

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 20, 2017

Frank W. Diver (1895-1976): Frank Diver, originally from Woodstown, New Jersey, loved high-quality cars and was a born salesman. At the age of 20, he was selling Franklins and Packards in the greater Philadelphia area from early dealers in that city. (That was not unusual, as Floyd Clymer of Berthoud, Colorado, born the same year as Diver, had dealerships at the age of 11!) Frank Diver was drawn to Wilmington when he married a Wilmington girl, Carolyn Prickett, the daughter of a Hercules Powder Company executive, about 1916. My father, still a Stanley dealer at Auburn Heights, bought a First Series Packard Twin Six, and then a Second Series roadster with an improved V-12 engine, from Frank Diver in 1916 and 1917 respectively.

In 1916, Roy Freck of West Chester, sponsored by members of the du Pont family, started Delaware Motor Sales, selling Cadillacs, and later LaSalles as well, in what was fast becoming a General Motors town. Most of the du Pont men owned Cadillacs, even though these cars were not built to compete with expensive Pierce-Arrows and costly Packards. Frank Diver bucked the trend and continued to sell Packards to the affluent in the Wilmington area. My father bought a 1921 Third Series Twin Six roadster and a 1921 Small Six sedan as a wedding present for my mother.

In 1922, about the time the Divers were expecting their fourth daughter, Frank Diver and my father opened the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington, with office, showroom, and shop at 10th and French Streets. Diver ran the operation, with my father as his silent partner. My dad was still in charge of all the machinery in the family's paper and fibre mills of Yorklyn, Wilmington, Newark, and Kennett Square. As the economy boomed through the 1920s, the new Packard agency did very well. From its cramped quarters on French Street, sales were made to well-to-do people who appreciated a fine American motor car. For my father, there were many fringe benefits. He would have about three new Packards every two years (getting the dealer's discount), trading them in with less than 20,000 miles on their odometers. A 1928 Packard Six sedan was kept at the agency for my grandmother, Elizabeth C. Marshall, who was then living in a Wilmington apartment. If she wanted to go somewhere, a driver from the agency would take the car and accommodate her needs. When she died in 1930, this car came to us at Yorklyn and served us well until 1935.

In the summer of 1929, when we were at Rehoboth, Frank Diver arrived alone in a new Big Eight Dual-Windshield touring car, painted a dark green. Only a few "open cars" were sold from the Wilmington agency, and I had never seen anything so beautiful. The last open Packard my father had owned was a First-Series Straight Eight of 1924, and he didn't go for this beauty five years later. While it didn't affect the number of Packards at Auburn Heights, the Depression hit high-end cars very hard, and Packard was no exception. A total of 48,000 Packards were made and sold in 1929; this was down to 8,000 in 1932. Early in '32 the agency was moved from 10th and French to a single-story building in the 2000 block of Pennsylvania Avenue (the Food Fair, one of the first super markets, later occupied this building). Since money was scarce, Frank Diver took on the Nash dealership and sold White and Indiana trucks as well. In 1934, Nash came out with an inexpensive car called the Lafayette, which was in the price range of Ford, Chevrolet, and Plymouth.

After four daughters, the Divers had a son, Clifford Prickett Diver, born on February 8, 1924. He was 12 days old when I was born, so we were buddies. Three more sons followed, so, in order of age there were Edith, Dorothy, Carolyn, and Frances, Clifford, Arthur, Frank, Jr., and Richard, the youngest born about 1930. The Divers lived in a large home at 1104 North Broom Street in Wilmington, and Mrs. Diver's parents lived at 900 Franklin Street, three short blocks away. Frank was able to get License number 900 for his father-in-law to correspond with his house number, which license was often seen around Wilmington on the front and back of a Packard.

