



Trail to Panamint can easily devour a sport/ute, as this unwary Explorer (left) discovers. Also falling victim to the rough terrain was the sole Land Rover (lower left) on the run. Carter (below) throws scraps of wood beneath the wheels for a little extra bite as the vehicles are winched up a waterfall

and he'd been prospecting in Death Valley and the Panamints since 1961.

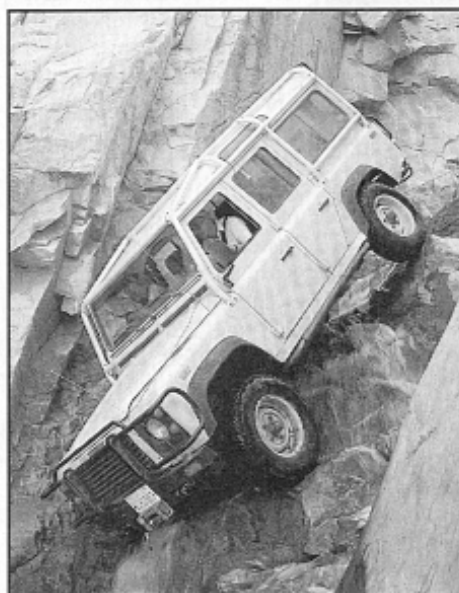
"Ya' know, it's amazing where those little Jeeps'll go," Lindsey said.

Though he has winched his own Jeep up Surprise Canyon before, the most recent time Lindsey brought it up, he just didn't want to bother with all the work.

He hired a helicopter.

Sunday's descent was much faster and included a more leisurely lunch.

"You have gravity working for you,"



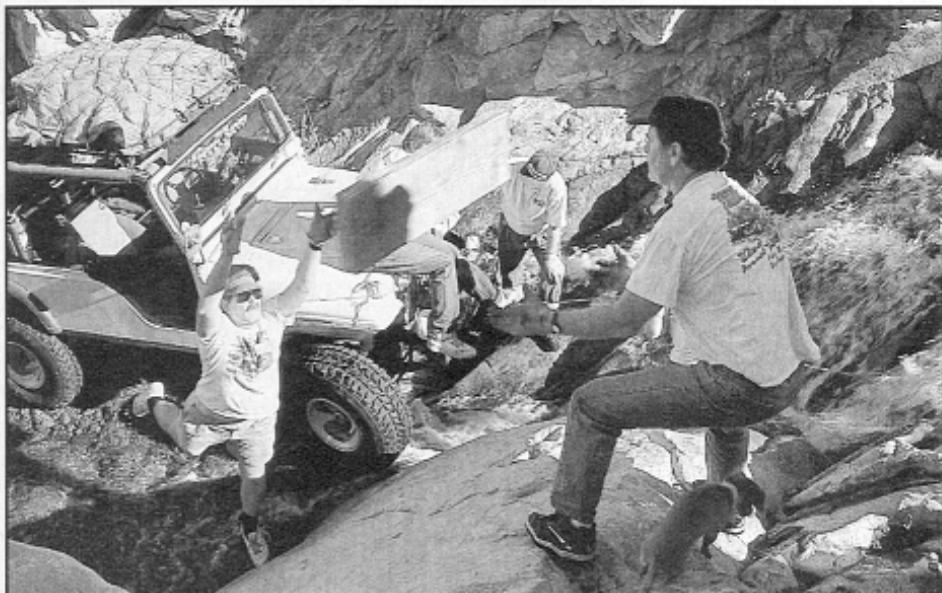
imize efficiency; organization was critical if we were to get to Panamint City by nightfall.

Paying attention was also critical. Like Lewellyn said, there isn't much to do behind the wheel except look at your spotter and steer. But some drivers wouldn't look at their spotters. One driver would only look at his left-front tire, forgetting there were three other tires on his Jeep that had to go someplace. The spotters could do nothing to help this guy because he didn't look for their help. The rocks took big bites out of his undercarriage.

Equipment problems were also rampant. Almost immediately winches began to fry. While the trip started with 10 vehicles and 10 winches, more than half either broke down and needed repair or simply fried completely to become expensive hood ornaments.

