

Fabulous Fins

Bruce Behner



The new Savoy Automobile Museum was featured in the Plymouth Bulletin in early 2022. The facility has been a resounding success reaching, that as one well-known collector car periodical editor mentioned as 'unimaginable'. The Savoy has received the distinction of being named the #1 Best Attraction for Car Lovers in America based on a 2024 USA Today Readers' Choice Award poll. Having been a long-time member of the Plymouth Owners Club since about 1971 and immersed in the world of Chrysler products since early childhood, you can only imagine my excitement at the opening of this world-class facility was for me. Add to that the fact that it was named for a Plymouth Savoy found on the property is even more special. After becoming a volunteer docent at the Savoy, it has been an honor to be able to share highlights of the routine rotation of intriguing and wide-ranging automobile exhibits that come through our doors.

In October 2022 a new exhibition gallery opened called Fabulous Fins. It featured a historical perspective of the origins of the fin design phenomena dating all the way back to a group of GM designers seeing a new P-38 Lightning fighter plane during a secret tour of Selfridge Field near Detroit before America's entry into WWII. That would eventually lead to the iconic finned era of auto design initiated by Cadillac in 1948 and adopted by virtually everyone in the 1950's.



Savoy Docent Bruce Behner and Grandson Finley Ansel von Litolff (nickname: Fin Man)



The Fabulous Fins gallery featured a dozen autos with this design feature including a collection of Cadillac's from 1948 to 1960 that also included a 1959 Plymouth Sport Fury. Interestingly all the vehicles were parked with the rear distinguishing fin feature as the first thing a visitor would view. This presentation emphasized many different marques widely varying design presentations of the fin concept when style with all its chrome seemingly knew no bounds. During the four-month tenure of the Fabulous Fins gallery we had our very first school group of more than 100 second graders attend. It was my good fortune to present this gallery as all the students cycled through in small groups. Naturally the presentation was adjusted to emphasize details that might interest young people such as size of the cars with their colors and huge amounts of chrome accents in addition to the varying sizes and shapes of fins. It is with fond recollection for me that almost every group entered as what for them was a probably never before seen world of cars, was the verbal reaction of "Oh, Wow!"

As a docent we only have time to briefly highlight a limited number of vehicles on display in each gallery. We often emphasize some aspect of particular impact the car had on the industry or maybe an interesting anecdote that carries with it a memorable historical connotation. These comments will often include reflections on individuals who may have created these vehicles. At this point we arrive at the 1959 Plymouth Sport Fury that



is part of the Savoy collection and has been owned by the museum since its opening. This provides the opening to mention Virgil Exner and Chrysler Corporations 'Forward Look' designs of the late 50's. It is with no small degree of satisfaction to add how a group of GM designers sneaked over to the Mound Road plant in 1956 and were stunned to see the new for '57 Forward Look Chrysler vehicles in a holding area behind a fence. They then quickly went back to get Bill Mitchell, GM design director, to go back with them to realize how their upcoming 1958 and 59 designs already on the

drawing boards were going to be a disaster. Chrysler had managed to produce cars much lower and sleeker with classic refinements. The 1958 GM models could not be changed but Mitchell and his designers would stage a quiet rebellion and totally change the GM lineup for 1959.

One youngster of that 2nd grade class provided this tour guide with one of the most memorable moments ever with a question as they were moving on to the next gallery. "Can I bring my dad to see these cars?" *It does not get any better than that!*

