

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 25, 2013

Servicing Packard Cars, 1930s: As has been mentioned, my father was associated with Frank W. Diver in the Packard Motor Company of Wilmington from 1922 until 1940. In addition to about four salesmen, of whom Diver himself was the best, and Mrs. Mounts, who kept the records, the service department consisted of a service manager, about five mechanics, a body repair department, two "errand men," and Ira John, who had a full-time job washing and polishing cars. Originally this was located in a building at 10th and French Streets that had several floors with limited space on each. About 1932, the agency moved to a one-story building on Pennsylvania Avenue, also with limited space and a very small showroom (this was later a Food Fair, one of the first supermarkets), but better things were planned.

In 1936, Albert Haddock, the son of W. D. Haddock, who founded a local construction company, was chosen to build a state-of-the-art dealership on a piece of ground facing Pennsylvania Avenue, one block from the 1932 location. This bordered a nice residential area, but with no zoning in those days, a business of this type was permitted. About the same time, Delaware Auto Sales (Cadillac) moved from 11th and King Streets to Pennsylvania Avenue and Clayton Street, also in a residential area. The new Packard building had a large showroom capable of holding five or six latest-model cars, a service department behind with at least eight "bays," a body shop in the rear, and two or three small business offices, all on one floor (the present Diver Chevrolet utilizes this building with greatly expanded facilities to the rear).

Charlie Steele, an Englishman, was an excellent service manager, and he understood Packard cars. When he retired, a man named Buckley took his place. Mechanics I remember were Jimmy Lafferty, Spot Tyre, Harry Meck, and Eddie Cole. My father especially liked Lafferty and Cole. Packard owners of those days, in order to keep their cars in top operating condition, could expect some major work each 10,000 miles. This would include removing the cylinder heads, scraping carbon deposits from the heads and cylinder walls, grinding the valves, and probably buying a new set of tires. Depending on the driver, it could also include brake and clutch work.

My father would request that Jimmy Lafferty come to Auburn Heights with his tools and spend a day when this motor maintenance was required. Lafferty, who never owned a car, was nevertheless a very good driver and diagnostician. Upon arrival, he would first spread a drop cloth on the front fenders, remove the hood, and if there were side-mounts, remove the one on the side where he planned to work. With his tools, he would then go to work, perform his intended jobs, put everything back together and be ready to test the car with my father by mid-afternoon. They would probably adjust the spark advance, the carburetor jets and the idle speed and make sure the car would come up the front driveway at 5 m.p.h. in high gear without "bucking." If it would, they would agree it was as good as new. This practice continued for many years, starting before I was old enough to remember and ending when my father withdrew from the partnership.

About 1938, Eddie Cole left to open his own garage just off Washington Street near Lea Boulevard, and soon after that Lafferty went to work for Bill Luke at Delaware Olds. Lafferty was a bachelor for much of his life, but when he went to the hospital for a brief stay, he ended up marrying his nurse. I don't know whether they ever owned a car.