The Defender 110, with its magnificent exoskeleton, fried its winch right away and had to be pulled up by the vehicles above it. On the fourth waterfall, its unprotected gas tank was punctured, which was repaired quickly with sealant.

Owner Roger Gunn, an amiable Englishman who up until that time had thought Rovers were the best vehicles made in the world, got to the base of the last three waterfalls and decided to park it. We all helped carry his stuff over the last falls and he rode into Panamint City on the hood of the Land Cruiser.



Then Lewellyn's Explorer, the second-longest vehicle on the trip, got stuck coming around one of the upper falls. The left rear-most pane of quarter glass smashed against a protrusion of rock that wedged the car up there, pinned to the canyon wall like an important note hung on a bulletin board. It took two winches, one front and one rear, to pull the Explorer away from the wall and slide it up over the falls.

Even Rick Russell, who had been up and down this canyon 10 times, scraped paint off the left-rear quarter panel of his Jeep.

By the time the ninth and last vehicle cleared the top waterfall, the sun was getting low in the western sky. It had taken eight hours to go 400 yards and we were ready for dinner.

The 70-foot brick smokestack that Sen. Stewart had built in Panamint City is still there. So is the stamping mill and a number of cabins of more recent vintage. Stone structures from the original 1874 Main Street lurk in the brush beside the trail.

The last time anyone had a serious go at mining here was just after WWII, and there are a handful of vintage 1940s trucks strewn about in various stages of decay, along with assorted mining machinery.

When we arrived, there was one lone prospector still living at the head of the old Main Street. His name was Keith Lindsey

said Russell. "That's about half the battle."

True enough, we were out of the canyon in four hours. The group seemed to have gotten better at the art of winching, and winching downhill is not all that complicated.

We picked up the Defender 110 on the way down. The tank repair had held and it had enough gas to make it to Trona for a fill-up. The only additional drama came on the way out into Panamint Valley when it caught fire.

"I'm definitely writing a very nasty letter to Land Rover," said Gunn, fire extinguisher in hand. A quick fix of some shorted-out wire and the Rover was running again.

We'd patched Lewellyn's window with a piece of thin plywood held in place by some twisted rope and duct tape, a rather unsightly repair that stayed put all the way to his home in Costa Mesa.

Driving across the central Mojave on the way back to L.A., the question occurred again: Why would anyone want to do something this hard? There's really no good answer. Most of the four-wheelers who helped Big Red and Mark Hinkley pre-run the course the month before decided they didn't want to come back for our trip. It's an awful lot of hard work. Hiking up it took only about three hours and left sore feet, but driving and winching left every muscle exhausted.

"It's good to have done it," said Lewellyn. "But I don't think I need to do it again." ■

full loads of camping gear. The only thing missing was a gun mount on each roll bar.

But the most important piece of equipment was the winch. There was a specific technique to winching up the falls: Drive till you can't get any farther, stand on the brakes, have someone spool the winch cable out, hook it to a relatively immovable object up above, have another person operate the winch via the tethered switch and follow the directions of your spotter.

The spotters were all former successful Surprise Canyon trekkers and knew exactly where each wheel belonged and how to get it there. The actual mechanics of the climb weren't too difficult.

"You don't do anything, really," said Lewellyn. "You just sit behind the wheel and follow the directions of the spotter."

Well, the driver doesn't do much; those of us sloshing through the waterfalls attaching cables and clicking on winches stayed pretty busy.

We started out Saturday morning just after sunrise in the dry, hot dustiness of the Panamint Valley. Big Red, as the six-foot, eight-inch-tall Carter is aptly named, distributed the chain-sawed blocks of scrap lumber that would act as ramps and supports beneath the wheels of the Jeeps, stuffed into holes in the stream for the tire treads to grab hold of.

