



Staying Power

JIM HETRICK'S RESTORED 1946 DODGE POWER WAGON RETAINS EVERY BIT OF ITS MILITARY-GRADE STRENGTH



"They're basically like a street-legal tractor is what they are."

That's Jim Hetrick of Lake Forest, talking about his restored 1946 Dodge Power Wagon. The rugged four-wheel-drive pickup, derived from a military vehicle that first saw service during World War II, has become a classic today in part because of its status as the first mass-produced civilian 4x4 truck.

Hetrick, a longtime auto enthusiast with a special fondness for Chrysler Corp. products, bought his about a year ago, though he had his eye on one long before that.

"I always liked them," he says. "I remember them as a kid. They were before my time but I remember seeing them as a kid and I always thought it would be really neat to have one one day. One that looked like brand new."

Hetrick's not alone in that desire. For a vehicle with such humble beginnings, the utilitarian pickup retains a dedicated following today. But maybe that should be expected from a vehicle referred to in its owner's manual as "the finest truck built."

According to Hetrick, it was returning WWII servicemen who gave the truck its first boost.

"Dodge supplied most of the vehicles to the military, so when the war ended, the GIs were coming home and a lot of them were saying, 'Give me a truck like I drove over there in wherever.' "

Dodge responded with a civilian version. "They named it after a magazine that was out there and what the GIs always referred to them as," Hetrick says. "Product recognition from the GIs is what really made these things a hit because they remembered them from the war."

Built on a 126-inch wheelbase, with a cab





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derived from earlier Dodge military trucks and a front shell modeled on a truck built for the Chinese Army, the Power Wagon's wartime heritage is clear. That heritage also meant it was virtually indestructible in civilian use. The simple six-cylinder engine would run forever with little attention. The huge, 8-foot pickup bed made hauling a breeze, and a power takeoff could be used to run auxiliary equipment. "They have a 5.83 rear end so they only do about 50 mph, but they'll pull just about anything," Hetrick says. "You can pull stumps, you can do all kinds of things with them."

That versatility kept the original version in production for decades, though Dodge introduced more contemporary models

under the Power Wagon nameplate. New federal safety regulations put a halt to U.S. sales of the original truck after the 1968 model year, though Dodge continued to sell it overseas for another decade. Such longevity means survivors are out there, though it's not necessarily easy to find a good one.

"I was going to restore one myself so I started looking around," Hetrick says. "But most of these things are in pretty bad shape because they rust easily like a lot of old cars do. I was thinking I was going to have to buy two to build one."

That turned out not to be necessary, though, as Hetrick found a truck online that had been restored just two years before. "I figure it

saved a couple of years off my life (from having to restore one," he says.

Hetrick's truck, like many Power Wagons, had been built in Los Angeles. "It spent most of its life in Oregon," he says. "And then it was restored by a guy named Marty McKenzie in Vancouver, B.C. He's pretty renowned in the Power Wagon field. He sold it to a guy in New Jersey and that's who I purchased it from and brought it back to California."

Hetrick says his Power Wagon is basically stock, with one major modification. "The only modifications are the wheels," he says. "Stock was 16 inches, which in 1946 was a very big wheel." But Hetrick's wheels are even larger - 20-inch, which gives the truck an

even more aggressive appearance.

"With the tires they're 40 inches tall, but it really gives it the good look," Hetrick says. "The wheel wells are obviously big enough to handle it and it just completes the truck, in my opinion."

That's an opinion shared by many others as well, as the Power Wagon has been well-received wherever Hetrick has shown it.

"The nice thing about this truck is no matter where I've taken it - and I've taken it to a lot of shows - it brings all car enthusiasts together," he says. "Whether they're a Ford guy or a Chevy guy, everybody likes the uniqueness of this truck and everybody enjoys it. It's a real crowd-pleaser."

Hetrick owns three vintage Hemi-powered Mopars, but finds himself behind the wheel of the Power Wagon more often than not.

"I just use it for fun, I drive it quite a bit," he says. "The only thing I don't do is drive it on the freeway because of the top speed being about 50 mph - I don't want anybody running into me. But other than that, I drive it around town and it's reliable."

Hetrick says he has no plans for the truck other than "to continue to show it and have fun with it. Once I grow tired of it I'll sell it and move on, although I don't think that will be anytime soon because I'm really having a good time with it." ■



SPEC SHEET
**1946 DODGE
POWER WAGON**
ENGINE 230 CID inline L-head 6
HORSEPOWER 94
TRANSMISSION 4-speed manual
SUSPENSION Live axles front and rear
BRAKES 4-wheel drum
CHASSIS Steel frame
TIRES 1250x20
WHEELS 20-inch steel split rims

