

Collectible
AUTOMOBILE

\$7.95 U.S./\$10.95 CAN.
April 2006

1959-63 Buick Invicta: Holding Action

1969-73 Imperial: Chrysler's King Abdicates its Throne
History and Hope at the Packard Proving Grounds



- Brazilian Vehicles with U.S. Roots
- 1964 Pontiac GTO: Super Coupe

1954 Ford Crestline Sunliner Convertible Coupe



Standing the Test of Time: The Continuing Story of the Packard Proving Grounds

by Gary Witzenburg

Before some of America's finest automobiles were deemed worthy to wear the Packard name, they were put to the test at the company's Michigan proving grounds. Now some dedicated enthusiasts are trying to show that they're up to the task of saving this piece of history.

Twenty-two miles north of Detroit, the land bordering Van Dyke Avenue in Shelby Township, north of Utica, Michigan, looks like most any other American suburb, dotted with gas stations, strip malls, fast-food emporiums, and subdivisions. Here, it's easy to miss the modest entrance to one of the more significant landmarks of U.S. automotive history: the Packard Proving Grounds (PPG).

On the west side, north of 22 Mile Road, between the Central Park subdivision and a muffler shop, sits an ordinary rural mailbox displaying the street address, 49965 Van Dyke. Inside the iron-gated entrance, on the right, stands the impressive 79-year-old Gate Lodge. A parallel drive to the left was once the outbound half of a divided boulevard, the grassy medians of which had sculpted "ox-yoke" corners like a classic Packard radiator. Graceful elms still border the drive on each side. A quarter-mile back from Van Dyke, a new chain-link fence separates what's left of the proving grounds from the upscale neighborhood growing around it.

Other parts of the property also mix the fresh and the faded. The lodge appears to be well-preserved, but a nearby garage looks quite elderly. Behind that, a larger building that serviced Chrysler-built tanks during World War II seems even older. A prominent green water tower wears "Packard Proving

Grounds" in large, white letters. Next to a remnant of test track rises a timing tower, unrestored except for a recent paint job.

There's a reason for all this. Thanks to the efforts of Packard enthusiasts, Shelby Township, the State of Michigan, even the U.S. government and a television show, the Packard Proving Grounds is in the process of being reborn; not as test facility, but as a tribute to the past and a national treasure for the future.

Early Years

It was 1925 when Packard decided to invest in a suitable facility to test and develop its luxury automobiles. The company was then 26 years old, 22 of which had been spent as a resident of Detroit after moving from its Warren, Ohio, birthplace. General Motors had recently opened a huge proving grounds in Milford, northwest of Detroit. With that example, Packard realized that public roads and a small oval near its East Grand Boulevard headquarters were insufficient to exercise its increasingly powerful and sophisticated cars.

Accordingly, company president Alvan Macauley began purchasing farmland in rural Shelby Township, then home to about 2500 residents. He then retained renowned industrial architect Albert Kahn to design and oversee construction of the proving grounds and its buildings. The brilliant Kahn was the logical choice, having created the East Grand complex.

The \$1 million, 504-acre facility was dedicated in fall 1927 and quickly got down to rigorous testing.

Inside its wrought iron gates, the new PPG was lavishly landscaped with roses, flowering trees, and ornamental touches. It was also home for its first manager, Charles H. "Charlie" Vincent, and his family. Within the Tudor Revival-style Gate Lodge was a separate residence section with three bedrooms, three fireplaces, two baths, and hardwood floors. The lodge also offered a six-room dormitory above an eight-car garage to accommodate visiting engineers, test drivers, and guests. Red brickwork, brown trim, and a multicolored slate roof contrasted with the buildings' cream-colored exteriors.