Mrs. Diver was musical, and she taught her children to play several instruments. My parents and I were invited to their home for a recital in a large basement room. Cliff and I were about 8 or 9 years old; the younger boys were not in the performing group. With their mother at the piano, the four girls each played a different instrument and Cliff played the drums. They were quite good, and Frank was very proud. Frannie Diver, the youngest daughter, attended Wilmington Friends School, as did the three younger boys. Frannie was very popular, and in her senior year, she was the May Queen. Cliff, on the other hand, attended Mercersburg Academy for 3 or 4 years, and when I went there during his senior year, he was in a 4-piece orchestra that played for assembly about three days a week and was in the band during football season. He played 2nd base on the varsity baseball team during the spring. His childhood sweetheart, Jean Mears, came to the Senior Dance at Mercersburg in 1942. They were married right after Cliff was discharged from the army in 1945.

In 1935, Packard had introduced its One-Twenty, which sold for about \$1,200, vs. \$2,500 or more for the big Packards. (Fords, Chevys and Plymouths were in the \$700 range.) In 1936, Frank Diver and my father commissioned Haddock Construction Company to build a state-of-the-art Packard dealership in the 2100 block of Pennsylvania Avenue. A young Albert Haddock had just taken over the company from his father, and this was the first large building he had undertaken. It was a fine job with showroom windows facing the avenue, and ample space for the shop and car storage behind. The offices were in the middle, where Frank Diver and Mrs. Mountz, his secretary and bookkeeper, could always be found. There were about six mechanics' bays, plus a wash rack and polishing areas in charge of Ira John, a lovable black man. In 1937, Packard introduced a light Six that sold for about \$1,000. Diver shifted from Nash to Studebaker as a car more affordable than a Packard. When Studebaker introduced its Champion in 1939, these cars sold very well in the \$750 range.

On average, I imagine the dealership employed between 15 and 20 people in the late 1930s. Charlie Steele, an Englishman, had been the head mechanic, and he retired. A man named Buckley took his place. Their regular mechanics were Jimmy Lafferty, Eddie Cole, Spot Tyre, Harry Meck, and possibly one or two more. There were always about 3 drivers on the payroll. These men would bring new cars from the Philadelphia distributor, bring in cars for servicing or repair, run errands, and sundry other jobs. Joe Stoeckle, Clayton George, and Bill Flinn served in this capacity. We got to know them well, as they often delivered messages back and forth between Frank Diver and my father. George and Stoeckle even accompanied us on some of our motor trips. There were two or three salesmen in addition to the best of them all, Frank Diver himself. The two salesmen I remember were Warren Collins and Byron Rawson.

My father bought a total of four 1940 Packards. Obviously, he liked the lines. The first was a six-cylinder 110, which soon became my car. Then there was a new straight eight 180 for himself. Third, my mother had a Model 160 short-wheelbase sedan. Finally at model-year end, he bought a second 180 with 138" wheelbase, as he had plans to convert the first one into a steam car. All of them were 4-door touring sedans.

Also in 1940, my father sent a letter to Frank Diver, saying he wanted to sell his interest in the dealership. I never knew why. Many years later after my father's death, Mr. Diver told me he had kept the letter in his safe, and he wanted to show it to me. He said it hurt him very much. I thought it better that I not see the letter, and he understood.

When World War II came on, there were no cars to sell, so Frank Diver kept his business going by selling appliances or whatever, as did many automobile dealers. When the war ended he still had the dealerships for Packard and Studebaker, but the Packard Motor Company had changed and he saw the handwriting on the wall. He gave up Packard but kept Studebaker for two years or so. He was selling a lot of Studebakers that had some futuristic styling, but an opportunity came along to get Chevrolet. In those days, Chevy was outselling every other make, including Ford. Possibly before 1950, the agency became Frank W. Diver, Inc., and then Diver Chevrolet.

When Frank Diver retired in the 1960s, his son Cliff took over. Cliff was in charge for at least 30 years, during which time his three brothers participated in the business. In retirement, Frank could not stay away and often served as the phone operator. Cliff has been the same way during his retirement years. At 93, except when he is in Florida, he is in the office almost daily. The agency has never been out of the family, and has been managed by Rich Diver, Arthur's son, for many years. The 1936 building has been greatly expanded over the years, as have the real estate holdings of the Divers nearby. From Pennsylvania Avenue, however, it looks much the same as when built in 1936.