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Packard, 81, Is a Youngster to Its Driver

By MARY M. CHAPMAN

PLYMOUTH, Mich.

WHEN Margaret Dunning was 10 years old, she lost control while driving the family's Overland touring car and careered into a barn, fracturing several boards.

"I hit it, and it didn't move," Ms. Dunning, who turned 101 last month, said.

"That car had a mind of its own," she said. "And I'm not a very tall person, so I had trouble getting onto the brakes with enough power to hold that engine down. It just got away from me."

Soon enough, though, she was back at it, rumbling around the back roads of Redford Township, just west of Detroit, where her family owned a sprawling dairy and potato farm. By then she had already been driving for two years.

Before the barn incident, Ms. Dunning's father had often let his young daughter steer while he operated the other controls. One day he let her do it all, but not without a stern lecture.

"Do you know what you're controlling here?" she recalled him asking. "Do you know the power that you're controlling?"

"He explained to me how, for some jobs, it was better to use multiple horses," she said. "But the minute you lose control, you've got wild horses to deal with.

"And that's how he taught me about horsepower," Ms. Dunning added. "And it stuck with me."

After that, Ms. Dunning, an only child, drove everything on the farm that was drivable, she said, including a Maxwell truck and eventually, tractors.

When she was 12 her father died, and his Model T Ford became hers.

Once her politically connected mother, who had arthritic feet and could not drive cars, finagled a driver's license for the 12-year-old Margaret, she drove her mother everywhere. Her mother drove the farm's four teams of horses.

"If you had just a little knowledge and some baling wire and bob pins, you could keep the thing going," she said of the Model T. "It was the little car that made America."

She cherished her time in the car alone, reaching into the wind for roadside stalks of fragrant

sweet clover. “I’d see a few friends or race past a blind pig,” she said, using the euphemism for Prohibition-era drinking establishments. “Before I could get home, people would be calling saying, ‘I think I just saw Margaret, with quite a dust pile behind her.’ ”

In those days there was something else in the air: the excitement spawned by a burgeoning auto industry. Henry Ford not only led that wave, but to the Dunnings he was a friend and neighbor who lived minutes away.

“Dad would come in and say, ‘Well, Henry’s outside and I’ve asked him to stay for dinner,’ ” she said. “Mom had made huckleberry pie and offered Henry some.

“He said that was his favorite pie — I think he was being polite, but he was marvelous just like that.”

She added, “He always wore a hat with a sizable brim and a black band, and he’d push it off his face when he talked to you, and looked you right in the eye.”

Ms. Dunning, who never married, attended a private high school in Wellesley, Mass., before enrolling at the University of Michigan, intending to study business.

“When I was little, Mom asked me what I thought I wanted to do for a living,” she said. “I told her ‘to buy and sell.’ I think that surprised her.”

She dropped out of college during the Depression to help at her mother’s real estate business and later had successful turns in banking and retail.

All along she supported her beloved town of Plymouth, where she has lived in the same home since she was 13. In the 1940s she and her mother donated property to establish what is now the Dunning-Hough Library. She has also donated more than \$1 million to the Plymouth Historical Museum.

Her love affair with vehicles never waned. She drove a truck as a Red Cross volunteer and has owned a parade of classic and antique cars. At her home, she also keeps a 1931 Ford Model A, a 1966 Cadillac DeVille that she often drives to car meets, a 1975 [Cadillac Eldorado](#) convertible and her everyday car, a 2003 DeVille. A battered Model T steering wheel is her garage doorstop.

But her real love is a cream-color 1930 Packard 740 roadster, which she has owned since 1949. She plans to show the Packard at the Concours d’Élégance of America in Plymouth on July 31 .

“I saw a for-sale picture and I was a goner right then and there,” Ms. Dunning said. “The guy said his wife had told him they had to get a closed car if they were going to have children. It was raining that day in Detroit when it came in, I remember it well. It sat in a carrier all by itself.”

Ms. Dunning cannot recall how much she paid for the Packard, and said it was unclear how many miles were on its in-line 8-cylinder engine. The Packard had not exactly been pampered, she said, before it was fully restored by a friend.

“It had been through the boot camp at some Army places during the Second World War,” she explained. “In those days soldiers wanted something to drive from camp to their new city, and they loaded them with other soldiers and ran the dickens out of them.”

Since it was restored, the Packard has mostly been a show car, although Ms. Dunning used to drive it more often than the three or four times a year that she takes it out now. “It’s always been a car that I’ve kept separate from other cars,” she said, adding that she has owned other Packards.

“They’re just made out of such fine material,” she said. “I love the engineering that went into it. There’s just a lot of very, very fine workmanship.”

Packard, an upscale brand produced from 1899 to 1958, ushered in several innovative designs, including the modern steering wheel. Ms. Dunning’s roadster was built in Detroit in an Albert Kahn-designed factory complex, now abandoned, that covered 3.5 million square feet and once employed 40,000 workers. In addition to the luxury vehicles, the factory turned out engines for World War II fighter planes.

Ms. Dunning still changes the oil herself, but mostly relies on a small maintenance team that includes a 90-year-old friend. “His hands are just magic,” she said.

Her car has black fenders and a red leather interior with a cigarette lighter, map light and glove compartments on each side of the dashboard. The windshield pushes outward, and there is a rumble seat and storage compartment in back. The transmission is a 4-speed — manual shift, of course.

All these years Ms. Dunning has kept her Packard’s original key with its elaborate crest. For her recent birthday, some friends duplicated the prized key.

“I was thrilled to death to have another one,” she said. “If I had ever lost the one I had, the locksmith would be out here for a week, and I still would not have that crest,” she said.

Ms. Dunning, who belongs to several car clubs, including the Michigan Region Classic Car Club of America, said the Packard has never given her much trouble, although there were times she had to deal with vapor lock, when the gasoline gets hot and evaporates before making it through the carburetor.

“You wait until the car cools off, restart it and off you go,” she said.

“I’ve never run out of gas with it,” she said with a chuckle. “That’s the famous thing to do with old cars. You’re so busy trying to keep everything else in shape, you forget about the gas.”

She said she was looking forward to the concours because she had not shown the car in years. “And it’s just such a pleasure to revive old memories, people I haven’t seen in such a long time.”

Having experienced the horse-and -buggy and Model T days, Ms. Dunning is amazed by the

technology and styling of contemporary cars, she said. She is considering buying another vehicle, but she does not know what yet. “It’s just so much easier to drive now because of power steering and brakes,” she explained.

“With the older cars you have to use what I call arm-strong steering. But cars like the Packard make it all worthwhile. I love that car a great deal. I mean, I honestly do love it.”