

Chet Hempfling  
pages my original or  
being true Bob Jones

Chet Hempfling

The following information was granted to Bob Lindsey  
by Chester Joseph Hempfling on July 26, 1988

A PERSONAL INTERVIEW OF CHET HEMPFLING AS  
TOLD TO BOB LINDSEY

I was born March 11, 1909 in Butler, Pa. I was graduated from high school in Prospect, Pa. in either 1924 or 25. After high school I went to work at Armco Steel.

I worked at ARMCO Steel until 1929. When Austin began production in 1930, I got a job and didn't miss a paycheck for the next eighteen years until I left in the fall of 1948. At one time, there were only two people working- an office girl and me. Our job was to distribute Austin parts.

In late 1931 or early 32, we produced about 100 cars per day. That was probably the height of production. We actually built more cars than we could sell so they were stored in one of the nearby steel buildings. The cars might be brought out a year later cleaned and polished up to be sold.

In 1937, engineer, Harry Miller and I began began to experiment to improve the Austin. This led to the production of the Bantam. The last Bantam rolled out on August 18, 1943. ?

In 1940, Bantam recieved word that the U.S. Government was in need of a vehicle for military purposes. At this time Harold Crist, Ralph Turner, and I hand built three prototypes of the military vehicle which later became known as the "Jeep". They were taken out to the army proving grounds for tests. Crist was

AHA! Evidence for the  
York - Hoover Bodies,  
and Aurands "couple  
of jeeps"

the boss. Turner was responsible for the chassis and the engine. I was responsible for fabricating the sheetmetal parts. I would like to say at this time that Ralph and I were "mechanics" not engineers. Engineers are college graduates who do drawings, and the drawings are sent to the workshop for production. Most engineers have no idea of how to work the machines used in production. We mechanics hand made the parts. They were then laid out on a block and pictures were taken. They were then sent to the drafting department and blueprints were then made. The blueprints were made after the part was made.

On the original Jeep I made the throttle and gas pedal. A man from Autolite and I made the first wiring harness. I strung the wires and he wrapped the wires as we went.

Crist worked us day and night. He wouldn't let us leave.

Ralph and I slept many nights in the upstairs girl's restroom.

Ralph and Sgt. Mosley wrecked the first Bantam Jeep in Ohio. They ran into a telephone truck. It was so badly damaged that we took it apart and reused the parts. *for what?*

A German metalsmith used an acetylene torch and a set of hammers to form the rounded hood. I still have the tin snips that the German "special ordered" to cut the sheet metal.

Ralph Turner was responsible for taking the Bantam Jeep to Holibird Proving Grounds in Maryland. I remained in Butler to resume my duties at the plant. I supervised the building of the 70 Jeeps ordered by the government. These Bantams were sent out all over the U.S. to different proving grounds.

I received a phone call one night about eleven o'clock. Ralph needed a set of rear springs that night. I took the springs to Pittsburgh, chartered an airplane, and flew to Washington, D.C.

I boarded the train for Baltimore without even buying a ticket. The train conductor had even lifted the stepping stool used for passenger boarding. When I arrived in Baltimore an army sargeant met the train and took me to an army warehouse where Ralph had already removed the chassis from the Jeep. We had to weld the frame and replace the rear springs. By this time it was 6:00 a.m. The sargeant in charge said, "Boys lets go to the canteen and get something to eat." We went to the canteen but the person in charge wouldn't feed us because they weren't open yet. The sargeant immediately pulled some strings, and we were fed. When Ralph and I returned to the warehouse, Capt. Mosley had already left for Washington, D.C. to give Roosevelt a ride up the Capitol steps. Ralph and I looked at each other wondering what to do. I decided to go back to Butler, and Ralph headed for Washington. Ralph did get to see and talk with Roosevelt. ?!

But - a  
Bantam in  
D.C. ?

At the time that I was supervising the building of the seventy experimental Bantams, I picked up a newspaper one day and saw that Willy's had landed a large Jeep contract. I showed the paper to Crist, and he was really mad. Bantam had not received any information to that effect. Finn who was in charge of government sales couldn't believe it either. Fenn

The seventy Jeeps were completed and sent all over the country for testing. Ralph was responsible for servicing the Jeeps on the East Coast and I serviced the Jeeps in the middle of the country. One of the first things that we had to change was the "updraft" carburetors. Later Jeeps had down draft carburetors.

One time I was sent to Fort Bragg to service a 4-wheel steer,

and as I was walking down the street I heard some one holler across the street, "Hey four eyes. What are you doing here?" I looked over and there was Ralph Turner. He had been sent to service the same Jeep. We stayed over at the Milner Hotel, and had quite a good evening. We had one other mix up like that at Camp Mead, Maryland.

One time when I was at Holibird, The test drivers kept bringing in Willy's Jeeps with broken rods in the engine. I asked our Continental Engine specialist why our engines didn't blow up like the Willy's. His answer was that Continental Engines had a short rod and the Willy's had a long massive rod. At high RPM's, the Willy's rod developed a "whip" which made it break.

When we went into full production manufacturing the 2200 Jeeps which were sent to Russia, Ralph was in complete charge of of the assembly line. I made sure all parts came in, and I was in charge of crating up the Jeeps for export. The Russians had sent three officers over to make sure everything was in order. One could speak English and the other two couldn't. One officer stood by the crates making sure they were crated properly. One time one of our drivers bent a bumper on the way over to the crate. I straightened it out, and the Russian wouldn't let it be crated. I hollered over, "If you don't want it, I'm going to send it to Hitler."