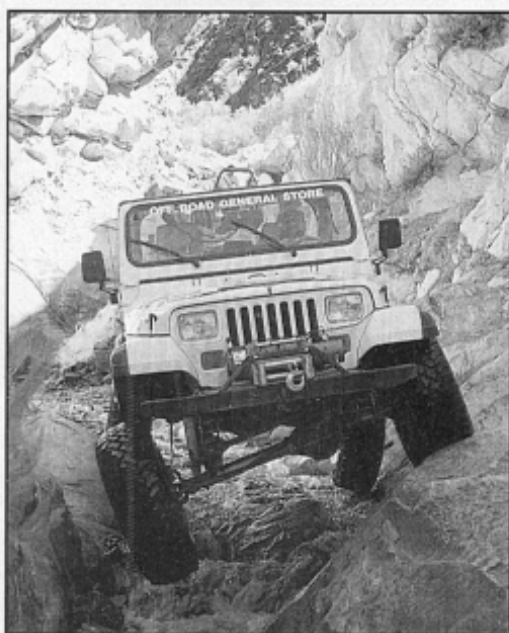
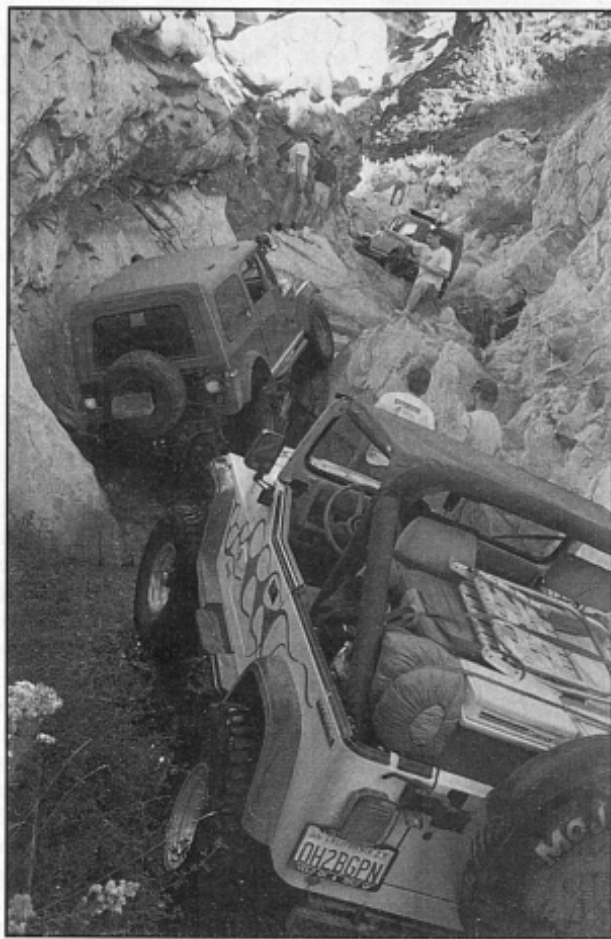
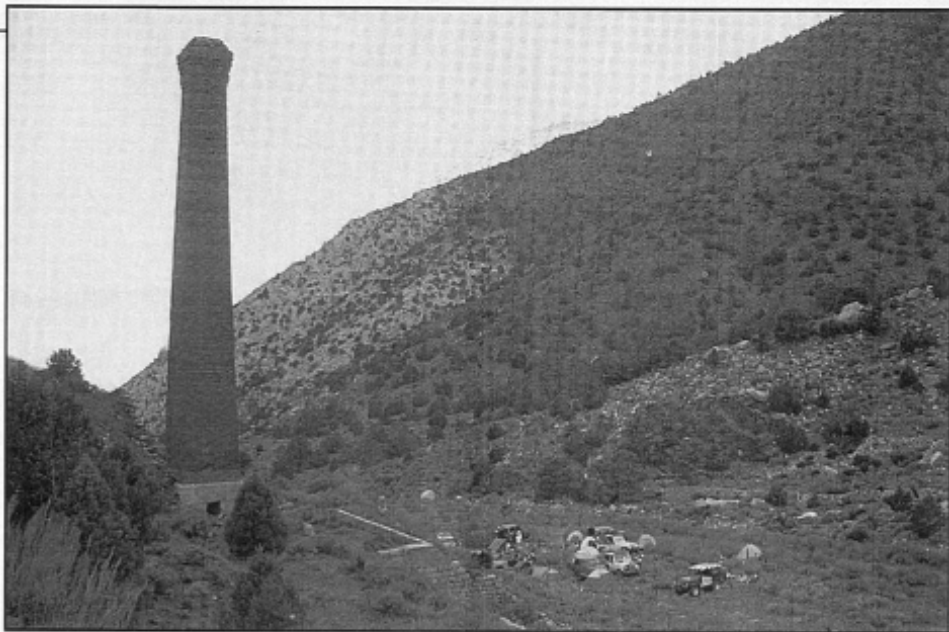
Then there were reminders from Lewellyn about safety: Keep your fingers at least three feet from the winch when winding it back in, wear your gloves, do not stand downstream of the vehicle being winched (even 10,000-pound cable has to break sometime) and throw a blanket over the taut cable to absorb recoil in case it does snap.

