

# A Custom 1953 Packard Station Wagon

by Rich Bonati



*Robert A. Falise with his Packard*

This article is dedicated to the late Robert A. Falise and his custom 1953 Packard Station Wagon. I suspected he was not in good health ...but only Bob knew the extent of his illness. The thing I found most remarkable about Bob was his uncompromising desire to proceed against all odds, and complete this project to his exact specifications and desires. I felt privileged to know Bob, his spirit, grit, and determination are the qualities that made America great.

In the fall of 2014, I received a phone call from Bob Falise. It seems he had read my November 2013 article in the Woody Times about a 1941 Packard 110 that I completely restored. He was impressed with the quality of work and the results achieved from this restoration. Bob wanted me to take his 1953 Packard Station Wagon, which he had purchased from the Packard Museum in Ohio and perform some work, restoration, and resolve some mechanical issues.

The car was shipped directly to our facility and a few weeks later when Bob visited our shop he saw his 1953 Packard for the first time. Of course, his purchase was based on photographs and written descriptions. As we went over the entire car, there were many areas in need of desperate attention. It seems that this car had been grossly misrepresented.

The roof luggage rack was split, distorted, and peeling off. The sheet metal roof was cracked and split and showed signs of a poor attempt to make the car look good in a "selling" photograph. In addition, the bottom of the tailgate was completely rotted and the actual wood shape was intact because of bondo, woodgraining simulation, and a clear coat of paint, which I believed kept the wood from disintegrating.

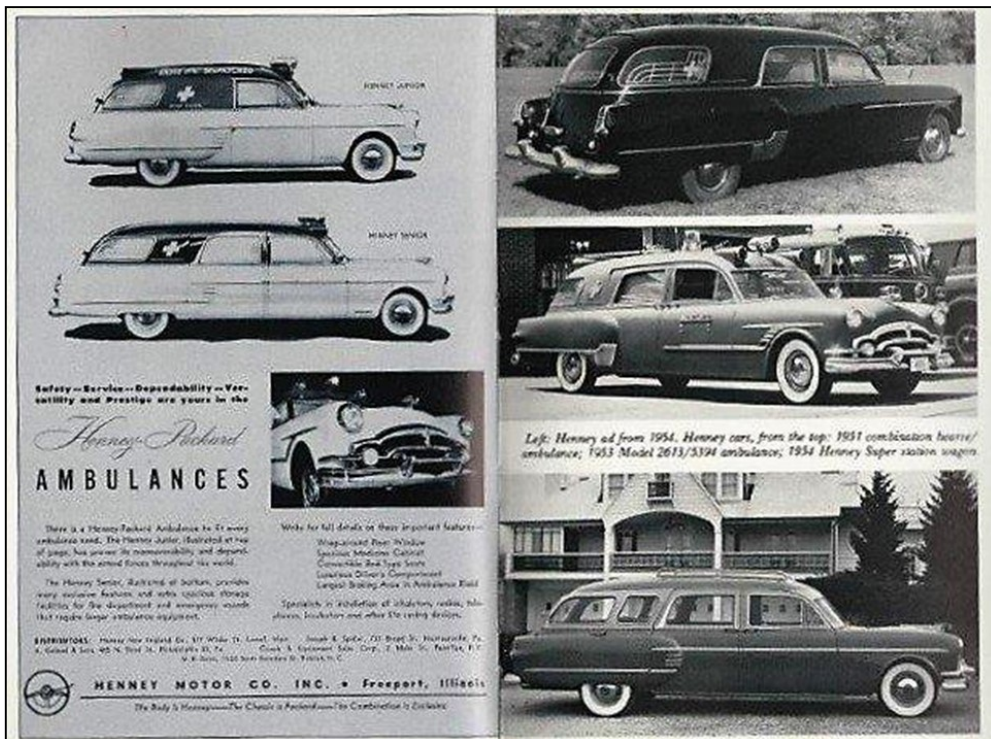
After spending several hours with Bob, we came up with a plan to make the car whole again. This would include wood refinishing and restoration, sheet metal restoration and paint, and repairs to a host of obvious mechanical problems which had been glossed over prior to sale. Bob also wanted some specific "creature comfort" modifications added to the car for his pleasure. These modifications were to be done without compromising the original look of the car.

Being a Packard and Wood body enthusiast, I was extremely interested in the car and thrilled at the privilege of bringing this car back to life. Packard never made a wood body wagon in 1953. The last Packard to actually have wood on the side of the car was 1950 and was called a Station Sedan. 1942 was the last all wood body wagon built by Hercules. The 1948, 49, and 50 Packard station sedans were all steel roof & body sections with steel simulated dark wood panels. These panels were integrated with thick white ash to give the car wood-bodied appearance.