But those weren't the only amenities. Appropriately for prestigious Packard, an on-site shooting range and a four-hole golf course were available to the Vincents, company employees, and visitors, who often spent days or weeks living and working at the proving grounds. A 6500-square-foot Repair Garage was added in 1929, complete with experimental and

Charles H. Vincent (left) and his secretary, Milton Forester, inspect a 1937 Packard Super Eight after it had been run at the company's proving grounds in August 1936. As the first manager of the Packard Proving Grounds, Vincent not only worked at the test facility in Shelby Township, Michigan, but he lived there as well.



engineering laboratories for testing engines, chassis, electrical components, fuels, and lubricants.

Charlie's youngest daughter, Roberta "Bobbie" Vincent Mocabee, lived her first 10 years at the PPG. "I remember my childhood very fondly," she recalls. "Emil Swanson was our head gardener, and he and his assistants did a beautiful job. I particularly remember the roses on the fence and the lilacs. It was a beautiful place for a child to play, and a lot of the fellows who worked for my dad were really nice people to be around. But we were three-and-a-half miles from Utica. Other than at school, I had no playmates my age. So I had an imaginary playmate, which seemed to do the trick.

"The lodge seemed very large when I was that young," she continues. "We always had a great big tree in the dining room at Christmas, and I swear I heard Santa Claus on the roof. Behind the bedrooms, my dad had his ham [radio] shack. I also remember the test track. A lot of times they would go 24 hours with the testing, and I remember spending time out in the Timing Tower."

New Packards were randomly picked from the assembly line to be rudely abused on rough, twisty test roads containing sections of sand, gravel, mud, water pits, and even railroad ties. The cars ran in Michigan weather from beautiful to brutal. Packard's engineering vice president in those days was Charlie's brother, Colonel J. G. "Jesse" Vincent, also known as "The Colonel." "Jesse built the cars and Charlie tried to break them," says Packard enthusiast and historic-preservation expert Jon Ottman. "It was a bit of a sibling rivalry."

For high-speed work, an expertly engineered 2.5-mile oval track with 29-degree high-banked turns was added in 1928. It was probably the world's fastest track at the time. Its 55-foot-wide concrete surface had barely set when race driver Leon Duray (CA, June 2001) used it on June 14 to set a world closed-course speed record of 148.17 mph, this after winning the Indianapolis 500 two weeks before. He again drove his Miller Indy racer, undoubtedly mindful of the scary fact that guardrail posts were in place, though the rails themselves had not yet been installed.

Because the facility was also used for test and development of Packard's aircraft engines, a landing strip was built in the oval's 300-acre infield, leading to a 4000-square-foot hangar at its north end.

In August and September 1929, famed aviator Colonel Charles Lindbergh paid visits to try a Stinson Detroit with a prototype aircraft diesel engine, one of many Packard engineering firsts.

Retired test driver and Utica resident Carl Altz, now 96, remembers working on the oval track as a teenager. "I drove a truck hauling dirt for the contractor when we were building the turns," he says. Seven years later, he was driving at much higher speeds. "We had half-mile straightaways and three-quarter-mile turns. We could run over 100 mph and let go of the wheel as we hit the turn and

Hawaiian naval base, PPG suspended automobile work and was leased to Chrysler Defense Engineering for test and development of tanks and armored vehicles. "Mother and I moved to our small farm in Avoca, Michigan, about 17 miles from Port Huron and 65 from downtown Detroit," Mocabee recalls. "My dad spent the rest of the war living and working in Detroit, and retired from Packard around 1951 or '52."

The facility was renamed the Tank Arsenal Proving Ground; there was no mention of Packard in a period brochure about it. Ottman says the first time



never touch it till we came out. When you were running high speeds, you could kind of relax and let the car drive itself."

World War II

Like everyone who was around that fateful day, Mocabee vividly recalls December 7, 1941: "It was my father's birthday," she says. "We'd had our birthday dinner, and dad was sitting in his red leather chair by the fireplace. I was standing beside him, and we were listening to the old Stromberg-Carlson radio. [President Franklin] Roosevelt came on and announced that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and we were at war. As young as I was, I knew that life was going to change."

