

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 1, 2014

Packards and Pin Cushions: In my mother's generation and in many families since, a woman with a family had to have a pin cushion. Usually these were very utilitarian, cubical but rounded, usually made of a ball of wool tightly compressed by a sewn cloth cover completely covering the oblong ball. Today, fancy versions of these plain pin cushions are available on the Internet in all price ranges.

For most of her life, my mother probably owned two pin cushions at any one time. One was kept close to the sewing machine, the other was more portable and often got lost. Both held many common pins and two or three needles, sometimes having been left threaded for the next button that needed to be sewed on with no advance notice. There was no order for the pins and needles in these pin cushions, but that wasn't necessary.

Although my mother could drive (her two sisters never learned), she was seldom behind the wheel when we were on a trip or far from home in one of the big Packards. If it were just she and my father, she would ride on the front seat. If I was along, she would be in the back, where she had lots of room to spread out, even sharing the space with several pieces of luggage. No matter where she rode, however, the plush wool upholstery in the car made beautiful pin cushions. Just how the pins got there is somewhat of a mystery, but I assume they came from the portable pin cushion in her purse. Pins could be found on the inside of the right front door and on each side of the back seat. Sometimes these would get quite numerous, and my father would pull them out and throw them away (or return them to their source) when he looked over the inside of his favorite car. However, the other side of the coin was that my mother made many emergency repairs while riding along.

When a Packard was traded in for a newer model, the upholstery was carefully checked over to make sure there were no pins or needles remaining. Another feature of these big sedans of the 1920s and 1930s was that shades that could be drawn over the rear windows. Even Ford and Chevy sedans had a shade on the back window, and usually one on the windows opposite the back seat. These were spring-loaded, just like the common home window shades of that period. In a car, they were seldom closed but could be drawn for semi-privacy or to keep the sun away. They were cloth shades of a higher quality than common window shades. In the more streamlined body of our '37 Packard Twelve, the rear shade pulls up from the bottom and is held closed by a snap, instead of the more common "pull-down" shades. Auto designers were trying to imitate the luxury of being at home.

By the 1930s, although the larger cars often had hot-water heaters on the passenger's side in the front, there was seldom any heat in the back. Fastened on the back of the front seat was usually a "robe rail," where a heavy car blanket could be hung. In cold weather, back seat female passengers would use this blanket to cover their feet, ankles and legs, a welcome accessory in the days before women wore modified men's jeans. After all, look what improvements they enjoyed when compared to the generation before, when they would have endured winter travel in an open horse-drawn carriage or buggy. The 20th century was on its way!