



# Packard Perfection

Sampling the quality of a restored 1941  
Model 120 Touring Sedan

By Jim Richardson  
Photography by David Gooley





**"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.



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.

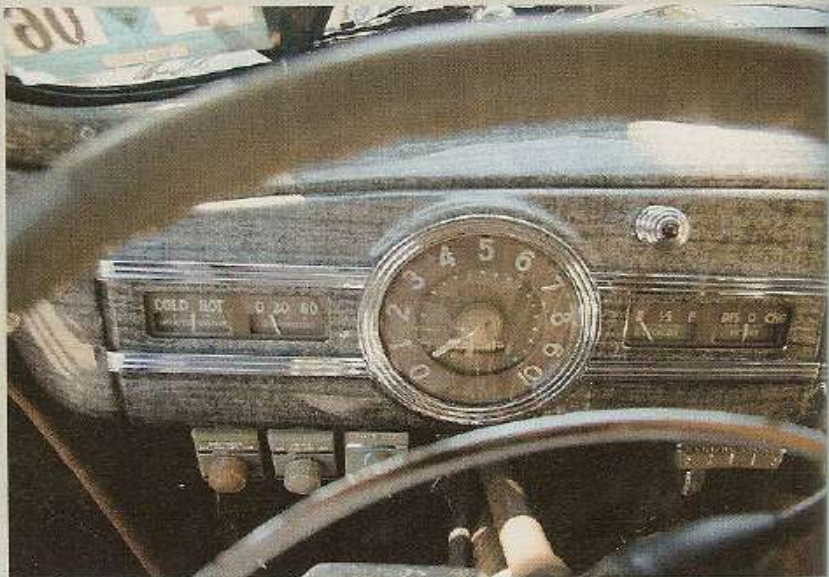
A recession hit in 1938, so no company sold a lot of cars that year. But 1939-'40 were again good years for







Correct English wool broadcloth interior is opulent, commodious and comfortable



Wood-grained dash was masterfully restored in the original aspen motif. Complete ensemble of large analog gauges is easy to read at a glance

*As one would expect of a well-maintained Packard, the engine came to life instantly and settled into vibration-free silence*

Packard as the country began to emerge from the long economic night. By 1940, Packard had dropped its big V-12 engine and replaced it with the new 356-cu.in. Super Eight in the Senior, 160 and 180 models, and all Packards were built on the assembly line, so profits were high.

When Robert called me with word of Ed's Packard, it happened to be in California for a tour and show, and was being serviced at Robert's facility, Custom Auto Service in Santa Ana. I was eager to do a

driveReport on it, but I knew time was the essence. In fact, I needed to do it and there, because the car and its owner were headed home to West Virginia the next day, so I dropped my wrench and drove to Robert's shop. We all enjoyed the pleasantries and then took the car to a quiet area on the edge of town where it could put it through its paces.

As one would expect of a well-maintained Packard, the engine came to life instantly and settled into vibrational silence. Headroom and legroom were abundant in the front seat, and a lushly lavish in the rear. The large speedometer with a needle the size of a medieval broadsword is flanked by a full complement of easy-to-read gauges. There is even a large, working compartment door.

The clutch pedal is big and heavy, but is easy. The three-speed column shift is sure and smooth. I pull the clutch low, give it a little throttle, and it oozes away like hot syrup on pavement. Going down the drive and into the city is seamless, with no bumps or vibrations. Acceleration from the 282-cu.in. straight-eight coupled to its Borg-Warner electric overdrive—Packard's Econo-Drive—is adequate, though Ed's uncle had wanted more speed. He could have opted for a more costly 160 or 180 model. Those came with Packard's 356-cu.in. Super Eight, which made the senior Packards the best production cars available in 1940.



Packard's 282-cu.in. straight eight is velvety smooth and bulletproof. A 245-cu.in. straight six was offered in the 110, and a 356-cu.in. straight eight came in the 160 and 180 models





Air conditioning discharge duct is behind the back seat. Vent window is for milder days



Though car is a 120, interior is deluxe. Fabrics are rich and understated



Banjo steering wheel was an option and absorbed the shocks of marginal roads



Packard did not offer full wheel covers in 1940. Beauty rings, whitewalls were extra

The 120's center-point steering is very light—all the more surprising when you consider the car's hefty 3,800-pound weight. In fact the 120's steering is so effortless and well balanced that the British publication *Motor*, referring to its road test of a 1936 model, stated: "The steering, altogether rather low geared, is so exceedingly easy to operate that one can spin the wheel by engaging a fore-finger with one of the spokes. Nevertheless, the steering remains quite steady at speed, has a nice self-centering action, and does not convey road shocks back to the hands." No doubt their example was equipped with the optional shock-absorbing banjo steering wheel, as is our 1940 model 120 feature car.

Braking is good with very little nose-dive, and cornering is surprisingly flat for a car of the era, thanks to Packard's patented Saf-T-Flex independent front suspension, later copied by Roll-Royce and used on the Ford Bronco. The old touring sedan is quiet and sure of itself even at freeway speeds of 60 to 70 mph. The long, tall aristocratic hood, crowned with Packard's optional cormorant ornament, gives a feeling of majestic elegance as we motor along in living room-sofa comfort.

