

JANUARY 5, 2009 F.A.H.P. NEWS

The Cars Esther Drove: My mother, Esther S. Marshall, had two sisters, one older and one younger, but neither learned to drive a car. In her generation, that was not unusual. In the World War I period, it was adventuresome for a woman to think she could do it. Cars were not always reliable, and if the self-starter didn't work, someone had to crank the engine to get it started. Most men thought they could do it, but some of them were not up to the task, either. A lot of men thought women really never knew how to drive, and today some still think that way.

In 1917, my Grandmother Shallcross bought a Buick 7-passenger touring car, and my mother's brothers, Gene and Ned, taught their willing unmarried sister how to drive. She mastered that in good order, except in shifting gears. My grandmother, owner of the Buick, was glad to have a woman in the family who could drive, as women may have wanted to go places of no interest to men. In the flat country around Middletown, Delaware, shifting gears was not as important as in the hills, so my mother made out well. After my mother was married and took up residence at Auburn Heights in 1921, my father gave her a new Packard Six sedan as a wedding present. The Buick was probably used a few years by the Shallcrosses, and then laid up in the barn behind Flowerdale, my grandmothers' home in Middletown. When I was small I used to play in it, competing with the chickens, squirrels, and whatever else found the old Buick attractive. (About 1955, my father bought a Doble Steam Car chassis with home-made body. In improving it, he found a Rolls Silver Ghost body and fenders, and adapted the old Buick top for use on Doble #E-19).

I don't remember the '21 Packard Six. After I came along, I believe she had a second one, probably a 1925 or '26 model. "Boxey" indeed were the bodies on these early sedans. Then came a 1929 Packard Standard Eight, Model 626, 5-passenger sedan, with cowl-mounted parking lights, side-mounted spare tires, and a trunk rack on the rear. Stylish! This was the first year the small Packard was an eight-cylinder car, as the faithful heavy sixes were discontinued after the '28 models. Unfortunately, the '29 was a hard-luck car. My mother, with me as her front seat passenger, spun around on the ice where the spillway from the lake along Route 82 (under the present Hoopes Reservoir) crossed the road. She was shaky and upset, but no damage was done. Then my father, driving the car along this same lake on a very foggy morning was forced off the road and a motorist going the opposite way smashed into the left front wheel. Finally, Clifford Murray ("Cliffey"), traveling down Miller's Hill east of Kennett Square on New Year's Day, 1930, upset on the ice, and crushed the top, although he was unhurt. I'm sure the car was fixed, but my parents thought this was enough, and I never saw that car at Auburn Heights again.

Next my mother had a 1930 Packard Standard Eight Model 726, 5-passenger sedan. A no-frills car, it had no parking lights and a rear-mounted spare. It was a very good car, however, and served her well for 5 years. After that it was used by “Cliffey” as a school car, taking my cousin Eleanor and me to Wilmington Friends at 4th & West Streets in Wilmington. My father always told him not to drive more than 35 m.p.h. My mother got one of the very first Packard 120 sedans in 1935. Much lighter and easier to drive (also much cheaper than the big Packards), it was an immediate favorite, but with “suicide” front doors. In 1936, it was traded in for a ’36 120, very similar but with a better-looking rear-body design and front doors opening the correct way. Being highly pleased with these lighter and smaller cars, she then had a ’38 Packard Six sedan, an excellent car, this model being the second year for the new six-cylinder engine. Being the first car I was allowed to drive to school in 1940, I banged it up when I hit the bridge at the bottom of Beaver Valley Hill (at high speed), and although my father had it fixed, he soon sold it to Charles F. Dougherty of Wilmington.

Next, my mother had a 1940 Packard 160 with short wheelbase (127”) and the large and newly-designed 8-cylinder engine. Alone, I drove this car to Middletown AND RETURN, in just over 1 hour, but I never told anyone until this moment. When Sara Bowers of Kennett Square disposed of her ’41 Packard 120 sedan with VERY LOW mileage in 1944, my father bought it for my mother’s use, and her ’40 went to her brother-in-law, Bassett Ferguson, who drove it regularly for another 6 years. She drove the ’41 until 1952 (it was then sold to “Cliffey”) when she changed to a six-cylinder Dodge sedan (also later bought by “Cliffey”) that was followed by a ’56 V-8 two-tone Dodge with a lot of power. With power steering and a good automatic transmission, it was an easy car to manage, but it was the last car my mother drove. Weldin Stumpf bought this car and drove it to work for several years. In 1970, I selected a small Buick Skylark sedan with a 350 cu. in. V-8 engine for her, and several of her female friends, as well as “Cliffey”, loved to take her around in this car, as it was so easy to handle. In 1978, I totaled the little Buick on the Kennedy Turnpike near Christiana Mall, being in the middle of a chain-reaction accident with seven cars involved. It had 26,000 miles on its odometer.

This week, Catherine Coin is back from her vacation and our work sessions will get under way again tomorrow night (January 6). There are several ongoing projects left over from December including the dismantling of the Rauch & Lang and the Stanley Model 607, the building of a new 20-H.P. burner, and a slight rebuild of the Model K’s burner. We will need to refine the design and build the 3rd track in the shop’s basement for the arrival of Jim Sank’s Diesel locomotive, and make plans for improvements to the Auburn Valley R.R., especially signal installation and turntable rebuilding. It’s hoped a small museum committee can install meaningful exhibits that will be inexpensive but central to our educational mission.

On Thursday, January 8, at 4:30, the temporary committee operating in lieu of an executive committee will meet in the office to map our course in the weeks ahead. Tom