The first anchor point at the top of the first waterfall was about 30 feet up. It was a metal spike that had been jammed into an old blasting hole about the diameter of a stick of dynamite. The spike came out easily by hand but Mark Hinkley, who would spend more time than anyone else under water on the trip spotting drivers, said not to worry.

"You just kind of keep a little downhill tension on it and it stays in," he said.

We stood well clear when Russell was winched up, and sure enough, it stayed in.

So began the first of 140 winching operations: Spool out the cable, hook up the D-ring or the tow hook, make it taut, haul up



Hardy off-roaders (top) pause at the 1870-era smelter smokestack in Panamint proper. Jeeps (far left) crawl up through a chasm that is tough to negotiate on foot, let alone on wheels. Suspension travel and ground clearance are tested to their limits as the skewed underpinnings of this Jeep attests (above)

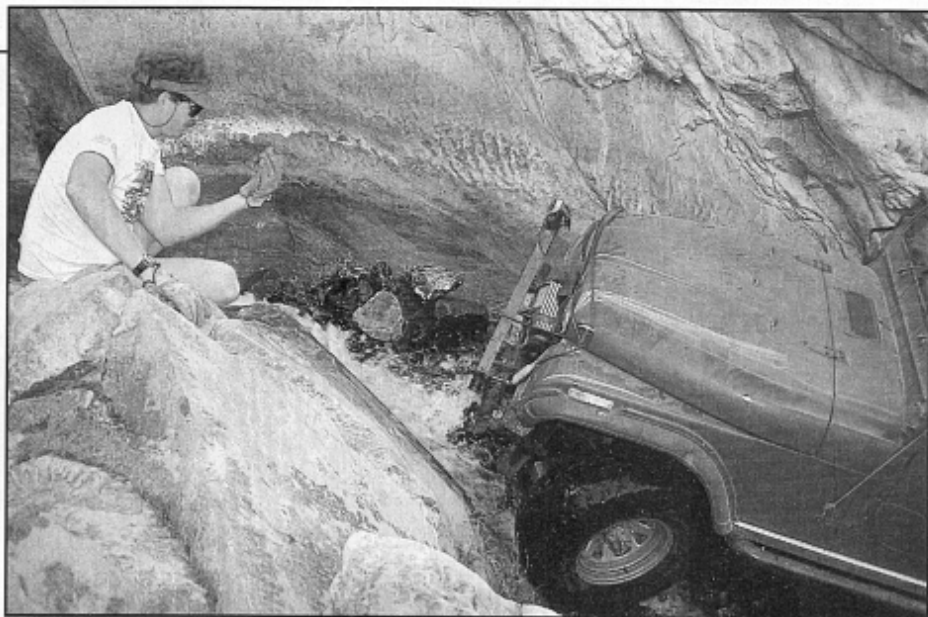
the Jeep while somebody points the way for the driver. Seventy times up, 70 times down. All in the midst of the waterfalls.

You couldn't just hook and haul, though. Most of the time there wasn't enough clearance to keep the vehicles from high-centering, so everybody had to stack rocks and chunks of wood to keep as many of the four wheels as possible on some tractable surface. The work was never ending, one Jeep would kick out the rocks that had just been stacked and they'd all have to be replaced.

Mark Hinkley was working hard, whining into his walkie talkie for more tension on the cable and slogging through knee-deep spring

water as he figured out what to do next. Mark Greathouse, a passenger in the Defender 110, would show up grinning with solid rocks the size of microwave ovens and say in a rich Kentucky twang, "Where yew want this?" Gary Chilcote, shuttling rocks and cable through the stream, eventually smashed his ankle in some underwater crevice and spent the rest of the trip using his good foot to pilot his friend Gene Markley's Jeep.

