

San Antonio Jeep Exclusive History

By

Tony Winkler

San Antonio Jeep Exclusive (SAJE) got its start in October of 1992. I attended the Ouachita Jeep Jamboree and had a discussion with Jill Smith, the daughter of Mark Smith who had founded Jeep Jamboree, Inc. Jill said that her father was going to be coming to San Antonio to drive to the YO Ranch north of Kerrville, TX to discuss starting a Jamboree at the ranch.

I had attended several Jeep Jamborees over the previous seven years and had met Mark several times at these events. I wrote Mark a letter and offered my assistance during his visit. Somewhat to my surprise Mark offered to take my wife and me to dinner upon his arrival in January of 1993. The next day I drove my 1978 Jeep CJ-5, accompanied by The Cajun Jeep Jamboree coordinator, to the YO Ranch. There we followed Mark and his associate Dano Raffetto, and Vic Jones, the Wild Life Manager of the YO, on a tour of the ranch.

Following the tour Mark, Dano and Vic entered a ranch office to discuss the possibility of a Jeep Jamboree being held at the YO Ranch. About an hour later they came out of the office and Mark told me the Jamboree was planned for March 1994 and I had plenty of time as his assigned coordinator to get the ranch ready, trails developed and the Jamboree put together with the exception of the meals. This was a complete shock as I had not really intended to be placed in charge of the event. Since Mark "offered" me the position I didn't feel I could refuse.

I realized that my first priority was to find some Jeep drivers that would be potential trail guides. Since I didn't know a single Jeep owner personally, I knew I had to find a solution to this problem. I occasionally visited South Texas Off Road, owned by Terry King. I approached Terry about starting a Jeep Club and he was supportive of that effort. He placed me in contact with several other customers and SAJE began its formative process.

I contacted Larry McLean of Jeep Exclusive in Amarillo TX. I had met Larry during my previous trips to the Palo Duro Jeep Jamboree. Over several letters and discussions the plan began to develop that we would form a chapter of Jeep Exclusive in San Antonio with the original chapter remaining in Amarillo.

As time went on the club in Amarillo began to have some doubts about our becoming a chapter. Their biggest concern revolved around the sizes of the two cities. With San Antonio's size, they theorized there was the potential that our chapter would become larger than the Amarillo chapter and thus we would have the power to overrule their club on club matters. This concern lead Jeep Exclusive to incorporate and to eventually back out of the decision to allow us to join their club as a chapter.

However, this did not stop their efforts in helping us to form a local club. They sent us copies of their bylaws and allowed us to use them as the start of the development of our local bylaws. They granted the use of their name Jeep Exclusive with the stipulation that we would always include San Antonio in the name to differentiate the two clubs. Thus the name San Antonio Jeep Exclusive (SAJE) was born. We owe a huge debt to Larry McLean and Jeep Exclusive for their assistance in forming our local club.

Over the next several months of early 1993 several organizational meetings were held at various locations. Since my job took me out of town on an irregular basis these meetings occurred at various times and places. Meetings were held at the Josephine Street Café, a bus on display outside a hamburger stand on Loop 410 and various other places. I apologize because my memory fails on the names of all the original club organizers. Some of the original names associated with the club and YO Ranch Jeep Jamboree along with myself were Terry King, Bubba Able, Lee Zalesky, Al Lesmerises, Sam Davis, Steve Burton, Rick Seaman, Val Minozevski and Corbin Shepperd. Again my apologies to those I've missed.

The minutes show that our first official club meeting was held on June 13, 1993. It was held at Converse City Park. A couple of park benches served as our seating. Officers were voted in. President-Tony Winkler, Vice President-Bubba Able and Secretary/Treasurer- Al Lesmerises.

Over the next several months the club activities included development of our bylaws, establishment of a firm meeting place, (eventually the City Hall Grill), establishment of dues (\$30), and preparing for the first YO Ranch Jeep jamboree.

In January 1994 I moved down to Vice President and Bubba Able moved to President. Due to my erratic schedule this allowed us to establish a firm meeting date for monthly meetings. A date of the third Tuesday of each month was established.

The first YO Ranch Jeep Jamboree was held and was a huge success. We sold out the first year and every year thereafter for 11 years. Mark Smith donated \$1000 a year over two years to help us get our feet on the ground financially as a club.

Over the next couple of years the club grew somewhat dramatically due to the Jeep Jamboree. At this time off road sites or venues were almost non-existent. The Nueces River and the Devils Den were about the only local spots one could 4-wheel and the Den was private property and thus illegal. I forget what years it occurred but both were eventually closed to 4-wheeling. Thus the Jamboree became the focus of the club, perhaps to its detriment. Almost all club members were either trail guides or attended the Jeep Jamboree. Other than a few beach runs there was very little off road activity.

The club began a turnaround in January of 1997 when Sam Davis was elected president. He eventually gained access to Graze Mountain Ranch for off road use. A trail system was developed and the club had exclusive use of the ranch for several

years. Over this time the club was able to begin breaking its dependence on the Jamboree for activities.

Eventually Graze Mountain was lost when the ranch was sold and the new owner did not want to continue the relationship. Under then president Geoff Mason a new off road venue was established at Utopia. Again the club had exclusive use of the property for off road use. Over several years an elaborate trail system was developed, electrical power added, plumbing established and a first class operation was formed. The club's dependence on the Jamboree as the focus of its activities vanished.

I personally believe that the club's development of off road sites on Graze Mountain and Utopia led to the current situation where there are numerous sites for off road activities. It proved that clubs or groups could be good stewards for the ranch owners and provide additional income. Additionally, access was provided to areas of ranches that previously were not accessible to the owners.

Since 1997 the club has continued to prosper. Under the leadership of various presidents such as Geoff Mason, Jerry Lovell, Mike Boyd, Connie Hilburn, Jack Brinks and the numerous board members who have served and especially the proactive members of SAJE the club has reached the status as one of the premiere off road clubs in Texas.