

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 18, 2010

A Comedy of Errors: In 1979, Elwood Dapp painted our 1937 Packard Twelve, along with two more of my cars, in Paul Smeltz's shop at Gordonville, Lancaster County. Mr. Smeltz, semi-retired, fixed up wrecked cars and made them whole and sellable again. In December 1978, I had totaled my mother's 1970 Buick Skylark, which had Delaware #8 as its license. I was looking for a small, used car on which to put #8, so I would not lose it. Smeltz said he had a 1975 Mercury Monarch that he couldn't sell, as it had a stick-shift transmission. It was a nice-looking car, and I liked stick-shifts in those days, so I bought it and enjoyed it as an everyday car.

My business partner, Walter Anderson, needed a car for about a week, as his was in the shop for extensive work. He was very reluctant to borrow the Mercury, but I insisted, as I also had a 1972 Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham I had bought from Ellice McDonald (with license #76). The second day Walter had the car, the ignition switch failed, and he had to call a locksmith, who replaced the switch and gave him a key to fit the new lock. Back in business, he was driving down Concord Pike (Route 202), when the rear license tag (#8), together with its holder, fell off and was lost. Walter was distraught; he knew he never should have borrowed the car.

Before long, the #8 license tag, not damaged, was turned in to the police at Penny Hill barracks. They called me and said I could come to get it. Walter offered to pick it up for me, as he was much closer. The police wouldn't give it to him, thinking he was an imposter. Finally, I got the tag back, along with the car, and all was well. I threw away the old ignition key so it would not get mixed up with the "good" key.

The first time I locked the car thereafter was at the Sears repair place on MacArthur Drive. When I went to unlock, guess what happened? I had no key that would fit the door locks. I went to the clerks inside and told them of my plight. One of them said, "Oh, we have just the right man who can get into locked cars!" And so they did. A man from the repair department was summoned, and it was not five minutes before he had the door unlocked. Then I had to engage the services of another locksmith.

Nothing particularly outstanding happened to the Mercury after that, but I was traveling on Kennett Pike toward Yorklyn one day when my cousin, Eleanor Reynolds, came up behind and began blowing her horn. She noticed the muffler and tail pipe dragging the road surface, with sparks flying. I don't recall the temporary repair, but I got home and fixed the problem. The fuel gauge on the dash said: "Use Unleaded Fuel Only," but I always used the cheapest, which in those days contained lead. Despite everything, I liked that Mercury Monarch.

Modern people with modern cars may not understand that in the 1970s, it was not possible to lock and unlock a car by pushing a remote button. In fact, car owners in the early 1930s had no way to lock their cars. Locks first came about on sedans and coupes and usually only on high-priced models. On our 1937 Packard, only the front passenger door locks with a key; on the others, it's necessary to reach across and lock the door with the inside door handle.