

May 7, 2007

Hello, Steam Team:

Wilmington Auto Dealers in the 1930's as I remember them: I do not remember all the dealers, but here are some of them:

Delaware Motor Sales, with financial backing from the duPonts, was located on the northeast corner of 11th and King Streets, across 11th Street from the Courthouse. The showroom faced the corner and a large neon sign on top of the building advertised Cadillac V-12's and V-16's. LaSalles were sold as well, and of course a lot of Cadillac V-8's. Roy Freck, formerly of West Chester, was the general manager. Somewhere between 1937 and 1939 they moved to a new facility on Pennsylvania Avenue between Clayton and duPont Streets. After nearly 70 years, Delaware Motor Sales is still at this location, and still selling Cadillacs. The building at 11th and King was torn down to make way for the Continental Life Insurance office building. After 30 years or so, this building was also demolished and an open parking lot occupied the site before MBNA built one of its downtown office buildings here in the 1990's.

The Wilmington Automobile Company had a showroom on the north side of West 10th Street just before it angled into Delaware Avenue. This was the Buick dealer, and they must have sold another G.M. car, possibly Pontiac. I don't know when Anthony Ursomarso started Union Park Pontiac, but I think somewhere along the line he took on Buick as well and Wilmington Auto went out of business. The building on West 10th Street was torn down to build the duPont Company's Nemours Building in 1935. William D. Luke, Sr., had the Oldsmobile agency on the west side of North Market Street near 14th Street. In the early 1950's Luke moved his Delaware Olds agency to a new facility on Governor Printz Boulevard. I can't recall who had the Chevrolet agency in the 1930's, but Fred Schermerhorn was going strong with Colonial Chevrolet by the late 1940's, with his agency on North Market Street near 35th.

Frank W. Diver and my father started the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington in rather cramped quarters at 10th and French Streets. This was a 3 or 4 story building with an old-fashioned elevator and limited frontage on the street. The showroom would not hold more than 2 Packards, and there was a very narrow passageway alongside for cars to enter the shop, storage area, or the elevator. Needing to take on a more reasonably-priced line of cars in the mid-1930's, Diver moved to a larger single-floor building on Pennsylvania Avenue between Union Street and Grant Avenue, which building later housed the Food Fair, one of Wilmington's first self-service food stores. Sears later used the old Packard building on French Street to sell and install Allstate Tires. In the new location, Diver took on Nash cars, and White and Indiana trucks, in addition to the Packard line. In 1936, Albert Haddock built for Diver and my father a large new facility one block up the street, where they sold Packards, Studebakers, and a very few White trucks. My father retired from the company in 1940, but he was never active there on a daily basis. In this 1936 building, greatly expanded and modernized, Diver Chevrolet is still going strong, now managed by a grandson of Frank Diver. The latter had given up Packard in 1947, and Studebaker shortly thereafter, to obtain the Chevrolet franchise. An out-of-town company called Packard-Goldner sold Packards from a facility on Lancaster Avenue east of Union Street from 1947 until Packard's demise in 1956-58.

I think there were two Ford dealerships, Buckley and Porter. Mr. Buckley was an older man who went out of business prior to World War II, and Austin Porter (to my knowledge, no relation of William H. Porter who sold General Motors cars in Newark) inherited his father's "Porter Ford". The younger Porter, although not more than 40 years of age, had health problems and Clarence Cannon seemed to run the company and take care of Austin before the business was closed out in the early 1950's.

We had a good week just past with wonderful weather. On Thursday evening, a record 27 volunteers attended our work session and the Events Committee meeting. Saturday, Bill Schwoebel, Butch Cannard, and Bob Reilly, assisted by Rose Ann Hoover, Jerry Novak and Emil Christofano, took two of our Stanleys to Dover for the annual "Old Dover Days", participated in the morning parade, and provided free rides around the historic Dover Green in the afternoon. 468 people took advantage of these rides in the Models 87 and 76. On Sunday, our first public event of the year was attended by 220 visitors and 30 working volunteers. Although attendance was somewhat disappointing, all went well and our visitors thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Rose Ann Hoover, Art Sybell and Ron Turochy had the museum spruced up and it looked very nice. The gift shop and its locked storage area have been relocated to the museum proper, and the Steam Car DVD was shown in the upper garage. The grounds looked very nice thanks to Ruth and her helpers Chevonne Robison and Jan Rivera. George Barczewski rented us a golf cart at a very reasonable charge, and Jerry Novak transported it, as a trial for bringing those who can't walk well from the parking area to a central location on the grounds. Many volunteers were here last week, not only on work nights but on most days as well, making sure that all was ready and presentable. Thank you, one and all!

The planning and logistics of the June Steam Car Tour are going into the final countdown, and the Committee will meet again tomorrow evening, May 8, at 7:30 P.M. Last Thursday, Bob Reilly mailed the registration form to the 80 or so people who had requested it, and returns should begin coming in this week. Early last week, a new electric panel box was installed in the museum which should correct our occasional power outages in that building. Although our Rauch & Lang electric did well and circuited the grounds 85 times on Sunday (vs. about 130 times on a busy day), those who drove it felt the 5-year-old batteries are getting weak and may need to be replaced soon.

Next week our quarterly Board Meeting is scheduled on the 17th at 7:30, with a joint Finance-Development Committee meeting planned for 3:30 that afternoon. Our insurance agent, Tom Heckman, was here today and delivered the policies affecting FAHP in 2007. Next Saturday, May 12, our Stanley Model 71 is due at Winterthur to be displayed from 9:30 until 4:00. The only opening of grounds and museum at Auburn Heights between now and the Steam Car Tour in mid-June is the May 19 (rain date 5/20) small private charter. So, this is the time we need to get all the Stanleys out that may be used in June and check them over for road-worthiness and tour reliability. Several off-site events are coming along in May, too, and we'll want to participate in a few of them. Have a good week! Tom