Following the Japanese attack on the

someone tried to maneuver a tank into the Repair Garage, it whacked the top of the door frame. Soon after, a much larger garage and repair building was constructed just to the west of it.

Altz turned from punishing Packards to testing tanks. "We didn't just test them," he says, "we were supposed to break them. That was our job." Amazingly, there were no crash fatalities in the facility's 30-year working history. Still, as Altz admits, "we had a few accidents. And we lost a couple fellows with bad hearts during the war."

"I once had a tank blow up on me and my partner. We were gassing it up, and we had a gas leak. He said it wasn't filling up. I said, well, you'd better check it. So I'm writing it up while he's gassing it.



2

1. The proving grounds not only served as the test center for Packard automobiles, but for its aviation ventures, too. Here, company president Alvan Macauley (left) and aviation pioneer Charles Lindbergh pose for a photo at the PPG in 1929 when "Lucky Lindy" came there to test a plane with a prototype diesel aero engine. 2. A distinctive feature of the facility is its long central drive with grassy medians shaped to suggest a classic Packard radiator grille. At a new-model preview in 1930, Packard dealers and their families milled around on the tree-lined drive. 3, 4. Disease killed off the original trees in the mid Sixties, but the ongoing site-preservation program planted 76 new elms on Arbor Day 2005, each of which was "adopted" by a patron.



3

We were going to drive it into the hangar to see what was wrong, but as soon as I hit the switches, she blew. It blew me out and blew him off the top. As I went down, I pulled the fire plugs and extinguished it. We found out the bottom was full of gas down around the engine. We were lucky there was a lot of gas in there, not just fumes."

Decline and Aftermath

Packard reclaimed its proving grounds when peace returned. Chrysler paid to repair virtually all of the pavement, which had been severely damaged by the tanks, and the tank garage was converted into a spacious experimental and engineering lab boasting a special climate room for component testing in extreme heat or cold. All this work went swiftly, and the facility was back up to speed in October 1946.

Altz, who worked at the proving grounds from 1934 to 1956, recalls another near-accident soon after the war: "I was checking a ZIS, a Russian Packard [copy], at high speed, probably a little over 100. This guy was running across the infield in a Packard at a pretty good clip and must have fallen asleep. At the last minute, I realized he was not going to stop. I slammed on the brakes and he ran right across in front of me. That was my closest one."

The PPG expanded in May 1951 when Packard purchased a 55-acre parcel just northwest of the original site to build a parts warehouse and a jet-aircraft engine plant. On October 1, 1954, struggling mightily in the face of tough competition from the much larger "Big Three," the company bought also-ailing Studebaker to form Studebaker-Packard Corporation. The plan was to boost volume by diversifying into the popular-priced end of the market.



4

1. A portion of the proving ground's 2.5-mile high-speed test track being torn up in 2003. If the preservation effort meets its goals, a 485-foot section of the track will be saved. 2. On the ball: As visiting champion golfer Gene Sarazen hits a drive from in front of the Timing Tower, Packard engineering chief Jesse Vincent starts to sprint away in a 12-cylinder speedster in an odd car-versus-ball challenge in July 1932. In six tries, the car always beat the ball to the point where it landed. 3, 4. Packards test on pavement and off in 1938. 5. During World War II, Chrysler Corporation took over the grounds to test combat tanks. 6, 7. The Engineering Laboratory as it looked in 1944 (6) and during roofing repairs in 2004 (7).

