

IN RETROSPECT

continued

cannot help being impressed by the very high quality of the One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon. It is much more like a very expensive European luxury car than any contemporary American car in the Packard class.

In order to own a car like this in 1940, you'd have arranged for Packard to sell you a Model 1800-160 chassis with full front-end sheet metal and ship it to the Hercules Body Company at 1501 W. Franklin Street in Evansville, Indiana. The running chassis would have cost you about \$1,450 and the Hercules body perhaps another \$3,500.

Your chassis would have had a wheelbase of 127 inches; front tread width 59 3/16, rear tread width 62 1/2. Packard literature of the period describes the frame as a "Tapered I-Beam X-Member." The Safe-T-ileX suspension consisted of coil springs in the front with lever-type shocks and an anti-sway bar, and semi-elliptic leaf springs at the rear with aircraft-type hydraulic shocks. Brakes were Packard servo-hydraulic 12-inch drums at all four corners, with linings 2.25 inches wide. It had a three-speed manual transmission with column-mounted shift lever, and Hotchkiss drive carried the power back to the Hypoid rear axle—which in itself was still new enough to rate special mention in the specifications—and a final drive ratio of 4.09. Packard's Econo-Drive, an overdrive with free-wheeling was optional at extra cost. Tires were 7.00 X 16 with the widest whitewalls you ever saw in your whole entire life.

The engine was a paragon of non-nonsense 1940 automotive virtue. It was a straight eight with a 3 1/2-in. bore and a 4 1/2-in. stroke that multiplied out to a displacement of 356 cubic inches. It was a nice simple flat-head—none of your noisy overhead cams or valves or push-rods or any of that monkey-motion. No sir, An L-head. Fundamental automotive truth. It breathed out 160 horsepower at 3500 rpm and featured a modern-as-tomorrow no-lead or low-lead compression ratio of 6.45-1. Heady stuff.

The Hercules people clothed all this mechanical conservatism in a wooden body that would make the cabinets in your house look like packing cases. Beautiful joints. No sharp edges. Piano hinges wherever one panel must swing away from another. Piano hinges. The floor was virtually flat and covered with nice, sensible rubber mat. There were no vent-windows in the front, but the rearmost side windows could slide open for half their length. The back window flipped upward and could be snap-locked into position and the tailgate folded flat, strong enough to support extra cargo when necessary. The whole package weighed 3,655 lbs. when it rolled out the door in Evansville.

The basic interior configuration for all Packard wagons was a 3-2-3 seating arrangement, not unlike Chevrolet's present-day Suburban Carry-all. This layout provided an aisle from the right-hand rear door to the rearmost seat. However it was popular to eliminate the two-passenger second seat and move the third seat forward, which provided more luggage space and still accommodated a total of six adults—plenty for most families.

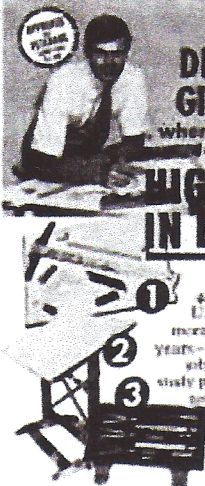
What's most impressive is the Packard's quiet comfort. It doesn't rattle and bang like most contemporary wagons. Oh, it creaks a little, but what yacht doesn't? The engine is virtually silent. Not because there are great wads of fibrous matting and clots of rubber stuffed in between you and it, but because it's a quiet engine. With no complicated valve gear and hardly any engine-driven accessories, it just doesn't make any noise. Without arrogance, without accusation, the old Packard One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon makes it pretty clear that there hasn't been much automotive progress, really, since 1940.

Harrah's wagon is so nice that it's popular with the boss and others as a regular business vehicle. As a result, it offers a couple of refinements the elderly Polish craftsmen on East Grand Boulevard never thought of. The air conditioning has been re-routed to blow cool air from beneath the dash instead of its 1940 location behind the rear seat, and a modern compressor has replaced the old Packard unit up front. There's a roll bar hidden in the wood work behind the rear doors, and the rear suspension has been updated with the addition of a Delco load-leveling device. But like everything else about the cars in Harrah's incredible, immaculate collection, even these modifications seem logical and right and one accepts them in the spirit in which they were intended.

The Packard One-Sixty Super Eight Station Wagon actually started life as two Packards. One was a 1940 Packard One-Sixty Super Eight Touring Sedan and the other was a One-Twenty station wagon of similar vintage. The Hercules body was duplicated by the Harrah organization's own craftsmen, using as many odds and ends of hardware and equipment as could be saved from the old wagon, while most of the original Packard components came intact from the big Super Eight sedan.

However it came about, the result is a glorious statement of what the good life was like back in antebellum 1940. Let's use it tonight. "Fantasia" is premiering at a movie house in Truckee, and we'll be able to listen to Fibber McGee and Molly on the way over, my Harrah's Automobile Collection, an attraction of Harrah's Hotel/Casino, Reno and Lake Tahoe, Nevada.

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