

February 26, 2007

Hello, Steam Team:

The first cars I remember riding in were a 1924 Straight Eight Packard and a 1926(?) Model T Ford, at opposite ends of the American Motor Car market. Both cars were touring cars, which means they had front and back seats with 3 or 4 doors, a folding top, and side curtains for inclement or cold weather. The Packard had 2 "jump seats" as well, and was called a 7-passenger with a new straight eight engine and 4-wheel mechanical brakes. The Model T could carry 5 and was a basic 4-cylinder car which probably didn't have an electric self-starter. The Packard cost close to \$3,000 and the Model T considerably less than \$500.

Since my father was in partnership with Frank W. Diver in the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington, this was the first of many Packards I remember at Auburn Heights. There were always three here at once and sometimes four, always one each for my father and my mother, usually a "big car" for trips (described in the Weekly News of 10/16/06), and later a "school car" usually driven by Clifford Murray. The school car would never be a new one. One of the memorable rides in the '24 Packard was from Maryland Avenue in Rehoboth to Beebe Hospital in Lewes in the summer of 1927, just after I had fallen down the steps and knocked out my 6 lower front baby teeth. About 1928, I sat between "Bate" and Ella Dennis on the front seat of the Model T for a ride along the long-closed Meeting House Road from Marshalls' Bridge toward Hockessin ("Bate" Dennis was described in the "News" of 12/26/05).

By 1929, my father had a maroon Big Eight Coupe, with 140" wheelbase, rumble seat, and golf bag door. My mother had a '29 Standard Eight 5-passenger sedan, the first year the small car had eight cylinders. At the Packard agency in Wilmington was kept a car for my grandmother, Elizabeth C. Marshall, who lived in the Rodney Court Apartments in that city. When she wanted to go somewhere, someone from the agency would go to Rodney Court, pick her up, and satisfy her travel needs. When she died in 1930, this car, a 1928 Packard Six 5-passenger sedan with cowl lamps and side mounts, came to us as the "school car". It was like new and served us well until 1935.

The '29 sedan that my mother had was a "hard luck" car. On the future Route 82 along the lake under the present Hoopes Reservoir, my father was forced off the road on a foggy morning, and to prevent going into the lake took a hard hit on the left front. I can still see him picking up the hub cap and throwing it into the lake. A few months later, this car was upset on the ice on Miller's Hill near Kennett Square with Clifford Murray at the wheel. "Cliffey" was not hurt, but I don't know what happened to the car.

By 1930, my father had a new Standard Eight Club Sedan and my mother a new Standard Eight 5-passenger sedan, both cars with a rear-mounted spare. Although she never became proficient in shifting gears, my mother drove her car with no trouble until 1935. However, in August, 1931, my father bought a '32 Standard Eight Club Sedan, one of his favorite cars, that he gave up reluctantly in 1936. During this period the "big cars" were the '28 Straight Eight 7-passenger sedan, the '32 Super Eight 7-passenger sedan, and the '34 Twelve 7-passenger limousine, quite an array of Packards. My father's car always carried Delaware License #8, the big car #76 (which I still have), my mother's car #155, and the school car #154.

For utility vehicles, a '29 Model A Ford Station Wagon (since the early 1970's called a "woodie"), and a '26 Graham Brothers truck (with a 4-cylinder, 12-volt Dodge chassis) were at Auburn Heights as well. I learned to drive on the Model A, and I recall that the Graham truck steered very hard, too much for a little kid. I practiced sitting behind the wheel of all these cars, attempting to duplicate the sounds of cars accelerating including the whine of the gears. I was warned not to blow the horn as it was to be used only in an emergency (the "cry wolf" story was driven home). Six cars were kept in the present garage with my father working around them until his shop was built in 1937.

Our annual Board meeting was held last Thursday with a total of 20 in attendance including guests Paul Nicholson and James Wagner from the Division of Parks, and Kathryn May, as well as Executive Director Bob Reilly. Three newly-elected directors were welcomed: Mary Hopkins, Peter Parlett and Richard Bernard (Richard was ill and could not attend). In addition, Stan Wilcox and Richmond Williams were re-elected for 3-year terms, and Bill Enslen was appointed to the Board for a one-year term by Ruth and myself. Officers elected for 2007 were myself as president, Rob Robison as vice president, Anne Cleary as secretary, and Bill Enslen as treasurer. Thanks were given to Butch Cannard and Dan Muir for their past service on the Board.

The four cars given by me at the end of 2006 were officially accepted as part of the FAHP collection. At year-end our membership stood at 152 families (it is now 160), with the average membership level being \$85. Our annual giving last year totaled \$94,000, and at year-end we had \$167,000 in the bank. Our on-site events grossed \$35,000 including gift shop sales. Total expenses for the year were \$66,000, of which \$46,000 was the cost of our Executive Director and office expenses. In eight "event days" in 2006, 3,200 people visited, 400 went through the house, and all but 2 cars in the collection were driven during the year. Volunteer hours totaled 6,288 on 150 work days with a total of 75 volunteers participating. A small steering committee is at work to begin a Strategic Planning process for FAHP. Seven public-event days are planned for 2007, plus two "charters" planned for April and May.

Work projects on the cars and locomotives are moving along well, with good progress on the Model 735 (wiring), the Model 740 (brakes and front-wheel bearings), the Model 76 (boiler change), the Mountain Wagon (hood lining), the Model 71 (installation of new water tank) and Locomotive 402 (injector valves). The repair and painting of the wooden railroad cars and the painting of the locomotives are upcoming, along with construction of a gift shop closet in the museum and the painting of the museum and garage floors. More extensive work involving outside contractors may be possible for the museum ceiling and for railroad stabilization and safety. Cost estimates and our ability to come up with the needed funds will determine how much can be done this year. We wish Jerry Lucas a rapid recovery from pneumonia, and Ron Turochy from a bronchial infection. We are happy to report that Richard Bernard is much improved. Best wishes to all. Tom