

Leigh's 1951 Willys Utility Wagon

Text by Tyler Tedford

In 1946, Willys-Overland Motors introduced the Willys Utility Wagon describing it as a "people's car". Perhaps the original sport utility vehicle, the Willys Wagon was the first all-steel, factory-built station wagon in North America designed to compete with the "rear" wood wagons manufactured by Detroit's Big Three. Powered by a four-cylinder engine with four-wheel drive, the all-steel body boasted easy maintenance, safety and ample space with a seven-passenger capacity. The seats are removable (with the exception of the drivers seat), making for added cargo space as the utility vehicle.



Leigh Tedford (pictured in photos) is the very proud owner of this featured 1951 Willys Wagon. In fact, her whole family has an enthusiasm for classic automobiles starting with her grandfather who introduced her father to vehicle restoration as a young boy. Her grandfather (Jack Tedford) restored his father's (Leigh's Great Grandfather, Charles Tedford) 1932 Chrysler CI series roadster and his high school 1955 Chevy Bel Air, teaching her father (Tyler Tedford) the mechanical skills and the love for classic automobiles she enjoys.



The Willys lived in Leigh's grandfather's barn until the "off the frame, total restoration" began in 2010. The restoration was a labor of love Leigh shared with her grandfather, father, and brother that took over 5 years to complete. Since her Grandfather's barn and shop were in Illinois, she would travel with her father and brother for weekends at a time and two weeks every summer, working alongside each other until complete. After completely disassembling the





was power washed.

After removal of the engine, transfer case, transmission and powertrain, the frame cracks, broken mounts and the cross members were welded up. A media blast to everything followed by primer and paint to the frame. Once the new leaf springs, shackles, pivot bolts and the related hardware were installed and the frame was completed,

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To begin with, both differentials were power washed, media blasted, painted and then reassembled with new bearings, seals, gaskets, new rear gear and new brake backing plates. The front brakes and axle shafts with spindles and knuckles and brakes were replaced as well as the rear brakes, axle shafts, and seals.

After magnafluxing and media blast, the motor was completely rebuilt reboring the cylinders to 20 thousandths over and a crank shave of the same. The transmission, transfer case and steering box received

the same attention. A new master cylinder, new steel brake lines and a balanced drive shaft with u-joints completed the rolling chassis.

The body received an eco-blasting using the dustless blasting technique. Hours of body work were spent welding up all the cracks and holes in firewall, and the rusted-out floorboards. And the right rear quarter and wheelhouse were replaced. Leigh's father and brother spent many hours using the old-fashioned labor-intensive "pick and file" method to make the metal perfectly straight before a high-build primer was applied inside and out. An undercoating was applied to the under body before the body and body parts were sent out to St. Aubin Auto Body in Manteno, Illinois for a final sand, paint, clear, color sand and buff.



When everything was returned to Leigh's grandfather's shop the final assembly began. The body was set on the chassis and fenders and grill attached. Dynamat was attached to the inside of the roof, side and door panels as the sound deadening material. Everything in the engine compartment that needed to be replaced was and a factory-correct wiring harness was used. Inside, the interior was totally disassembled, detailed and restored. All seats, side and door panels were reupholstered. All new glass, weather stripping and



window felt strips, carpet, headliner, wind lace and new oak floor strips were installed. Everything that needed replating was sent out for straightening and chromed. Coker Firestone Military NDT tires were mounted to the original rims.

The Willys is no "trailer queen". It is a fully restored driver and can be seen at times driving around Manassas. It is driven to the local events including the 41st and 42nd Edgar Rohr Shows. This is not to say Leigh doesn't trailer it to events. In the fall of last year, she

trailed the Willys to the South Eastern Willys Get Together in Asheville, North Carolina, where her wagon earned the Chancellor Award and then up to Gettysburg to the Mason-Dixon Willys Jeep Gathering earning the Best of Show in her class. This year, Leigh will be at the Brentsville Classic Car Show on 28 April before heading to Auburn, Indiana in early May to attend the AACA Central Spring



Meet (DPC Class) followed by the Willys Jeep Rally in College Corner, OH. After that she plans to attend as many of the local events as she can.

While all the work wasn't done by herself, the project took a significant amount of Leigh's time. Traditions are important to her. It's not just about the Wagon, but also the family

time together. For Leigh her '51 Willys Wagon is very much the physical element of a Grandfather, father and son, and now a father and daughter tradition of the love of antique automobiles.