



Area couple enjoys a distinctive car from the 1920s

By Jeanie Senior

Wes and Cheryl Valpey's 1929 Packard has the presence of a vintage ocean liner, the glamour of a 1930s movie star.

Gleaming with bright nickel and chrome, with a wheelbase as long as a pickup truck, it's a reminder of a glorious era in American automobile history.

The car came to Wes from his father, who several years ago invited each of his three sons to pick a favorite auto from his sizable collection.

"Big boy toys," Cheryl says, smiling. "I married into the car."

"She married into a lot of things," Wes says. "My family has a long history of collecting cars and other old things."

Wes chose the Packard, which he drove regularly after he got his driver's license.

"I've always liked it," he says.

Wes defines his father, who lives in New Hampshire, as a true collector who still owns the first car he ever bought. It was another Packard. The elder Mr. Valpey was 16 at the time.

The Packard Motor Car Co., founded in 1902, was considered the country's leading luxury car maker, attaining its pinnacle in the 1920s and 1930s.

In those years, Wes says, "a Packard was one of the most desirable cars."

"They typically were owned by doctors, lawyers, corporate management—very, very successful people," he says.

That's apparent from the cost. The Valpeys' Packard Super Eight Phaeton sold for about \$3,100 new in 1929. The price of a new 1929 Model A Ford, by comparison, was about \$400.

In contemporary terms, one



Above, Wes takes his family, from left, Sam, Bend and Cheryl, in their vintage Packard. Top, the classic Packard grille.

might compare the Packard to a top-of-the-line Mercedes or BMW, Wes says.

Packard's advertising slogan was "Ask the man who owns one."

Wes' father, who bought their Packard in the late 1970s, was its third owner. It originally was sold to a man in Vermont who drove it until the mid-1930s, then put it into storage. It was sold in 1961, still in excellent condition. The second owner had it repainted, did some repairs on the upholstery and had a new top and side curtains made.

Otherwise, the car is original. Wes says it is called "a superb driver," meaning it is in excellent mechanical condition.

The odometer recently registered 30,000 original miles. It's been to the Dufur Threshing Bee and a car meet in Redmond. Those are its lengthiest outings since the Packard's arrival in Washington.

A former Alaska bush pilot who now is a pilot for Horizon Air, Wes says he can do routine mechanical maintenance—"but for major things, I don't have the equipment."

The car has a vast interior, with leather upholstery and a folding foot rest for back seat passengers.

There's also a rail for a car robe—a necessary accessory on chilly days. The car has a cloth top, side curtains and no heater.

"You have to dress appropriately," Wes says.

Other vintage accessories include a rear trunk and two spare tires, one mounted in each front fender.

"People don't realize these old cars carried two or three spare tires for a reason," he says. "Two to three thousand miles on a tire was all they expected from a set of tires. A day trip in a car without a flat tire was considered a nice day."

The car weighs 4,500 pounds, has a 140-inch wheelbase, and an aluminum housing for its crankcase and transmission. The engine, called a Super Eight, is rated at about 109 horsepower, with a top speed of 80 miles per hour.

"I'll run it at 45 to 50 miles an



Wes with his pride and joy, the 1929 Packard given to him by his father. Much of the car is original, including the distinctive "winged lady" hood ornament.

hour," Wes says.

Packards were so in demand in the late 1920s there was a waiting list. Some 50,000 were sold in 1928, and 35,000 in 1929.

Production plummeted during the Great Depression, however, with the number sold dropping to 7,000 in 1934.

Those grim years sent many other luxury car makers—including Peerless, Marmon, Franklin, Stearns-Knight, Stutz, Dusenber and Pierce-Arrow—out of business.

Packard, founded in 1898 by two brothers who believed they could build a better motor car, lasted until the mid-1950s.

Wes says his car, as a standard production model, isn't one of the Packards that arouse hysterical bidding at vintage car auctions.

It's still desirable, but "the gener-

ation that grew up around these cars is fading."

He says younger generations tend to be interested in newer cars popular when they were teens and young adults, such as 1970s muscle cars or cars from the 1950s.

The Packard is on temporary display in Hood River at the new Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum. It is one of several antique cars on exhibit at the museum, which also has an extensive collection of rare airplanes—some of them the last of their make and model or the only ones left flying—as well as a collection of military vehicles.

The Valpeys have full access to their car anytime the museum is open, which means they can take it out for parades or picnics or old car outings.

"I like to have the car where people can experience and enjoy it," Wes says.

When it's at their home in Snowden, he says, "we don't get to share it." ■

The Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum in Hood River is open seven days a week. The Web site is www.waaamuseum.org.

Correction

Fern Johnson is the program coordinator and manager of the nonprofit Second Hand Rose store, not the store owner, as stated incorrectly in a January photo caption with the story.