

From Fifth Avenue to Smithfield

Local collector buys Vanderbilt family's Town Car



By Ron Scopelliti

Seeing a classic car in Smithfield isn't that unusual. Northern Rhode Island has more than its share of finned fifties classics, sixties muscle cars, and road-worthy Model A Fords.

But seeing a four-wheeled representation of America's gilded age, a time when wealthy industrialists took on the role of American royalty – that's something different. And that's exactly what Smithfield automotive treasure hunter Tom Laferriere has found.

Laferriere recently acquired a 1934 Packard that was custom built for the Vanderbilts – the family that epitomized the “high society” lifestyle in Newport and New York City during the early part of the twentieth century.

A Packard aficionado and antique auto collector, Tom owns several examples of the make, but this one stands out for its exclusivity, and its connection to American, and Rhode Island history.

“There are two key issues with this car,” he says. “First, it's the only 1934 Rollston.”

Rollston refers to the coachmaker that built the car's body. At the time, wealthy purchasers wouldn't simply buy a car with a mass-produced body.

“They bought the chassis with the fenders,” Tom explains, “and they brought it to the coachbuilder of their choice.”

Rollston was an exclusive company that built only 50 bodies per year during its busiest period. Only two Packard bodies were built by Rollston in 1934, and Tom's is the only one that still exists.

The other issue is that the car was made for the Vanderbilts. Having established a fortune in the late nineteenth century,

the family became famous for their Manhattan mansions, their “summer cottages” in Newport, and their Biltmore mansion in North Carolina – the largest private residence in the United States

“This,” he says, “makes [the car] not only a piece of automotive history, but a piece of American history.”

The body style of this particular car places it a step above the other Packards Tom owns. While all his Packards were luxury cars in their own right, they were cars that would be driven by the owners. The “town car” or “panel brougham” style of Tom's latest acquisition required the ultimate high-end auto accessory – a professional driver.

“Only a chauffeur would drive a town car,” he says.

This wouldn't have been a problem for the car's original owner, Grace Wilson Vanderbilt, who had a staff of 35 in service at her Manhattan mansion.

Grace was the wife of Cornelius Vanderbilt III. Known to his friends as Neily, he was the grandson of the first Cornelius Vanderbilt, who made the family fortune in the railway business, and the son of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, who built Newport's most famous mansion, The Breakers.

An identification plate on the Packard's firewall notes that the chassis was delivered from Park Avenue Packard in Manhattan. Then, the chassis was sent to Rollston, a New York City coachbuilding firm that was particularly known for its Town Cars. There, the car's one-of-a-kind aluminum body was formed over a wooden frame, and mated to the chassis.

Upon completion, it was off to the Fifth Avenue mansion where Grace lived, largely apart from Neily, who by this point in their marriage spent most of his time living on his yachts as he cruised to various ports. In his absence, Grace maintained a high profile, throwing at least two lavish dinner parties each week and a ball each month, for a period of twenty years. By all accounts, she devoted herself to maintaining her social cal-

endar like it was a full-time job.

“Despite her gaudy extravagance,” writes Clarice Stasz, in her book, *The Vanderbilt Women*, “Grace cleverly took reign of society and was even referred to as its queen”

“She lived in New York, and she used this car until 1951,” says Tom. A notarized letter written in 1961 by Vancura Machine Company president Emil Vancura confirms that his company maintained the car until 1951, “at which time Mrs. Vanderbilt was too feeble to go out in automobiles.”

This letter was part of documentation that came with the car. Also, in the glove compartment, was a 1951 post card to Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt from a friend in Palm Beach, Florida bearing the timeless sentiment, “Wish you were here.”

Neily Vanderbilt died in 1942, and Grace lived until 1953. According to Vancura’s letter, after Grace’s passing the car was left in dead storage at their facility. In 1957, the car was donated to



Though the interior of Tom Laferriere’s 1934 Packard town car is not in the condition it was when the Vanderbilts owned it, the luxury is still evident in the wood veneer, the detailed upholstery, and the distinctive door hardware. (Your Smithfield Magazine photos by Ron Scopelliti)

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the Abyssinian Baptist Church, but they never used it, and it remained in storage until it was sold to a private owner in 1961.

When Tom saw a picture of the Packard on a photo-hosting web site, he knew it was something special.

“This car was known for a long time,” he says, “but it sort of disappeared in the early seventies.”

He contacted the photographer, and got the name of the person who had been storing the car in Florida. The car had been evicted from its storage unit, and parked outside, resulting in damage to both the body and interior. Despite this, Tom was keen to own the Packard. He flew down to check it out and reached a deal with the owners for a sum he’d rather not disclose.

Now relocated to Rhode Island, the Packard has an imposing presence. It features an inline eight-cylinder engine that was noted for its silence, automatic chassis lubrication, and adjustable ride control, through lever-action hydraulic shock absorbers.

