

Packard's V8 Engine For 1955-1956

By Frank Ambrogio



*This 1957 Golden Hawk graced the July 2015 TW cover
Photo courtesy of owner Barry Maxwell*

One thing that has puzzled me through the years is why Studebaker was so proud that the 1957 Golden Hawk ended up with the same horsepower rating as the 1956 model. I'm sure almost every Studebaker fan knows the story of how the Packard V8 powering the 1956 Golden Hawk was replaced by the Studebaker V8 for the 1957 Golden Hawk model. Sacrificing 63 cubic inches was offset by adding a supercharger. The result, same horsepower rating but fewer cubic inches for the new model. Still, a great car, but in my opinion, the company was fully aware it had nothing new to offer. so it promoted *improved handling* as the reason to buy the

facelifted 1957 version.

While virtually every car brand was offering cars with more cubic inches and/or more horsepower for 1957, Studebaker was not keeping up. In fact, it lost ground. Granted, that 1957 Golden Hawk was still a beautiful car and the Studebaker V8 has proven to be a rock solid engine. However, this analysis is *not* about engine quality, it is about brand image and public perception.

Let's take a look at the prevailing philosophy in the mid 1950s. Along with styling, horsepower and engine displacement were the big factors in selling cars, not only to the younger driver, but to the family man as well. Check out the statements from *Don Francisco* that appeared in the February 1957 issue of Hot Rod Magazine:



*The supercharged V8 for 1957 Golden Hawks
Photo courtesy of owner Barry Maxwell*

"It was a happy day for motorists in general when the big wheels who design the automobiles most of us drive got the "go" fever not so long ago and borrowed some of the hot rodders' sacred devices to make them stock equipment on their formerly dull machines."

"The men in Detroit, Dearborn, South Bend, etc., started their revolution slowly. First, they dumped the L-head design, then they started boring and stroking, annexed dual exhaust systems, upped compression ratios, went crazy with big valves and wilder cam grinds, added four-throat carburetors and then dual four-throats, and then leveled off with a better ignition system through the use of twelve-volts. All this added up to quite agreeable transportation that was something of a

pleasant shock to the average Joe who, before this, didn't know such things were possible. The man who used to look down his nose at anything he thought was a hot rod became eager to buy one of the factory versions when he discovered what enjoyable automobile performance was."

Studebaker had solid footing on this concept in 1956, but *stepped on its own crankshaft* the following year. And, the 352" wasn't Packard's biggest or most powerful V8. The senior Packards hit the pavement loaded with a 374 cubic inch V8 delivering either 290 or 310 horsepower. The rest of the industry caught on early and kept upping the stakes offering engines with increased horsepower each year, while Studebaker-Packard took the wrong fork in the road.

Realizing the value of horsepower, Chevrolet's 1956 V8 at 265 cubic inches delivered 205 horsepower but later, the GM division offered the Corvette engine option with 225 HP, still 50 horsepower short of the Packard V8. For 1957, the new 283 cubic inch V8 delivered 220 horsepower with engine options providing horsepower of 245, 250, 270, and finally 283 with fuel injection reaching the one horsepower for each cubic inch benchmark.

Meanwhile, Studebaker made no advancement at all. The supercharger just allowed it to stay even with the previous year, while the cubic inch displacement spiraled downward. Clearly, Studebaker was headed in the wrong direction. For the rest of American production, the horsepower output and cubic inch displacement never kept pace with the industry trend.

By 1958, *the wheels fell off* as Chevrolet's 348 cubic inch big block was introduced, still 4 less than the 1956 Golden Hawk's 352 cubic inch Packard V8, but 59 more than the Studebaker V8. In two years, Studebaker went from the leader in the cubic inch and horsepower race, to the status of also ran. Except for the Nash Metropolitan at 42 HP, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Mercury, Dodge, Plymouth, etc., were all offering upgrades in engine power and size.

In 1956, Packard was in the second year of producing its V8 engine at its modern engine plant in the Detroit suburb of Utica, Michigan. *Curtis-Wright* took over management of Studebaker-Packard in 1956. As part of the management agreement, the Packard engine plant was leased to *Curtis-Wright* subsidiary, *Aerophysics Development Corporation*, and the Packard V8 became little more than a footnote in American automotive history. That plant was purchased by Curtis-Wright two years later.

But, what if S-P had *somehow* been able to keep the Packard engine in production? This engine was born with some pretty hefty credentials. Regarding the all new 1955 Packard V8, *Racer Brown's* comments printed in the August 1955 issue of *Hot Rod Magazine* included the following:

"...the big Packard has the edge on all competitors in all departments: the displacement is 3.2 per cent larger than its closest rival, the advertised power is four per cent higher and the advertised maximum torque is 2.9 per cent more."