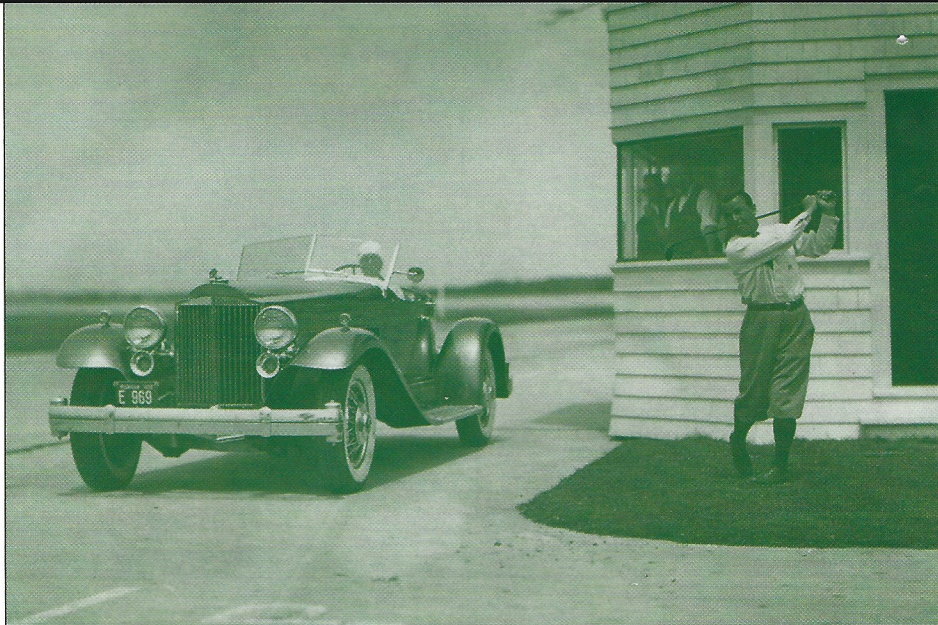


1

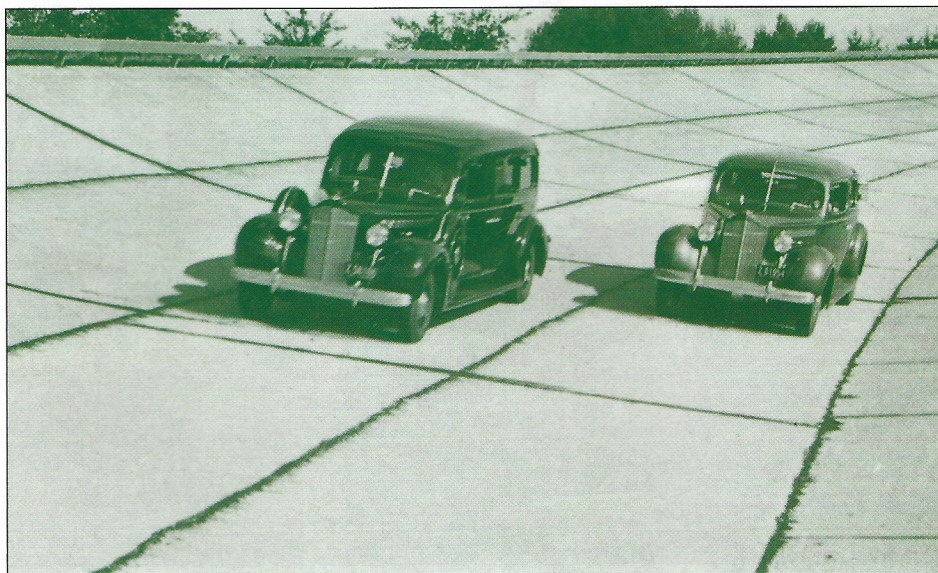
That same month saw a 10,000-lap speed and endurance run on the oval track. Staged mainly to demonstrate the durability of the new ohv V-8 being introduced for 1955 (CA, September 1984), Packard test drivers pushed a prototype '55 Patrician sedan for eight straight days and nights, stopping only for driver changes, fuel, tires, and minor maintenance. They covered 25,000 miles, equivalent to the circumference of the earth. The overall average speed, including stops, was a then-astounding 104.7 mph, and numerous certified speed and endurance records were set, too.

