep rolled off the production line, and the underlying technology has become more advanced. Yet the Jeep still retains much of its original capability



and charm. If you need proof, just ask the 2,888 Jeep owners who registered for the 2021 festival.

Bantam board member and association vice president Tony Colangeli, a die-hard Jeoper himself, offers insight into why the legacy of the Jeep has endured for so long: “There’s a great community built around Jeeps. It’s really a lifestyle similar to Harley riders.”

As proof, he recalls the time he had to stop during a sudden rainstorm to put his top up. Within minutes, two random Jeeps pulled over to help. His story is far

from unique.

“What other vehicle do you drive down the road only to have another Jeep wave back at you?” says Jonathan Baughman of BF Goodrich, one of the merchandise vendors at the festival. “If you are on the trail and have an issue, there’s always going to be someone willing to help. If you’re hanging out in the mall parking lot, you’re inevitably going to run into a fellow Jeep owner and have something in common to talk about. People need this sort of connection in their lives. The love of the Jeep binds these people together and is

an extension of their personalities, values and interests.”

The organizers of the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival clearly understand this dynamic. They have developed exhibits, activities and events that appeal to just about everybody—from military history buffs and show ‘n shiners (those with immaculate vehicles) to off-roaders and new Jeep drivers looking to learn the ropes. Recognizing that off-roading by female drivers is exploding in popularity within the Jeep community, the festival also features a “Babes of Bantam” trail ride, which provides female Jeeps the opportunity to experience a dedicated trail with its own set of obstacles.

Throughout the weekend, spectators and attendees enjoy a diverse range of activities, including a Jeep parade and invasion, the Best of Bantam competition, technically challenging on- and off-site trails and a Jeep playground obstacle course where participants climb piles of dirt, crawl over rocks and get muddy. Other noteworthy attractions include an authentic WWII encampment area, a Jeep history exhibit, food stands and a huge vendor area where Jeep parts and accessories are sold. Visitors can also check out the zany antics at the Barbee Jeep Races, gorge themselves at Rib Night or marvel at the futuristic Jeep lighting on display at the Festival of Lights.

Putting on an event of this magnitude requires an almost Herculean level of support, and approximately 775 volunteers, 157 merchandise vendors and sponsors, 14 swap meet vendors and 18 food vendors make it happen.

## ***From Mild to Wild***

**SHOW ORGANIZERS ESTIMATE THAT** 30,000 people visited the three-day festival in 2021 with approximately 15,000 Jeeps from 31 states showing up for the “invasion” in downtown Butler on Friday night. Another 1,387 Jeeps participated in the 10th anniversary Jeep parade. (In 2015, Bantam broke the Guinness World Record for the largest Jeep parade with 2,420 vehicles.)

“After having to cancel what should have been our 10th anniversary in 2020, we knew there would be high demand for Jeep enthusiasts to get out and be with







A long shutter exposure was used to capture a Jeep's lights as it navigated through the woods during the Bantam Night Ops Mission. (left, bottom) An older-style Jeep ambulance was one of more than 1,387 vehicles participating in Friday night's Jeep parade on Butler's Main Street. (right, bottom) Ride-on Jeeps are not just for kids. With almost a cult-like following, riders (some in costume) sprinted downhill during Saturday night's Barbee Jeep Races.

other Jeep owners at Bantam," Patti Jo Lambert, festival director, says.

The beauty of the Jeep is that it's for everyone regardless of age, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, income or education. There really is no "one" personality type that defines a Jeep owner, though most view Jeeps as a metaphorical expression of how they see life.

In many ways, one can argue that the Jeep is quintessentially more American than even baseball or hot dogs. It reflects American diversity and was born out of the spirit of American necessity, ingenuity and freedom.

"Anyone who has a Jeep experiences it how they want to," Henk Van Dongen of Truck Hero, another key sponsor, says. "Some people like to have a nice build for cruising around, others want to go wheeling and some are going to go to the extreme and take their Jeep all over the country for serious off-roading. If you look at all the Jeep builds at the Bantam Festival, they go from mild to wild. Jeep truly is a personal statement."

From the beach to the blacktop, from the mountains to the mall, there will always be a place for anyone in the Jeep community. No matter what type of Jeep they own, these enthusiasts are connected by their shared love of the vehicle and



the fellowship of others who ardently embrace the Jeep lifestyle.

Owning a Jeep is certainly the quickest path to knowing what is meant by the proud sentiment, "It's a Jeep thing." Yet you can come pretty close to understanding that feeling by simply visiting the Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival and experiencing it for yourself. Just be forewarned, you may get hooked if you do. 🍷

—Daniel Stainer writes from Slippery Rock.

## WHEN YOU GO

The **11th Annual Bantam Jeep Heritage Festival** will take place June 10-12 at Cooper's Lake Campground, 205 Currie Road, in Slippery Rock, Butler County. The festival has on-site off-road trails, a playground with obstacles, a Jeep history exhibit and a vendor area with 150-plus companies. Note that elements of the event do change/evolve from year to year. Pricing for Jeep owners participating in various activities ranges from \$20 for the Jeep invasion to \$125 for the festival package. Spectators can attend for \$10 a day for adults and \$3 a day for children ages 3-12. [bantamjeepfestival.com](http://bantamjeepfestival.com)