A sense of discipline and purpose evolved as the party slithered up each section of canyon. Our 10 vehicles were divided into three groups, each with a lead spotter to point the way for the drivers. The idea was to max-



is Mount Everest." While you couldn't exactly get up and down Mt. Everest in a weekend, we get the idea.

In Roger Mitchell's 1969 guide book *Death Valley Jeep Trails* there is a paragraph in boldface type inserted in the 1991 edition that reads, "Several years ago the road above Chris Wicht's place (at the base of Surprise Canyon) suffered two serious slides and washouts. Recently a group of three rigs finally made it through, using locker rear gears, and then hauled their cars up with winches. Definitely, this is not now an off-highway vehicle route. Consider it a rough five-mile hike to Panamint City!"

We made that rough five-mile hike last June, before hearing about Lewellyn's trip, and were unable to comprehend how the tire marks had been placed so high up on the canyon walls.

The Rubicon Trail winds 71 miles over the Sierra Nevada and is considered the toughest of all the Jeepers Jamborees, but there is nothing on that trip that requires even a single winch point.

In Lewellyn's monthly newsletter he lists the special requirements for Surprise Canyon. Along with the minimum 8000-pound winch,

31-inch tires and a roll bar, it says, "Muy grande huevos!"

"This is just about the most extreme thing you can do with your vehicle without using a helicopter or something," said Don Carter, one of the two guides who, along with Lewellyn, would lead our group up the trail.

"Guys call me up and say, 'I've got an eight-inch lift and 44-inch tires, I can drive up that sucker,'" said Rick Russell, the other guide. "And I say, 'Yeah.'"

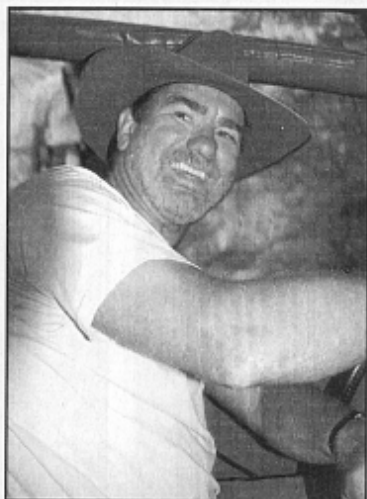
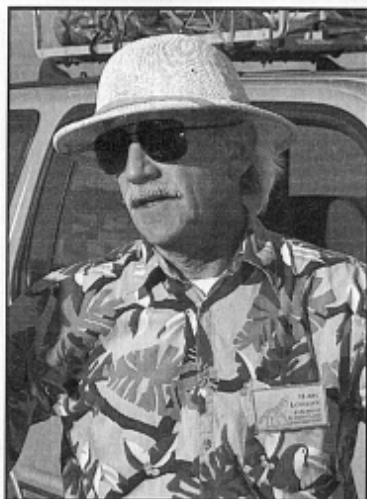
Like Lewellyn, Russell makes his living being a four-wheeler. He publishes guided trail maps, consults for SUV makers and produces videos of off-roading. Russell was the first person to get a vehicle up Surprise Canyon after the '82 washout.

"I drove up to the base of the falls in 1990 and said, 'You'd have to be one serious four-wheeler to get up this.'"

He came back the next year and made it. His would be the forwardmost Jeep in our expedition. As with most serious off-road adventuring, seven of the 10 vehicles in our party were Jeeps, but there was also an old Toyota Land Cruiser, Lewellyn's Explorer and a Land Rover Defender 110 driven by a real, live English guy.

All the vehicles had winches, locking differentials front and rear, roll bars, air compressors, tool kits, special high-lift jacks and

Seven waterfalls on the road to Panamint are traversed by winching the vehicles straight up (opposite page). Spotters such as Don Carter (above) and Rick Russell (left) are critical to the process of inching up the steep trail—drivers follow their hand directions and let the vehicles and winches do all the work. After the road to Panamint was washed out by flash floods more than a decade ago, Harry Lewellyn (far



newspaper and one brewery. There were no churches. Disagreements were more likely to be settled quickly and effectively than through court hearings, thus the local cemetery had 57 tenants in the town's first year.