Modern Jeep publications always make mention that Bantam couldn't run the number of units needed to satisfy government demand. We proved we could with the units produced for Russia. All the information regarding this point comes from government sources not from the people who were inside Bantam.

The reason Bantam didn't land the government contracts, as we got it from hearsay-none of it can be proven, is that Roosevelt had one of his sons purchase controlling shares in the already

*Elliot?*

*★  
3 engines  
in 5,000  
miles  
Over*

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bankrupt Willy's stock. Willy's had to get the contracts with this type of connection. Henry Ford got wind of this activity, and put up quite a squawk. Ford also wanted some contracts. At first Ford received a contract for only 1000 units. Ford told Roosevelt that they wouldn't make 1000 Jeeps unless they got a contract for more Jeeps than that.

When Crist, Turner and I set about making the Mighty-mite for the Marine Corps in the early 1950's, some people from Detroit came over to our "Mid American" plant to see our product. They kept referring to the Willy's Corporation as the "Democrat Organization". Detroit didn't like Willy's any better than we did!



I left Bantam in the fall of 1948 because I didn't like the plant manager. What had happened was that Monroe Equipment Co. had bought out Bantam. Monroe made lawnmower equipment. They had one purpose in mind, and that was to strip the plant of its machinery. The boss called me in one day and told me that he had heard that I was leaving. I said, "Yes." He asked, "Why?" I said, "Because the plant manager doesn't know what the hell he is doing. That's why!"

I went to Erie, Pa. and worked for Crist in the Erie Engine Company until 1951.

In 1951, Mid-American Motor Company of Wheatland located near Sharon, Pa., was gearing up to make a vehicle for the U.S. Marines. They had heard that Crist had supervised the making of the first Jeep, and wanted him to oversee this project. The vehicle became known as the Mighty-Mite. Crist got a hold of Ralph Turner and me to help build the vehicle. While Ralph and Crist worked on the Mighty Mite, Crist and I worked on a prototype of a U.S. Mail truck. It was called the MARCO. I hand fabricated the sheet metal for the entire body.

Up to that time mail trucks were painted what Ralph and I called "mouse brown". Actually the U.S. Government had thousands of gallons of surplus paint left from WW II and they were trying to use it up. We painted our mail truck blue and white. Crist and I came up with that color. I got Crist to paint the top white and the bottom blue <sup>→ RED BAND IN MIDDLE ABOUT 5" HIGH</sup> so that the contrast would make the truck's profile look smaller. After Ralph and I paraded the truck all over the United States in mail truck shows, the U.S. Government adopted the colors and they are still used today. The MARCO sported a Lycoming Aircraft Engine. The torque was so high that it would start out in high gear. It had front wheel drive in a day when front wheel drives hadn't been accepted yet. The back gate rolled up like modern trucks. It was way ahead of its time in design. Ralph and I took the truck to Florida for tests. Our front wheeled drive outshone them all, ~~has the U.S. government~~ ~~adopted Willy's product in the end.~~ The government even sent us

back to Wheatland to outfit the truck with a water cooled Continental Engine, but it didn't perform anything like the aircraft engine.

Mid-America built around eighteen Mighty Mites. What happened there was that the vehicle was to be used by the Germans to patrol the rugged boarderlines around Germany. The original agreement was that we build the parts and the Germans would assemble it in Germany. I told them what would happen, and it did. They took one over for demonstration purposes. As soon as the Germans saw it, they built their own version of the same thing, and Mid-America lost out. I believe that it was about that time that Ralph left and went back to Erie. I stayed on.

Crist and I tried one other thing, and that was to make the Mighty-Mite into a civilian truck. About the only change was a unique tail gate that we built. When the tail gate came up a seat folded out for a person to sit. When the tail gate was let down the seat folded inside making a truck. I took the truck to Messa, Arizona and stayed with it for three weeks. It didn't go over either.

From about 1955 to 57, Fairchild Aircraft Company came to the Wheatland plant to diversify. They were afraid that since the big wars were over that the demand for aircraft would stop. They had us build a three wheeled TRI-CAR. The one back wheel drove through a torque converter from the engine. Esso Gas stations had made a commitment to buy thousands of these for advertisement and distribution. None of these vehicles were ever produced.

In 1957, I started looking elsewhere for employment. One place I checked asked what I thought I should get for a salary. I said that the last employment paid \$750.00 a month. They forgot about me right there. The employment office sent me to Pullman Standard. They were hiring at that time. They asked me if I could weld. I explained to them that I supervised that department at Bantam. Pullman sent me to the welding department for a welding test. I welded about three inches, and the supervisor tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Good enough. Go on down and start welding."

I turned around and my new boss was a kid that I had shown how to weld in my department at Bantam.

I welded about three weeks. They transferred me to the machine shop. I worked there a short while. Finally they asked me if I would like to make guards for the machinery. I got them to make an agreement that no one could bump<sup>me</sup> off the job, and I finished my fifteen years employment making guards. One time I had four men helping. I retired at age 67.

If you're going to ask me to characterize myself, I'll tell you this! I worked for three companies that kept me working when everyone else had either quit, been fired, or laid off. I can fix any machine that was ever made. When I'm done it will work as good as or better than it did when it was new.

Genealogy: Fathers name. Albert Joseph Hempfling- came from Salem, Ohio  
Mothers name. Jesse Wigton- Butler area  
Grandfather. Alphonso Hempfling- born in Germany  
Wife's name. Elizabeth Rankin- Butler