

How Henry Ford Saved the Jeep

Barry Thomas

Two of the most famous brands in the world are Ford and Jeep. Their existence is also linked to the same man, Henry Ford. That Henry Ford created the Ford brand is obvious. That he is also responsible for the Jeep brand requires an explanation.

Henry Ford hated farm work. One of his life goals was to build a tractor that every farmer could afford. In 1919, when Ford Motor Company's stockholders didn't want him to build tractors, Henry took his son, Edsel, and his righthand man, Charles E. Sorensen, and started a new company, Ford & Son, to build tractors. Fordson tractors soon dominated the small tractor market. In 1938, Henry met Harry Ferguson, inventor of the 3-point hydraulic implement lift, and the two shook hands on a deal to build a new type of tractor. Henry sent Charles Sorensen, along with Ford engineers, off to design the new tractor. Unveiled in 1939, after only eight months of development, the Ford 9N series tractor with the Ferguson 3-point hydraulic lift system would revolutionize small acre farming.

The Sword Is Beaten into a Plowshare



To demonstrate the ease with which the new Ford tractor may be operated and controlled, eight-year-old David McLaren was helped into the driver's seat Thursday and told to handle the controls. The new tractor was exhibited by Henry Ford at Dearborn to a group of newspaper men.

Detroit Free Press June 30, 1939, story on the Ford 9N introduction.

Cast-Iron Charlie

Charles Sorensen was a force in early automotive history, almost equal to that of his boss. His innovations in metallurgy earned him the nickname "Cast-Iron Charlie." His skills included not only engineering, but production expertise, too. As America went to war for the second time in the Henry Ford era, Sorensen found himself in charge of military contracts, including the building of the B24 bomber. The planes, composed of 488,000 plus parts were, by the war's end, being produced at the rate of one per hour. He was also overseeing the building of the Army's ¼ ton truck, aka, the military jeep.

The Ending of a Forty-Year Relationship

Sorensen's book, *My Forty Years with Ford*, details the sad circumstances of Henry Ford forcing him out of the company in 1943. Tragically, Ford's son Edsel, who had been heading the company, died and the old man had assumed responsibility for

running the company again. Sorensen, fearing that Ford's mind was unstable, told him that he needed to bring his oldest grandson, who was serving in the Navy, home to run the company. Henry ignored Sorensen and appointed himself Edsel's replacement. Mrs. Ford was finally able to convince Mr. Ford that he had to give up the leadership. But Sorensen knew he was no longer a part of the team that had been built over forty years. Sorensen invoked the retirement deal he had made in 1941. Sorensen's departure caused great concern in Washington. He was able to convince the government leaders, who didn't trust Henry Ford, that his grandsons could bring stability to the company. Shortly after Henry Ford's grandson was released by the Navy and returned to head the company, Sorensen headed to Florida.

Why Willys-Overland?

Sorensen didn't stay retired for long. Government officials and other car manufacturers came knocking on his door. He was the most famous and one of, if not the, highest paid production executive of the time. The *Detroit Free Press* reported in June 1944 that Sorensen's last reported salary at Ford in 1942 was \$220,000 (\$4.0M in 2023 dollars) and Willys-Overland offered him \$52,000 annually (\$880,000 in 2023 dollars) plus a huge stock option. Clearly, he wasn't attracted by the salary. According to at least one story, it was the Jeep itself that sealed the deal. In a *This Week* magazine article published in July 1945, just prior to the civilian Jeep's introduction, Arthur Bartlett wrote the following:

"'Cast-Iron Charlie,' as they call Sorensen in the automotive industry, had been the production genius of the Ford Motor Company for nearly 40 years when he resigned and retired about a year and a half ago.

Various industrialists began making him offers, trying to get him back into the making of cars. He turned them down. But then, one day, Ward Canaday, chairman of the board of Willys-Overland, tried a new form of persuasion. He sent Sorensen a Jeep.

Sorensen, of course, knew all about Jeeps from the manufacturing standpoint. He had been making them at Ford. But now he began to play around with them as the ultimate consumer. He drove it around the farm...(h)e hauled things in it...(h)e used it as a tractor...(h)e rigged attachments to it... and had it...do other jobs as a mobile power unit. And within three months, he had adopted it as his post-war baby, and given up the idea of resting any longer. He accepted the presidency of Willys-Overland and went to work on the domestication of the Jeep for civilian uses."

