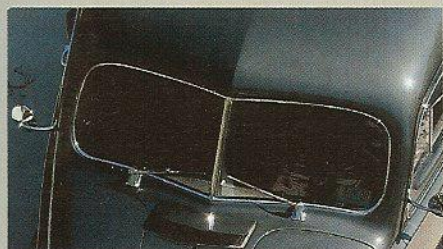


**"You've got to see this car!"** said Robert Escalante, internationally known restorer of classic Packard automobiles. And he wouldn't have called unless he had found something truly extraordinary, because both of us have seen any number of beautiful classic Packards and have restored show-winning examples ourselves.



Robert's recommendation didn't disappoint—this metallic Sea Cloud Gray 1940 120 touring sedan was impeccable down to the smallest detail. Its original aspen wood graining was painstakingly matched. Its extremely rare factory air conditioning system was correct, even down to the decals and hoses. It also had several other rare and sought-after options available that year, and its deluxe interior was spot on. Granted, it was not a convertible or a woody—the most spectacular models of the genre—but the quality of the restoration was unsurpassed, as was the car's understated elegance.

And this was all the more interesting because this particular Packard has been virtually recreated from what remained of a rusty derelict, one many would have considered a parts car. It happened because, to owner Ed Stifel III of Triadelphia, West Virginia, this particular Packard was very special indeed: It was the automobile he had desired since childhood. It had originally belonged to his great uncle Henry 'Dick' Gee, a prosperous electrical components dealer in Wheeling, West Virginia, who bought the car new in the spring of 1940.

Although Cadillac dominated the luxury car market until 1925, Packard's main competitors for the reputation of building the finest automobiles in America were Peerless and Pierce-Arrow. Later, during the Classic era, Cadillac again became a major challenger for that honor just when the demand for fine, handcrafted automobiles all but disappeared in 1930. Finally, in the 1940s, Packard began to concede the high ground to Cadillac, a situation that contributed to the legendary firm's demise in the 1950s.

The Great Depression caused widespread unemployment and a virtual mass extinction of the high-end, hand-built automobile makers such as Duesenberg, Marmon, Pierce-Arrow, Stutz, Cord, Peerless and Auburn. The main reason Cadillac survived was because it had General Motors' huge share of the industry as a whole to fall back on. But Packard's entire product line in the early Thirties was aimed at the carriage trade, which was all but gone by that time.

Management knew that if the com-

pany were to survive, it would have to broaden its range of products to appeal to the less affluent. Their first attempt at doing so was the 1932 Light Eight, a handsome smaller Packard, but it, too, was built largely by hand in the traditional, painstaking manner. As a result, Packard lost money on every one they produced. It was then that the company's leaders knew they had no choice but to go to mass production.

So, betting the firm's future and its remaining fortune on a do-or-die gamble, the brass at Packard built a multimillion-dollar modern factory with a state-of-the-art assembly line on East Grand Boulevard in Detroit, and grabbed experts wherever they could—including from General Motors—to help design their new car.

The result was the Model 120, which made its debut in 1935. It was smaller, lighter and less opulently equipped than the big, handcrafted Senior models. And because it was mass-produced on a moving assembly line, Packard was able to sell the car for under \$1,000, making it competitive with Oldsmobile, De Soto and Buick.

The 120 was a solid, well-engineered and well-appointed automobile that carried the Packard name proudly and had many of the elegant styling cues of the prestigious Super Eights and Twelves, but on a more diminutive scale. As a result, it was an instant success: Over 10,000 120s were sold sight-unseen before the automobile even made its official debut at the New York Auto Show in January 1935. It roundly trounced Cadillac's smaller, sportier La Salle in

sales, and even gave Buick a run for its money. Of course, a major reason the 120 models were such a hit was because of the Packard Motor Company's superlative reputation.

The company had been successful in turning its fortunes around, but Packard didn't rest on its laurels. For 1936, the 120 model's 257-cu.in. 110hp engine was enlarged to 282 cubic inches producing 120hp, and it rode on a 120-inch wheelbase, hence the 120 designation. And then for 1938, the whole line of cars was redesigned, suspension was improved, and the 120 model's chassis was lengthened to a 127-inch wheelbase. Also, during 1938-'39, the car was merely called the Packard Eight. The 120 designation was again used in 1940-'42.

The 120 model's Wagner-Lockheed hydraulic brakes were excellent, its new suspension system the best in the industry, and its striking traditional Packard ox-yoke grille distinctive. (Incidentally, the so-called ox-yoke grille was actually patterned after an English gothic church window to counter Rolls Royce's Greek Parthenon radiator shroud.)

The mass-produced 120 model—and the introduction in 1937 of the even less expensive six-cylinder-powered 115 model—saved Packard from the sad fate of most of the other prestige automakers, as well as many mid-priced makes such as Hupmobile, Graham, Reo and other independents of the Depression era. In fact, while these companies were failing, Packard enjoyed its best year ever in 1937.

A recession hit in 1938, so no company sold a lot of cars that year. But 1939-'40 were again good years for