

Ask The Man Who Owns One!

By Steve White

That was the enigmatic slogan of American automotive giant, Packard. I would expect few if any Millennials or Gen-Xers to know that name, but it had been one of the “Three Ps”, a reference to the best of the best: Packard, Peerless, and Pierce-Arrow. These cars were built without regard to cost for the most discerning of buyers. And everybody knew!

The Packard automobile was launched in 1899 in Warren, Ohio. Its principal founder was James Ward Packard. In 1903 the company moved production to a magnificent new factory in Detroit designed by noted industrial architect, Albert Kahn. Kahn also designed the Packard Proving Ground at Utica, Michigan. The Detroit plant would close in 1956, following production of the last true Packards.

To understand the magic of the Packard name, one has to look at its long history of building some of America’s finest cars, especially prior to WWII. Packard was dedicated to quality and innovation. At a time when most companies were building 4- and 6-cylinder cars, Packard in 1916 introduced its Twin-Six, a revolutionary V-12 engine that powered the marque’s most prestigious cars until 1923. A modernized V-12 reappeared in 1932 and was continued through 1939. It is said that Enzo Ferrari was fascinated with Packard’s V-12 engines, which led him to take his cars in that direction.

Another early innovation by Packard was air conditioning offered in 1939, the first company to do so. About 1500 cars were equipped with that feature until wartime auto production ceased in 1942. Oddly, it wasn’t until 1953 that Packard once again offered air conditioning.

During the post-WWII era, Packard transitioned through a number of body styles, finally settling on a lasting and attractive concept by John Reinhart, which began production in 1951. While it retained the basic outline of the original handsome Reinhart design, the 1955 Packard was a stunning development. Some outer enhancements were apparent, including wrap-around windshield and bold three-toned paint schemes, but it was under all that glamour where the big changes could be found.

New overhead valve V-8 engines replaced the side-valve straight-8s that could be traced to the 30s. In addition, the new Packard could brag about being the first American car to employ torsion bar suspension, which included a ride-leveling feature. The Ultramatic transmission, which had been around since 1949, was improved and in 1956 offered with a push-button control mounted in the center of the steering wheel. It is worth noting that the Ultramatic was the first automatic developed by an independent car maker.

Packard was at its best during its earliest years, and through the 20s and 30s. This was the heyday of the Classic Era, when the finest cars were wrapped in luxury coachwork provided by

the likes of LeBaron, Darrin, Dietrich, Brunn, Murphy, and others. Packards were sought after by these designers and an unusually high number have survived. At Classic Car Club of America events, Packards, including coachbuilt examples, are often seen in large numbers. Packards were built to last and their owners show them with pride.

The postwar era was difficult for the independent brands. Eventually, all of them failed. In the case of Packard, the last real one was produced in 1956. The 1957 and 1958 models were manufactured alongside Studebakers in South Bend, Indiana. After that, the brand ceased to exist.

I don't own a Packard. So, I asked a man who does own one to tell us about his car.

My 1946 Packard Clipper

By Chris Overcash

Denise and I found this great car in October, 2015, in St. Petersburg, Florida. It is a rare original, showing only 6700 miles on the odometer. We are the third owners. I have Cadillacs, but always wanted a Packard. I found them to be so beautifully designed. Our car has 4"-wide whites for the "Gangster" look. It runs and idles very quiet like a Packard should, and is a gem to drive.

Being the first postwar Packard, the 1946 models were mild makeovers of the 1942 cars. During WWII, Packard produced the Merlin aircraft engine under license from Rolls Royce. Many iconic aircraft like the P-51 fighter used these engines. And Packard supplied the V-12 engines for PT Boats. It took time for Packard to shift from wartime production back to cars. So, the 1946 models are rare.

The body type represented by my car was designed by famed coachbuilder, Howard "Dutch" Darrin. Its sweeping lines helped make the Clipper an immediate success.