

1930 Pierce-Arrow Group B Sport Phaeton

The Tyranny of Tradition

BY JON G. ROBINSON / PHOTOS BY AL ROGERS



“It would be far easier to build Pierce-Arrows of average quality, and infinitely more profitable to produce them in greater numbers. But the tyranny of tradition forbids.” — Pierce-Arrow, 1930.





Lee Garoyan restored this Pierce-Arrow to exacting standards in the 1980s. Some of his challenges included several badly conceived modifications that previous owners had inflicted on the car through the decades – the most egregious of which was a 1936 Buick trunk that had been leaded into the rear of the body. Today, the Buick trunk is gone, and the Pierce-Arrow carries an accessory trunk as it should.

MANY CAR COMPANIES HAD CLASSY ADS, BUT THERE'S NOTHING QUITE SO ELOQUENT AND PERSUASIVE AS A PIERCE-ARROW PROCLAMATION.

Packard said, “Ask the man who owns one.” Cadillac claimed to be the “Standard of the World.” Pierce-Arrow didn’t have slogans. Pierce-Arrow had prose to be read as literature:

The 1930 colorings and upholsterings and appointments are new elements of beauty, freshly expressed.

Silent gearshifts ... non-shatterable glass ... super-safety brakes ... low-sprung gravity centers ... hydraulic shock absorbers, etc., etc. All Pierce-Arrow features ... each having been added as it proved itself ... and without particular mention or special acclaim. Nor is there any excess of modesty in this attitude. It is simply that no new feature, or any group of new features, could conceivably be so important as that which is Pierce-Arrow. Greater is that than the sum of all its parts.

Pierce-Arrow claimed that reaching these Olympian standards was a burden borne under the *Tyranny of Tradition*.

Fortunately, it was all true. The 1930 Pierce-Arrow is a truly beautiful and technologically advanced car. One exceptional example survived upper-Midwestern weather, crossed the Atlantic twice, fell into disrepair, came back to life under a meticulous restoration, and has won the highest awards. It is now a centerpiece in the fine collection of Terry and Rita Ernest of Port Huron, Michigan.

“When my wife and I were married 23 years ago, we discussed hobbies we could mutually enjoy,” Terry Ernest tells. “To my great surprise and pleasure, she said she really liked antique cars! After many discussions of different types of antique cars we both liked, we decided we wanted an early Auburn Boattail Speedster.”

About the time the Ernests got married, a 1930 Pierce-Arrow was completing restoration in California, immediately winning top honors at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance, and it took the highest award the Pierce-Arrow Society

bestows – the Venderveer Trophy, which is now called the Weis Trophy.

In spite of the Auburn’s tragic rarity, the Ernests did find their dream Speedster, and this led to their collection that today includes a 1934 Packard Dietrich Victoria, a 1936 Packard convertible coupe, a 1933 Cadillac town sedan, and two pre-war fire engines. They have a 1912 Havers to satisfy their brass-era tastes. Terry is the director of the Wills Sainte



“Only the stern mandate of very great pride ... and no lesser legislation on earth ... may command always the finest a man or an organization has to give. Such is the tradition which governs the creation of America’s finest motor car.” – Pierce-Arrow, 1930



ENGINE: The Group B engine was Pierce-Arrow's middle-sized straight-eight in 1930. Its 366 cubic inches produced 125 horsepower. Technological advancements included a camshaft-driven fuel pump instead of a vacuum tank and a factory oil filter.



STEERING: Present owner Terry Ernest enjoys the 1930 Pierce-Arrow's relatively nimble steering compared to the stiffer, heavier feel that many of the big classics from the 1920s and early 1930s have.

Claire Automobile Museum in Marysville, Michigan, and has a 1926 Wills Sainte Claire in his personal collection.

Terry had admired a friend's 1932 Pierce-Arrow, and, while searching for a '32 for themselves, Rita discovered this 1930 dual-cowl sport phaeton. Terry had his heart set on a '32, but he decided to look at the '30. It captivated him immediately. A previous owner had restored the car so perfectly that the Ernests only use the '30 for high-end car shows and touring with the Pierce-Arrow Society. Like any old car, the Pierce-Arrow had a long trip to the Ernests' garage.

"This particular car was purchased by the Meyer family. They were mill owners in St. Paul, Minnesota," Terry Ernest tells. "One of the younger members of the family took the car to England with him in 1938 where, sometime before World War II, it was converted to right-hand steering. After the war, an American G.I. purchased the Pierce, returned to the U.S. in 1947, and converted it back to left-hand drive."

