

**MARK A. SMITH**  
**RUBICON TRAIL**  
**ADVENTURE**  
**JEEP JAMBOREE USA**

*Dick Wasley and his wife Liena climb Cadillac Hill on the Rubicon Trail*



# MARK A. SMITH RUBICON TRAIL ADVENTURE JEEP JAMBOREE USA

*Article & Photographs by Bill & Dan Sheridan*

**C**rossing the Rubicon — It has been a long day. Coated in trail dust, we begin our descent to base camp at Rubicon Springs. Looking down the narrow trail as daylight begins to fade; trail guides are stationed at massive boulders and trouble spots to keep the group safely moving. Quick on their feet, they expertly guide our large trail group through the toughest trail in the world.

Reaching the Valley floor, we are filled with anticipation of finally reaching base camp. Night has fallen; dusk had long since departed leaving this wheeler trail-tired and bone-weary. Bright and early we had loaded up all our gear in a Jeep Rubicon, provided by Jeep Jamboree USA, for a three-day wheeling expedition in the High Sierras. The Jeep we were driving had a little over 1,000 miles on the clock, and spent most of its young life as a Rubicon Trail buck.

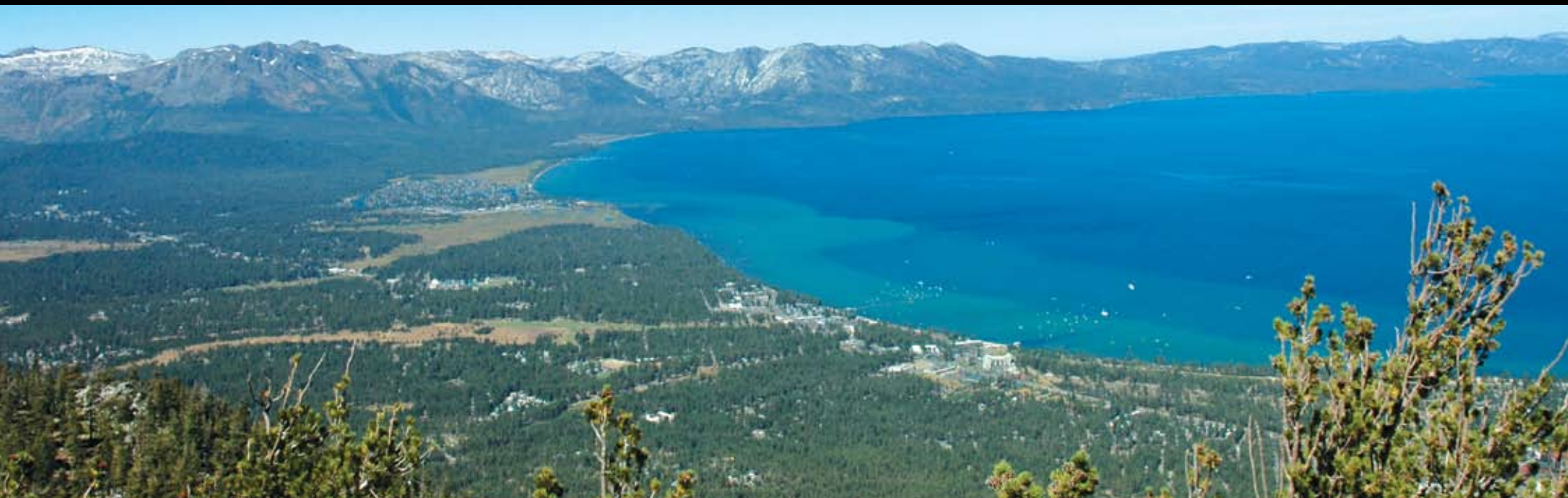
Crossing the Rubicon River and reaching Rubicon Springs is an experience I will never forget. I see a 'Tread Lightly' sign reminding all to maintain a proper speed to reduce trail

dust. Strains of a song wound its way through the forest, a baby grand piano and a violin joined in to one of the most memorable renditions of "Happy Trails" that I have ever heard. We rolled into base camp at Rubicon Springs and the welcoming committee handed out cold drinks to the parched Jeepers. Mark A. Smith stood there like John Wayne in his cowboy hat, with a warm handshake, and a big grin. "Glad you could make it. Welcome to Rubicon Springs!"

