

MODEL T FORD AT THE PALACE
OF FINE ARTS



I was at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco this morning to welcome the arrival of the Historic Vehicle Association of America in their 1915 Model T Ford – culmination of a 3600 mile drive from Detroit following the tracks of Edsel Ford who made the same road trip a century ago. He came to attend the Panama Pacific International Exposition, for which this great classical rotunda and colonnade were built.

Yesterday's visit to Stanford – [\[Link\]](#)



(Photo by Amy Sullivan)





The welcoming committee (L-R): Donna Huggins, Mayor Lee's PPIE100 (Panama Pacific International Exposition 100 year anniversary) Spokesperson; Randy Book, grandson of one of the friends who traveled with Edsel Ford in 1915; Paul Ianuario, Mark Gessler, Casey Maxon of the Historic Vehicle Association (HVA), MS, Phil Ginsburg, General Manager, San Francisco Parks and Recreation; Mike Sangiacomo, VP California Historical Society. (Photo by Amy Sullivan)

(Click on the pictures for enlargement)

I was with the car in Carmel last week as part of the week of car events around Monterey. What was striking then, yesterday in Stanford, and again today, is the way an artifact like this acts as catalyst – provoking in people all sorts of feelings, memories, thoughts. Someone this morning had seen the car on TV and came along because she had a family connection with the original trip. There were other family links too, including Randy Book's grandfather who was on the trip with Edsel, though Randy didn't know until the HVA trip was announced – more personal links than I'd ever have expected. People tune into this connection, then-now, made through an iconic and populist machine, the robust, forgiving, adaptable, characterful Model T, present, ready-to-hand, on a street in San Francisco today. Everyone smiles. This is what I call the *actuality of the archaeological imagination* – the energy of the then-now linkage through a material artifact – [Link] [Link]

And this is why we need to care for automotive heritage (where heritage is the past-in-the-present) – the power of the past-present link to provoke reaction, reflection.

The link with the world fair of 1915 is also one that provokes reflection. It was organized to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal, a new modern global artery connecting the west and east Americas, as well as San Francisco's recovery after the earthquake of 1906.

Designed by Bernard Maybeck, the Palace of Fine Arts is a kind of folly of an ancient ruin, meant only to be temporary, constructed of wooden framing, canvas and plaster. It was so decayed by the 1960s that it was rebuilt in concrete, then refurbished with seismic upgrades in 2010. This evocation of another era makes us think about the *value* of retaining links with the past, collective material memories, mnemonics, that offer orientation, even when they also need substantial injections of cash and resources to maintain them. So we preserve, conserve, restore, rebuild, because of the returns in cultural, community, and personal emotional value.

And look now at this juxtaposition of a classical evocation with the San Francisco and Bay Area of 2015.

It's the same, I suggest, with the Model T.



Edwin Deakin 1915

The road trip today in a century old vehicle is not just a story to be told. It's an event, a performance, here and now, present before us. This is why I call it theatre/archaeology. The HVA road trip is a brilliant *intervention* in a debate of which many people will not be aware – the neglect of a key component of modern experience – automobility. The HVA is promoting awareness of the need to record, conserve, preserve, study the history of the automobile, because it is not happening and we stand quickly to lose the remains of what has been such a key component of people's lives this last 120 years.

On heritage and intervention – see my essay “Let me tell you about Hadrian's Wall: heritage, performance, design” – [\[Link\]](#)