But it’s the body that truly commands attention.

The town car bodystyle reflects the *Upstairs, Downstairs* attitude of the day, with the passengers riding snugly inside the



A rear view of the Packard shows its distinctive trim, and the sharp “razor-edge” angle at the roofline.

An advertisement for NorthPaws Veterinary Center. At the top left is a red paw print logo with the text "NORTHPAWS VETERINARY CENTER". To the right is a photograph of a large, two-story blue Victorian house. Below the logo and photo are several photos of various dogs and cats. Text in the center reads: "Our charming blue Victorian has been thoughtfully redesigned into an expanded 6300 sf state-of-the-art veterinary facility, featuring geothermal heating, energy-efficient lighting and advanced veterinary technology. Our focus remains on your pet's comfort and care..." Below this is the announcement: "Come Join Us to Celebrate the Grand Reopening of our Environmentally Friendly Facility Sunday, July 31st 11:00am-3:00pm". Further down, it says: "Green facility tours, pet demonstrations, giveaways and family fun...Exciting details at www.northpaws.com". At the bottom, it lists the address: "NorthPaws Veterinary Center 564 Putnam Pike, Greenville, RI 02828 Phone: (401) 949-5030" and the website "www.northpaws.com". There is also a small AAHA Accredited logo.

custom body while the chauffeur’s compartment has an open roof, with a fabric top that can be snapped on for particularly bad weather.

While the driver’s area is Spartan, the appointments in the passengers’ compartment are more reminiscent of a well-furnished den than a modern car. Even in its now-tattered state, the luxury of the interior is evident from the soft fabric of the seats and the burlled, wood-veneer trim. The right-side armrest features a relatively new luxury feature for the time – a radio.

A speaking tube arrangement allowed the passengers to talk to the chauffeur. They could also crank down the glass panel that separated them from the driver for more direct communication.

Tom says the body’s conservative lines had led some to question whether it was older coachwork placed on a new chassis. While this was sometimes done, Tom says it isn’t the case with the Packard.

One of the more modern features on the body is the V-shaped windshield. At the time, most windshields were flat, including that of the other 1934 Rollston Packard. The windshield’s two glass panes flip up to provide ventilation for the chauffeur.

The car is also somewhat unusual in that it features heating not only for the passengers but for the chauffeur.

“It’s very odd that they gave the chauffeur heat,” he says. “Usually the chauffeur wouldn’t have any luxuries.”

Though the Vanderbilt Packard may be the embodiment of an era, it was an era that was coming to an end. By 1934, the time of railroad barons, and the extravagant wealth of America's "Gilded Age" were on the decline. The great depression, along with the emergence of federal income tax and increases in property tax took their toll on the ultra-rich.

Rollston went out of the coachbuilding business in 1938 due to decreased demand for custom bodies. Many of Packard's competitors, like Stutz, Pierce-Arrow, Cord, and Duesenberg, also ceased production during the thirties. The age when coachbuilders would seriously consider whether passengers had enough headroom to wear their top hats while traveling was on its way out.

While the Packard nameplate continued on well into the fifties, the company was forced to add a series of less expensive models, introducing their first under-\$1,000 cars in 1935.

The Vanderbilts also had to cut back. In 1940, Neily sold the Fifth Avenue mansion, with a tenancy agreement that allowed Grace to live there until one year after his death. After that, she was forced to move to a smaller mansion, further uptown.

By 1947, all of the mansions the Vanderbilts constructed on Fifth Avenue had been sold and demolished to make way for high rise apartments and office buildings. The summer cottages in Newport gradually passed out of the family's control, becoming tourist attractions rather than residences.

According to Arthur T. Vanderbilt II in his book *Fortune's Children : The Fall Of The House Of Vanderbilt*, Grace found it difficult to give in to the changes.

"As long as Grace Wilson Vanderbilt had anything to say about it," he writes, "the Gilded Age was not over yet."

By the time the car fell out of use in 1951, Tom suspects Grace's Packard would have seemed like an oddity, sharing the streets of New York with the increasingly streamlined post-war cars.

Though the car's now-faded paint may detract from its monetary value, it makes a poignant statement about the slow decline of the lifestyle its owner embraced. The story behind the car is at least as interesting as the elegantly sculpted body, and that's a big part of what keeps Tom searching for automotive treasures.

"The thrill is in the hunt," he says. "Hunting them down, you hear the story."

Now that he's tracked down the car and its story, he hopes to pass it on to a new owner.

"I'm planning to market it," he says. "I love the car, but I can't keep everything." He would like to see it go to the Packard Museum if they can reach an agreement.

Until then, if you're on the road and see a regal, green vehicle with a surprisingly silent straight-eight engine, give it a tip of your imaginary top hat, and think back to a time when "Rockefellers walked with sticks and umbrellas," and the American dream included a 70-room summer cottage made of marble.



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