



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour  
Museum of Automobiles  
8 Jones Lane, Petit Jean Mountain**

November 1, 2024

By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Beula Ivy, Stan Shirley, Cathey Andrews,  
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*Museum of Automobiles  
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2024*

## Welcome and Introduction

Hi! I'm Ashley Sides, preservation outreach coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Museum of Automobiles and to the final Sandwiching in History tour

of the 2024 season. I want to thank the generous staff of the Museum of Automobiles and everyone else that has had a hand in hosting us and making this tour possible.

## A Man, a Mountain, and a Museum

This museum goes back to Winthrop Rockefeller. He was the grandson of oil baron John D. Rockefeller, which meant that he was very wealthy. He moved to Arkansas in 1953 and adopted the state as his home. He fell in love with Petit Jean Mountain and built his home and ranch up here.

In 1960, his friend James Melton decided to sell his antique car collection. Melton was a famous tenor opera singer and movie star who for decades had collected vintage cars. He had relocated his collection from Connecticut to Hypoluxo, Florida (Palm Beach area) in 1953 and opened the James Melton Autorama, a tourist attraction. When the cars went up for sale, Rockefeller bought about 40 of them.

With this core of a collection, Rockefeller next made plans to display them. He opened this Museum of Automobiles on October 18, 1964. So that means that the museum just celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary two weeks ago.

The museum opened right at the height of the 1964 election season. Rockefeller, who was running for governor, took time out of his campaign for the museum's grand opening. It was officially a non-political event, but he was doing something to benefit the state, and he must have calculated that this would be a good look for him. He was, in his own words, "not a car buff"; the reason for the museum was that he wanted to bring tourist revenue to Conway County and the region.

The launch of the museum was successful. To win the job of governor, however, Rockefeller would have to wait until the 1966 election.

The initial exhibit had some 38 cars, mostly from the Melton collection, plus others that Rockefeller had obtained. They ranged from the 1860s-era to more recent models. The cars had been restored and were all in running condition. For the first six years, museum staff made a point to drive one antique car around outside daily, often 10 miles around the mountain, on a rotational basis, so that each car would be driven about once a month. Staff kept them well-maintained. One person was employed full-time to polish the brass fixtures on the cars! The museum's first director was Alan Symonds. Beginning in 1966, Buddy Hoelzeman directed the museum for a good many years.

## A High-Profile Attraction

The museum attained renown from the beginning. National media picked up on the museum's opening. It helped that the story involved nationally known figures like Melton and Rockefeller, but it was also seen as a quality collection of vintage cars, a subject that people are interested in.

The Mid-America Old-Time Automobile Association made the Museum of Automobiles the permanent location for their annual auto fair and swap meet beginning in 1968. The event had been held at various venues since the 1950s. The museum also became the MOTAA's national headquarters.

*Motor Trend* magazine wrote a piece on the museum in May 1966, calling the Rockefeller collection "already one of the country's best while still in its infancy," and saying, "Arkansas is the home of as finely a restored group of rare cars as can be found anywhere." But they critiqued the Melton set, saying it was received "in abominable condition as museum pieces go" and needed much expensive restoration. Rockefeller had also purchased several old-time race cars from a Providence, Rhode Island, collector named George Waterman, and these, "meticulously restored," were regarded by *Motor Trend* as "the finest collection of vintage racers extant anywhere."<sup>1</sup>

At least eight other cars in Rockefeller's collection had been acquired from family members and were some of the ones he or they grew up riding in as youngsters. In addition to Rockefeller's autos, the museum displayed other vehicles on loan from private collectors. The idea was to represent the evolution of the automobile from its early days through more recent times.

The museum was vibrant and innovative. In late 1965 or early 1966, a tire factory was established in the museum basement to produce tires for antique and classic automobiles. Named PJA Pneumatic, they planned to manufacture 10,000 to 15,000 tires per year and ship them around the nation and the world.<sup>2</sup> This would address two problems: The profits would supplement admission fee income and help support the museum, and more importantly, there would always be a ready supply of tires for the cars in the collection.

The museum had grown frustrated at the difficulty in re-tiring the dozens of vintage cars. "Even tires on museum cars dry up and crack every seven years or so," as *Motor Trend* explained, and these cars were being driven regularly as well.<sup>3</sup> Availability of tires for historic vehicles that were no longer being made was limited. So Rockefeller bought the Gehrige Tire Company's

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<sup>1</sup> "The Winthrop Rockefeller Collection," *Motor Trend*, May 1966, 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> PJA stood for Petit Jean Attractions, the parent company of the Museum of Automobiles.

