

POWER WAGON ADVENTURE

hunting for buried treasure in the deserted western Badlands is a real test of the rugged Dodge four-wheel-drive wagon

By ROBERT AMES

IT WAS the least likely day possible for ghosts. The weather in the isolated corner of southeastern Arizona was bright, clear and warm. We were alone and the two washes that we crossed a mile back would keep out anyone except those driving high-clearance, four-wheel drive cars like the Dodge Power Wagon that brought us here.

As I walked back and forward in a grid pattern my electronic treasure finder pipped monotonously in my ears with its rhythmic tone on each step. Looking for buried treasure is slow, methodical work and I kept day-dreaming about the twenty Mexican smugglers who had been killed here in Skeleton Canyon.

"What do you suppose they would think if they could see me looking for their money?" I thought. "Or the outlaws? I suppose they would come riding back and ambush me too."

Suddenly the treasure finder set up a high-pitched squeal and the meter jumped crazily.

"Damn," I said out loud as I looked up and saw that I had wandered back near the wagon with its steel body giving me a false reading. Then I drew up short as something unusual appeared around the back of the car.

Alongside the Town Wagon was a man on horseback. A man complete with ten-gallon hat, spurs and a big six-gun on his hip. There is a time and a place when everybody believes in ghosts. This was my day and for an instant I was ready to believe anything.

Then this ghost did a strange thing. He got off his horse, dropped to his knees and peered inquisitively underneath the wagon.

"Four-wheel drive, aint it," he said, standing and brushing the sand off his pants. "That's what I figured when I saw you got back this far."

I knew then he wasn't a ghost, because this has been the normal reaction when anyone got their first close-up look at the wagon. People squat, stoop and get down in the dirt to get a good look underneath.

Dodge's Power or Town Wagon is a car that has interested me for several years. One reason, of course, is the four-wheel drive in the W100. But more important as far as I am concerned is the fact that this car is built like I think a station wagon should be.

Inside all the space is genuine and ample. This version seats eight passengers and each person can be comfortable. All the seat benches are 16 inches high plus 37½ inches headroom. In back there is a full-width seat, in the middle a seat for two and the front has a split seat.

Best of all, the two rear seats do not fold. Instead they come loose from the floor and can be taken out entirely. This gives the Town Wagon a dual purpose since without the seats it is actually a panel truck with windows. The dimensions of this cargo compartment exceed those of most passenger wagons by a wide margin, especially in the case of the floor to headlining measurement where 52¼ inches makes it possible to load many items upright that would ordinarily be carried on their sides. The 155-cubic-foot capacity is almost all usable too, losing only a small area for the spare tire, and wheel wells.

No one can honestly test any car like the Town Wagon until he has first taken it on a true camping trip. And with a car that will go almost any place the possibilities are wide open.

I chose this forsaken spot in southeastern Arizona for several reasons. First it was a likely spot to test a versatile all-around car, second it lent itself to dry camping which is one of my favorite campouts. Then, there was another reason. In 1882 some outlaws ambushed a smugglers' train, burying the \$90,000 loot and I needed the money if I could find it.

I called Bill Kincaid of the Goldak Company in Glendale, California and he loaned me one of their pipe locators. This is an electronic device developed to locate water pipes underground and will pinpoint a piece of metal from six inches to around twenty feet deep. It works equally well with buried treasure.

We left Los Angeles before sunup in true western fashion and within minutes were cruising along a freeway. This was my first chance to see what the Town Wagon could do as a highway car.

Since the distance to Skeleton Canyon was over 700 miles the Town Wagon's road behavior was of no little concern. At about 3200 rpm the speedometer registered 65 mph and for most of the way I kept it right there. The engine did not heat, nor did the car seem to be straining.

Wind noise at highway speeds is quite noticeable but not objectionable. The engine and front drive shaft also seemed comparatively quiet. However, the Town Wagon came equipped with factory mud tires and to me this was a mistake. The value of these tires in overall driving is questionable and the noise at any speed over 30 mph far outweighs any value they would have unless most of the driving is done in muddy or snowy weather. With the windows down the howl of the tires against the pavement makes normal conversation impossible.

Comfort on long trips is more than just average. The higher

benches plus good legroom makes stretching and changing positions possible. The ride is harsh and bouncy. It does smooth out with heavier loading but for this trip we were a few hundred lbs. under the maximum GVW.

At Douglas, Arizona, the last fair-sized town before fifty miles of open ranch land, we stopped for local directions and to fill our extra gas and water cans.

The story of Skeleton Canyon's buried treasure goes back to the time of the OK corral battle in Tombstone and is indirectly related to many of the events that occurred there around that time.

About this time the outlaws ambushed a Mexican smuggling train and carried off the loot. Shortly afterwards, Jim Hughes, an outlaw, discovered that another pack train loaded with silver and gold was coming through, and decided to pull another ambush in the same canyon.