*(p.537 - Beverly Rae Kimes - PACKARD a History of The Motor Car and The Company)  
1948-1950 Station Sedan - This was Packard's Post-War "Woody"*

Henney - a commercial vehicle division of Packard, did make a hearse, an ambulance, and a Henney super station wagon, but this wagon was huge and did not have a speck of wood on the car.



*(Pgs. 712-713 - Beverly Rae Kimes - PACKARD  
a History of The Motor Car and The Company)*

*This was Packard's only version of a Station Wagon in 1953 (no wood)*

After much research and to satisfy my own curiosity, I learned that this car was sent to Costa Rica on or about 1998-2000 and re-bodied into a custom wood wagon by Taller Juan Feyth, a custom body builder in Costa Rica. (Originally we were led to believe that the car had been re-bodied in 1953, making it a one-off custom of that period but that was not the case.)

*Custom  
European-style  
tool  
compartment  
in fender*



*Coachbuilders Seal  
in tool  
compartment*



In Costa Rica, a Clipper sedan was cut and transformed into the wagon we have today. I must say, the transformation was perfect -- the wheelbase and the custom tailgate with simulated rear continental spare were perfect. In fact, if I were commissioned to make such a car, I would be hard pressed to differ with this model.

The wood restoration was first on my list. After some research in remaking the rear tailgate, I found that the car's body was made out of maple, NOT white ash. Unfortunately, while

maple is wonderful for indoor furniture, it is less tolerant of weather conditions and outdoor exposure, which obviously, this car had been subjected to. The tailgate wood had structural rot and deep



**Tailgate damage**

black stains, and even the "good" wood, though not rotted, had deep black water marks which required a special process to neutralize into acceptable wood panel sections.



**Tailgate set up**



**Tailgate disassembly**

**Preparation of new tailgate wood**



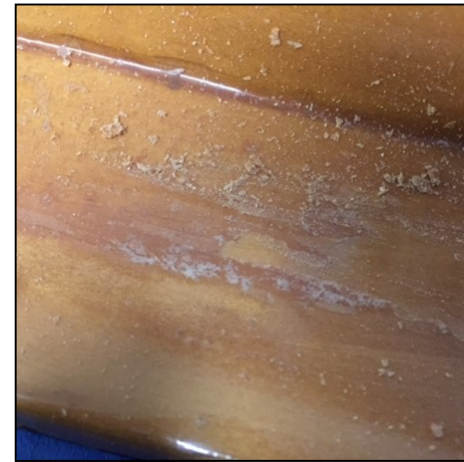
**Tailgate - Damaged wood removed, new wood fitted, and stained**

**Tailgate Restored**



Having worked on many complete wood body restorations, I found that if the customer wants a perfect job it is necessary to replace every single piece of wood (good or bad) in order to achieve uniformity of color, grain and overall look. Even then, some new wood may have some heart wood sections and variations in grain and color which require bleaching and neutralizing so that a uniform patina can be achieved. I have attended many shows displaying wood body cars, and can always spot and pick out small or large sections of the wood body that were replaced. Many times the restorer will just cut out, in a straight line, a rotted piece of wood and splice in the replacement without even attempting to conceal this repair. Wood body cars with the original wood have a softer, darker look and it is extremely difficult to blend new wood into the mix.

Our first task was to completely sand off the clear coat & varnish that had been applied earlier. Once all traces of that were removed, we proceeded to use a two-part wood bleach to remove the black water stains which were rampant. This process was repeated five to six times until the stains were almost removed...pushing the limits of the bleach process to achieve the best acceptable results. Once this was accomplished I mixed wood stains with yellow, red, and orange opaque enamels to bring the treated bleached sections back to a suitable match. At this point, we stained the entire wood sections of the car with a specially formulated stain. Luckily, the rotted wood was confined to the tailgate which was clearly segregated from the rest of the body, only and we were able to treat the balance of the water-damaged wood.



*Flaking  
urethane  
clear coat*

*Wood  
with  
unrepaired  
water  
stain*



*Repaired  
water  
stained  
wood*

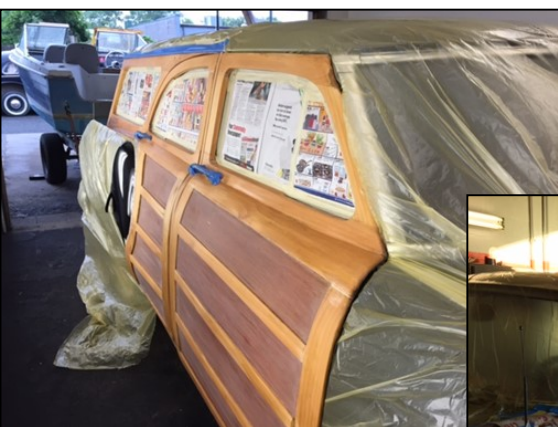




*Water stain removal in process*

Because the original wood had a yellow tint and the new tailgate wood had a white tint, it had to be specially tinted to match the rest of the car. This process was achieved by mixing stain with some automotive enamel paint and staining the tailgate using reds, yellows, and oranges and "blending fingers". Eventually, after several attempts, an acceptable result was achieved.

