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by Bob Stevens

Vehicle service and restoration are difficult venues under the best of circumstances, but Robert Escalante has that personal touch that puts a customer at ease. He's not only personable and charming, he's also very knowledgeable about his favorite automotive subject ... Packard.

Escalante owns Custom Auto Service in Santa Ana, Calif., a restoration shop that specializes exclusively in Packard. He's owned the company for 14 years, and has worked there since 1971. Under his direction, the firm has prospered and grown. He currently has six employees and, on a typical day, will have a dozen Packards in the shop for everything from a routine tune-up to a full restoration. Occasionally, a car or two will be offered for sale, although it won't be one owned by Escalante or his business, but rather one of his customers. He prefers to act as a broker for his clients rather than dabble in the business of buying and selling cars in any volume.

His main business is Packard restoration and service. Specializing in one marque has helped strengthen the business, Escalante believes, explaining that good service is tantamount to success in this business, and concentrating on one marque is the best way to be the best in the business. He likes to treat customers like family. He's also big on educating customers to the intricacies of the restoration process. "I photograph the entire project to document not only the quality of the work performed but also the complexities of the procedures involved so I can show the customer just what has happened and why," he explains.

He also has a talented staff of six skilled craftsmen and mechanics, and dependable subcontractors for such things as chrome plating, upholstery, pinstriping, etc. Good employees and



the hospital for Packards

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suppliers are paramount to staying healthy in this highly competitive and cost-sensitive business, he adds. And, government regulation, or over-regulation, is making matters worse for the restoration industry. Government is exerting tremendous pressure on small business at all levels, he said, and it's occupying more and more of his time with forms, reports, etc.

But he still loves the business, and the people. As you walk through the shop, there's an orange '53 Packard convertible in one corner with its hood up, a '47 four-door sedan being worked on in another part of the shop, and a '41 Packard 120 coupe undergoing a thorough tune-up, while two '41 coupes are

Photos by the author

1. The charming structure housing Custom Auto Service in Santa Ana, Calif., is a former auto dealership, but, unfortunately, not a Packard outlet. It originally housed a Detroit Electric sales and service center when it was built in 1910. It's had several automotive-related tenants during the past 87 years.

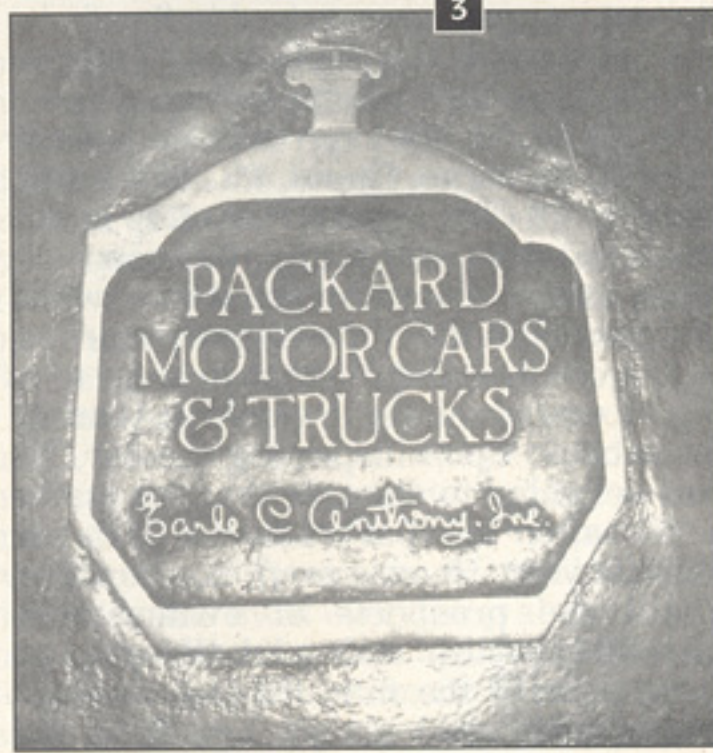
2. Among the cherished possessions displayed in his office is this rendition of the Packard Request show car designed by Dick Teague, and autographed by him.