By 1956, however, Studebaker-Packard was almost broke, and the only way out was to accept a management agreement transferring control to aircraft-engine builder Curtiss-Wright. Many jobs were lost and many tears shed as production ceased in Detroit and the PPG was closed, C-W ordering that operations be consolidated at Studebaker's South Bend, Indiana, plants. The 1957-58 Packards (CA, April 1989) were thus thinly disguised Studebakers. The last one was built on July 13, 1958. A once-proud marque was dead.

In 1962, Curtiss-Wright sold the proving grounds to Ford Motor Company,



2



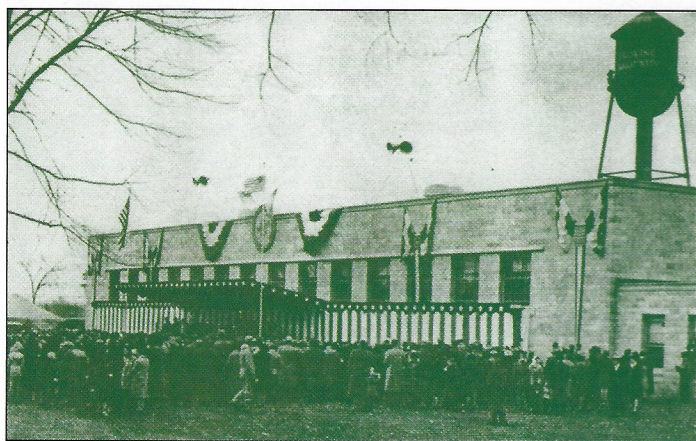
3



4



5



6



7

which converted the former jet engine plant into an automotive-trim facility. Ford later used other portions of the site for various purposes, but—to its credit—left the buildings and important artifacts untouched. Thus, the PPG was available for judging and drives on the test track when The Packard Club held national meets there in 1973 and 1982. But by the mid Nineties, only the trim plant was still open, making door panels, fascias, instrument panels, trunk liners, and other injection-molded parts. This became the Utica Visteon Trim Plant in 2000, when Ford combined its captive parts suppliers to form Visteon Corporation. In October 2005, the plant was transferred to Automotive Components Holdings, LLC.

Uncertain Future

Meanwhile, rising property values from Shelby Township's continued growth made exploiting the area's one large undeveloped parcel increasingly tempting for Ford Land, the automaker's real estate and development arm. In 1997, the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) proposed constructing a large distribution center on the north end of the long-unused test track. When serious concern was expressed by Packard enthusiasts, historians, and even some township officials and residents, a USPS consultant warned of the negative publicity that would flow from building on such a historically significant site (under the U.S. National Historic Preservation Act of 1966). "There was a lot of political pres-

sure all the way to Washington, D.C., for the Postal Service to find another site," Ottman says. In March 1999, the USPS announced that it would look elsewhere.

Such debates about the future of the property and its Kahn-designed buildings were of more-than-casual interest to John MacArthur, president of the Packard Motor Car Foundation (PMCF), the independent nonprofit entity created by The Packard Club in 1997 for the purpose of preserving the history of the Packard Motor Car Company. "My grandfather was chief body engineer," MacArthur says. "He and my father were there near the end in 1956, and test drove the '57 prototype just before it was cut up."

Ottman, then a reporter for a local newspaper, wrote numerous articles on

the PPG and its struggle to stave off developers. As he related in one story: "A major rally was held in January of 1999, where many local officials and politicians got their first look at the site. Support was clearly building for the salvation of at least a part of [it]. . . . On February 4, 2000, representatives of the Packard Motor Car Foundation held the first of many meetings with officials from Ford Land to discuss the preservation of a key portion of the site."

Only weeks before, Michigan's Historic Preservation Office had determined that the PPG should be recommended to the National Park Service for listing on its National Register of Historic Places. That was great news for the preservationists but not for Ford Land, since designating the entire site would impede plans for developing any portion of it. Ford Land moved to block the nomination and, in the process, revealed that its development plan could mean demolition of the historic Albert Kahn buildings.