Again referencing Don Francisco's article in the February 1957 issue of *Hot Rod Magazine*:

"C-T Automotive in North Hollywood CA, bored Packard V8 cylinders an eighth of an inch and stroked its camshaft three eighths of an inch. This created an engine with a staggering displacement of 414 cubic inches with a compression ratio of 11 to 1. From the apparent thickness of the walls after boring, it looked as though the cylinders could have been enlarged at least another quarter of an inch without any trouble."

The Packard V8 engine would have provided S-P with the potential to offer engines comparable in size and power to what was available from any other manufacturer. By 1956, Packard had already produced cubic inch displacement V8 engines with 320", 352", and 374" covering a horsepower range of 208 to 310. By simply *cramming* the 374" Packard V8 into the 1957 Golden Hawk, Studebaker could have kept pace with and increase of 22 cubic inches and a 15 horsepower boost to 290. That probably would have brought more customers into the showroom than that laughable *improved handling* myth.



***This 1956 Packard Caribbean Convertible with a 374" V8, produced 310 horsepower
Photo, courtesy owner George Hamlin***

On the Packard side of the house, the 1957 Clipper suffered the same fate as the Golden Hawk with the supercharged Studebaker 289" replacing the Packard 352". Things got even worse for the full size Packard for 1958. While the 1956 senior Packards left the plant sporting a 374 cubic inch V8 pumping out 290 or 310 horsepower, the 1958 model limped out of the showroom with a 225 HP power plant. Calling that car a Packard was an insult to the brand and, as the sales figures clearly revealed, didn't fool anyone.

Competitor Chrysler meanwhile upped its New Yorker horsepower from 280 in 1956 to 325 in 1957 before reaching 345 in 1958. The displacement increase during that same period went from 354" to 392".

The Cadillac V8 engine for 1956 Series 60, Series 62, and Series 75 models offered 365 cubic inches delivering 285 horsepower. Both figures were less than Packard's 374 cubic inch V8. For 1957 the Cadillac horsepower jumped 40 *hoof beats* to 325, while 1958 saw another increase in horsepower to 335, 110 more than the 1958 Packard.

Lincoln's 368 cubic V8 galloped along with 285 ponies in 1956. By 1957 the horsepower climbed to 300 followed in 1958 with a 430 cubic inch V8 delivering 375 horsepower. By now, it should be obvious why Packard didn't last beyond the 1958 model year. The corporation issued the death certificate in 1957, and finally signed it a year later.



***1956 Packard Caribbean V8 with 310 HP
Photo courtesy owner George Hamlin***

Horsepower and *cubes* were major selling points in the mid to late 1950s and drew customers into the dealer showrooms. Unfortunately, there was no problem finding a parking space in the *customer only* area of the Studebaker-Packard dealers' lots.

The availability of the Packard V8 would have offered other options for the 1957 and 1958 full size Studebaker and Packard models. Customers could have had a choice of five V8 power plants ranging from 259 to 374 cubic inches with a maximum 310 horsepower. Those are figures similar to what was available elsewhere. Perhaps not as many die hard Packard fans would have abandoned the brand if the aptly named *Packardbakers* had sported Packard power.

I wonder how many Studebaker buyers might have opted for one of the larger engine offerings. Remember, even the *average Joe* wanted more power. The chance to offer the Packard V8 in the larger Studebakers and Packards, would most certainly have helped the dealers. Offering engine options for the full line of products was the standard of the industry but S-P forced itself down the road of mediocrity with only a dead end as the eventual outcome.

I don't have an answer as to why the Packard V8 engine never made it to South Bend. I'm sure money, space, logistics, lack of vision, and the fact that AMC stopped buying engines from Packard contributed to that decision. Finding a suitable alternative for the Ultramatic transmission would have had to be addressed also, but I doubt that would have been a major problem. I can only guess what might have been had Studebaker-Packard been able to stay competitive in the horsepower race.

I think the decision makers made the biggest mistake of the decade when they failed to keep the Packard V8 alive. Because of this, there was a blossoming and profitable performance segment of the automobile market that the corporation was never able to exploit.

	1956		1957		1958	
	Highest CID	Highest HP	Highest CID	Highest HP	Highest CID	Highest HP
STUDEBAKER						
Chevrolet	265	205, 220	283	245, 250, 270, 283	348	315
Ford	312	225, 260	312	300	430	375
Plymouth	303	240	318	290	350	305, 315
Studebaker	352	275	289	275	289	275
PACKARD						
Cadillac	365	285	365	325	365	335
Chrysler	354	280	392	325	392	345
Lincoln	368	285	368	300	430	375
Packard Clipper Hawk	374 352	290, 310 275	289	275	289 289	225 275