<sup>3</sup> "The Winthrop Rockefeller Collection," 44-45.

factory in Harlan, Indiana, and had it delivered to Petit Jean. The equipment was 40 years old but still worked fine.

A few months into the tire factory's operation, they began allowing museum visitors to go downstairs and watch the production process through a window in the wall. This only continued for a couple of years, however. In 1968 they sold the factory equipment and tire molds to the Universal Vintage Tire Company in Hershey, Pennsylvania, where it is said to still be in use.

The Museum of Automobiles lent out vehicles in their collection for various purposes, including publicity. In his 1966 gubernatorial campaign, Rockefeller set three cars (including his beloved 1914 Cretor's popcorn wagon) out on display across the street from his Little Rock campaign headquarters to promote his campaign. At the 1968 HemisFair World's Fair in San Antonio, a 1904 Oldsmobile from the museum stood in front of the Arkansas pavilion to draw attention to the state.

Sometimes movie producers requested historic cars from the museum to use in their films. Four 1930s-era cars were lent for the Shelly Winters movie, "Bloody Mama," which was filmed in Arkansas. In 1972, actor Rock Hudson was injured in an accident involving a car from the museum. Rockefeller had loaned his 1900 steam-powered Locomobile to Universal Studios because of his friendship with producer George Seaton. Hudson was learning to drive it for the film, but lost control and crashed it, damaging the vehicle and breaking his leg and wrist.

Meanwhile, the collection continued to grow more prestigious. In the late 1960s, an antique car collector from Little Rock named Atley Davis found a rare 1920 Climber automobile in a barn in Oklahoma. He bought it, fixed it up, and sold it to Rockefeller for display in the Museum of Automobiles. The Climber Motor Corporation had been the only auto manufacturer based in Arkansas. Their factory in Little Rock produced around 200 of the cars between 1919 and 1923, and this one was thought at the time to be the last Climber in existence, making it a very special addition to the museum.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the museum's prestige and activity, by 1968 Rockefeller was saying the museum "isn't performing the way it should."<sup>5</sup> It was receiving plenty of visitors (apparently averaging about 50,000 to 55,000 per year), but it seems to have been struggling to sustain itself financially. Rockefeller didn't want to sell it but was playing around with the idea of leasing it to someone

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<sup>4</sup> Learn more about the history of the Climber Motor Corporation with AHPP's 2022 Sandwiching in History tour of the Climber Motor Car Factory in Little Rock. The video is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmBtdaQAmU>, and the tour script can be downloaded from <https://www.arkansasheritage.com/docs/default-source/ahpp-documents/sandwiching-tour-scripts/sandwiching-in-history---climber-motor-car-factory-little-rock-november-2022---script.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "Museum of Automobiles," *Corpus Christi Times*, April 26, 1968, 13.

at Hot Springs. Other times he also talked about someday donating it to the State of Arkansas. Nevertheless, he held on to it.

## The End of an Era

Winthrop Rockefeller was elected governor of Arkansas in 1966 and again in 1968, holding office until 1971. He died on February 22, 1973, at the age of 60. The museum was the site of his memorial service, and it was a big event.

The antique cars were removed to the basement, and the museum was decorated with large sprays of flowers and banks of greenery. Two thousand folding chairs were set out, but it was not enough to accommodate all the people who came. When the chairs were filled with guests and several hundred additional standing people maxed out the museum's capacity, guests who arrived after that sat outside on chairs around the fountain and listened to the service on the loudspeakers. Eventually the grounds were packed and police started turning people away. Estimates ranged from 3,000 to 5,000 guests in attendance.

Dignitaries from around the country came to pay their respects. Vice President Spiro Agnew was here, along with three governors and two former governors of Arkansas and various other states, and of course the entire Rockefeller family. (Winthrop's brother Nelson was the governor of New York at the time.)

The museum, then only 9 years old, was so tied to Rockefeller's identity and dependent on his money that the big question was what would happen to it now that he was gone?

Trustees were named as executors of Rockefeller's estate. His will commissioned them to handle the estate according to their judgment of how to honor his legacy of investing in the causes he believed in. Rockefeller's interests and assets were vast; this process would take a while, and the trustees were not in a hurry.

Meanwhile, the museum kept doing business as usual, admitting visitors, maintaining cars, rotating out exhibits, hosting the annual auto fair and swap meet, and expanding the collections.

