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## In Tulsa, a rusty portal to the past

**The Oklahoma city unearths a 1957 Plymouth Belvedere time capsule buried 50 years ago and celebrates an era of innocence and mobility.**

**By Carmen K. Sisson** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

**TULSA, Okla.**

They came from all corners of the world. Some flew. Most drove. They packed cars with kids and coolers. The cynicism they left behind.

Great road trips, like great movies, require a certain suspension of disbelief, and for 24 hours everyone waited on the edge of their seats, enjoying the ride. By now, much of the world knows the spoiler – the starlet's shine faded, her throaty purr fell silent, the good guys lost and the villain got the girl. It made no difference. For the people of Tulsa, the journey was the destination anyway, and some of the best parts ended up on the cutting-room floor.

It all started 50 years ago when city officials came up with a unique marketing scheme to promote Oklahoma's golden jubilee. As 200 people looked on in amazement, they buried a brand-new 1957 Plymouth Belvedere in the courthouse lawn, to be unearthed 50 years later as one of many events slated to celebrate the state's centennial. The car, one of the most iconic symbols of the 1950s, was both a public-relations stunt and an archaeological snapshot of life in a simpler time.

When it was retrieved from its sodden grave early Friday and presented to a crowd of more than 7,300 onlookers and 200 journalists from around the globe, at least one part of the Belvedere's mission was accomplished – all eyes were on Tulsa.

As silver disco lights swirled over the audience and lasers splashed across the stage, workers slowly rolled back the gleaming gold covering protecting the car. There was stunned silence for a second, then a roar swept through the crowd. Yes, there was a veneer of rust, but there was something else, too – a sort of noble dignity and indomitable optimism.

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It's fitting that a car was chosen to encapsulate the 1950s experience. In an age of unbridled enthusiasm and almost unparalleled freedom, the American automobile embodied everything people loved back then and still often long for today. Following the Great Depression in the '30s and World War II in the '40s, the '50s were relatively tranquil. The Korean War was a half a world away, and the cold war was real but a somewhat abstract concept to most Americans – a nuisance exemplified by the "duck and cover."

"The '50s look to us now like a very free time," says Bruce Jackson, an American culture expert at the University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York system. "There seemed to be more air, more space. During World War II, there were virtually no cars, and gasoline was rationed so there was very little point in owning one. Suddenly we were pouring them out by the hundreds, and people had a mobility they'd never had before. The economy was expanding at a prodigious rate; people were buying homes and graduating on the GI bill; the lower class was becoming the middle class. There was no scary thing hovering over the '50s as it [did] for the decades on either side of them."

Tulsa residents James Bankston and Paul Turney remember those halcyon years well. Like most teenage boys, they spent their days working after-school jobs, saving money to buy cars.

"We were just in love with cars," Mr. Bankston says. "Everyone wanted one. We'd all go to Mohawk Park and spend the day polishing our cars together, having picnics. Then we'd go to the movies or take our girls to the lake to watch the submarine races. Of course, there were no submarines."

Mr. Turney continues the nostalgic narrative. "Friday nights, we'd go to Cotton's – six to a car – and get three Cokes to share," he says. "We'd stick somebody in the trunk and sneak in the drive-in, and when we got tired of being there, we'd go to the next place, just this wagon train of cars going round and round."

To the two car-crazed teenagers, the idea of burying a shiny new Plymouth Belvedere was a little crazy. The two had just graduated from high school and had gone downtown to escape the summer heat in one of Tulsa's only air-conditioned buildings – the Majestic Theater. Neither can remember the movie they saw, but they'll never forget the sight of that car being lowered into the ground.

As last-minute objects were placed in the car – a wedding photo, a Lawrence Welk album, a ladies' purse containing the necessities of the day (bobby pins, a tube of lipstick, and tranquilizers) – Bankston and Turney crouched on the curb and pondered how to leave their mark.

Borrowing a new high-tech gadget of the day, a ballpoint pen, they hastily scrawled their names on the whitewall of the right rear tire. Fifty years later, those names remain, even though the Belvedere succumbed to as much as five feet of water during its interment.

The names were a bright spot at Friday night's unveiling, as were the almost pristine contents of a steel time capsule buried along with the Belvedere. It contained an American flag and guesses for Tulsa's population in 2007. The closest to today's number – 382,457 – would receive the car, its contents, and a \$100 savings account now worth at least \$700.

Like nearly everyone at the event, Bankston and Turney say they're disappointed the car didn't stand up to the rigors of entombment better, but they're proud to be a part of its history.

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Tulsa officials should probably be lauded for just finding the car. Often, time capsules are buried and the locations, or the dates they're supposed to be opened, are forgotten. Yet they remain an indispensable part of American culture – time captured in a tomb.

"There's something hopeful, something romantic about time capsules – the notion that things will work out right," says Paul Hudson, cofounder of the International Time Capsule Society at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta. "The '50s were such an opulent age, and the Belvedere was a wonderful icon. It would have been great if someone could have driven it off into the Tulsa sunset."

Instead, no one will be driving the Plymouth without extensive work, and maybe not even then. The key is rusted into the ignition. The seats are rotted through to the springs. Hot rod expert Boyd Coddington pronounced the car "a mess" and offered a dispirited "no" when asked by onstage organizers if there was any hope for salvaging it.

Still, enthusiasts like Steve Chenault, who owns four classic Plymouths and drove nearly 1,000 miles with his family to see the unveiling, believe it was worth the trip, even though today's cost of gas is considerably higher than 1957's 24 cents a gallon.

"I'm really hoping the person who gets the car will appreciate what they have," Mr. Chenault says. "It's a piece of history and deserves to be treated as such."

And so the lights dim on Tulsa's legendary Miss Belvedere. For a starry-eyed generation of dreamers, she offered a Technicolor vision of the future. And today, 50 years later, she offers an untarnished portal to the past. So what if it wasn't the ending anyone hoped for – the road trip was still a blast.

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