It was a boom town in the classic boom town sense. A standard lot on the mile-long Main Street went for \$1,000 in 1875.

Panamint City was founded in 1874, when any hint of a silver strike was worth millions in financial backing. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce funded construction of the town's first wagon road. Two U.S. senators from Nevada, John Jones and William Stewart, provided money to build a stamping plant to process the ore from the mines. Jones even bought up most of what became Santa Monica, Calif., and started construction of a railroad to connect Panamint City to what he wanted to become the port of Santa Monica.

In 1875 the town boomed. Smoke poured continuously from the 70-foot stack of the ore mill, fired by local pine logs or by lumber hauled in on muleback from the Sierra Nevada 50 miles away. Pure silver cast in 450-pound theft-proof balls was hauled out of town by mule train and across the state to the San Francisco mint. For almost a year it seemed there would be no end to the prosperity.

Then a bank panic swept through Califor-

nia, and the most of the mining stocks that provided funding for the mill dried up. Many of the 2000 inhabitants made their way down the road to other boom towns across the desert and to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

By early 1876 there was still a town and a few small, relatively unproductive veins of ore. Then, on July 24, 1876, a black cloud roiled over the top of Surprise Canyon and sent a plume of rainwater crashing through Panamint City, wiping out most of the flimsy wooden structures and killing almost 200 people. By 1877, what mining stocks remained became useless and the town all but dried up.

When it was all over, Jones' railroad had only made it 14 miles from the coast to downtown Los Angeles, so he founded the city of Santa Monica instead. Stewart pocketed about a million dollars in profit and moved on to other interests.

The Panamint Range stayed pretty much the same, waiting for the next possible reason humans would find such a compelling reason to get to it.

Not too many people would try this," said Harry Lewellyn, organizer of our trip. "In off-roading, I like to say the Rubicon (AW, Oct. 5, 1992) is the Super Bowl, the Camel Trophy (AW, July 12) is the Olympics, and this

Why" is something couch potatoes ask instead of actually doing something, and something that doers only ask themselves when they're in the middle of getting it done. Many of the well-recorded accomplishments in modern history were pretty pointless when you really think about them. They didn't advance civilization much, cure any disease or decrease the national debt. But there was something in the idea of the challenge, something that, once discovered, couldn't be left alone.

Such was the lure of Panamint City, an 1870s ghost town perched 6000 feet up in the dry, lifeless Panamint Range on the eastern edge of the California desert. It is not all that different from hundreds of other ghost towns and mining camps that dot the American West, except that this one is cut off from civilization by a series of seven waterfalls, created when a flash flood 11 years ago wiped out the old ghost town's only road.

