

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 10, 2007

Learning to Drive: Almost everyone will remember learning to drive, although many on the road never did. My experience was probably typical of a young man growing up in the 1930s whose father had a car. I loved to ride on the front seat with my father and watch his every movement as he used the clutch, foot brake, and accelerator pedal and shifted gears. If we had occasion to go to Rehoboth in the off-season, there would be practically no traffic on the road from Dover to the shore, and he would let me sit in the middle and steer with his oversight. Not much steering was required, as the road was straight.

One day in the fall of 1931, when I was seven, his big 1928 Packard Model 543 seven-passenger sedan was setting outside the garage in our Rehoboth driveway. No one was around, so I decided I would put it in the small two-car garage, just long enough for the big Packard. I really couldn't sit on the seat and reach the pedals, but by stretching out straight and hanging on the steering wheel, my feet would just reach the brake and clutch. In that posture, I could only see the headliner of the sedan. Nevertheless I got the motor started, put the car in low gear, and let out the clutch. Into the garage we headed, just where I wanted to go! But whoa, the far end of the garage was coming up fast, and there was little chance to stop. I closed my eyes, slid off the seat, and went down on both clutch and brake with all my might. The motor stalled, and the car came to a stop, only a few inches from where it would have smashed into the end of the garage. Breathing a sigh of relief, I got out and feared the next step: what my father would say when he noticed his car had been moved. A few minutes later, he came out, said he thought he had left the Packard outside (he knew he had), and wondered how it got in the garage. I confessed ignorance. I didn't try to drive again for about a year.

For men who worked around Auburn Heights, my father always had a car or small truck that he never drove himself. My first recollection was "Bate" Dennis and a Model T Ford that ended up down the race bank when he left it running by the kitchen door. The next was a '29 Model A Ford Station Wagon, a model that became a "Woodie" in the early '70s. We used this Model A as a light truck with the seats removed. On this car, I really learned to drive at the age of 8 or 9, whipping around the driveway after school and learning all the tight places that would accommodate this great little car. I even had one or two places I could drive under the rose arbor and out onto the lawn in dry weather. When I became a little more adventuresome, I went down the steep driveway behind the present museum, made a sharp turn at the bottom, and drove all over the meadow between the creek and the mill race. My father did not encourage these escapades, and occasionally he would put a stop to it, but I suppose he remembered how he wanted to operate anything mechanical when he was a boy. Anyway, he was always too easy on me; most of the disciplining came from my mother.

In 1937, Mary Leonard Chalfant and her daughter, Sara Bowers, both of Kennett Square, bought a new Packard 120 sedan and traded in a 1931 Packard Standard Eight sedan with very low mileage. Neither ever drove a car. My dad bought the old one, and it became the "school car" with license #154. When I was 14 or 15, I snuck out onto a public road, which was great fun. I remember traveling what is now Benge Road as far as the Pennsylvania line and back, a round-trip of about 3 miles. One time I met John C. Mitchell, owner of a 200-acre farm, who was out inspecting his field. I was sure he would tell on me, but he didn't. Another favorite route was across a back field from the Yorklyn Gun Club to Sharpless Road and up and down that lightly traveled road for a short distance. During all this illegal driving time, I was lucky, but soon after getting my license in February 1940, my previous cockiness caught up with me and I had three fender-benders before 1940 was over.