They caught the smugglers in a crossfire and when the shooting was over there were 19 dead Mexicans and several outlaws were seriously wounded.

With disabled men and not enough equipment to carry their loot the outlaws decided to bury the money. According to the legend the treasure was hidden within sight of the massacre and near an oak tree. Skeleton Canyon got its name because after the second massacre the bodies of the smugglers were left where they fell. In a few years the canyon floor was covered with bleached bones of men and burros. For nearly two decades human bones and an occasional silver dobie dollar were picked up by ranchers and cowboys.

The massacre took place at a junction where two washes meet. Here there is an area about 200 yards long and a hundred yards wide. Several clumps of giant sycamore trees shade many places and we chose a spot beneath one of these clumps to camp. I unloaded our stove, icebox, cooking equipment and several other items. The gear I didn't care about leaving out overnight included two cameras, binoculars, the treasure finder and a couple of boxes. These fit nicely in the driver's side of the car, stacked both on the floor and on the seat bench.

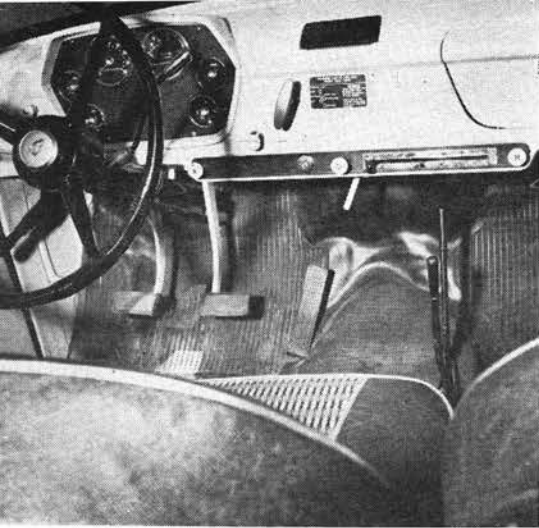
The left door was locked and the single seat on the right folded forward. This is a good arrangement since it makes entry from the front during a campout easy. There are 51 inches flat space on the floor between the wheel wells and two sleeping bags will fit without too much overlap. Along the sides, in the extra area left over because of the wheel wells, there is room to store the items needed during the night. In our case we left



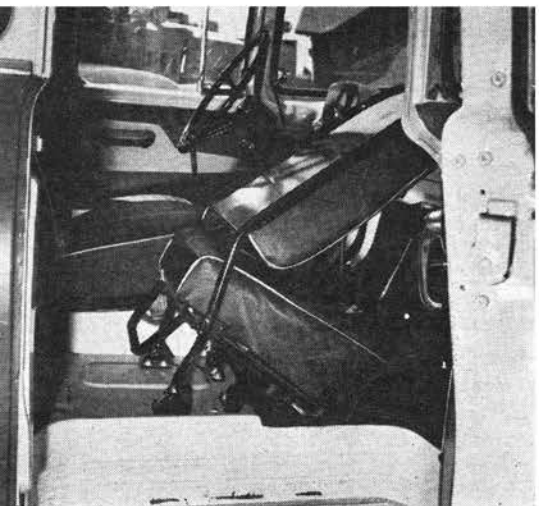
DURING ARIZONA trip dozens of old ghost towns were explored. For 1300 miles the Dodge Town Wagon averaged a 9/14 mpg gas consumption range. During back country four-wheel driving the



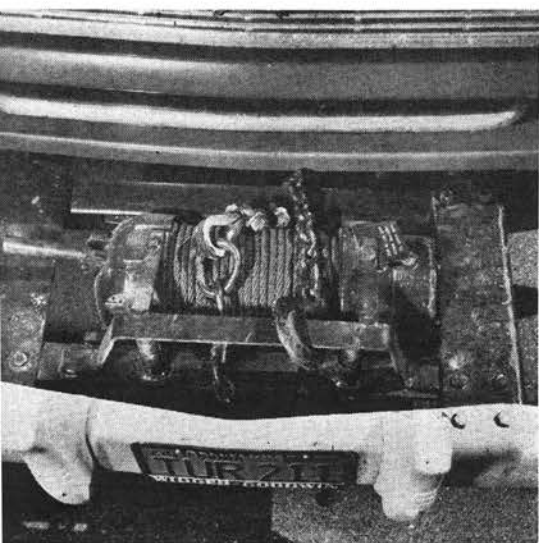
mpg figure was in the 5/9 mpg range. Roads selected for the test included level, gentle climbing and steep mountains. Author is shown with electronic metal locator in search for treasure.



TOWN WAGON has tachometer, plus oil and ammeter gauges. Power take-off on panel, levers are four-wheel drive, transfer case.



