

ESCAPE ROAD

1948 Tucker

Car of the future or an idea whose time would never come?

By Roger Barlow

After reams of newspaper and magazine publicity about "The Car That Is Ten Years Ahead Of Its Time," the rear-engine Tucker made its debut as a 1948 model. But within a year (after having built only 51 cars) the company was out of business and Preston Tucker was indicted for fraud. He was tried in federal court and acquitted, but his business was ruined. An innocent victim, his ardent supporters contend, of the frightened moguls of the Detroit auto industry.

Automotive genius or slick promoter? How are we to place Preston Tucker and his car in the Annals of the Automobile?

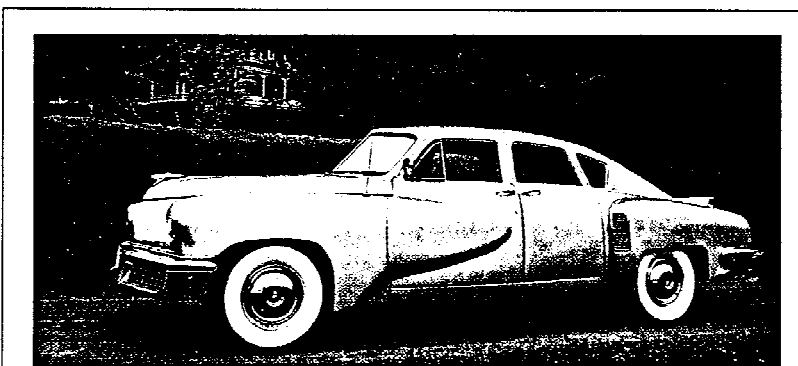
"Rear-engine" was the automotive buzzword after WWII. Virtually no one in America had ever driven a car with its engine so located, but somehow there was a widespread belief that this was the way almost all cars would soon be made. There were rumors of this or that American manufacturer planning

such a car ... or already testing one. Some postwar models of front-engine, rear-drive cars even appeared with phony air exits around the trunk area!

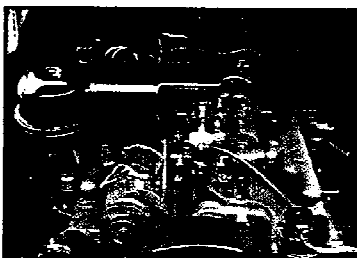
But only Preston Tucker was firmly committed to the rear-engine car. He and his engineers had sold themselves on the limited and even dubious virtues of such a design, then pursued the Holy Grail with true religious zeal. Indeed, his car was not only to be rear-engined but would also bristle with other innovations. Some of them were commendably safety-related such as disc brakes and a windshield so installed as to pop out during an accident if hit by a passenger. Most were more or less untested—such as the new independent suspension by rubber elements in torsion.

His original engine (of which at least one running prototype was built) was a fascinating departure from then-current automotive practice—a huge 9.8-liter, light alloy flat-

six with hydraulic, not mechanical, operation of the valves! An engine, it was said, that idled at a mere 100 rpm, revved only to about 1300, but developed such immense low-speed torque that it was geared to pull 50 mph at 500 rpm!



For its time, Tucker styling was sleek, aerodynamic. Engine (below left) is rear-mounted flat-six; access to interior (below right) is through 'suicide' doors



George Olson photos

Unfortunately, the time and money expended on this unique engine were a total loss, for it became obvious that many more years would be required to get this radical concept developed and refined enough to be ready for production, and Tucker needed an engine in a matter of months. So a crash program of adapting an existing 5.5-liter, air-cooled, flat-six helicopter unit made by Franklin was instituted. No simple task either, for it was considered advisable to convert it to water-cooling and make other modifications.

And the list of innovations Tucker had to make workable didn't stop at a powerplant. Handling was another matter. Getting a long-wheelbase, rear-engine sedan large enough to seat six to handle in a satisfactory manner was an intimidating task never yet solved by anyone. Then there was a fuel injection system and even hydraulic steering under development—plus work on a team of

race cars.

One break the Tucker project got was to hire designer Alex Tremulis, who created a body shape that was effectively aerodynamic, wide and purposeful-looking. The Tucker had the most interesting and exciting styling since the 810 Cord and the original Lincoln Continental. And it was a goer as well as a looker ... to 60 in under 11 seconds and on to about 117 mph. No sedan would equal this for years.

As I said, I owned a Tucker. Not for long, but I did own and drive it.

One evening in 1953 there was a call from salesman Tony Anthony to let me know a low mileage Tucker was on our Vine Street used car lot. An hour later I was behind its wheel.

Having driven VWs, the 170H Mercedes, early Porsches and the 4CV Renault, its handling was no surprise—with so much weight so far aft, in such a long wheelbase, oversteer was only to be expected. And it was there to a quite disconcerting degree despite the helpfully quick steering ratio.

The Tucker engine, I believe, weighed only 300 pounds dry. But add water, a radiator, transmission and differential and there were some 700 pounds back there (1100 pounds or more with three in the rear seat) waiting to introduce unsuspecting ex-Buick drivers to the thrills and throes of oversteer.

The odd action of the suspension contributed further to my unease with the car. I did not enjoy driving "my" Tucker! Nor did I like the interior trim, front seat and elementary instrumentation. The car was an interesting concept ... but definitely not ready for prime time, as they might say today on Vine Street.

I phoned Tony Anthony in California recently to see if he remembered driving this car. "Spooky," was his summation, "real spooky. And scary."

Indeed, despite the high regard and fanatical devotion of some Tucker owners, Detroit was not really threatened by Tucker's grand plans. Indeed, one fears there is no possible solution to the basic and fatal flaw of this or any large rear-engine car.

Preston Tucker was wrong. Rear engines weren't destined to be the mark of the car of the future. Front-wheel drive was. ■