Two of Rockefeller's personal cars were added to the museum and went immediately on display, although one of them was not very old yet. One was a 1951 Cadillac Fleetwood Seventy-Five that he arrived in Arkansas in in 1953. The other was his 1967 Cadillac limousine with a custom hood ornament of a solid silver Santa Gertrudis bull. They are still on display.

Downstairs, the museum installed an antique drug store and souvenir shop. The furnishings of the drug store had been given to Rockefeller by his wife, Jeannette, in 1967 for their 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary. She had bought the entire interior of the Baker Drug Store in Stamps after traveling there for a speaking engagement. The drug store's fixtures and furnishings had been in continuous use from 1902 until she bought them.

All the while, the question of what would happen to the car collection and the museum hung over it all, and it kept Arkansas in a state of anticipation. In late 1974, a consultant recommended that the museum and its contents—valued between \$1 and \$2.5 million—be turned over to the state. The Department of Parks and Tourism was ready to accept it if offered. Although the museum had been operating at a slight loss, Parks and Tourism Director William Henderson said he thought the museum could be self-sustaining or at least break even, but he couldn't guarantee. It was expensive to operate, although the state could do it more cheaply because they wouldn't have to pay taxes and because the salaries of the ten full-time employees would have to be reduced to fit into the state compensation scale.

The estate trustees expressed an interest in this outcome, but they clarified that it was one of many options they were exploring. Certain conditions would have to be met—which the Parks, Recreation and Tourism Commission agreed to—and the transfer would have to be approved by both Governor Dale Bumpers and the Legislative Council, both of which also expressed interest.

Nevertheless, some saw it as a risky move. They argued that the museum could never be profitable, located as it was on an out-of-the-way mountaintop and therefore not accessible to enough tourist traffic to sustain it.

The Hot Springs Advertising and Promotion Commission, realizing that the state's position was iffy, sent the trustees a telegram expressing their interest in having the museum collection turned over to the City of Hot Springs in the event that things didn't work out with the state. Their claim was that "Hot Springs is the leading tourist area of Arkansas," and that "there is a larger potential for visitors than there is in Petit Jean."<sup>6</sup>

It took another year, but in the late 1975 the trustees made their decision. Perhaps state officials hadn't shown enough confidence that the museum wouldn't be liability, because in the end, the executors didn't entrust them with the cars. To the surprise of the Parks and Tourism Department and others in the state, nearly all of the antique auto collection was sold to Harrah's Museum in Reno, Nevada, which had around 1,500 classic cars. The executors announced that the sale "was more in keeping with the charitable priorities expressed by Governor Rockefeller."<sup>7</sup> More than 70 of Rockefeller's 82 cars were sold for \$947,000, which

<sup>6</sup> "Spa Makes Bid as New Location of Auto Museum," *Hot Springs New Era*, September 7, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> "Rockefeller Estate to Sell Vehicles in Petit Jean Museum of Automobiles," *Arkansas Gazette*, August 12, 1975.



went to the Winthrop Rockefeller Charitable Trust. The one-of-a-kind Climber went to Harrah's also. Only a handful of cars were kept because they were special to the family.

With the building now just an empty garage, the museum had to close.

## A New Beginning

The following year, the trustees donated the vacant Museum of Automobiles building to the state. The Department of Parks and Tourism gladly accepted it, and knowing it was designed specifically to exhibit antique cars and would have limited other uses, they leased it to a group of 10 Arkansas antique car collectors under a newly created nonprofit organization called the Museum of Automobiles, Inc. Buddy Hoelzeman, the museum's former director under Rockefeller, would continue as the director of the new Museum of Automobiles. The public reaction to the closing of the popular museum resulted in an outpouring of donations and support for the new museum, helping them to a solid launch.

Other than the cars on display, not much outwardly changed from the old museum. The Museum of Automobiles reopened in June of 1976 with 35 cars, mostly on loan from collectors as well as remaining cars from the original Rockefeller collection, with plans to increase the display to 48 cars by later in the year. The museum has always felt that around 50 cars is the sweet spot for how many cars can be displayed effectively at a time. Some of the cars on exhibit would rotate out after a year or so to allow other ones to be displayed, so that visitors would keep coming back.

