Contact: Andy Bowman

Ann Marie Fortunate

50 Years Later, City of Tulsa to Unveil 1957 Plymouth Belvedere

- Time capsule with revolutionary car to be opened June 15 as Tulsa celebrates centennial of Oklahoma statehood
- Car with design ‘three full years ahead’ was product of famed Chrysler design team
- Big-finned ‘57s thrust Chrysler into styling leadership

June 12, 2007, Tulsa, Okla. - “Suddenly it’s 1960!”

That’s what the magazine ads proclaimed 50 years ago in announcing the all-new 1957 Plymouth.

With its new highly-acclaimed Torsion-Aire front suspension, push-button Torqueflite automatic transmission and soaring tail fins, the 1957 Plymouth was advertised as “Three Full Years Ahead” of its competition in the low-priced field — “the only car to break the time barrier.”

Now, suddenly it’s 2007, and the 1957 Plymouth will re-emerge as part of TULSARAMA, the City of Tulsa’s celebration of the 100th anniversary of Oklahoma statehood.

On Friday, June 15, the city will unearth a 1957 Plymouth Belvedere buried in a time capsule in front of the county courthouse in downtown Tulsa 50 years ago. The vehicle will belong to the person (or heir) who in 1957 came closest to guessing the city’s population in 2007.

(The next opportunity to see a Plymouth emerge from the ground in Tulsa will be in 2037, when the city will unearth a 1997 Prowler buried in Centennial Park as part of a celebration of the city's founding.)

The revolutionary design of the 1957 Belvedere was appropriate for the Tulsa time capsule: Oklahoma Golden Jubilee chairman W.A. Anderson declared the finned Plymouth had “the kind of lasting appeal that should be in style 50 years from now.”

This revolutionary Plymouth was the work of the styling team assembled in the early 1950s by famed designer Virgil Exner, notes Chrysler senior designer and design historian Jeffrey Godshall.

Hired from Studebaker in 1949, Exner first explored new directions in styling through a series of concept cars — or as Exner called them, “idea cars." This tradition of concept cars continues with today’s Chrysler.

After a spate of innovative “idea cars” such as the 1951 Chrysler K310 and the 1953 Chrysler d’Elegance, Exner was given responsibility for the styling of the company’s production cars. His first advanced designs in 1955 — referred to as The Forward Look — were followed by the “Flight Sweep” cars of 1956, marking the first time an automobile manufacturer applied fins to its entire line of vehicles.

With even larger towering fins, the ’57 Plymouth was a stunner, Godshall said.

The extreme lowness of the car, its light-looking roof supported by thin pillars and the big fins gave the exciting new Plymouth the wedge-shaped silhouette that Exner and his staff were looking for — the same shape used in military aircraft, Gold Cup racing boats and ballistic missiles.

And the fins were functional as well. Contemporary wind tunnel testing proved they reduced the need for steering corrections in strong crosswinds.

The new ‘57s were enthusiastically embraced by a buying public who saw the big fins as a symbol of a future of carefree living, Godshall said. The combination of advanced styling, Torsion-Aire ride and Torqueflite transmission

enabled Plymouth to recapture its status among the leaders in auto industry sales.

The big-finned ’57 cars established Chrysler — long known for its pioneering engineering — as a style leader as well.

This tradition of design leadership was recaptured during the 1990s under design Chief Tom Gale, resulting in innovative vehicles such as the cab-forward design of the Chrysler Concorde and companion sedans.

That leadership in design continues today under the direction of Trevor Creed, Senior Vice President – Product Design Office, which has produced a new generation of revolutionary designs such as the Chrysler 300 sedan.

“At Chrysler, we value our company’s tradition of producing great American automobile designs,” said Creed.

Representatives of Chrysler’s Product Design Office and the Walter P. Chrysler Museum will be on site for the unearthing and public reveal of the 1957 Plymouth Belvedere in Tulsa, Okla., on Friday, June 15.

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