IN THE AUTO WORLD

Sorensen Expected to Become Willys Chief

BY DONALD F. SCHRAM
Free Press Business Editor

The appointment of Charles E. Sorensen as president of Willys-Overland Motors, Inc., may be expected soon, although sources close to the company asserted Thursday that no announcement is contemplated this week.

Sorensen conferred for four hours late Wednesday with Willys-Overland directors in Toledo, and at its conclusion, accompanied Ward Canaday, chairman of the board and president since last December, to New York.

ASKING FOR STOCK

It is known that Sorensen is asking for a huge block of stock in the company. He was one of the highest-paid executives in the automotive industry as production chief for the Ford Motor Co., earning more than \$220,000 in 1942.

FORECAST BY FREE PRESS

That Sorensen was under consideration for the Willys-Overland presidency was forecast exclusively in The Detroit Free Press last Sunday.

Rumors have been rife for several weeks that Sorensen, who left the Ford organization early in March after 39 years' service, would form a connection with one of the independent automobile producers in the near future.

Also in the wind are reports that Lehman Bros., New York investment banking house, is interested in a financing transaction involving Willys-Overland, and possibly other independents in the field.

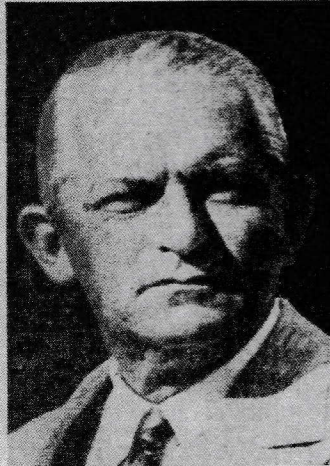
ASSEMBLY PIONEER

Sorensen, credited with developing the moving assembly line in the automobile industry, was trained as a pattern-maker and master foundryman. He designed many Ford branch factories and devised many of the products patented by the Ford company. He is 62 years old.

A recent achievement of Sorensen's was the design and layout of the Willow Run plant.

WOULD COMPETE WITH FORD

As head Willys-Overland, Sorensen would come into postwar competition with Henry Ford, his former chief, in the production of low-priced automobiles. The



CHARLES E. SORENSSEN
Dickering for new post

Toledo company has laid plans for development of a new low-priced car, and for a campaign to promote distribution of the jeep as an all-purpose vehicle for the farm. The company is currently engaged in production of military jeeps.

MOTOR STOCKS ACTIVE

Motor stocks have been particularly active in the New York Stock Exchange during the past week. Packard Motor Car Co. has been the market leader in number of shares sold, and closed at \$5 Thursday, after sales of 79,500 shares. Sales Wednesday were 47,700 shares, the market also closing at \$5. Monday's sales were 47,500, and Tuesday's at 98,100.

Also popular in the market during the past week have been shares of Nash-Kelvinator Corp., Studebaker Corp., Hudson Motor Car Co., Continental Motors, and Hupp Motor Car Co. Forty thousand shares of Graham-Paige Motors changes hands Tuesday at 1%.

New Tire Plant

PARKERSBURG, W. Va.—(AP)—The opening of a branch plant of the Pharis Tire and Rubber Co. in Parkersburg was announced by Furber Marshall, president of the Newark, O., concern.



Photo from This Week magazine article showing Sorensen at the wheel of a never-produced model that was the forerunner of the CJ-2A.

The Civilian Jeep

The World War II military Jeep was an instant success, far out reaching its purpose as a scout vehicle. Very early in the war, the State Department began to study how the Jeep, as a substitute farm tractor, could be used post-war to help feed a devastated Europe. Willys-Overland (hereafter, Willys) began their own testing and determined that the post-war Jeep would need modifications to make it a truly useful farm vehicle. Henry Ford, the antiwar activist, had no need and no interest in producing a civilian version of the Jeep.

Charles Sorensen, never a man to waste time, appears to have immediately taken charge of bringing the civilian Jeep to market. By July 1945, before the War had ended, Willys introduced the Universal Jeep model CJ-2A in a demonstration held at Sorensen's CESOR Farm. This was the same farm he had used when testing the Ford 9N tractor.

The new CJ-2A was marketed to the returning GI farmer who had a small farm and who didn't own a tractor. Horses still outnumbered tractors on the farm after the war and Willys engineers had envisioned a Jeep that could take the place of horses and mules, pulling ground-driven implements. But within 14 months of the CJ-2A's introduction, Sorensen unveiled a hydraulic lift system for the Jeep that matched that of the Ford 9N tractor. Once again, the demonstration took place on Sorensen's farm.

