

## In Retrospect

By David E. Davis, Jr.

The phone rings. It's Eric Dahlquist in California calling "Will you go to Reno and drive a 1940 Packard woodie that Harrah's Auto Collection just restored?" A "woodie" he calls it. A woodie. It's not a woodie, for heaven's sake, it's a station wagon. A wagon for going to the station—which in 1940 implied that you were really somebody because only the very best people could afford to live in the country and commute to the city.

Of course, I'll do it. I'm a station wagon freak anyway. I love station wagons, especially wooden ones. And this one is very special. The classic Packard grille leading the way for a long, appropriately aquiline, aristocratic nose. A prow that cleaves the air for a vast wooden box of a body. A

body of ash and birch. Enough wood to panel a pretty nice Alpine hunting lodge. A body about the same height as your average telephone booth. A tall, handsome, *noblesse oblige* kind of car from a time when terms like "upper crust" and "cave society" were meaningful social indicators and the country was much more neatly compartmentalized where one's class was concerned.

Packard was dying in 1940. The disease had been diagnosed as too narrow a range of models clustered in the high-priced bracket and the cure proscribed was the addition of a bunch of cheap six-cylinder pseudo-Packards at the other end of the market scale. In 1938 they even cheapened the eight-cylinder cars, and in 1939 they dropped their 12-cylinder model. But there were still a lot of Packard lovers out there in 1940, and the One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon would have been their kind of car. It looked like a Packard and, as a station wagon, it was aimed at the old Packard status market. A nice car for nice wealthy people.

Perfect? What could be more right for

an outing with a 1940 Packard station wagon than a trip to Reno? I mean, Reno was exactly the sort of place where you'd have expected to see Packard station wagons running around in 1940. Reno was the sort of place Packard station wagon people went. All the biggies went to Reno. You'd decide to divorce whichever movie star you were married to at the moment and you'd fly out to Reno to do it. And when you stepped off that big silver DC-3 at the airport you'd find that the hotel had sent a guy down to pick you up in a—what else?—a Packard station wagon.

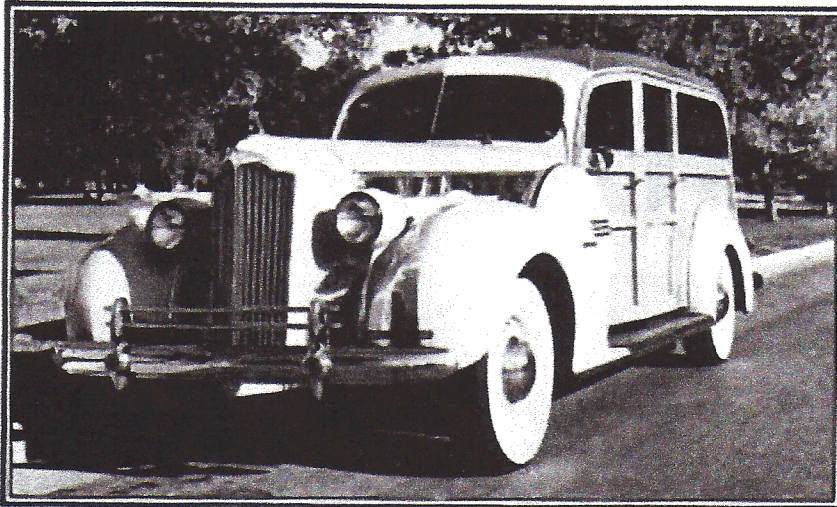
But this is no ordinary Packard station wagon, because Reno is no ordinary town and you are no ordinary biggie. This is a Packard One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon. Let the proles and the, you know, *nouveau riche*, ride around in the standard One-Ten and One-Twenty station wagons. This is probably the only station wagon ever built on the One-Sixty Super Eight chassis, and you're riding through the streets of Reno in it, kid. Hot stuff!

This one has twin spare tires mounted on the front fenders. The crummy little Packard One-Ten only has one spare and it's mounted behind the front seat (if you can imagine). The One-Twenty carries a single outside spare mounted in the right front fender, at least, but it just doesn't make the same kind of statement as a One-Sixty Super Eight. And talk about statements . . . the Packard you're riding in has discreet little chrome messages mounted on the spare tire covers that say AIR CONDITIONED. *Air conditioned!* Most of the people in the United States have never even been in an air conditioned building, for God's sake, and here you are in an air conditioned automobile. A Packard first for 1940.

You sit inside this Packard One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon and it's like sitting inside a prewar cabin cruiser. Partly it's because of all the wood on the inside. On the inside! The side panels are birch plywood and the headliner is made of long curved strips of ash, about an inch wide, held in place by beautifully fitted ash crossmembers. The seats are very businesslike affairs, exposed steel tube frames with leatherette upholstery stretched over the same kind of springs used in the Packard sedans of the period.

The ride is boatlike too. It's the classic American car ride that all us sports car people complained about in the years after World War II Safe-T-flex suspension. Absolutely smooth. Soft. Good directional stability, but a very tentative, pessimistic feeling going around corners. It does roll some. Or perhaps, because of the altitude of the occupants' eustachian tubes above street level, it just feels like it's rolling. Anyway, back in 1940, America's over-achievers had no interest in handling as we know it today. You drove fast on the straights and slowed down for the corners . . . a lot. The popular notion of a high-speed corner was executed in something

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Above: "... there were still a lot of Packard lovers out there in 1940, and the One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon would have been their kind of car. It was aimed at the old Packard status market." Below: "The engine was a paragon of no-nonsense 1940 automotive virtue. It was a straight eight . . . of 356 cubic inches. Heady stuff."