Then it begins to sink in. We had just conquered the Rubicon. The Trail by which other trails are measured by. The Crown Jewel in Jeeping. And this was no ordinary trail run — this was the Mark A. Smith Rubicon Trail Adventure. Imagine an expedition to the Antarctic with Sir Ernest Shackleton or getting a tour of Yankee Stadium from Babe Ruth. This is where it all began some 54 years ago. A bunch of friends met at Mark's house in Georgetown, California, to discuss the crazy notion of a Jeep Trip across the High Sierras, using the Old Rubicon Road. The rest, as they say, is history.







Cutting through the Sierras, the Rubicon Trail is an old Native American trail linking the Sacramento Valley with Lake Tahoe.



Stock Rubicon Jeeps supplied by Jeep Jamboree USA stand at the ready.



With his trusted trail guide, Bart Coffman sitting up top, Mark Smith gave folks some pointers about running the legendary Rubicon along with a few good laughs.

At the welcoming reception in Lake Tahoe, there was a cross-section of wheelers from all across the country and even the far reaches of the world. Hans Weinmann, a die-hard Jeoper, made the trip all the way from Switzerland. Paul Vaona, a flight medic, came down to the lower 48 from Anchorage, Alaska. Then there was Skip McKee from Maryland with his son Graydon, Barbara Coppa and her brother Cliff Darr, Jr. who flew out from Connecticut.



While the Jamborees have been hitting the Rubicon Trail since the 1950s, the idea of a Jeep-supplied expedition like the Mark A. Smith Rubicon Adventure is still a new concept — only in its third year. Folks who could not otherwise transport their own rig all the way across the country, got the chance to wheel on the legendary Rubicon.



With 11 Jamborees notched on his Jeep, Tim Apel caught a plane from Ohio with his family for their second Rubicon Adventure. Tim's first vehicle was a '73 CJ-5. "I tore the rusted body off and replaced it with a fiberglass body, dropped a V-8 into it and loved it. I have always owned a Jeep," said Tim whose daily driver is an '03 Rubicon with 35" rubber.

As much as Tim loves Jeeps and Jamborees, "I would not have attempted to transport my Jeep from Ohio to the Rubicon." Tim added, "As tough as the Rubicon is, it is amazing how those stock Jeeps handle it. Nobody would believe it, unless they wheeled it. The trail is just that hard."



Tim Apel in the center next to Mark with Jerry, Kristy, and Chris.



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At any one minute, up on the granite slab, those off-camber situations made you re-aquaint yourself with your Maker. The traction was unbelievable. No mud to speak of. But one little, innocent roll-over and it looked like you would tumble off the face of the planet. There was nothing to stop you.

We were all in bone-stock Jeep Rubicons. Front and rear lockers. 31-inch tires. No lift kit. No sway bar disconnects. Tires aired down just a little. It took me back to the days of learning how to wheel again, sharpening your skills, finesse wheelin'. We were all on a level playing field, and that playing field just happened to be the Rubicon Trail. It was a challenge like no other.

Graeme Stewart, a veteran of nine Jeep Jamborees, was not at all surprised with the way the stock Rubicon performed on the trail. Back home Graeme has a 1994 Jeep Cherokee with a 6" lift, rear converted to triangulated Coil spring, Longarm front, 4.0:1 T-case. Running Swampers TSL 34 x 9.5 x 15.

"My Dad has a Rubicon and the only modification we have done is a Teraflex 3/4" urethane spacers, and he can hang with me on the trail," said Graeme who has dreamed for years about going on the Rubicon. "I built my Jeep for the Rubicon, but getting out there with it and getting that much time off work has eluded me for years," said Graeme who helped celebrate his Dad's 70th birthday out on the Rubicon with his wife and mother.

As our wagon train of Rubicons proceeded on its merry way, we passed by another group of off-roaders running some big rigs. They were busy helping a friend whose rig that had flopped over on its side. It had 38-inch tires and an exoskeleton rollcage. They just scratched their heads as our procession of Jeeps went by.