In 1977, the Museum of Automobiles got another Climber. Atley Davis, who had sold the 1920 Climber to the museum in the 1960s, when it was thought that was the only one left, found another one, a 1923 six-cylinder, in Oklahoma, which he bought, restored, and donated to the museum. He had been unable to reacquire the earlier 1920 Climber from Harrah's. Then in 1989, one of the Museum of Automobile board members did succeed in buying it back, so that now the Museum of Automobiles has both of the last two Climber cars known in existence.

And the Mid-America Old Time Automobile Association continued to use the museum as its national headquarters and host the annual antique auto show and swap meet. The meet that started with about 2,000 participants was drawing 25,000 by the 1980s and nearly 100,000 by the 1990s.

The museum still delights visitors who come to see the stars of its core collection and exhibits of other cars on loan. It continues to be supported by admissions, souvenir sales, car shows and swap meets, and donations.

## An “Ultramodern Structure”: A Word About the Architecture

The importance of this museum isn’t just due to the cars or even the history behind it. Its mid-century modern design is actually quite significant in its own right. Most people who visit it probably notice instinctively that it’s not a typical museum design. But unless you’re someone who pays attention to architecture or structural engineering, you might just hurry to the cars and not think to ask why this architecture is so distinctive.

When Winthrop Rockefeller decided to build a museum to house his automobile collection, he turned to the firm of Ginocchio, Cromwell, Carter, Dees & Neyland, who had designed Rockefeller’s home and farm. They put two of their most talented architects, Dietrich Neyland and Robert Millet, on the design of the project, with Oliver Gatchell doing the engineering.

Their client needed a large open space to display the cars; support pillars in the interior would obstruct the view. Rockefeller did not want it to look like a grocery store. Their creative solution was to use a tensile cable structural system to suspend the roof from the building’s four corners.

The tensile cable concept is simple. You see it in a tent or a suspension bridge, which have been used for ages. But it wasn’t until the late 1800s that Russian engineer Vladimir Shukhov developed one of the first practical calculations of stresses and deformations of tensile structures. He used the principles in structures for the 1896 Nizhny Novgorod Fair, but it didn’t gain widespread application until the late twentieth century, starting with German architect Frei Otto’s West German Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal and his Olympic Stadium in 1972. So Neyland and Millet were charting a bold course in 1964 with the design of this museum.

The Cromwell firm had used the tensile cable concept once before, but on a much smaller scale and with a circular design, in the 1957 Union National Bank Drive-In in Little Rock. The Museum of Automobiles is therefore an early and significant example of tensile-cable construction in the state of Arkansas.

In order to suspend the roof by cables across the 150-foot-square space—a quarter of a city block—Neyland, Millet, and Gatchell utilized a squared variation of a compression ring held aloft by four corner columns or pylons that are anchored in 20-foot cubes of concrete. These corner columns are connected by cast-concrete beams, which, under pressure from the weight of the roof, work as a compression ring to buttress the columns. Suspended from a 30-foot height at the top of the columns, the roof, clad with a membrane and copper sheets, drapes down from 24 high-strength bridge strand cables to the center, where it is 15 feet above the floor.



A 1966 Bethlehem Steel ad boasted about their cables being used in the structure of the museum's roof and described it this way, "Radiating from the four corner posts, the steel cables pass through a cruciform steel strut back to each adjacent corner post. The strut stabilizes the roof and divides it into four equal parts. A grid of wood purlins is connected to the cables and roofing is nailed over it."<sup>8</sup> In keeping with Modern ideals, the structural elements are open to view.

Lauded in the press as "ultramodern," the building quickly gained acclaim.<sup>9</sup> It was featured in numerous publications, and descriptions of the new museum generally mentioned the remarkable architecture in addition to the cars. The *Arkansas Democrat*, in announcing the museum's opening in October 1964, said, "This building will interest ordinary visitors as well as architects, engineers and museum curators. It is an innovation in museum design. ... It is a pleasure to see an imaginative design, practical, and artistically frank in use of materials, as in the automobile museum that will be dedicated Sunday."<sup>10</sup>

It was intended to be a structure as progressive and iconic as the man who commissioned it. For its importance as an early example of tensile cable construction in Arkansas, the Museum of Automobiles was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2018 with statewide significance.

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<sup>8</sup> Bethlehem Steel, "Steel Cables Support Roof of Arkansas Auto Museum," advertisement in *Progressive Architecture*, May 1966, 89.

<sup>9</sup> "Autos Displayed on Petit Jean," *Arkansas Democrat*, May 15, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> "Rare Exhibit in a Unique Building," *Arkansas Democrat*, October 17, 1964.

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