3. As one walks from the showroom into the service department and restoration shop, he encounters this brass plate embedded in the floor. It's from one of the California dealerships operated by the famous Packard retailer, Earle C. Anthony.

4. Mounted on the building facade's sunburst over the entrance to the showroom is a Packard service sign, reflecting the current occupant's nature of business.



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5. Robert pauses briefly at the entrance to his office, which is decorated to the max with automobilia.

6. Robert Escalante personally greets visitors to his showroom, and he does so with a charming personality and graceful demeanor that would make Al Gore feel at home in an automotive establishment. The maroon '48 convertible was on display, but not for sale; neither was the black '48 sedan next to it.

7. Display cases lining the walls of the showroom contain Packard parts, accessories and memorabilia. It's like a mini Packard museum. Occasionally, there is a car or two for sale in the showroom as well.

8. Each case in the showroom is filled with hub caps, taillights, emblems, photos, etc., dominating a Packard enthusiast's attention for a long time.

9. Yet another case is filled with instrument panels, carburetors, ignition components, nameplates, etc. These are basically display only, but occasionally a piece is recruited from a display case to speed along a restoration in the back shop.

10. West Coast auto writer Phil Skinner (left) poses questions for Robert Escalante and Cal Soest (right), the chief mechanic at Custom Auto Service.



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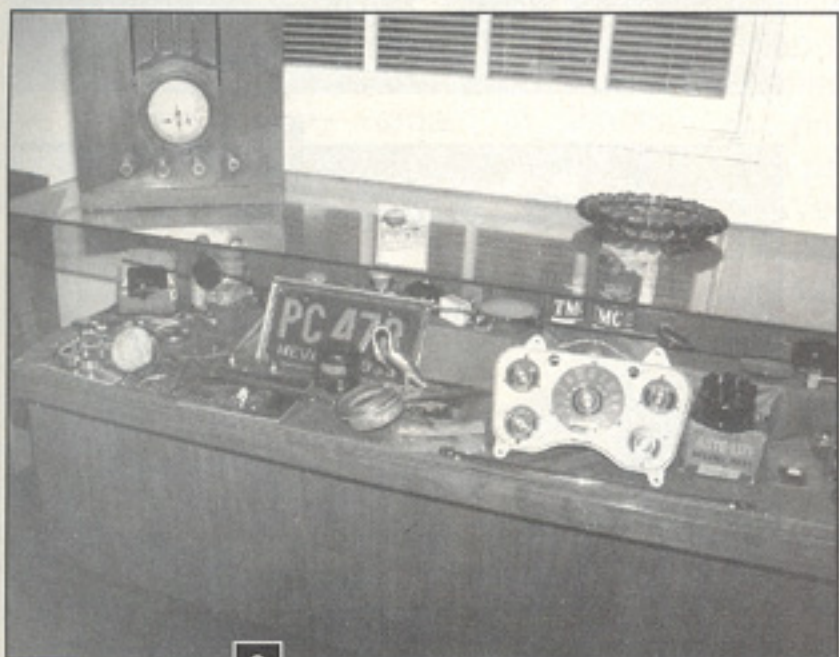
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About the shop
 Custom Auto Service, 302 French St., Santa Ana, CA 92701, phone 714-543-2980, is open normal business hours, Monday through Friday. Packard is the house specialty, and Robert Escalante is the proprietor extraordinaire.

receiving a little mechanical attention in another corner of the garage. Off to one side, Bill and Rick Buckley are watching as skilled technicians perform some mechanical work on their '41 Packard coupe. The shop is exceptionally clean and orderly.

