

Robert Escalante

The man behind Custom Auto Service, Southern California's Packard restoration specialist

Words and photography by Jim Richardson



Want to buy a brand new 1939 Packard Super Eight Convertible Coupe? Well, you can. And yes, it's true, they haven't made them since 1939, and all of those that still exist are 65 years old. But what difference does that make if the car is restored to factory standards and put into as new condition? Fact is, essentially new Packards from any of the company's golden years can still be purchased at Custom Auto Service in Santa Ana California, and your classic Packard can also be restored, serviced, maintained and repaired there too.

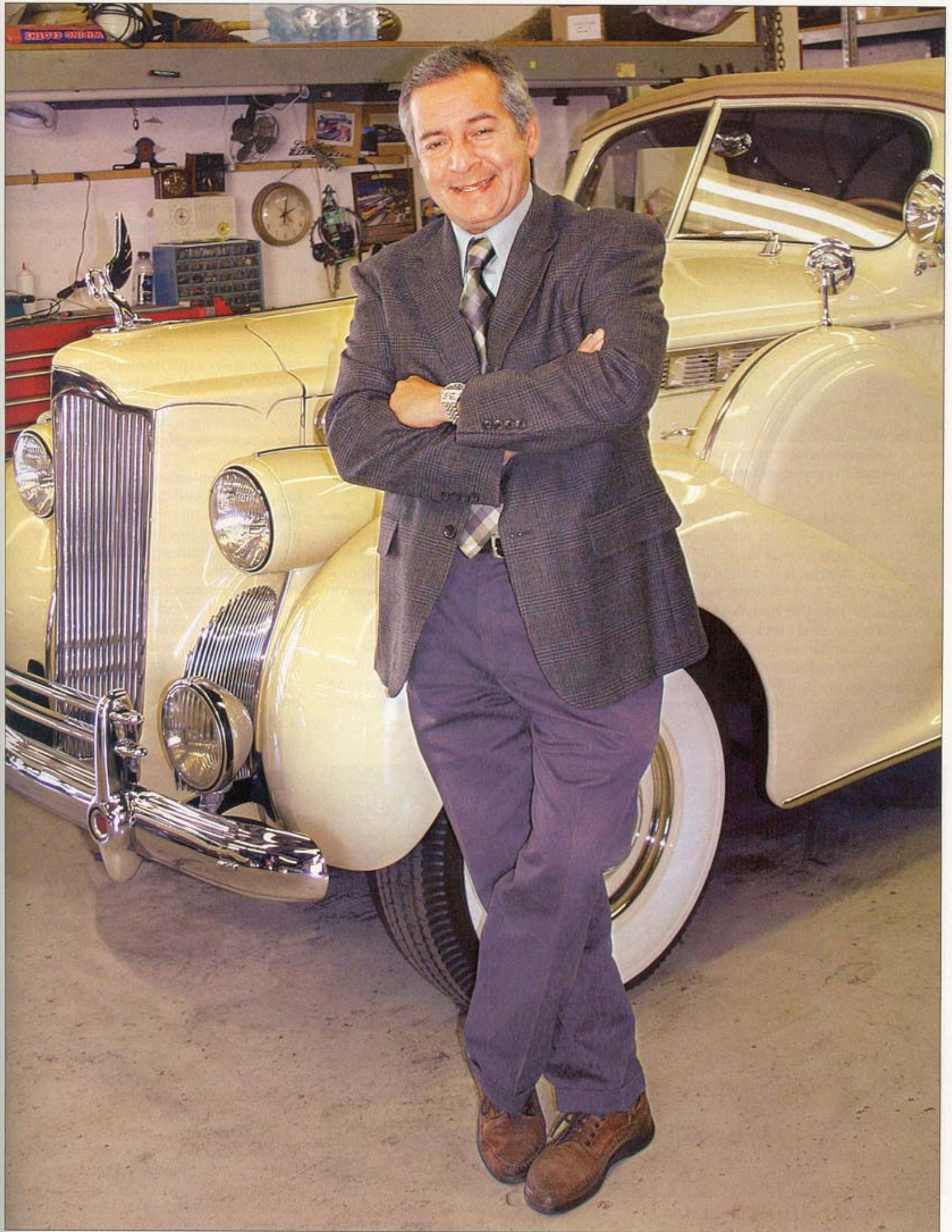
This is true because Robert Escalante, owner of the oldest restoration shop in

Southern California, has made Packards a specialty. With 38 years in the business, they have worked on nearly every model of Packard ever made and have developed an expertise not available anywhere else. As a result, they have the skills, the parts, and the resources to restore any Packard to show-winning quality. It is as if they were a dealership that never received the letter years ago that Packard was going out of business.

Of course, they work on other brands as well. They have restored everything from Pierces to Stutzes to De Sotos and even a Nash Metropolitan for a special customer, and have produced a num-

ber of show winners with these marques too. So what's their secret? Custom Auto Service is a family operation, and the family's pride and reputation are wrapped up in the services they provide. Only chief mechanic Cal Soest is not related, but he may as well be because he has been with the operation since its beginning in 1966.

