



by Bob Stevens

**S**ick and ailing Packards in Southern California have a convenient place to go for a cure ... Custom Auto Service in Santa Ana, where examples of the beloved marque go to get well, whether it's a tune-up, a cosmetic freshening, an engine overhaul, or a complete restoration.

Owner Robert Escalante has been associated with Custom Auto Service since 1971, when he signed on as an employee. He's owned the place since 1983, when he acquired it from founder William Lauer.

The building at the corner of French and Third is an attraction in itself. Built in 1910 to house a Detroit Electric dealership, it had a charging station in one corner and was a popular "filling station" for passing motorists in electric vehicles. Later, in 1932, it housed a GMC Truck outlet and after World War II it became home to a string of automotive repair shops before Custom Auto Service settled into the historic structure. That was 1966 and owner William Lauer specialized in the restoration of Packards from the very beginning. Escalante acquired the shop from Lauer after working for him some 13 years. The building is located along what was once "auto row" in Santa Ana, and it contains artifacts rescued by Escalante from several facilities along the boulevard before they were razed.

Packard had a long production life, starting in 1899 when James Packard and his brother William started manufacturing automobiles. It ended in 1956, when the last true Packards were built. During that time, some 1.606 million Packards rolled off the line. In addition, Packard-badged Studebakers were made in 1957-58, accounting for another 7,431 units. And, since Packard has a higher-than-average survival rate, Custom Auto Service has a large market for its maintenance, repair and restoration services, especially since it has customers from all over the country, as well as Canada and Mexico. Cars are fre-



**the ER for Packards**

## Part 2

quently shipped all the way from the East Coast to the West Coast just to take advantage of the shop's one-marque expertise.

The shop's restorations regularly win at major Packard shows and such prestigious concours as Pebble Beach; a Packard restored by Escalante appears on the cover of Jim Richardson's restoration book; the shop does a lot of work for actor Ken Kercheval, who owns several Packards; and Robert sold Jay Leno his '47 Packard. Robert also knew the late styling genius Dick Teague, who retired from American Motors as its design chief and had earlier served as Packard's director of styling. "We worked together on several projects," Escalante recalls.

Escalante has also depended on others in the building of his business, starting with his wife, Gege, who helped tremendously in launching the Robert Escalante era at Custom Auto Service. The entrepreneur also gives a lot of credit to his father, Al; his two brothers, David and Sandy; and his cousin, Toby Escalante.

*Photos by the author*

1. Robert Escalante, the handsome and debonair owner of Custom Auto Service, is right at home surrounded by pre-war examples of the fabled marque to which his business is devoted. He's owned the restoration shop for 14 years.

2. The spacious shop can hold about 20 cars at capacity, and still have room to work on them. Here are a '53 convertible (left) and a sidemounted '41 convertible coupe, both in for routine service work.

3. Famous actor Ken Kercheval owns this '41 Packard 110 two-door sedan, which is awaiting its turn in the restoration shop. The six-cylinder Packard is solid. Fans of the television drama, *Dallas*, will remember Kercheval as Cliff Barnes, J.R. Ewing's perpetual victim.

4. A '37 Packard V-12 touring sedan is in desperate need of restoration, and soon its turn will come up.

5. The parts bins at Custom Auto Service are jammed full of hardware, switches, brackets ... all the little pieces it takes to build an automobile, or restore one.


6. Doors, trunk lids, hoods and other panels are stacked in piles behind the shop. An engine and transmission (bottom) are helping support the load.

7. Gas tanks are crowded onto their own shelf in the parts room, as are driveshafts, bumpers, etc.

8. Straight eight Packard engines are stored indoors, along with transmissions. There's a lot of them,

At the top of the list, though, is his right arm, Cal Soest, his chief mechanic. He's a wizard, Escalante claims, explaining that Cal is often solicited by authors to proofread their articles or books for technical accuracy prior to publication.