Graeme Stewart helped celebrate his Dad's 70th birthday on the Rubicon.

The whole experience changed my perception of stock Jeeps as being rigs for rookies out on the trail for the first time. I got a new found wheeling respect for stockers. I thought back to all those trail veteran in their vintage Jeeps I've met over the years. Quiet, unassuming Jeepers usually running 31-inch tires, the Jeep you watch and say, "how the heck did they do that?" Every club seems to have one. The tailgunner of the group, the dependable one stuck in the back of the line. They take a certain amount of pride in running a stock, or a dang-near stock rig. Their motto is 'Trust in Jeep'.



Mark Smith is one of these trail veterans. A Jeepster for over 50 years and founder of Jeep Jamboree USA, Mark is considered the "Father of Modern Day Four Wheeling" and has taken stock Jeeps through some of the toughest trails on both sides of the equator. *See page 18 for sidebar on Mark's legendary Crossing of the Darien Gap in five stock Jeep CJs.*

"I think that the stock Rubicon vehicle is totally capable of doing the Rubicon Trail without any modifications," said Mark. "In fact, I have never used lockers in my life. I think 90 percent of it is how you drive. If people would just go slow and easy and let the vehicle do the work. Relax a little. Use your crawling gears. Whether it is automatic or stick-shift, the big thing on stick-shifts we like to try to teach people is don't use the clutch; keep both feet flat on the floor. Just a little bit of power when needed. It's just a neat trick and it works beautifully."



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**Rubicons on the Rubicon Trail**

The Jeep Wrangler Rubicon was first introduced back in 2003. A stock Rubicon features front and rear Dana 44 axles with built-in air-actuated locking differentials, 4:1 low-range NV241 transfer case, and 4.10:1 differential gears.

"I think we have something very special on the Rubicon," said Mark. "The Rubicon Trail is considered the Crown Jewel of 4-wheeling. It has worldwide recognition," continued Mark. "You know for years we have worked with Jeep Corporation. When Bob Lutz was President of Chrysler and Jeep, he said, 'All Jeep vehicles must be capable of the Rubicon Trail.' Of course, we have always tried and tested them over the Rubicon Trail. For many years, Jeep had wanted to come up with a Jeep that was worthy of the Rubicon Trail so they could hang the 'Rubicon' name on it."

You know for years we have worked with Jeep Corporation. When Bob Lutz was President of Chrysler and Jeep, he said, "All Jeep vehicles must be capable of the Rubicon Trail." For many years, Jeep had wanted to come up with a Jeep that was worthy of the Rubicon Trail so they could hang the 'Rubicon' name on it.

— Mark A. Smith

"We have never modified Jeeps. We just had the new ones out on the Rubicon. The new 4-door Rubicon did beautifully on the trail. It performed very well. But Jeep using the name Rubicon, they figured this was the one they could stamp the name 'Rubicon' on. It was actually developed to be capable of the Rubicon Trail stock."

"You see when you lift them, you change your center of gravity. In teaching 4-wheel drive, we don't do much side-hill driving just for that reason because so many people have modified their vehicles which changes that angle so that you could roll over."





INTERVIEW: Mark A. Smith

Driven by a Dream



In 1978-79, Mark A. Smith and his team crossed the Darien Gap in 30 Days with five Jeep CJ7s. The Darien Gap, located between Panama and Colombia, is the 250-mile uncompleted portion of the Pan-American Highway. Without the use of Bridging ladders, 30 to 60 additional days would have been required to cross the Darien Gap.

Article by Bill Sheridan

In *Driven by a Dream*, Mark A. Smith takes you on a wheeling expedition that literally boggles the mind. Sandwiched in the middle of his memoir is the journal that he kept on the *Expedición de Las Americas* which includes the famed Crossing of The Darien Gap in 30 days.