The car needed a full restoration when Lee Garoyan bought it in 1970, but it was



CARBS: Below these manifolds, the Pierce-Arrow carries a Stromberg "Duplex" carburetor with each of its two barrels feeding four cylinders. Pierce-Arrow's quality and attention to detail show in the construction of the ignition system. The distributor and ignition wire carriers did not need to look this nice to run well, but through touches like these, Pierce-Arrow made sure the customer knew he was getting what he paid for.



PERFORMANCE: The Pierce-Arrow's owner says the eight is quicker in acceleration than the V-8 in his '33 Cadillac and that the drivetrain is not excessively noisy. The transmission is not synchronized, but he says it shifts smoothly, and it's not hard to find the gears.

mechanically sound enough to drive 300 miles to his home in Davis, California. Garoyan fabricated new top bows and hardware and replaced the badly modified front seat and windshield posts. Garoyan had to undo several non-stock items such as the vacuum brakes and a 1936 Buick trunk someone had grafted to the body using lead. A previous owner replaced the original Clark four-speed transmission with a free-wheeling Muncie three-speed, but Garoyan installed a stock transmission. The car originally came with

artillery wheels, but Garoyan engaged in a long search for the proper, optional, chrome-plated, wire wheels.

As with many of the most-expensive cars of its time, the 1930 Pierce-Arrow was not restricted to a narrow set of factory colors. Customers could get almost any hue they wanted simply for the asking, which gives modern restorers the freedom to personalize.

"The contours of the car suggest that two or three colors would enhance its appearance," Ernest tells. "Pictures of



DETAILS: This Pierce-Arrow received a very detailed restoration. These leather straps hold the top and boot cover in place when the top is lowered.

the car were painted yellow-butterscotch, several shades of gray, combinations of greens, etc., but nothing looked good. Ron Dreyer, a classic car and wood boat artist from northern California, helped."

A couple of days at Dreyer's studio, several meals, and a few bottles of wine narrowed down the colors to two or three, which were painted on pictures of the car. Paintings were placed on a wall, and visitors to Garoyan's office were asked to vote. After several days, the present colors won out, and Garoyan



GEARS: The standard rear axle ratio for the 1930 Pierce-Arrow Group B was 4.42:1, but a 4.09:1 rearend appears on the Group B option list. This car's owner suspects the car may have the optional ratio because, going down the road, the drivetrain feels more "long-legged" than either his '33 Cadillac or his '36 Packard.



Usually, a four-door convertible without glass side windows is a touring car. With the addition of a second cowl and windshield for the rear seat, the car transforms into what Pierce-Arrow called a sport phaeton.



"And there is ever present a pardonable disdain of any process less fine than the hand-craftsmanship which has always distinguished Pierce-Arrow motor cars." – Pierce-Arrow, 1930

came up with the magnificent color combination the car wears today.

The 1930 Pierce-Arrow is not just a pretty face. This particular Pierce is the middle-of-the-line Group B. Even the "middle Pierce-Arrow" is a lot of car. How much car? This Group B cost \$3,300 when an average American yearly income was about \$2,000, and a house cost about \$7,200. Even the bottom-line Group C cost \$2,600, while the upper-line Group A cost between \$4,000 and \$6,000.

The Group B was available in one of two wheelbases – a standard 134-inch platform and a 139-inch version for seven-passenger models. The Group B has Pierce-Arrow's mid-sized, 366ci, flathead straight-eight, and the features are quite advanced for the time: a camshaft-driven fuel pump instead of a vacuum tank, fully

pressurized oiling, a factory oil filter, and a Stromberg "Duplex" carburetor with each barrel feeding four cylinders. On paper, the engine generates 125 horsepower, but with long strokes and lots of overlap, big straight-eights achieve this power at a very low rpm, and it's one of the Ernests' favorite traits of the big, pre-war classics.

"It's not excessively noisy, but you can hear it *pull*," Terry says. "The drivetrain has a good, firm feel when you start off in first and go for second. It's a car of substance. It sounds like a big car, and it's powerful like the big classics of that time. Our '33 Cadillac feels heavier, and it's not as quick in acceleration as the Pierce. I also have a Packard 12-cylinder that is a heavier-steering car, but this Pierce-Arrow has a lighter body and engine, so it has a much-smoother motion to it. It's very

comfortable to drive and easier than some of the big cars from those years."

Terry agrees the car's mechanical brakes are impressive compared to the economy-car mechanical brakes from the early '30s. Other than higher-speed differential gears in some of his other cars, he believes in keeping the classics stock.

"We don't need to reinvent what the engineers did. We just have to make sure that what the engineers did is working properly."

Words, however fine, and pictures, no matter how true to life, are incapable of conveying the rare charm that belongs to Pierce-Arrow – Pierce-Arrow, 1930.

As for the flowery prose Pierce-Arrow expended to promote its products, the Ernests agree with the company when it claims, "All are pardonable boasts." ■