



Beythoun of Mission Viejo.

"They're timeless. Ageless," Escalante says, his enthusiasm obvious. One look at the massive cars' elegant proportions, flowing lines and tasteful chrome, and you know he's not exaggerating.

Packards have always been a cut above. In the 1920s, the marque outsold Cadillac and was considered the American Rolls-Royce. In the 1930s, the cars were owned by heads of state and movie stars like Gary Cooper and Clark Gable. Today's Packard owners include Johnny Depp, Jay Leno and writer Harlan Ellison, as well as Orange County aficionados such as entrepreneur Mike Harrah, developer Gen. William Lyon, auto dealer Donnie Crevier and radio station owner Art Astor. In some cases, Escalante sold them their cars.

"I find that owners today tend to be creative types," Escalante says. "The car is an extension of their creativity."

Escalante acquired his Packard enthusiasm naturally, having been captivated by stylish cars in the early 1970s while in high school. Oddly, his interest can be traced to a coed's Volvo.

"I always thought that was the coolest car," he says recalling the early Swedish sedan that resembled a 1948 Ford. Escalante planned to buy a Volvo, "but then this Packard became available on Main Street in Santa Ana and I fell in love with it. It was almost like an oversized-looking Volvo." He bought the car - a 1941 110 four-door sedan - and in the process found his calling.

"The car had a broken taillight," he recalls, "and I needed another." That's when he discovered Custom Auto Service and its owner Bill Lauer, who founded the business in 1966.

"I had a radio for the car and I traded it to Bill for the taillight. The radio was worth more than the taillight, but I didn't know that at the time."

No matter, Escalante soon began working for Lauer. "I started out doing chores around the shop," he said, but later moved into body and fender work. Escalante's father, Al, worked in the body shop of Reason Buick in Santa Ana at the time and was able to give him some pointers. Today, he is part of his son's shop team and still offers his expertise.

By 1983, Lauer - who also founded the Packards International Motor Car Club headquartered in the shop's building - wanted out. Seismic retrofitting issues loomed and the city's threatened use of eminent domain put the shop's future in doubt. "The city wanted to put in a shopping center," Escalante recalls. "And Bill didn't want to go down the eminent-domain tunnel." So Escalante stepped up and bought the business. "Ignorance is bliss," he notes when looking back at his eminent-domain battles with the city, in which he eventually prevailed.

In addition to his father, Escalante's brothers David and Sandy and his cousin Toby work in the shop. Additional expertise comes from Cal Soest, a Packard master mechanic who has been with the business since it opened. "Cal is one of the few guys around who can rebuild a 12-cylinder Packard engine," Escalante says. Authenticity is the byword for Custom Auto Service restorations - cars from the shop have competed successfully at Pebble Beach and the Newport Beach Concours d'Elegance — though some cars get modern improvements like radial tires and maintenance-free batteries.

A stroll through the shop shows about a dozen cars in various states of disassembly. "If we detail an engine compartment, it is exactly the