The Darien Gap, located between Panama and Colombia, is the 250-mile uncompleted portion of the Pan-American Highway which stretches more than 16,000 miles from Alaska to the tip of South America. The Gap features some of the most extreme wheeling conditions in a section of the world where mountains, snake-infested swamps, and heavy dense forests surround you on each side. It's a truly inhospitable place where even the bugs have bug bites. The Countries of South and Central America were experiencing revolutions and political unrest at the time. If you are looking for one word to describe The Darien Gap, I would suggest impenetrable. That was until Mark and his crew decided to tame The Gap with five stock Jeep CJ7s and the *Expedición de Las Americas* was borne.

*Driven by a Dream* is narrated in Mark's down-home comical manner and loaded with amazing photographs depicting his wheeling experiences throughout the world. Often referred to as the "Father of Modern Four-

Wheeling" and the founder of Jeep Jamboree USA, Mark gives the reader insight into the evolution of wheeling, the history of the Rubicon Trail and other land mark events in the history of off-roading.

Low-Range recently caught up with Mark A. Smith who had just returned from a trip to the North Pole to discuss the challenges in crossing The Darien Gap and his 351-page memoir, *Driven by a Dream*, which was 18 years in the making.

**Low-Range:** What made you decide to write the book? **Mark:** After we completed the Expedition, many people asked if we were going to write a book. Fortunately, I kept diaries and logs of the whole trip plus pictures of the different places I've been to throughout the world.

I figured the best thing to do was to put it all down in writing. So I worked on this book for 18 years. There were probably half a dozen times that it almost wound up in the trash. It gets very frustrating. You read, you type, you rewrite. In fact, one book review commented that the book is written by an adventurer, not a writer. I thought that was a good comment. He said basically, it's like riding along and being part of the adventure.



Chile Argentina to Alaska via The Darien Gap — The Expedition relied on five stock Jeep CJ7s, 6 cylinder, 4 speed manual T-18 transmission with 31 inch tires.

**Low-Range:** When you originally started out writing the book, was the plan 351 pages or

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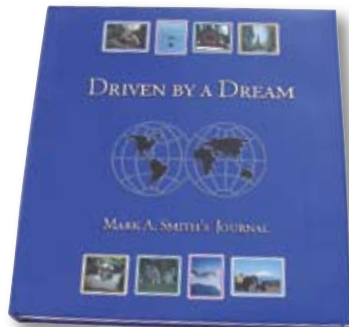
Photos courtesy of Jeep Jamboree USA

Crossing the Darien Gap

We had the privilege of interviewing Mark Smith in the Nov/Dec '05 issue of *Low-RANGE* about the release of his book, *Driven By a Dream*, which contained Mark's historic crossing of the Darien Gap. Located between Panama and Colombia, the Darien Gap is the 250-mile uncompleted portion of the Pan-American Highway. In 1978-79, Mark and his team crossed the Gap in 30 Days with five stock Jeep CJ-7s.

"One day we were working nine hours and went 500 feet," said Mark. The Expedition relied on five stock Jeep CJ-7s, 6 cylinder, 4 speed manual T-18 transmission with 31 inch tires. Without the use of Bridging ladders, 30 to 60 additional days would have been required to cross the Darien Gap.

To put the difficulty in Crossing the Gap into perspective, Mark references the trip in the early seventies. "It took them one hundred days to take two vehicles through. There were 250 men involved including British Army engineers, U.S. Air Force, the Colombian Navy and Marines, and Panamanian Guardia. Eight Colombian Marines died in a river crossing during the British endeavor."



For further information about *Driven by a Dream* visit [www.jeeppjamboreeusa.com](http://www.jeeppjamboreeusa.com).

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A Father & Son Jeep Adventure

It was about 11 years ago that Graydon McKee decided to go on his first Jeep Jamboree. After owning his YJ for a couple of years, and he heard the call to go off-roading. "Dad offered to buy two tickets to a Jamboree so I could take a friend. I told him that I wouldn't go unless he came along," Graydon recalled.

"Dad didn't want to do that of course. 'They had to pay me to do that in the Marine Corps. What makes you think that I'd actually pay someone else to let me do that now?'" Or something to that effect is what I remember him saying. I held fast and told him that if he was going to buy the tickets then I insisted that he come along as a father & son trip. The rest is history," said Graydon.