Over the past 30-plus years, the shop has accumulated a huge inventory of Packard parts, including used, NOS, rebuilt, aftermarket, reproduction, etc. Its shelves are packed with generators, voltage regulators, radiators, body trim, hood mascots, wheel covers, etc., about everything needed to repair or restore a Packard. And there are engines, rear ends, suspension systems, transmissions, etc., about everything needed to power a Packard. Specializing in one marque has enabled the shop to develop a comprehensive stock of parts.

"Catering to the automotive passions of our clientele for more than a quarter of a century, we have earned a reputation for quality and service that is reflected in our motto, 'It's your pleasure ... it's our pride,' and expressed in our advertising slogan, 'After thirty years, there is still no substitute,'" Escalante boasts, with obvious pride. The Packard faithful, apparently, would agree. 





2

although some have been raided for parts.

9. Need a molding for an antique Packard? Well, it's probably here in one of these barrels. (Come to think of it, all Packards are antiques, and have been for many years, since the last car built to carry the Packard name was made in 1958!)



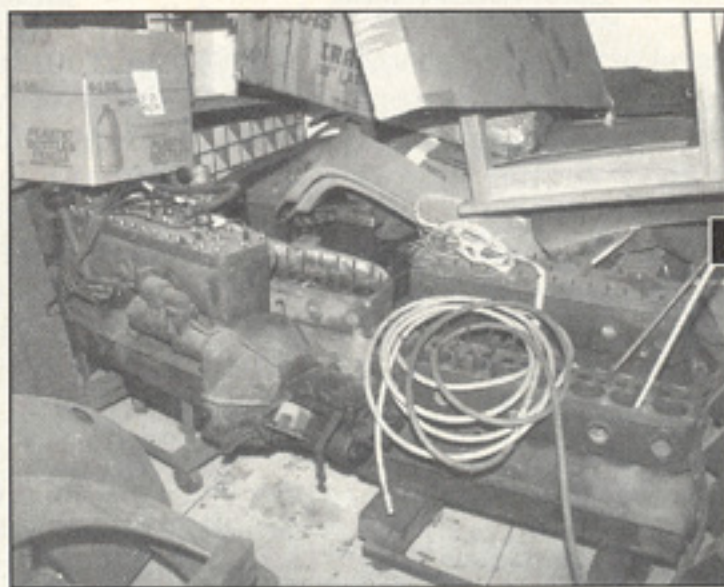
4



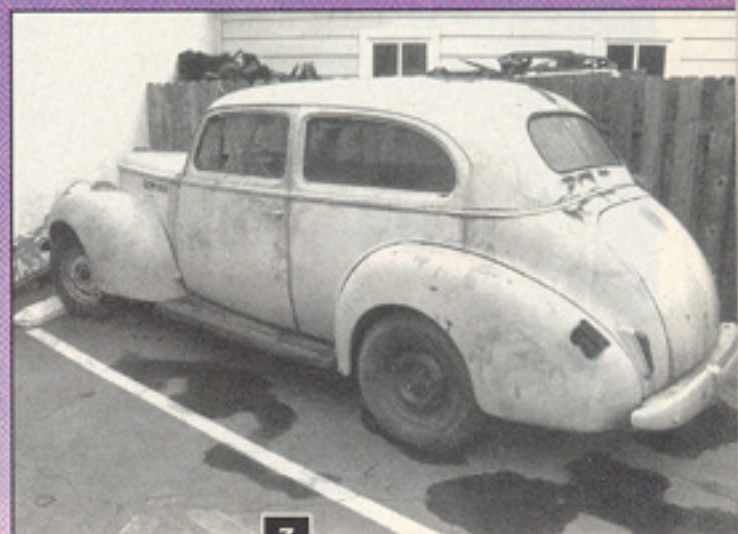
6



7



8



3



5



9

#### About the shop

Robert Escalante's Packard restoration shop is open normal business hours, Monday through Friday. Custom Auto Service is located at 302 French St., Santa Ana, CA 92701. The phone number is 714-543-2980.