Discussions continued, however, and on March 16, 2000, the Park Service announced that the Packard Proving Grounds was indeed eligible for listing as an historic place. Cable television's History Channel provided a further boost by spotlighting the facility in an episode of its *Modern Marvels* series that first aired in January 2001.

Rescue and Restoration

Finally, on January 30, 2002, after a series of public meetings, the Shelby Township Planning Commission did approve a master plan for the parcel of land that included the PPG. In a ceremony held there on July 9, 2002—two and a half years after negotiations began—Ford Land and PMCF officials announced an agreement to preserve some 14 acres, with the remainder earmarked for residential, light-industrial, and commercial/office development. Under the accord, the eastern seven acres were donated to the foundation, complete with the lodge, the garages, the water tower, and some service buildings. In exchange, Ford Land received an option for the purchase of an adjoining 6.88 acres containing the relocated hangar, the timing tower, and a 458-foot section of the test track and guardrail—provided that specified improvements are completed by December 31, 2007.

"The plan calls for initial improvements in excess of \$3 million," MacArthur explains. "There's a list of things to



1



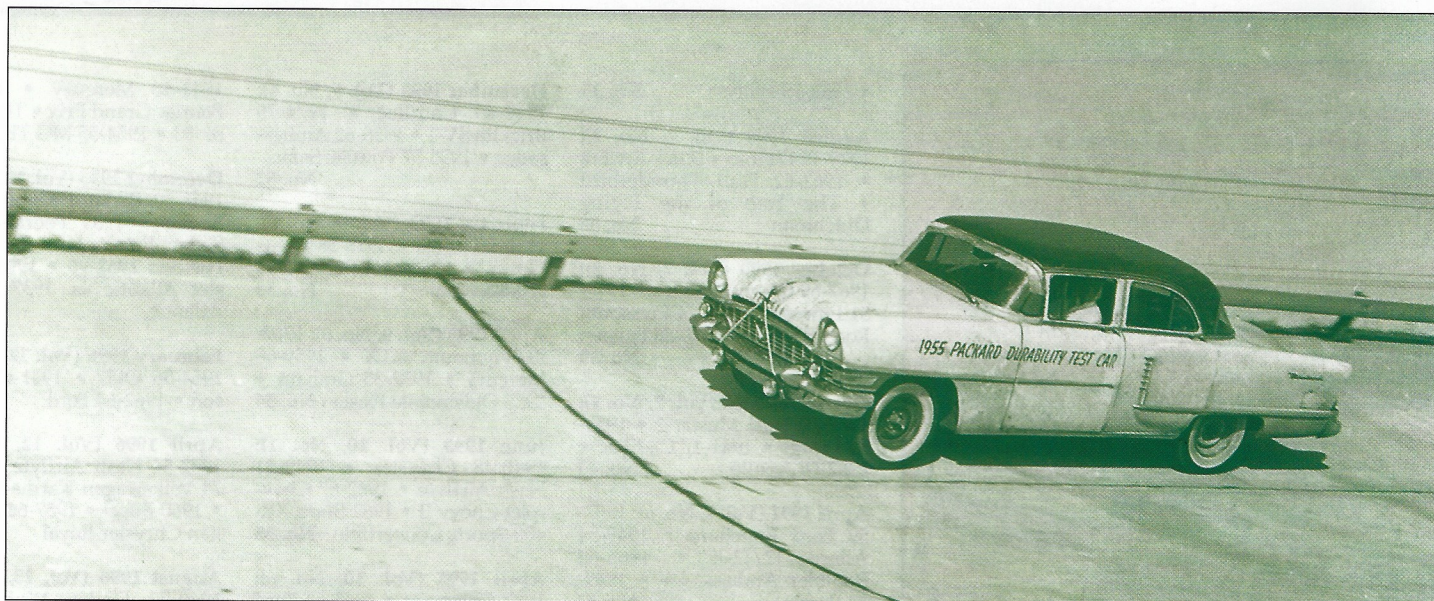
2

be done, primarily cosmetics, painting—which is largely complete now—exteriors, windows, doors, roofs, and some paving and landscaping . . . to stay in the good graces of Ford Land and be in a position to buy the land in the back. To date, we've put over a half-million into it, so it requires at least another \$2.5 million, primarily from individuals, and some grants. That's where the aggressive fundraising comes in that we have to do over the next couple of years. Our total goal is \$13.5 million, including a substantial endowment, and we're hoping to get some legislative appropriation at the federal level, and maybe a little state help, too."

The plan is to restore the Gate Lodge as a museum devoted to the history of the PPG, and to the general role of vehicle

testing and development in the evolution of the automobile. The Repair Garage will combine exhibit space with a catered banquet facility, while the larger one-time tank garage will become a National Arsenal of Democracy Museum focused on America's home front efforts and sacrifices during wartime. "No other museum is adequately telling that story," MacArthur asserts.

Fortunately, the well-designed and solidly constructed buildings have survived in remarkably good condition. The wrought iron front gates are in surprisingly decent shape. "The gates still open and close perfectly," says Packard enthusiast and historian Dwight Heinmuller. "None of the metal structure has deteriorated, there's no sagging, and everything