"Dad was hooked from the first day and now owns three Jeeps in addition to my old Jeep. He drives my YJ to work a few days a week to keep it going. He recently upgraded the air intake as well," Graydon added.

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"Running the Rubicon was more about mental endurance than anything else," said Graydon. "What was daunting was the length of the trail. The hard obstacles were one right after the other for eight hours straight."

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Graydon & Skip McKee

Skip McKee, an ex-Marine and self-described Jeoper for 50 years, outlined a few of the Jamborees he and his son have gone on: "We have been to Penn's Woods twice, Poconos, Catskill Mountains, Paragon three times, Oakridge, Va. twice, Appalachian in NC. We are planning Snowshoe Mountain and Alaska for 2007."

Low-RANGE: Would you have made this trip if you had to transport your rig across country as many folks do when they go out to Moab?

Skip: We could not have made the Rubicon if the Jeep had not been provided. It is a long trip to do in a trail rig coming from the east coast.

Low-RANGE: What type of Trail Rig do you have?

Skip: We have a '62 CJ-5 that is a work in progress. The 1995 YJ is what



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Up on the granite slab, those off-camber situations made you re-aquaint yourself with your Maker. The traction was unbelievable. But one little, innocent roll-over and it looked like you would tumble off the face of the planet.

we use on each trip. I wasn't surprised by the way the stock Jeeps performed on the trail, I had followed some on other trips. But if I had one, I would lift it a bit. The trail guides were outstanding and I enjoyed the people we met. We had such a wonderful time that we hope to make the Alaska trip in June.

Graydon recalled the time when he was going to buy a brand new '95 YJ. "The kicker is that Dad actually tried to talk me out of it. He told me that Jeeps were loud driving down the road, uncomfortable, hot in the summer, cold in the winter. He had had enough of Jeeps in the Marine Corps. Anyway, I wasn't daunted, so I bought one," said Graydon.

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## Keeping the Rubicon Trail Open

**Low-RANGE:** Considering the rapid rate of land closures and trail restrictions, has it been a struggle to keep the Rubicon Trail open?

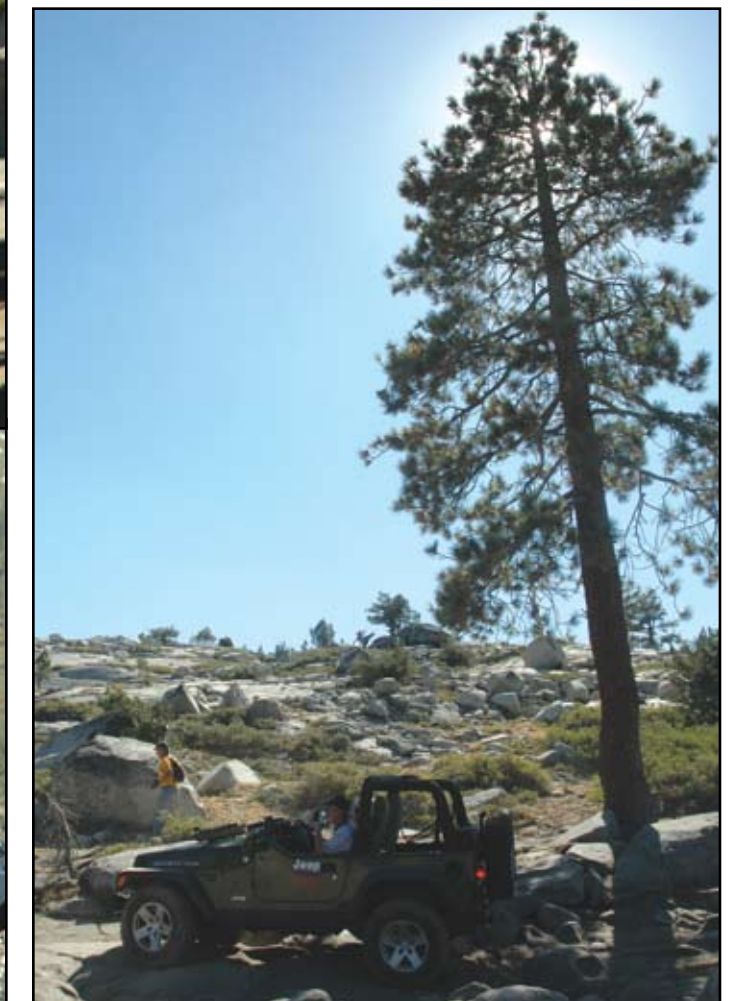
**Mark Smith:** The Rubicon Trail contributes approximately 3 to 5 million dollars a year just to the economy of El Dorado County. Because of what the Trail contributes to the local economy, the County is very solidly behind us on keeping this open. In fact, we now have the Friends of the Rubicon Trail Foundation to help keep the trail clean and operating.

