

The Packard

Bill Hawley 2010

I love movies made in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. In fact, I think that as a group they were the best ever made. I continue to watch them at every opportunity even though who knows how many times I have seen them already. Packard automobiles were used as props in many of those old movies. How I love to hear Humphrey Bogart's lines about someone driving a Packard.

In the 1930s and 40s, Packards were among the most desired automobiles. Think Cadillac or Lincoln! They were large, powerful and luxurious. The frame was so well constructed and the outer skin was such thick metal that they might make good Sherman tanks. Ford Motor Co. had a patent on V-8 engines so the Packard was powered by a straight 8. The engine was so long it gave the automobile an extremely long front hood. But did that engine ever have power! The car came with a very good AM radio and a very plush interior. No air conditioning, power steering, power brakes, etc. I have no idea how many miles per gallon the engine delivered but when gasoline was less than fifteen cents per gallon, who cared? Packards were so heavy they rode like a dream even on the bad roads of that day.

A Packard automobile was hard to come by because of the price and a lack of availability. Rudisill-Colvin Motors sold Packards in Gastonia. They were the only dealership I can remember in the area. As best I can remember, the dealership was located in what had been built as a gasoline service station. The area where oil was changed and the area where cars were washed (no car washes then) had been closed in with glass and served as a showroom. Two cars were all that would fit in the showroom but a lot of the time it was empty because they had no new car to show. No mass production of Packards! Most of the cars on the lot were used cars which was the majority of their business. If memory serves me correctly, I bought my first car from Mr. Rudisill. I remember being surprised to have him tell me that he had actually lived in Charlotte all these years.

Papa Hawley was a very short, small man but how he loved large, powerful, luxurious automobiles. Especially, Packards! He was so short, he had to sit on a pillow for him to be able to see well enough to drive it. He also constantly chewed tobacco so he always drove with the window down. You could never fail to pick out Papa Hawley's car in a crowd. It was the one that had all the brown stains on the driver's side from that open window all the way back. Papa Hawley bought several Packards from Mr. Rudisill. I think he had one of every color except red.

As stated before, Packards were hard to come by and there were other people who had a strong desire to own one also. One such person was Rev. Earl Armstrong. Rev. Armstrong was the preacher at a very large tabernacle on Airline Avenue in Gastonia. If you listened to the Gastonia radio station WGNC on Saturday afternoons, you could spend most of the afternoon listening to him. Back in those days, there was really only one way to drive from Stanley to Gastonia. You had to go to Dallas and turn left when you arrived at the old Court House. The street turned into a road which became Henrietta Street when you reached Gastonia. One day, by chance, Rev. Armstrong was driving his Buick toward Dallas while Papa Hawley was driving toward Gastonia. Rev. Armstrong spotted the Packard and stopped Papa Hawley somewhere between Long Creek and what is now Sims Legion Park. Rev. Armstrong wanted that Packard. The two men traded cars right beside the road and Rev. Armstrong continued now in the Packard toward Dallas and Papa Hawley continued toward Gastonia in the Buick. I have no way of knowing, but I would bet that Rev. Armstrong stopped at the first service station he came to and had the Packard washed clear of all that tobacco juice all over the driver's side.

During World War II, production stopped on automobiles being sold to the public. A few very plain cars were made for people such as doctors. Otherwise, people had to keep the cars they had. After the war was over, mass production began to fill the need to replace those worn out during the war. As the mass production began, brands such as Packard could just not keep up with the mass produced Cadillacs, Lincolns and Chrysler Imperials. Before long, they were out of business. Other casualties were autos such as Nash, Hudson and Willys. Willys designed and built Jeeps for the military. The Jeeps were so popular they survived but were eventually sold to another company. Chrysler now has the Jeep brand. They all made good cars.

Daddy did not own a car, at least while Martha Anne, Patsy and I were young. When we went someplace like church, Daddy would take one of the logging trucks. There wasn't room for all of us to ride in the cab so I just walked. When we had further to go, I would sit on the back of the truck next to the cab. Riding in the back on a logging truck back in the 1940s is quite different from what we see with dogs riding in the back of a pickup truck today. First, there was no floor. There was only four wooden "skids" attached crosswise to the frame for the logs to rest on. And there were no sides. Only wooden "standards" which fit in holders on the ends of the skids which kept logs from rolling off. If you looked down, what you saw was the road beneath. So, believe me, you had no problem sitting very still. Not a lot of fun even for a short distance.

Sometime after the war, Papa Hawley bought a new car. I can't remember what it was but Daddy bought Papa Hawley's Packard. I can't remember for sure but I believe it was a 1941 model. That car served our family well into the 1950s.

As long as they keep showing those great old movies on TV, I will continue to look for Packards.

