

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 25, 2013

The Packard Motor Company of Wilmington in the 1930s: Frank W. Diver was the driving force and general manager of Wilmington's Packard agency from 1922 until World War II. My father, Clarence Marshall, was his financial partner, who would stop in two or three times each week. The agency had three locations during the decade of the 1930s: a tall, narrow building at 10th and French streets (later a Sears tire store), a cramped one-story building on Pennsylvania Avenue between Union Street and Grant Avenue (later occupied by Food Fair), and a new building also on Pennsylvania Avenue between Grant Avenue and Bancroft Parkway, built in 1936 as a state-of-the-art dealership. This latter building, greatly expanded over the years, is the headquarters of Diver Chevrolet, now run by the third generation of Divers.

In the original 1936 building, there was a showroom facing Pennsylvania Avenue that would easily display four or five Packards and either a Nash or a Studebaker (less expensive cars were also sold, in order, during the Depression). Behind the showroom in the center of the building was the business office. Mrs. Mountz kept the books, and she and Mr. Diver occupied this area. In back of the office was a large service department, with about five bays, each with its mechanic, and ample storage room for new and used cars, as well as privately-owned cars in for service. All the way back in the building was the wash rack and polishing area.

Frank Diver himself was the chief salesman, and he had some prestigious accounts in a General Motors town. He sold a 1934 Packard Twelve to Pilling Wright of Newark and took a 1930 Minerva in trade (Wright was president of Continental Diamond Fibre Company, and his former home is the president's house for the University of Delaware). When he sold another "Twelve" to Wilmer Stradley, president of Diamond Ice and Coal Company, a special front seat had to be substituted to accommodate Mr. Stradley's 350-pound frame. Other Packard salesmen working for Diver were Warren Collins and Byron Rawson. I remember visiting one day in early 1937 when all had long faces; the stock market had just taken another plunge (fortunately, it picked up later that year, and 1937 turned out to be one of Packard's best sales years).

Charlie Steele, an Englishman, had been head of the Service Department. He knew Packards, and he was good. When he retired, a man named Buckley got the job. The mechanics I knew were Jimmy Lafferty, Eddie Cole, Spot Tyre, and Harry Meck. Lafferty was especially methodical, and he often came to Auburn Heights to work on my father's personal cars (see the Weekly News of 3/25/13). He never owned a car. "Spot" bought a used '32 Packard Standard Eight Club Sedan and kept it in mint condition. Cole left to open his own shop just off Washington Street near Lea Boulevard. In later years, several worked for Bill Luke at Delaware Oldsmobile, first at 13th and Market and then on Governor Printz Boulevard. Ira Johns, a smiling black man, was the washer and polisher, and cars that left the agency had his special shine.

Competent men to run errands were essential, and the Packard dealership had three who come to mind. "Errands" entailed all sorts of things, such as driving cars from the Packard distributor at 400 North Broad Street in Philadelphia to chauffeuring special people on request. Clayton George helped drive my parents and me on a trip to Virginia Beach and Old Point Comfort in 1930. Before that, he probably drove my grandmother, Elizabeth Marshall, when she needed to go somewhere from her Wilmington apartment. During World War II, Clayton was a conductor on local Pennsylvania Railroad trains between Wilmington and Philadelphia. Bill Flinn lived with his parents near Greenville but had a weak heart that limited his physical activity. He could drive, however, and was completely capable. Joe Stoeckle, the son of a brewer at 5th and Adams streets who fell on hard times when prohibition took over in 1921, knew the Marshalls best, as he went on several trips with us, the longest of which was to the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1934. Stoeckle even helped my father with one or more trapshooting tournaments. He never had a well paying job, and the last time I saw him he was a bookkeeper for Hudson Supply Company near the foot of Market and Shipley streets.

Five years ago today, Ruth and I moved out and turned over Auburn Heights to the state. We met Chazz Salkin and Ron Vickers in a law office in Wilmington, and in a few minutes it was done.