3



4



5



6

1. The Gate Lodge freed from overgrowth. 2. The Packard Aviation hangar was moved to a new site in 2003. 3. This prototype covered 25,000 miles in an eight-day record run in 1955. 4. Governor Jennifer Granholm looks on as William Anderson of the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries speaks during an awards presentation to the key parties involved in the PPG preservation. 5. From left, Sean McCourt, chairman of property owner Ford Land, Packard Motor Car Foundation President John MacArthur, and Shelby Township Supervisor Ralph Maccarone represent the entities involved in the effort. 6. The water tower resplendent again.

fits perfectly after all these years with practically zero maintenance. That's a real testament to the quality of the original construction."

Many people and groups are helping to bring the proving grounds back to life. Shortly before this writing, the PMCF—with the help of a volunteer crew sponsored by DaimlerChrysler's Mount Elliott Tool and Die Plant—removed 50 years' accumulation of weeds, bushes, and scrub trees. In addition, wood structures have been primed and painted (mostly by volunteers), building roofs repaired or replaced, basic electrical service restored to the lodge, and the water tower water-blasted and painted to closely match its original Packard green with the famous Packard script in white. There's even a

new flagpole, donated by the Shelby Macomb Daybreakers Kiwanis Club, flying a fresh 12×18-foot American flag. Arbor Day 2005 saw 76 disease-resistant, 18-foot Princeton elms planted along the parkway to replace the originals that died off in the mid Sixties. (Each new tree was "adopted" by a patron.) A state historic-site marker was dedicated last August 17.

Make a Date

MacArthur envisions a 2008 opening for the Proving Grounds Museum. "That one will be quicker and easier to do than the arsenal," he says. "It will be primarily, but not exclusively, Packard in its telling of the story of a proving grounds." The trees, gardens, and landscaping also will be restored to a parklike look and feel perfect

for outdoor events and shows, including the Classic Car Club of America Michigan Region's annual Carnival of Cars.

For now, The Packard Club has scheduled its 2006 national meet for nearby Pontiac during the week of July 3—with a Fourth of July picnic set for the PPG site. The Foundation will hold an on-site reception for contributors during the meet. By then, depending on funding, a replica of the big Packard Proving Grounds sign should be hanging above the front gates, just as in the old days.

Those interested in contributing to the restoration, preservation, and future of the site should contact PMCF Treasurer Bruce Blevins, 11101 Blackberry Creek Drive, Burton, MI, 48519, or log on to www.packardmotorfdn.org. **CA**