**Mark:** I've been fighting for a good 35 years or more to keep that trail open. Now the Rubicon Trail was dedicated as a County Road in 1887. Then through the years, we've had a couple of different forest service rangers. Because the trail goes through both private and government land, they insisted that the County had given up the road and that we would need to get permits to go over the road. I would never submit to the permit process. That word "permit" bothers me. It is not really in my vocabulary.

In fact, my position was, that we were grand-fathered in. We were using the Rubicon Trail before some of them were even born. We had been fighting with them for years. I had the County re-declare the Rubicon Trail as "an unmaintained County Road" in 1989.

**Mark:** The Spider Lake area has some major problems. It's a beautiful area. It's a nice recreation area, but it is almost all solid granite so sanitation is a problem. This is where the Friends of the Rubicon suggested the use of these portable toilets. If you Pack it in, Pack it out.

Now, the Forest Service has a great attitude with us. They work with us. They try to keep the trail open. We've







Skip McKee



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had some problems with the extreme machines going in there and tearing up the land and going anywhere they wanted. That led to the closure that they had at Spider Lake. The Trail was never closed. But the area, around Spider Lake is open for very limited camping. But they cannot take their vehicles over to the lake. They can park within the boundaries of the unmaintained county road which is 50 feet wide. They can hike into camp, but they cannot take their vehicles in. This last summer there were many citations issued. The citations are for causing environmental damage. It is about a \$350 fine. And they gave quite a few citations out.



**Low-RANGE:** Do you think the Rubicon Trail will remain open for future generations to enjoy?

**Mark Smith:** Yes, I think that things we have done will definitely ensure that, plus, the fact that we own about half of the trail. We have been very responsible in everything we do. As far as closure goes, I don't think that the Rubicon Trail will ever be closed because it serves private land and you cannot restrict access to private land.

**Mark:** Back in 1985, Paul Derosiers was with the Bohemia Lumber Company and I got Paul interested in 4-wheeling. Eventually, I convinced him that they should sell that land to us. He called me one day and said, we will sell you the land. So, I got 20 people and we raised the money and we bought Rubicon Springs which is 400 acres, so we own a good portion of the Rubicon Trail.



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**Low-RANGE:** Is it possible for a wheeler to be an environmentalist?

**Mark:** Many of us are more of an environmentalist than a lot of these greenies are. We teach responsible off-road driving. Respect the wildlife and the environment. Tread Lightly and stay on designated trails.

**Low-RANGE:** The trail guides and spotters were among the best we have wheeled with. Considering that there were more than 25 Jeeps on the trail and there was no breakage. From start to finish they kept everyone moving, in a safe, fun environment. We had quite a distance to cover before we reached base camp.



Bart Coffman.

**Mark:** All of our guides are well experienced. Bart Coffman has been with us for 25 to 30 years. People like Bart are calm and easy going. 'Hey, you can do it. Don't give up. Just go slow and easy.' That is one thing you have to stress. Because if you start yelling at a guy, when he's driving wrong, they really lose it. Almost all of our guides have been with us for 10 years or more, especially on the Rubicon.



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A welcome sight after a long day on the trail.