FOLDING FRONT seat arrangement worked excellent for camping. Back door was locked and wagon entered from front.



POWER WINCH has 8000 lb. capacity and can be operated with the transmission in either neutral or in four-wheel drive.

the gas and water can alongside the front and stored flashlights, boots and clothes along the rear.

It gets cold on the desert at night but inside the Town Wagon we were warm and comfortable. The body is tight and seals out wind, cold and dampness. It would be easy to camp out in the dead of winter with a pair of good sleeping bags.

At sunup we were frying our bacon and hurried breakfast since I was eager to try out the treasure finder. I had been scoping the canyon for nearly an hour before the horseman rode up. He turned out to be a game warden, named Ralph Morrow who was on his way to check some water holes back in the mountains.

Morrow had been living around the Skeleton Canyon since 1900 and when he was a boy the story was fresh in the minds of the few ranchers who lived nearby. According to him some of these ranchers had a hand in one or both of the attacks. He told me I was right about where we were parked, the massacre had taken place on the identical spot. About the treasure, however, he had a few different ideas.

"When the shooting started," he said,

"several of the mules got loose and started to run. There is a story that one of them broke away and was lost, but I don't believe it. Those oldtimers were experts at rounding up other people's livestock and would not have let any animal get away. Especially if it was loaded with silver.

"Even back as late as 1910 the cowboys around here were still picking up a few bones and dobie dollars around here, but that is the last I can remember being found."

He thought for a few minutes, then continued. "That Hunt boy, he was in on it, according to the oldtimers. Well after he died some of his relatives came to his ranch, about twenty miles from here, and dug something up. According to the story it was a strong box with some of the loot inside."

Ralph Morrow had been in this country for over forty years and I never miss a chance to talk to someone who knows the area. If he could not give me any encouragement on the treasure perhaps he could fill me in on some of the roads into the back country.

"How's the road further on?" I asked. "Road?" he smiled. "Well there have

POWER WAGON PROFILE

THE ARIZONA TRIP was not the only test conducted with the Dodge Town Wagon. In order to more accurately analyze the car's potentialities it was necessary to drive in several special situations and make a detailed analysis of the power train and accessories.

The model selected for testing was the W100 which has as standard equipment four-wheel drive, transfer case, column-mounted shift lever and a three-speed manual transmission. Major extra equipment included a V-8 engine, tachometer, winch, power steering and an overflow tank on the radiator.

Starting with the 200-hp V-8 engine, power flows directly to the transmission where it is multiplied and carried by a short propeller shaft to the transfer case. Here torque is either passed directly to the rear wheels at a 1:1 ratio or divided equally among the four wheels at a ratio of 1:1 or 1.96:1.

When torque is divided between all four wheels the power is delivered to the front differential via a separate drive shaft. From the differential, power is directed to both front wheels by the driving front axle.

Dodge's front axle layout, while fairly conventional for four-wheel drive, is quite different from the rear axle. The front axle connects through a splined slip joint drive flange to the wheel hub. The axle is broken at the wheel and inside the steering knuckle is connected to an outer axle shaft by means of a universal joint. The outer axle is bolted to the wheel hub and is the final link in getting engine torque to the front wheel. The universal joint permits the wheel to steer.

The front axle of the W100 is a full-floating design. This means that all the weight of the car is supported by the axle housing so that the sole function of the axle shaft is driving the wheels.

Axle ratios were 4.1 in the rear and 4.09 in front. This minute difference is relatively unimportant but will show up in excessive tire wear if much four-wheel driving is done.

On the left side of the transfer case is an additional power takeoff with a drive shaft leading to the winch. The 8000 lbs. capacity winch can be used either with the transfer case lever in neutral with no wheels driving or, as in the case of pulling the car out of a mud hole, with the trans-

been jeeps over it, but not very many and not very recently. Actually it is just an old horse trail . . . the old trail the smugglers used when they brought their silver across the line 80 years ago. I don't think you can make it much further. The canyon narrows and the road isn't as wide as your car."

Morrow had to leave and I went back to scoping with the metal detector. In the next few hours I got several strikes. I dug up dozens of rusted tin cans, a completely deteriorated pail and one badly rusted horseshoe. Since we didn't have too much time to spend in the canyon and because this wasn't exactly the kind of buried treasure I had expected to find I decided to have a try driving on the old smugglers' trail.