The car is tall by today's standards, with no transmission hump in the floor, front or rear. As a result, you look down on most modern traffic and are eye-to-eye only with the SUV crowd. But even with your eyes fixed firmly on the road, you are aware of the admiring stares of

those around you. After all, these cars were styled to make the less fortunate feel, well, less fortunate.

The factory-installed air conditioning—an industry first in 1940—is quiet and effective, though it might be a little drafty for those in the back seat: The cool air outlet is right behind the passengers' necks, which was standard practice on most cars for many years. Our feature car is one of only five 120 models known to have been so equipped. At first, in late 1939, the Weather Conditioner, as Packard called it, was offered on all models,

but by the spring of 1940, installations were restricted to the Senior cars.

And yes, air conditioning was available as an aftermarket add-on as far back as 1934, in the form of a large box that hung off the rear of the car on a luggage rack; Packard was the first to integrate it into the design of the automobile. Cars destined to be equipped with a Weather Conditioner were sent to the Bishop and Babcock Manufacturing Company in Cleveland, Ohio, to have the unit installed. Needless to say, at \$310, it was not a particularly popular option, especially in the company's less expensive models.

Even though it works well, the Weather Conditioner is not like a modern system. The compressor runs all the time because there is no clutch, so the faster you go, the cooler the car's interior becomes. But the system works as a heater just by actuating a lever inside the car. In fact, it is essentially the mother of all automotive climate control systems; Cadillac followed suit with their own air-conditioning system in 1941, but such systems did not come into general use in most cars until the 1950s.

In the winter, the belt for the air-conditioning compressor could be removed to save fuel and increase power, and the car's conventional heater could then be employed as required. But in my experience, unless the weather is quite cold, the English wool broadcloth interior and the well-designed body will keep you pretty cozy.

While it couldn't quite match Oldsmobile's—and later, Cadillac's—completely automatic Hydra-Matic trans-






mission, which also debuted in 1940, Packard did offer the aforementioned Borg-Warner electric overdrive beginning in 1939. The Packard Econo-Drive gave you essentially five speeds forward, and you could shift without a clutch except when coming from a standing start. In 1941, Packard offered their Electro-matic clutch, which worked much like Volkswagen's automatic stick shift. With that setup, you had an automatic clutch, but you still did the shifting yourself. Packard finally came out with their own fully automatic transmission, called the Ultramatic, in 1949.

The 282-cu.in. straight-eight produces a lot of torque at low rpm, so the big car pulls from a stop pretty well, and the Econo-Drive overdrive makes it possible to cruise at modern freeway speeds with ease. But even though Packard 120 models with overdrive are capable of high-speed driving, there are a couple of factors that might limit the prudent modern driver's enthusiasm.

The first is the car's brakes. Though excellent for the era, they cannot equal the stopping power of modern, lighter cars with disc brakes. The other issue is that the wheels and tires of the heavy old Packard must be carefully balanced, because the car is softly sprung for a good ride. Any imbalance would make itself abundantly clear in the form of tire-destroying vibration at high speeds.

As we roll along through the old orange-growing town of Santa Ana, California, I get the urge to just keep on going over to old Highway 66 to head

eastward. Even though the car is 65 years old, Packard's legendary dependability and the car's condition would make it very likely that we could drive all the way to Ed Stifel's home in West Virginia comfortably and without drama. After all, the Packard Motor Company prided itself on quality and dependability from its inception.

Today, thanks to Ed Stifel's determination and Herculean effort, I am able to experience for a brief time what it was like to drive one of the cars Packard built during its halcyon days, when the company's understated, stylish, quiet, comfortable and reliable cars were still the masters of the road. I imagine Ed's Uncle Dick would be proud to see his cherished Packard restored to such impeccable standards after all these years. 

## Owner's View

**Owner Ed Stifel remarks,** "My childhood friends and I frequently rode our bikes around Uncle Dick's semi-circular driveway at his home, passing that beautiful Packard, which was usually parked out back beneath the large porte-cochere, and we marveled at its stately elegance and classic beauty. It was then I determined that one day I would own such a regal automobile."

Ed kept track of the car over the years, but it wasn't until six years ago that he was in a position to obtain the old Packard. "Years before it had been parked

down in a hollow near a stream and covered with a plastic tarp. It was rusty, running, full of holes, dull, cracked and broken. You'd need a tetanus shot to go near it. But in July, 2000, the dream of a young boy on a bike was fulfilled."

"The car is a joy to drive: steady, responsive, comfortable and dependable. Lovely in its lines and never fails to attract admiring attention from all who I know. Uncle Dick, wherever he is, smiles once more when he thinks of his Packard."

## WHAT TO PAY

### 1940 Packard Model

Low	Average	High
\$10,000	\$18,000	\$26,000

### + PROS:

- Smooth, rattle-free ride
- Quality through and through
- More comfortable than the finest room couch

### - CONS:

- Few found regularly for sale
- Brakes not up to today's standards
- Finding trim parts for these cars can be difficult



## CLUB SCENE

**Packard Automobile Club**  
P.O. Box 360806  
Columbus, Ohio 43236  
800-478-0012  
www.packardclub.org  
Dues: \$40/year; Membership: \$100

**Packards International**  
302 French Street  
Santa Ana, California 92701  
www.packardsinternational.com  
Dues: \$45/yr; Membership: \$200

**Eastern Packard Club**  
P.O. Box 1259  
Stratford, Connecticut 06615  
Dues: \$25/year; Membership: \$100