## The Story of the Rubicon Flyer

"I have the old stagecoach that went in and out of Rubicon Springs," said Mark Smith. "This is kind of crazy," he continued, "Why was I, of all people led to it. It was about 10 years ago. I was in an old gold mining town



Mark and his son Greg found the old Rubicon Flyer in a barn.

which is about an hour and a half south of Georgetown. I was there with my son Greg. I was visiting a guy that builds old wagons. Greg was in one of the barns looking around. He yelled over to me, 'Hey Dad, you've got to see this. You've got to come over for a minute.' I walk over and here is this mountain stage coach. It's not like the cross country stage coaches. It had 'D. Abott, Rubicon Soda Springs' on the side. It was the old stagecoach, known as the Rubicon Flyer that went in and out of Rubicon for almost 10 years. Carrying eight or six passengers, or carrying bottled mineral water out."

Back in the day, the best and most efficient way to get to Rubicon Springs was to hop aboard the Rubicon Flyer, a mountain stagecoach which brought city dwellers to Rubicon Springs to enjoy the healing powers of the famed Rubicon Soda Springs.

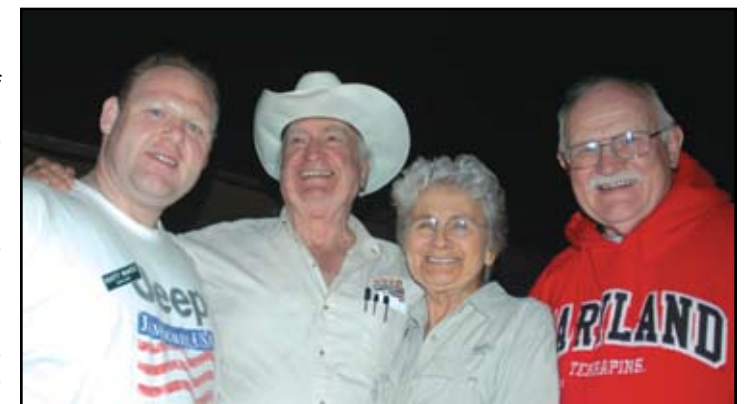
In 1901, it seems ole Daniel Abbott had a bit of a sense of humor, for when he purchased Rubicon Springs he promptly replaced the welcome signs with "Enter at your own Peril." The legend of the Rubicon Trail has grown since



then from an out of the way, country destination into a modern day wheeling proving ground.

Not since the Rubicon Flyer has a vehicle been graced with the Rubicon name, that is, not until Jeep and Mark Smith entered the picture. Like I said, the legend continues.

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Mark and Irene Smith, center, with Graydon and Skip McKee.



Lisa Torgerson on violin and Kelly Stephens on piano.





Offering an eagle eye view of the Rubicon Trail, helicopter rides piloted by Mel Cain and his son, Curtis, gave us a unique overview of what we just accomplished as a group. As we flew over and recognized some of the sections of the Rubicon we wheeled the previous day, down below, a thousand feet or so, we spotted wheelers enjoying the famed trail.

Looking down, you can almost imagine what it would have been like being jostled around aboard the Rubicon Flyer, the horses straining to get a footing on the steep up hill climbs, trail dust flying, the stage coach driver cussin' and fighting with all his might to keep the Rubicon Flyer from careening off into the abyss.

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Tim Apel and his father, Jerry, with Mark.

Life at base camp is something you could get used to. No phone, no computers, no worries. No problems. Just plenty of food, folks, and fun, not to mention great conversation. It was an opportunity for everyone to get acquainted.

Barbara Coppa and her brother Cliff Darr, Jr. made attending Jamborees an annual family trip. "Although my son Evan (age 4) did not go on the Rubicon Trail Adventure, he has gone on the two Catskill Jamborees. He has his Uncle's love of Jeeps so it looks like we will be going on Jeep Jamborees for a long time to come," said Barbara. "We decided to go on the Mark A. Smith, Jeep Jamboree because of a recommendation of the organizer of the Catskill Jamboree Mike. He told everyone it was the trip of a lifetime. Once Cliff and I heard that, we decided we would be on the next trip."

Barbara added, "Having a Jeep provided for us was the perfect way to experience the Rubicon Trail, with someone else's Rubicon and a repair crew, what could be better?"

**Low-RANGE:** How did you and your brother get into off-roading?

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**Barbara:** My brother and I have always been very close. He has raised me since I was 10. Cliff has always played a dual role as big brother and father. As long as I can remember, Cliff has loved cars, Jeep, and the outdoors.

