

TUCKER TOUR

By Franklin Gage #36262

In the middle of Old Town Alexandria, VA there is a non-descript, unlabeled, windowless white warehouse, accessed by alleys. One would never guess that inside is a museum with a collection chronicling an attempt to produce what was advertised as the first all-new post World War II automobile.

That car was the Tucker 48, named for the founder of the company set to produce it, Preston Tucker, and the year it was to debut. Tucker had a varied background in the automotive business, from selling parts in a barn behind his Mother's house in Ypsilanti, MI to being hired as an office boy at Cadillac, where he got skates so he could make deliveries faster than by walking. Over time he worked in just about every department at Ford, Studebaker, Chrysler, Pierce-Arrow and Packard. Though he had no college training, he did take night school and mail-order correspondence courses.

Prior to WW II, he designed a combat car capable of 100+MPH, but those in government who made purchase decisions felt it was "too fast." Tucker built a gun turret, however, that was purchased.

After the war, Tucker set about achieving his dream of, as his advertising would claim, an advanced design "Car of Tomorrow – Today." His plans included numerous safety and other innovations, including one that makes his cars instantly recognizable – a third, center-mounted 'Cyclops' headlight that would turn when the steering wheel turned to illuminate the direction the car would soon be following. There were numerous other features that made this a 'different' car:

---The engine was in the rear (it was originally going to be air-cooled, but ended up with conventional water cooling).

---The body styling was aerodynamic looking – it had a sleek fastback design, and was only 5 feet from the top of the roof to the ground, nearly a record at the time. The lowering of the car was partly achieved by the 'step-down' floor, a feature shared by only one other production car of the time – Hudsons.

---Safety-inspired touches (in addition to the Cyclops headlight) included interiors with push-button door releases instead of handles, padded dash, a strong frame around the outer sides of the car and a 'pop-out' windshield. But no Tucker was produced with what now seems like the most obvious safety feature – seatbelts!

---The interior was remarkably spacious.

Only 51 Tuckers were ever produced, including the first prototype known as "The Tin Goose." That car (now residing at the Swigart Auto Museum in PA) and all the rest survive, except for 4. One's fate is unknown, one was lost in a warehouse fire, one was vandalized, and another was totaled in a rollover on a racetrack. Interestingly, another rolled over at 95 MPH and with only the installation of a new wheel and tire was driven away – the driver's sole injury being a scratched arm.

Three of the 47 survivors (including the first production car following the prototype 'Tin Goose'), perfectly restored, reside today in that non-descript Alexandria warehouse owned by David Cammack, where this kind, soft-spoken gentleman delights in generously sharing them and a huge collection of Tucker memorabilia with interested visitors. Dave acquired his first Tucker in 1972, but his interest was sparked when he and his late brother Bill went to see the prototype Tin Goose when it was brought to the nearby Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC to promote the Tucker about a quarter century earlier.

Dave has plans to one day donate the collection to the Antique Automobile Club of America Museum in Hershey, PA, but the Free State Region was honored to tour Dave's museum in March while it is a little more in our neighborhood; we learned a lot. Here are just a few tidbits: The car was to be priced at \$2,450 – about the same as a large Buick of the era. All Tuckers have Lincoln Zephyr steering wheels – a contribution from the Ford Motor Co. – with Tucker emblems replacing the Lincoln ones in the center. Six tailpipe outlets adorn the rear bumper – three per side. There are two keylocks on the left side of the dash; one is the ignition, the other an anti-theft steering wheel lock. In this respect, Tucker seems a little behind the times – even my '27 Chevy has one dual-purpose lock! There is no glovebox in the dash – it is in the front passenger door.

With just 51 cars of an entirely new car, each is a little different. For example, along the way the gas tank and filler cap were moved from the rear to the front of the car, supposedly to add weight up front to partially offset the weight of the rear engine. Only two were built with automatic transmissions (one is in Dave's collection), and the standard drive cars have a tiny knob gearshift mounted on the steering column but at a right angle to the driver.

Dave attributes the car's failure to Columnist Drew Pearson, who reported on U.S. government charges against Tucker having to do with his allegedly selling parts to a car not yet in production. The stock price tumbled by over 50% the day after Pearson's column, and it took until November, 1950 for Tucker, following a trial, to be found "Not Guilty." But his exoneration was overshadowed by the "Guilty" verdict the day before in the spy trial of Alger Hiss. The damage was done, and the entire enterprise collapsed with only the 51 cars produced.

Ironically, Tucker's prosecutor was Otto Kerner, who later was elected Governor (D-IL) and appointed by President Johnson to head a Commission to study the causes of 1960's riots. The Commission report was used to justify untold billions in welfare spending. Kerner's career was capped by being sent to jail for 19 years on stock fraud charges.

Dave's cars were used in the popular Tucker movie starring Beau Bridges. One was so badly damaged Dave took the opportunity to change the color. In addition to the cars, Dave's walls are covered with all manner of Tucker-related posters, new articles, correspondence, photos, etc. He has an extensive collection of Tucker parts, along with a cutaway, bodyless full size frame and drive train used to show how the car was engineered (a similar Cadillac frame is behind it so one can compare Tucker's superior design). He also showed us a couple of videos, including one featuring a Tucker designer named Phil Egan who shared many interesting stories from the time.

Dave's Museum used to have a bonus appreciated by many visitors – the entire 2nd floor was a huge working model train layout. But the trains had to move to display shelves lining the walls, because about three years ago a collection of thousands of pages of Tucker documents (from letters to contracts to blueprints) arrived. The owner had offered to sell them to Dave several years before for \$10 million; when he died, his heirs (anxious to be able to sell the house) were happy to take a much more reasonable offer. The papers were not well organized (some were falling out of broken boxes) so Dave and college students working part time are sorting and filing everything. It rivals an ambitious restoration project!

In these days of rising gas prices, readers may be interested to note that Tuckers were reported to achieve over 20 miles per gallon – quite good for a car of that size and era. They were also reported to handle well. But Dave "Tucker" Cammack can't personally testify to that – he's barely ever driven a Tucker except to and from trailers!