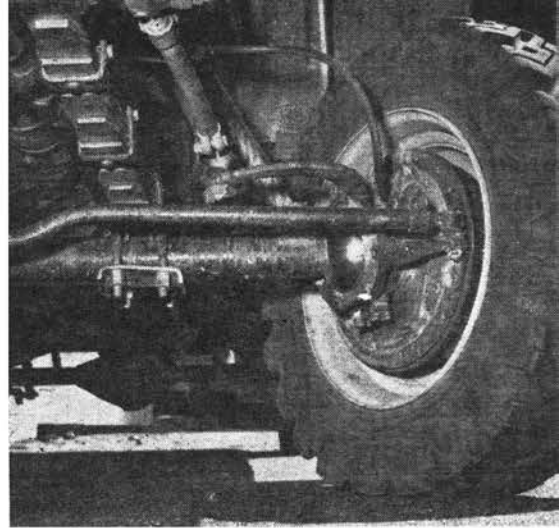
We packed up and drove for a few hundred yards. Then the road abruptly crossed the wash again and I stopped the car. The bank on one side angled down about ten feet at forty-five degrees and the bed, although flat, was filled with boulders ranging from walnut size to over two feet in diameter. Nowhere in sight was there a tire track, nor any indication that a car had ever made it across this wash.

The Town Wagon's high clearance and compound low made it rather simple for it was an easy matter to duck most of the rocks or pass over them with clearance to spare.

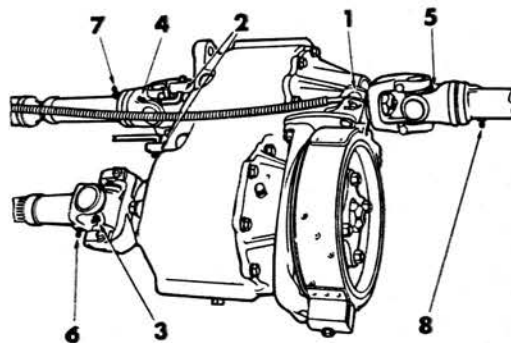
The road on the other side started out all right but before we had gone fifty yards it turned sharply and ahead I could see the canyon narrowing. Since we were in a reasonably good spot for turning around if necessary, I decided to scout ahead on foot.

There was no doubt that this was originally a mule trail. Nowhere could I see any evidence of a grader ever touching the roadbed. It looked more like water had rushed down the mountain side and gouged it a trifle wider. From the appearance it was possible that a jeep had at sometime crossed this way. But the trail was so narrow that it would be foolhardy to bring the Town Wagon with its 75½-inch width any further. The trail was not even wide enough to accommodate the tread of 65½ inches.

We turned around and went back, not because anything mechanical about the wagon would not make the trip but simply because the car was too wide for the rugged trail. •



FRONT AXLE carries weight on housing, leaving the driving axle free to supply power in four-wheel drive. Front drive shaft turns at all times unless hubs are installed.



TRANSFER CASE. 1. Hand brake connections, 2. Transfer case controls, 3, 4, and 5. Universal joints, 6, 7 and 8. Propeller shafts.

mission engaged in four-wheel drive.

Weight is an important factor in any car and with a car that is more closely related to a truck than to a passenger vehicle it takes on added significance. The Town Wagon as equipped for this test requires some special thought.

With a GVW of 6000 lbs. the test car weighed in at 5020 lbs. The front axle has a capacity rating of 3000 lbs. and according to the weight distribution, 3020 lbs. were on the front. A heavy load could theoretically pull some of the weight off the front axle but it is doubtful. Major contributing factors to the added weight on front were the V-8 engine, power steering and winch which combined totaled 560 lbs. The payload of the Dodge, 980 lbs., could be increased with overload springs since the rear axle capacity is rated at 4500 lbs.

Power steering was well worth the extra weight and cost it would add to the Town Wagon. Driving any car that weighs nearly three tons can be fatiguing and this accessory cancelled nearly all the effort required in back country driving.

Another extremely worthwhile option is the reservoir tank on the radiator. When the radiator becomes overheated (such as in mountain driving) an overflow tube permits steam and water to boil over into a container holding several quarts. After the

water cools it is siphoned back into the radiator.

One important difference between the D100 (conventional drive) and the four-wheel drive version is the addition of riser blocks underneath the suspension. This gives an additional height to the W100 of more than six inches. The floor clears the ground by more than 32 inches unloaded and although the Dodge Town Wagon can't swim it can sure wade. In fording, however, it would be a good idea to check the stream bed to make sure it will support the car's three-ton weight.

In sand, mud and snow, all of which road conditions were only average or below average, the Town Wagon performed adequately. By compensating for the extra weight with slow speeds and steady driving, little slippage was noticed and not once did the test car get stuck.

In traffic, driving the car resembles driving a big truck more than anything else. Except for steering the controls feel heavy to manipulate. This is especially true in the case of the hydraulic clutch. Another driving impression is height, which puts the driver far above the usual sight line. Actually the driver's belt buckle will be above the roof of any standard passenger car. This height has several advantages and better vision in traffic is one of major importance. •



BENT FRONT FENDER resulted from creeping over rocks in order to clear front differential. Fender is actually lowest clearance.