**Low-RANGE:** What did you think about the Trail Guides? Barbara: Every trail guide that I have met at both the Catskill Jamboree and the Rubicon Adventure have been the nicest people with a genuine love for Jeeping. Mark A. Smith and the Trail Guides make the experience magical on the Rubicon. The food, music, campfires, and all around camaraderie make the trip an experience we will never forget.

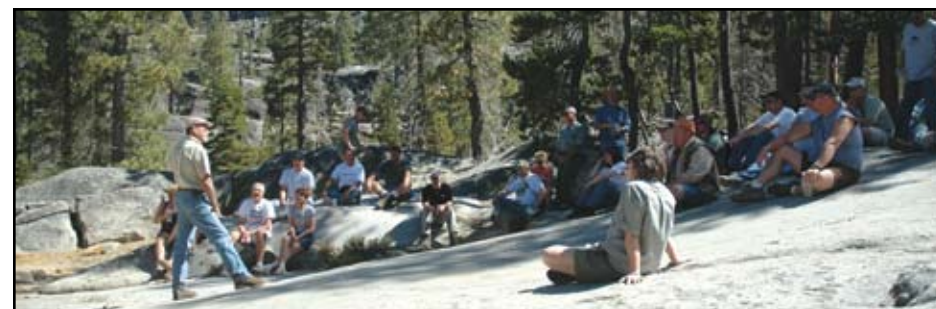
**Low-RANGE:** What was your favorite part about the trip?

**Barbara:** Going over all of the obstacles on the crown jewel trail of off-roading. Driving into camp and being handed a cold drink by Mark A. Smith to live violin music and a baby grande duo. Meeting Mark, his wife, Irene, and their dog J.J.

We first met Dick and Liena Wasley at the reception party back at Lake Tahoe. So after sharing a table at the party, we were lucky enough to spend some time together on the trail with this nice couple from California. Dick has been an avid off-roader for the past 25 years. Motorcycles, dune-buggies, and Jeeping. At the party, he mentioned that he did a section of the Rubicon on a dirt bike.



Cliff Darr, Jr. and his sister, Barbara Coppa, with Mark Smith.



Camp life included a talk on geology and glaciers from Professor Brian Hayes.



Early the next day packin' out to the tune of "Oh, what a beautiful morning" on the piano.





"We got a 2004 Jeep Rubicon and took a number of off-roading ventures with our clubs and friends," said Dick. "I kept talking up the Rubicon Trail and Liena's enthusiasm increased. We finally said, ok let's do it."

**Low-RANGE:** What was your favorite part of the trip?

**Dick:** I enjoyed being with and watching Liena navigate over and around the boulders on the trail. She watched the spotters carefully, never panicked, and did better than I did, I got hung up once. This was her first real tough off-roading driving experience.

**Liena:** My favorite part of the trip was the challenge of the 1000 Dollar Hill and watching my husband hanging on to the sissy bar going over all the rocks.

**Dick:** The trail has changed somewhat since I first went over it in 1986. New boulders have magically appeared, the Little Sluice Box has changed in position, and the 1000 Dollar Hill was not in existence. Mark Smith and his collaborators have had a lot to do with keeping the trail open and viable, and all of us off-roaders sincerely appreciate his efforts.



Dick & Liena Wasley. Dick has been an off-roader for the past 25 years: Motorcycles, dune-buggys, and Jeeping.

**Low-RANGE:** Mark, one last question. How the heck did you get the Baby Grand Piano out there?

**Mark Smith:** At the 25th Anniversary, we brought in a 16-piece bagpipe band. We kind of snuck them in there and they came out of the woods playing, "Scotland the Brave." Well, the idea was to have a surprise every year. I had been to a stage play with my wife and daughter. That night we went to a piano bar after dinner, the guy was sitting there with a candelabra and a tux. I said that's it for next year. You know how women are, they said you're crazy, you're out of your mind. I found a guy who would rent us a piano. He thought the idea was absolutely crazy. We flew a grand piano in and have been doing it every year since. ■



*Jerry and Tim Apel*

