

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 20, 2007

Big Cars of the 1930s: I always liked big cars. Of my family's Packards when I was growing up—our “big car,” the one in which we took trips—was a seven-passenger sedan with the largest motor and the longest hood. This car, changing from a 1928 Model 543 to a 1932 Model 904 to a 1934 Model 1108 to a 1937 Model 1508 (still in the collection) always carried license number 76. So I would coax my dad to take “the 76” when we were going anywhere, but he seldom used it for everyday travel, and it was considered too heavy and cumbersome for my mother to drive. When we took the ‘37 to California in 1941, my cousin Meta Shallcross dubbed it the “Spirit of ‘76” and said “the Spirit moves us!”

A few times each year, my mother shopped in Philadelphia. Sometimes she would go on the train from Wilmington, but sometimes she would be driven by my father or by Clifford Murray, who performed many tasks around Auburn Heights. Saturday mornings would have been the only times I could have been there during the school year. When we would stop on Chestnut Street near 15th or 16th, chauffeur-driven Packards and Cadillacs, presumably from the Main Line and other affluent suburbs, would pull up to the curb, their drivers would walk around and open the back door, and a society matron with a fur around her neck would disembark for her shopping engagement. In the Cadillac line, most of the cars would be V-8s, but occasionally a V-12 or V-16 would be seen. Packards were almost entirely Super Eights or Twelves. Very seldom did I see a Lincoln, a Chrysler Imperial, or a Pierce Arrow, and foreign cars were almost nonexistent in America. These cars would usually be black, often had the divider glass between front and back seats, and would be clean and polished, regardless of the weather. The chauffeur would take the car around the block or into a parking lot until his important passenger was ready to go home or somewhere else in the city. Members of the city police were on horseback and would make their rounds, politely reminding people of the no-parking zones and sending them around the block. Most of these fine cars were melted up in the scrap drives during World War II, and their owners could not maintain this lifestyle after the war. A relatively small number of people seemed to have it all during the 1930s.

Occasionally we would stop at a fine resort hotel, and there a wonderful array of big cars seemed to be everywhere. I can recall such scenes in 1936 at the Lake Placid Club and at the Glen Springs Hotel at Watkins Glen, New York, overlooking Seneca Lake (on our Nova Scotia trip). Not only were there big sedans and limousines, but many convertibles as well: rumble seat roadsters and convertible coupes, seven-passenger tourings with rear windshields, and sporty short-coupled phaetons. Cadillacs and Packards again outnumbered all others.

A man named MacKenzie operated a bus line between Boston and Sydney, Nova Scotia, in the 1930s, an over-the-road distance of about 800 miles. He could not use large buses as the ferries on Cape Breton Island were so small they could carry only cars. The Nova Scotia roads were terrible in the summer of '36. Rebuilding was taking place but was not very far along, and there was almost no paving, only dust. So, MacKenzie had two or three 1935 Pierce-Arrow V-8 12-passenger sedans with four doors down each side. A few years later, vehicles of this type would be known as “airport limousines.” I believe the one-way trip took 2½ days, as he did not travel at night. With three similar vehicles, I'm not sure how frequent his schedule was, but I would think there was a departure twice a week from each end. After crossing onto Cape Breton Island on the Gut-of-Canso ferry (a larger boat), the best route to Sydney was via the Ross Ferry that crossed an inlet from the Atlantic. This little boat could carry five small cars or four large ones, and with MacKenzie's Pierce-Arrow at a 45-degree angle across the stern, our big Packard and one or two small cars was the limit. The owner himself was one of the drivers, and my father had several conversations with him. We saw him again in Sydney washing up and servicing for the return trip to Boston. This 12-year-old dreamed of running a bus line like this one! Such an endeavor would allow me to drive a *big car*.