Fred Coldwell wrote of the picture accompanying the article:

"I imagine the photo of Sorensen in the JEEP is a publicity photo taken some time before the Civilian Jeep introduction on his CESOR farm on July 18, 1945. I also believe he owned an MA jeep that he used on his farm during the war. Some preproduction CJ-2 jeeps, both Agrijeeps and stamped JEEPs, were tested on his farm during 1944 and 1945."

So even if the photo and the story were "staged", we do know that Jeeps were on his farm at the time he made his decision.

Love Hydraulic Lift Performs on Cesor Farms



Photo taken from an article on the introduction of the 3-point hitch that made the Jeep a direct competitor of the Ford 9N tractor

Only Sorensen could have made this happen. Suddenly the Jeep was not a replacement for horses, but a fully functional tractor in the same class as the Ford 9N. If a farmer in the 1940s and the 1950s wanted a tractor with a hydraulic 3-point hitch, he could buy a Ford tractor, a Ferguson tractor or a Jeep. The Jeep was the only farm vehicle that could be used as a truck, a car, a mobile power source (for powering machines with a belt or shaft) and a tractor.

While bringing in experts he had known at Ford, Sorensen carefully constructed the design of the hydraulic lift to withstand any patent fights. Ford Motor Company and Harry Ferguson had vigorously fought the big tractor manufacturers (and each other) over patent infringements of the system that would become the industry's standard. Jeep was never sued for patent infringement.

The hydraulic system was an "add-on" that could simply be bolted onto the Jeep without need for modifications. It could be installed at the factory, at the dealership or in the farmer's garage. This idea of customizing your Jeep by adding accessories to meet your needs (or wishes) is still with us today

The Utility Line

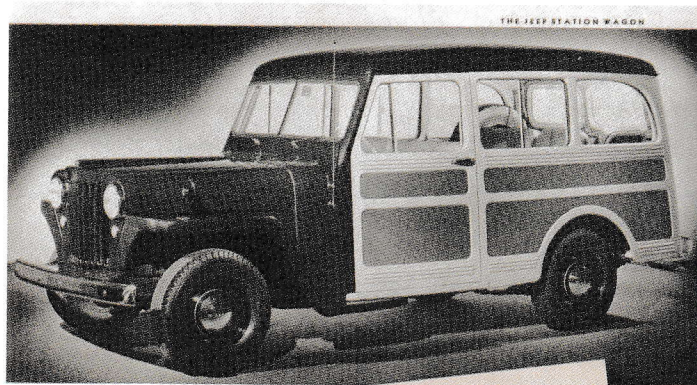


Photo taken from the March 1946 Willys-Overland financial report showing the station wagon prototype.

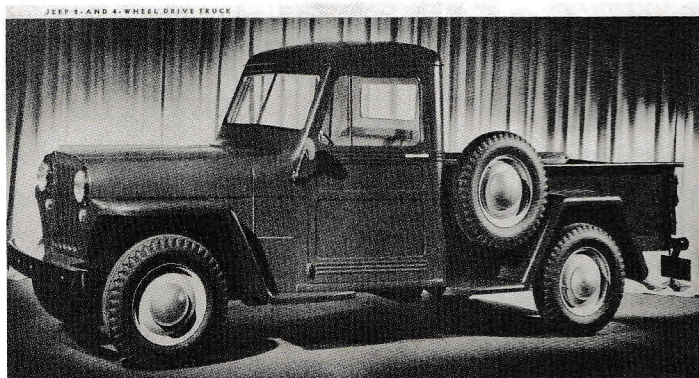


Photo taken from the March 1946 Willys-Overland financial report showing the pickup truck prototype. (10)

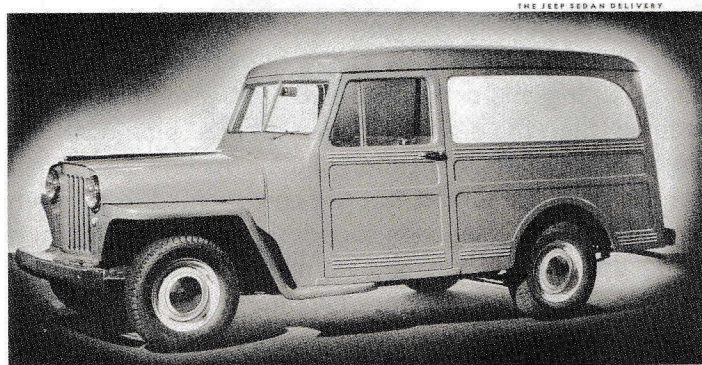


Photo taken from the March 1946 Willys-Overland financial report showing the sedan delivery prototype.