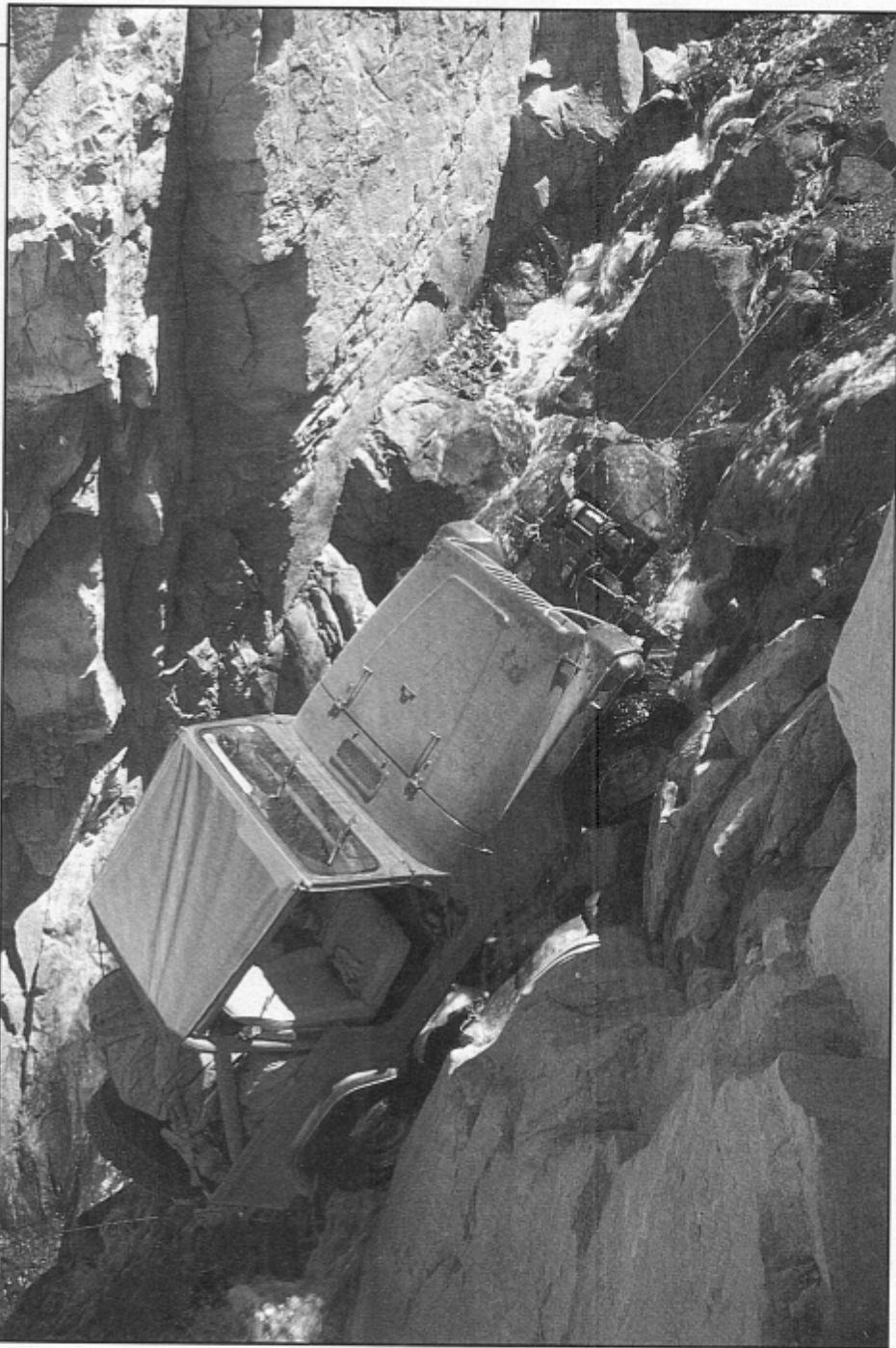
The road wound up through the floor of a sluice box called Surprise Canyon. When it was open, silt and sediment filled the deepest, most narrow section of the gorge and people simply drove up the one-lane trail on top of that. But every 100 years or so that sediment is washed out by a flash flood. The most recent was in 1982, a deluge that exposed not only the bare rock at the bottom of the canyon, but the year-round spring-fed stream that runs through it.

Now the difficulty lies in that one 400-yard stretch of road where the waterfalls stop most of the vehicles trying to go up—and take paint, sheet metal and winch bearings from the ones brave enough to try to continue.

The trip is difficult enough for those walking—you use your hands as much as your feet. And the driving is hampered not only by the precariously steep angles, but by the constant cascade of water across moss-covered rocks slicker than mule snot.

And there we were with our group of 10 vehicles getting ready to drive up it. Not so much drive, that is, as hook 10,000-pound cable to 10,000-pound winches and pull, push and prod our 10 vehicles one by banded-up one up through the cascading water and over the tops of all seven falls. An ironic proposition for a road that you could once drive up in a Cadillac. So the challenge here is not simply finding an old ghost town, it is figuring a way to get there. Getting up to Panamint City is now less of a driving proposition and more an act of faith and mechanical engineering.

In its prime, Panamint City was home to more than 2000 people, served by seven stage coach runs a week, 12 saloons, 10 bordellos, six general stores, a bank, a



BILL DELANEY PHOTOS

LET'S GET VERTICAL

We find out that the trail to Panamint City goes only one way — up

By Mark Vaughn