

# Packard Proving Grounds Showcases Proud Auto History

by Irena Granaas

The history of the Packard Motor Car Company is a quintessentially American story, highlighting the best aspects of our free enterprise system, as well as how far and how fast the mighty can fall.

Detroit-based Packard, automaker of choice for the wealthy and famous during the first half of the 19th century, is no more, but many samples of its sumptuously designed and meticulously engineered cars survive.

Here in the Metro Detroit area, car and history buffs are fortunate to be able to tour the Packard Proving Grounds, at Van Dyke and 23 Mile Road in Shelby Township, thanks to the efforts of many people who have been working to preserve the grounds as a historic site and to restore its original appearance.

In an exclusive interview, Hilary Davis, an author and Packard Proving Grounds volunteer, laid out the Packard Motor Car Company and Proving Grounds timeline of events. Davis, who earned a master's degree in historic preservation from Eastern Michigan University, is also a member of the Shelby Township Historical Committee.

The Packard Motor Car Company began in 1899. Its manufacturing plant was in Detroit, and Packard did its road testing on city streets, but realizing the need for something better, by 1926 Packard sought a testing facility.

"(The company) bought land in what is now Selfridge Air Base, but for some reason they sold the land . . . and came to the present location at 23 Mile and Van Dyke," Davis said.

Out of the one-square-mile site, Packard eventually purchased about 560 acres of farmland, bounded by Van Dyke and Mound highways to the east and west, and 23 Mile to 22 Mile roads from north to south. Today, a little less than 14 acres of the original site remain.

The entrance to the Packard Proving Grounds shows an elegant face with its graceful front gates, handsome two-story lodge and a nearby Repairs Garage, both styled in the Tudor-revival style by well-known industrial architect Albert Kahn.

"Everything was designed to show sophistication, elegance and a high degree of engineering

excellence," said Davis.

The site included a 2.5-mile oval test track and a nearby timing tower. Cars were brought in from the Detroit plant by rail to the southwest corner of the property. The test track was the site of a world's closed-course record of 148-plus mph, set in 1928 by racecar driver Leon Duray.

Next to the test track were miles of specialized roads used to put the cars through their paces. These included a steep hill, mud pits, bumps, curves, sand pits, a "washboard" road and railroad ties. After testing, cars were driven to the repair garage for evaluation. The garage's exterior is Tudor-revival fashion, but all industrial on the inside.

"As far as I know, the marriage of industrial and the Tudor-revival Cotswold exterior is unique. We fought like crazy not to have these structures torn down," Davis said.

The Proving Grounds also includes a hangar. Besides being a maker of premium automobiles, Packard was also involved in the development of airplane engines.

"They made some groundbreaking advances in airplane engine design, and did a lot of marine and airplane engine design here."

Famed aviator Charles Lindbergh visited the Proving Grounds on Aug. 15, 1929, flying in a plane powered by a Packard diesel DR-980, which Lindbergh praised for its performance.

The previous year, Packard Head Aeronautical Engineer Lionel Woolson and Packard Test Pilot Walter Lees set a record with a DR-980-powered Stinson, flying nonstop from the Proving Grounds to Virginia in six hours.

The airplane engine era at Packard came to an end in 1930 after Woolson was killed in a plane crash.

Packard continued to prosper even through the Great Depression (1929-1942). During these years, the grounds were home to Proving Grounds Manager Charles Vincent, his wife Lucile and three daughters - Dorothea, Cornelli and Roberta.

In 1941, the U.S. became engaged in World War II. The Vincents left in 1942 and the Proving Grounds were turned over to Chrysler Defense Engineering for the testing of tanks and other military vehicles.

Curtiss-Wright bought the



A 1953 Packard Caribbean Convertible, donated by the original owner.

proving grounds in 1958 to build jet aircraft engines. In 1961, the property was purchased by Ford, which moved its trim operations from Highland Park to the Proving Grounds.

"Ford was a wonderful steward of this property," Davis said.

As for Packard, by 1950 the company's golden age was coming to an end. Davis explained Packard was adversely affected in the early 1950s by questionable management decisions, poor product quality and a resulting loss of reputation.

Meanwhile, Americans began snapping up vehicles from General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. Davis noted that Cadillac began competing successfully for Packard's traditional customers.

"In an ill-fated move to be more competitive, Packard Motor Company purchased Studebaker in 1954," she said. "By 1956, the merger with Studebaker was failing."

The Packard assembly line shifted to South Bend, Ind. By the time the first 1958 Packard Hawk rolled off the Studebaker-Packard Corp. assembly line, Packard Motor Company had all but ceased

to exist, Davis said.

In 2002, Ford started a lease grant program with the Packard Motor Car Foundation to launch the restoration and perpetual care of the Proving Grounds. The Packard Proving Grounds are in the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic Site.

Since Ford handed over the keys in 2002, the foundation has made landscaping improvements, painted the elevated water storage tank, moved the Lindbergh Hangar to its new foundation, re-roofed over 27,000 square feet of the garage and engineering buildings and repainted exteriors and some interior spaces.

As a way of providing ongoing support to run the grounds and the museum, the foundation also plans to convert the repair garage to a banquet hall, for which some auto history buffs have already made reservations.

"People want this, which is great . . . It has the atmosphere and it's unique," said Davis.

The foundation is seeking donations and volunteer help. To volunteer or to donate, call 586-739-4800 and leave a message.

## Selfridge Museum Now Open for New 2013 Season

The Selfridge Military Air Museum is now open for business.

Officials recently announced that the 2013 general public hours for the Museum and Air Park is noon to 4:30 p.m. on Saturdays, Sundays, Independence Day and Memorial Day, from April 6 through Oct. 27.

The Museum and Air Park can also be opened by appointment at other times throughout the year by calling 586-239-5035.

Visitors to the museum will see almost \$6 million worth of displays, including a full-scale historically accurate replica of a World War I fighter plane, the SPAD XIII; an interactive cutaway and motorized World War II aircraft engine; an interactive Air Traffic Control radar display; an extensive display of original aviation art produced by noted aviation artists; a Korean War-era "Jeep"; and three aircraft cockpit trainers - a modern F-16 "Fighting Falcon," a Vietnam-era A-7 "Corsair II," and a World War II LINK trainer that guests can actually sit inside.

Other exhibits include a wide variety of military memorabilia, including weapons, aircraft engines, military uniforms, military aircraft models, and photographs spanning the more-than-96-year history of the National Guard base.

New displays for 2013 include an F-89C "Scorpion", a C-130E "Hercules", and an A-10A "Thunderbolt II" in the outdoor Air Park. A 3/4-scale historically accurate model of the original "Wright Flyer" will soon be on display in their "Spad Hangar."

Further information on the Selfridge Military Air Museum and Air Park can be found at [www.selfridgeairmuseum.org](http://www.selfridgeairmuseum.org).

## Ally Financial Receives Top Rating

Ally Financial, formerly known as GMAC, came in first place on the 2013 Big Wheels Report list of top auto finance companies. The annual report, issued by *Auto Finance News*, ranks auto finance companies by the amount of finance contracts and leases outstanding each year.

"Every day, our people work hard to set the industry standard for products and services that deliver real value to dealers," said Tim Russi, president of Ally Auto Finance. "We're proud to be

recognized on this list. We wouldn't be at the top of this list without our dealer customers. Dealers are at the center of what we do. We only win when the dealers win."

Ally Financial Inc. has its headquarters in Detroit and was founded in 1919 as the General Motors Acceptance Corporation, a provider of financing to car customers. Since then, the business has expanded to include insurance, direct banking and commercial finance.

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