Sorensen's biggest contribution to the Jeep brand wasn't the hydraulic lift. Jim Allen, writing in the Winter 2021/2022 issue of *The Dispatcher* magazine, notes how Sorensen saved Willys from itself. Willys' board and stockholders wanted a post-war car. They saw the CJ-2A as a mere sideline and not the purpose of a real car company. Sorensen knew that Willys would never be able to compete with the likes of Detroit's giants for resources, including bodies. Sorensen wanted to create a line of utility vehicles that could be assembled from parts punched out by appliance manufacturers: body panels would have minimal curves and no intricate stamping. It would make use of the Willys 4-cylinder engine and the flat fender and slab sides design of the military jeep to enable production to start right away. The March 1946 Willys-Overland semi-annual financial report lays out Sorensen's plan for a "Utility Line", but also promises a future "Motor Car Line" when the time is right. By the time this report is issued, Sorensen has been bumped upstairs and is listed as the vice-chairman of the board.

Sorensen was actively involved in Willys only from 1944 to 1946, although he would be on the payroll into the 1950s. His "Utility Line" of Jeep trucks, station wagons and panel trucks lasted into the 1960s. Willys didn't have to rely solely on sales of the civilian Jeep or compete in the car business and that move most likely saved it from the fate of so many of the independent auto makers.

By 1951, Willys had survived the post-war Detroit battles by following Sorensen's plan of building on the basic utility vehicle concept. They had avoided the costly annual model changes and made changes to improve performance and efficiency, but not style. But Willys leadership, who had been able to implement Sorensen's plans, could no longer hold off calls from dealers and stockholders who demanded a car.

Almost Like Flying!

The New **Aero Willys**

LOADS AT 60 - CRUISES AT 75 - WITH POWER TO SPARE
UP TO 35 MILES PER GALLON WITH OVERDRIVE
DRIVER SEES ALL FOUR FENDERS

First Car To Combine Such Luxury With Record Mileage!

A blend of aero and auto engineering has created in the Aero Willys a new kind of car! Its ride is so cloud-soft and luxurious, you feel airborne. When you press the accelerator, it almost seems to sprout wings. Yet this amazing car gives mileage up to 35 miles per gallon in overdrive! Before you buy any car in any class, drive an Aero Willys. WILLYS-OVERLAND MOTORS, Toledo, Ohio.

TAKE AN "AIRBORNE" RIDE AT ANY WILLYS' DEALERS

Exhaust, transmission and drive shafts to change without tools. "Aero" is standard, and costs nothing extra, extra. Economy with the Willys.

Entire Drive System, from engine to rear axle, floats on rubber, effectively suppressing vibrations and noise.

61-Inch-Wide Seating, both front and rear, provides luxurious spaciousness for six full-grown passengers.

F-Head Hurricane 6 Engine with 7.6 compression tops all other American sizes in efficiency of power output.

Willys builds for defense—military Jeeps, aircraft parts, many other products.

1954 magazine ad for the Aero Willys. You remember the Aero Willys don't you?

1952 saw the introduction of the Aero Willys, a compact sedan in production until 1955. In April 1953, Willys-Overland merged with Kaiser-Frazer to form Kaiser-Willys. Kaiser-Frazer's Henry J sales were faltering, and Henry Kaiser had to merge with someone to stay in business. Willys-Overland was renamed Willys Motors Inc.

Patrick R. Foster in his book *The Story of Jeep* sums up what happens next: "The sales organization called Kaiser-Willys, existed as long as there was a Kaiser car, which wasn't long. The Willys car was still enjoying decent sales, although it certainly wasn't setting the world on fire. In truth, the fate of both Willys Motors and Kaiser no longer rested on their passenger cars, but rather on the continued success of the Jeep line." (Emphasis the author's)

One could argue that the names in the last statement could be changed nine more times and it would still be true. From 1945 until today, the Jeep brand ownership would change ten times! That must be a record. While many individuals deserve credit for preserving the Jeep brand for almost eighty years, Charles Sorensen deserves top billing.

What if?

Would the Jeep brand have survived for 80 years without the intervention of Sorensen? We will never know. What we do know is that Henry Ford dismissed Charles Sorensen and the rest is history. **D**