Bob Escalante himself drives a 1940 Packard 120 sedan on a regular, almost daily basis. It's equipped with a silent-

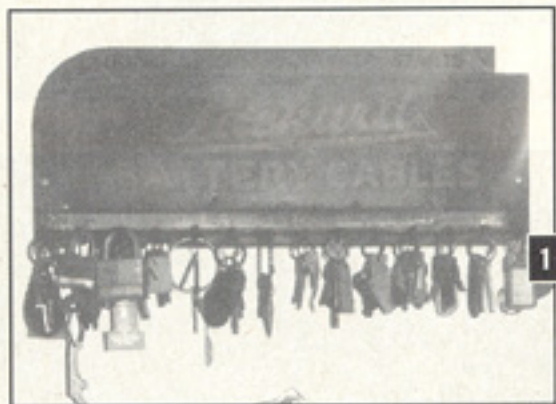
running straight eight Packard engine coupled to a smooth-shifting transmission with overdrive. He loves exposing old cars to the general public and spreading the word on the fun and adventure available in the old car hobby. It doesn't hurt in the promotion of his business either.

Custom Auto Service is situated in a historic structure, a 1910 building that

originally housed a Detroit Electric dealership. Its various clients over the years included a GMC Truck and trailer outlet that opened in 1933 and was there for decades. Now it's the home of a Packard restoration shop. What a natural marriage ... restoring historic vehicles in a structure with some real history to it.

Next Month

Parts is parts unless they're Packard



11. A display rack for Packard battery cables is used these days to hold the keys to customers' cars.



12. A dark blue 1941 Packard 120 coupe was in for a tune-up and other minor service work. A lot of Custom Auto Service's customers take advantage of the mild southern California climate and operate their cars frequently, even daily, so routine service is big business in Escalante's shop.



13. Undergoing a complete restoration is a '39 Packard convertible coupe. The shop provides a complete service, from tune-ups to full restorations.



14. Two Packards in for service include a blue '51 sedan (left) and a green '47 four-door sedan with a gray top (right).



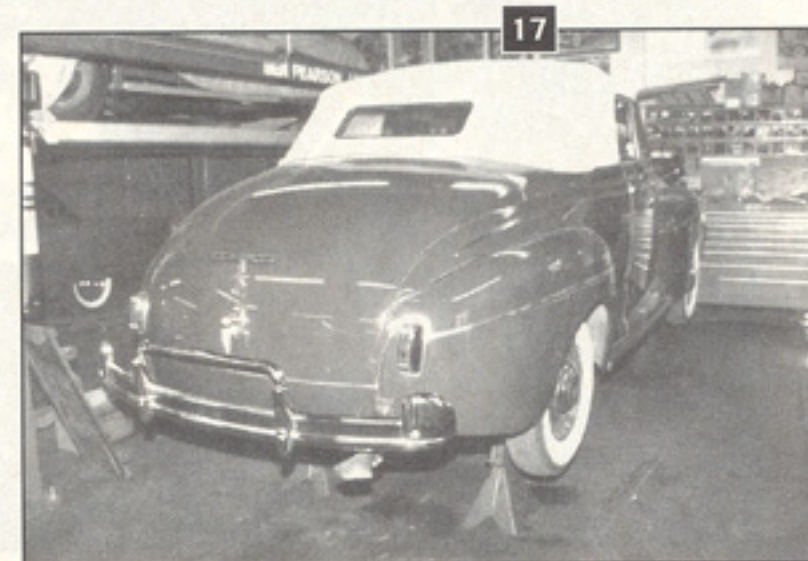
15. A customer checks out the underside of his '41 Packard coupe, which was in the shop for some service work. It's a beauty.



16. Maroon 1941 160 convertible coupe is a certified classic, and certainly looks the part.



17. Whoa! That's not a Packard! Yes, occasionally a non-Packard product will slip through the defenses. This '41 Ford convertible coupe was in for some routine service. The shop is purely Packard, but occasionally will take in an off-brand under the right circumstances.



18. Parked outside awaiting its turn in the shop is a '55 Clipper Panama two-door hardtop.

