

Calendar

Kin Mobile

Tribute to the Family Car

Car museums have a surreal quality. Objects meant to be mobile and outdoors are displayed like dream props, out of context. Almost as surreal are the memories of cars in our collective past. The sight of them can evoke the strongest reveries, like certain smells.

What used to be known as "the family car" is a remnant of those days when there was only one vehicle in the middle-class driveway and its solitary nature provided a challenge for teenagers of the Wally Cleaver era: how to wangle the keys from Mom and Dad for a Saturday-night date.

Today we have "Mom's car" and "Dad's car," the better to drive to

work, and many a kid thinks a car is his or her birthright.

Mary

Oswell, the San Diego Automotive Museum's exhibits manager, says that one family car of yore — the station wagon — was originally a commercial vehicle. "They were used primarily to transport people and luggage from the train station to the hotel in town. They were a way to get a bunch of people somewhere." Called "depot hacks," they had wooden siding and no glass in the windows. In fact, they had no windows at all. Neither driver nor passengers wore goggles. "They weren't going for a long ride."

Then, in 1937, Ford introduced a wood-sided model with windows. It began to sell in great numbers and became, more or less, the car we recognize as a station wagon today.

Oswell curated the museum's new exhibit, which traces the history of the family car. On display will be 15 models, mostly American. The museum owns three of them; the rest are being lent.

The show's 1955 Studebaker Champion is owned by Flo and John Cummings, volunteers at the museum and "big Studebaker fans," says Oswell. They bought it shortly after their marriage. "So it's not only a family car, it's a one-family car."

Ironically, this car, which they drove across country with the kids piled into it, is what's known as an "orphan" car — one whose manufacturer has stopped production. "These are often middle-priced cars and ones that are most fondly remembered," Oswell says.

The same model (not the same car) that lender Dann Whalen received as a gift in the 1960s, when



Flo and John Cummings with '55 Studebaker Champion

he was 17, is in the show. As Oswell tells the story, "His dad said, 'Well, Dann, we think it's time for you to have a car.' And he handed him the keys and said, 'It's out in front of the house.'" Dann was elated, imagining the snazzy car that Dad had chosen at the dealership; what he found, instead, was his grandfather's old Nash.

While the 1952 Nash Statesman was not that high school boy's most fervent automotive desire, years later he went looking for one. Oswell interprets the purchase as Whalen's attempt to recapture a remnant of his past.

Whalen is a member of a local Nash car club today.

Besides evoking personal memories, the show is meant to evoke thoughts about the economy that eventually produced the multicar families of today. "So we're going to bring in a Model T, primarily to talk about the cost of owning a car. The Model T was the first car that a run-of-the-mill family could own. It cost \$800 in 1908, its first year of production, when most cars were \$1000 or more. Henry Ford believed

that everybody should have an automobile, and that's why he ended up creating an empire based on mass production."

Safety features are extolled by current car makers. Oswell says that cars built in years prior to Ralph Nader are low in safety features. "They tried in the '50s to offer safety belts as an option and people didn't want them." What family-car purchasers wanted instead was spaciousness and couch-like seats. Even midpriced cars were sold on the basis of their "living-room-ness," she says.

"They wanted height, too, because men used to wear hats. Leaving room for one used to be par for the course. Car makers boasted that a man could drive their models without taking his hat off."

One of two European cars in the show is a seven-passenger Saab station wagon from 1969. It's also the show's newest model. Oswell calls it "a European attempt to get a lot of people in a small space."

The other European is a Volkswagen bus from the early '60s, but the idea that it became the hippie

vehicle of choice — and a symbol of family disintegration — is not broached. Like all of us, the museum displays a distinctly selective memory, and the music on the soundtrack will be Bing Crosby, not Jimi Hendrix.

Nor will a Rambler be included, because they are too small, says Oswell. It's a gap. Legend has it that the flip-down front seats of the cars produced by the American Motors Corporation between 1958 and 1969 were responsible for not a few shotgun weddings, when teenage parents started families unintentionally and gave yet another meaning to the term "family car."

— Jeanne Schinto

**"Sedans, Vans & Wagons:
A Tribute to the Family Car"**
San Diego Automotive Museum
2080 Pan American Plaza,
Balboa Park
Friday, March 2–May 28
10:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m.
\$7, adults; \$6, seniors (65 up)
and active military (with ID);
\$3, kids (6–15); under 6, free
Info: 619-231-2886

Local Events
page 53

Classical Music
page 66

Art Museums
& Galleries
page 69

Theater
page 72

Pop Music
page 78

Movies
page 105

Restaurants
page 113