

Bent Fenders in 1940: I got my driver's license on my 16th birthday, February 20, 1940. I had looked forward to this day for a long time and had counted the days leading up to that important date. I had first attempted to drive in 1931, and soon thereafter I was driving my father's 1929 Model A Ford Station Wagon (with seats removed) all over the driveway and yard at Auburn Heights. We used this car as a small pick-up truck. So, by 1940, I thought I had all the answers.

On my 16th birthday, it was raining when my father picked me up after school to go the Motor Vehicle Division to take my driver's test. He came in his big '37 Packard Twelve (still in our collection), normally used only for trips, instead of his everyday car, a '38 Super Eight Packard Club Sedan. I never knew why. In those days the Motor Vehicle Division was located on Concord Avenue in Wilmington, between Market and Washington Streets. He parked the Packard on the street, and we went inside. I was prepared to answer questions and to take a driver's test in the big Packard. Through his connection with the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington, my father knew the manager of the division, who asked me if I knew how to drive and a few more questions, such as, "When can you pass a standing trolley car?" He thereby issued my license without a driver's test, quite a let-down. My father drove until we got out of the city, and then he let me drive home. My life was changed forever.

Although I was given a new 1940 Packard 110 six-cylinder sedan painted robin-egg blue with red pin-striping, I was not allowed to drive it for a couple of months. Instead, I used my mother's discarded '38 Packard Six (a very good car), as she had a new 1940 One-Sixty short-wheelbase sedan. I drove her old car to school and made many extra miles exploring after school. One day in April, with a school friend as my passenger, I attempted a record-breaking climb of Beaver Valley Hill, as my father had often told me that "in the old days" if a car could climb Beaver Valley Hill in high gear, that was special. There was a narrow truss bridge at the bottom of the hill and a sharp curve going onto the bridge. I took this curve too fast and side-swiped the side of the bridge, almost destroying the left front fender and knocking the front end alignment out of whack. The car would still run, so I crept home to show my father the damage. He didn't say much, which made me feel even worse. The damage was repaired, I used the car a while longer, and it was then sold to Charles F. Dougherty.

During that first summer of driving, I drove my new '40 One-Ten a lot, having registered 8,500 miles by November. Over Thanksgiving weekend, I drove it to Williamsburg and back, accompanied by my father in the big '37, with about 10 relatives and friends in our party. One Friday morning in early December, there was ice on Route 82 as a school bus driven by Owen O'Neal stopped at one of the railroad crossings below Yorklyn. Not being able to stop, I slid into the rear of the bus, the rear bumper of which was higher than the bumper on the Packard. The impact ruined the radiator grill, damaged the Packard bumper, and put a crease in both front fenders. I went on to school and had to explain to my classmates how I severely damaged the appearance of my car. My father made arrangements to have it repaired in the body shop at the Packard dealership.

The car was to go in the shop on the Monday following. En-route to school, I picked up a mechanic who planned to ride to Friends School in Alapocas with me and take the car back to the shop. At the very first intersection, a car coming from the right slammed into the right front of the small Packard. The driver of the other car had gotten her license the day before. We were both at fault, and it was never determined whose error it was. With two crashes in three days, the front of my car was really in bad shape! Unlike today, however, the fenders would be straightened and re-painted, and a new chrome-plated grill was ordered. The replacement front bumper was from a '39 car, but few could tell the difference.

I could see imperfections from the repairs, but they were not noticeable to most. Although the car was not used for a few years during World War II, I drove it until 1950, when I sold it after 77,000 miles, considered high mileage for those days. I did have two more "fender benders" about 1947, one requiring a new left front door, but 1940 was the bad year. Fortunately, accidents decreased markedly as time went on.

Work Report: On Tuesday, April 12, 18 volunteers attended the work session and the Events & Scheduling Committee meeting, as follows: Jerry Novak (in charge), Tom Marshall, Ted Kamen, Dennis Tiley, Dave Leon, Anne K. H. Cleary, Brent McDougall, Rose Ann Hoover, Tim Ward, Ken Hilbeck, Jerry Lucas, Ed Paschall, John Bacino, Mark Bodenshtab, Paul Kratunis, Bob Stransky, Mike Ciosek, and Bob Jordan.

On the Auburn Valley Railroad, the trailing truck of Locomotive 401 was degreased, and new carpet was installed in one of the coaches. The rear deck of the tender was primed, and the diesel locomotive's headlight was checked out.

On the Model H-5, the water tank was cleaned, and a nipple in the exhaust line from the cylinders was shortened to hopefully clear the flue. The flat leather belt on the bench lathe was replaced. Work continued on the wiring on the '37 Packard.

On Wednesday afternoon, April 13, 10 volunteers answered the call: Dave Leon (in charge), Dennis Dragon, Bill Schwoebel, Jeff Kennard, Paul Kratunis, Bob Jordan, Steve Bryce, Tom Marshall, Mike Ciosek, and a new volunteer, Gary Fitch.

The Model CX was fired up, and while the burner worked well, the safety valve was leaking badly, so full pressure was not realized. The valve was removed for repair. Light bulbs were ordered for the diesel locomotive, and the turntable will be adjusted by Mike Ciosek for better alignment.

The tops on two Stanleys were put down for the season. The 735 pilot fittings still leak badly, so more effort is required. The early electric clock from the '37 Packard was repaired by Dennis Dragon and re-installed in the dash panel. The tail light bracket from the Model H-5 was taken by Jeff Kennard for repair.

On Thursday, April 14, the following nine volunteers attended: Tom Marshall (in charge), Bob Stransky, Dave Stransky, Bob Jordan, Ted Kamen, Steve Bryce, Bill Schwoebel, and new volunteers Larry Tennity and Neal Sobocinski.

Success was achieved in pulling the new wire through the original cable to the ignition switch on the '37 Packard. The safety valve from the Model CX was taken apart by Bill Schwoebel, cleaned, and tested. There still appears to be a leak, so more work will be done on it before it is installed on the car. Another used pilot vaporizer was located for use in the Model 735, but it, too, will need modification and repair.

On the Model H-5, the hanger strap and exhaust hose were hooked up by the Stransky brothers, but there is insufficient clearance alongside the flue, so this will need further attention. Also on this car, the speedometer needle was stuck on 45 m.p.h. and a tooth was broken off the small fiber drive gear. The head was freed up, and the needle returned to zero. The detachable odometer and trip odometer were cleaned and lubricated, and a new fiber gear was found that will work with modification. (On Saturday, this gear was modified and installed -- the cable still needs adjusting and final hook-up).