At that time, the shop was owned by Packard buff Bill Lauer who put his friend Cal to work on the mechanical end of the operation. Also, about that same time, Escalante, fresh out of high school, acquired a 1941 Packard for transportation that gave him a real appreciation for





Robert's younger brother David takes direction from their father Al regarding the panel work needed to rebuild and restore this Packard's body properly

the marque. In fact, Escalante was so impressed with the quality and style of Packard automobiles that he signed on with Lauer's shop so he could learn more.

"At first, I did all the work no one else wanted to do like cleaning and painting chassis and block sanding paint," said Escalante. But, little by little, he learned the various trades involved, and saw how the business worked. Then, in 1983, Lauer decided he wanted more

time to travel and fewer hours tending to his rather demanding business, so he put the facility up for sale. It was then that Escalante—in his early thirties—purchased the operation. A gutsy move, to say the least, but he made it work for himself and everyone else involved.

Twenty years of 14-hour days later, Custom Auto Service is now known internationally as a major dealer, restorer and service facility for Packards as well as



The installation of new brake shoes was being carried out on this 1935 Phaeton

other classics. Escalante's father Al still mentors and helps with cosmetic restoration, though he has taught son David to be a panelbeater and painter of extraordinary skill. Another brother, Sandy, assists Cal Soest with the wrenching. Also, Sandy and cousin Toby have turned detailing into a fine art, with numerous prestigious show trophies to prove it.

I first met Robert and the guys when I acquired a 1940 Packard 110 Coupe in need of restoration back in 1984. I planned to restore the car myself, but thought I might need a little advice about the idiosyncrasies of the make. Also, I was not certain whether I wanted to do all of the work or not, so I drove down to their shop in Santa Ana, California. I purposely went on a Saturday so as not to interrupt the work week for the shop, but I wondered at the time if I would be given the brush off since I wasn't likely to be much of a paying customer.

Turns out I was treated with warmth and hospitality. Robert introduced himself and then poured me a cup of coffee. I told him of my intentions, and he gave me an overview of what was involved in restoring a Packard of the vintage of mine. After that, he asked Cal Soest to inspect the car and tell me what he could see. Cal noted a leaking head gasket, bad front wheel bearings, worn shock absorbers and frayed wiring. These observations didn't exactly cheer me up, but they did give me some insight into what was ahead for me.

Then David and Al Escalante came out and inspected the body. There was little rust, but a garage door accident in the past had left two sizable dents in the top that had been repaired fairly capably, but were full of plastic filler. One rear fender had been extensively repaired also, and the hood did not fit quite right, but the guys told me that, actually, the car was in pretty good shape. Even the interior—though redone in incorrect fabric—was not that bad.



Although all the machine work is farmed out to a trusted machine shop nearby, every engine, including this difficult to assemble V-12, is rebuilt by Cal Soest



After being thoroughly restored, this 1936 Packard 120 has returned for a tune-up

Armed with information given me by these experts, I went home and spent the next year mechanically restoring the car down to the last cotter key and bearing seal, and then I took it to Custom Auto for paint. The guys gave it a flawless multi-coat lacquer finish; I had the chrome and upholstery redone, and we were off to the shows. The car took a first in class at a C.H.V.A. (Contemporary Historical Vehicle Association) show the first day out, and continued to do well at subsequent shows.

Since that time, I have learned to do my own panelbeating and paint work. And the guys at Custom Auto have always taken the time to coach me when I needed it. They are not in the business of giving advice, of course, but they love old Packards as much as we hobbyists do, and enjoy working on and driving them as much as we do. In fact, everyone at the shop drives Packards.

The headquarters of the Packards International car club is housed in a large office on one side of the old showroom at Custom Auto Service, and its meetings and functions are often held in Escalante's showroom. "Many of the cars we work on are unique, but their owners are often even more interesting," says Escalante. And he's right. It is not at all unusual for nationally known celebrities to bring their Packards in for service and restoration.

The club and the people at Custom Auto Service are not elitist, though. The shop works on at least as many of Packard's less expensive, mass-produced 110 and 120 models like mine as it does the one-off custom-bodied classic 12-cylinder and Super Eight models. And Saturday mornings are set aside for customers and club members to visit the shop and get to know the experts who will be transforming their vehicles.

"I want the customers to know and trust the people who will be working on their cars, and I want my craftsmen to know and respect the customers as well," says Escalante. "It takes some



With its prominent grille and front body panels removed, this 1941 LeBaron-bodied Packard is at the initial stage of a complete, body-off, ground-up restoration

3,000 hours to properly restore a Packard to factory standards, and that costs a fair amount of money. So trust and understanding are very important in these situations." And, after doing over 100 top quality restorations, Escalante should know what he is talking about.

Robert Escalante's Custom Auto Service has sold, restored and maintained Packards of all vintages, and can keep these remarkable cars performing

at their best. They love old cars, and especially Packards, and it shows in their work. So, if you should want a new 1954 Caribbean Convertible, 1936 V-12 phaeton or just a 1941 six-cylinder doctor's coupe, Robert can probably locate one for you already done, or he can transform yours into a showroom-new example. His advertising says it all. Their slogan is, "After 38 years, there is still no substitute." 🐾



The second LeBaron-bodied Packard in the shop is this 1941 four-door sedan that was built atop a model 180 chassis. It's awaiting some minor mechanical work