This process was for blending NEW wood to old wood only. Hugo (my right-hand man) and I went over the entire car for days, nitpicking all small areas of wood that we felt were unacceptable. In many cases, re-sanding and applying small amounts of stain with fine-line brushes to add a little bit of grain and depth without looking like it was "wood grained".



*Blocking - first coat of varnish*

*Staining to match wood tones*



*Finished wood on doors*

Once we were satisfied with the uniformity of the wood body color, we then sprayed high-grade marine varnish which has a nice amber tint as well as being malleable, to apply and re-sand to achieve a natural wood look. (I do not like polyurethane over wood because it can make a car look "plastic".)

As a restorer and someone who appreciates the integrity of originality, I can also understand and support an owner's desire to make a car "user friendly" with modern conveniences, such as a/c, overdrive, increased electric, and alternators. My philosophy is: if the upgrades will facilitate the owner's more frequent use and enjoyment of the car, by all means, do it!

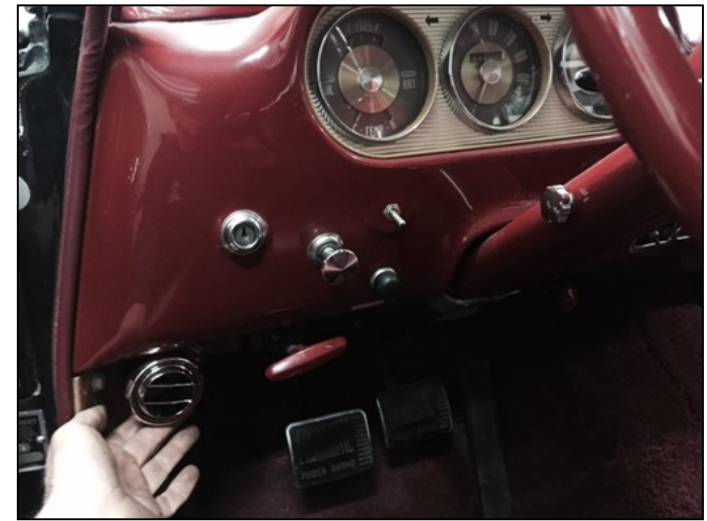
Of course, these modifications must be engineered to fit and operate in the car perfectly. Too many times, cars have been upgraded for air-conditioning and additional power with unsatisfactory results, defeating the goal of more enjoyment and usage.

Bob planned to use this car in Florida and wanted an air-conditioning system that would cool ALL the passengers in the car and he insisted that he did not want to compromise any of the original appearance of the interior. Our solution was to have two smaller air-conditioning units - one for the front seat area and a second unit, tucked away in the rear quarter, to cool the cargo and rear passenger areas. This required concealed ductwork and hi-pressure lines and it was necessary to eliminate the original radio (keeping the facade intact) in order to accommodate the heat/defrost and cooling unit under the dash. Both units would run off one common hi-efficiency compressor, which, together with electric fans, would greatly minimize horse power reduction from the original motor. No sense in having a great air-conditioning unit, if the cooling system cannot keep the car from overheating, so, a new radiator had to be designed and built to fit in the same exact cavity while increasing the cooling capacity to more than double the original radiator.



*Under dash ac unit - replaces radio*

*Left side  
dash  
ac vent*



*Ductwork  
and  
ac unit  
in cargo  
area*

*Cargo area  
ac vent*





*Cargo area ac duct vents in quarters*



*Custom radiator to meet extra demand*

Finally, the electrical system had to be upgraded to a 200 amp alternator in order to operate the compressor, two blower motors, air-conditioning, and accessories in the car without having it stall out or go dead at a traffic light or at idle.



*Front interior with ac*



*Completed restoration with tailgate open*

Bob and I were totally pleased with the final results, but unfortunately, just as we reached the completion of this project, Bob passed

away after a lingering illness, never having had the opportunity to experience the enjoyment of using this great car.

In spite of failing health, he would not compromise on the quality of the work on his car in order to rush its completion, and I am dedicating this article to his vision and his dream 1953 Packard. He had intended to name her "Quarry" because it was his "quarry"-- the ultimate car he longed for.

*A special "thank you" to both Rich Bonati and Josephine Harkin for all of their time and effort in putting together this truly excellent article! Thank you both so very much!*