JEAN SHEPHERD

Happy birthday, United States of the Automobile.

• In just 100 years, barring unforseen cataclysm such as collisions with out-of-orbit planets and other such bad-news events, we'll be celebrating our Tricentennial. More accurately, *they'll* be celebrating our Tricentennial, since most of us will be dusty memories, if we're lucky. There'll be a tidal wave of magazine articles and fancy picture essays written by heavy thinkers from places like the Hudson Institute, but I'm afraid when all is said and done, life as it will actually be lived in 2076 will bear little relationship to what we in 1976 imagine. Do you think for one split instant any fever-brained soothsayers of 1876 could have predicted the possibility of a Howard Cosell? Or that a few Arabs wearing Foster Grants would be in virtual control of the entire civilized world? Just to be sure, I looked up a reprint of a magazine article that appeared in July of 1876. The writer, a highly respected pundit of his time, predicted that "the year of 1976 will surely see the end of wars as we know them. Pestilence and disease will have disappeared, since science and technology will have rendered disease a rarity. Famine will be unknown, and man will have learned to live in harmony. . . ." I'm glad that poor geezer didn't live to see the Long Island Expressway at rush hour.

A hundred years ago, there were a few tinkerers who figured that it was possible to build something that would be able to crawl around on the gravel roads without having a horse hitched to it. This conceit had been around even then for some time, and a few abortive attempts had been made to pull it off. Several flame-belching monsters had been put together, using scalding-hot steam engines and giant wooden wheels. They usually included a mast and sail, and the forward-thinking citizens of the day clung to these devices while they crept about at four or five miles an hour.

Maybe the most important thing the heavy-browed prognosticators of 100 years ago failed to predict is the insane grip that the automobile has on mankind. In fact, the automobile itself was only dimly hinted at in those days. I have no doubt that something that's lurking on the outskirts of our lives today will, in the next century, take over the world and, in its turn, reduce people to bondage. Who among us is not a slave to his car? Endless payments, vapor locks, insurance, tolls and the ever-present human lice who rip off antennas and bash in grilles just for the sheer rottenness of it. All so that you could get in line with 400,000 other victims to creep to the beach where the water has been polluted by tankers bringing gasoline to the pumps to enable you to get to the beach, which, in turn . . . well, why go on? It is a mad dance that would have boggled the imagination of any good burgher attending the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition back in 1876.

All these turgid thoughts were drifting like stale cigar smoke through my mind as I sat on U.S. 22 in an inching line of steamy metal creeping along a single detour lane around a New Jersey construction site where eight guys wearing yellow hats appeared to be playing pinochle. Behind me, a giant Peterbilt tractor breathed flame on my rear window and threatened to suck me right up into its air cleaners like the rest of the neighborhood pollution. Ahead, a scrawny, blue-haired lady was stolidly driving a green '69 Ford station wagon filled with 30 or 40 yelling kids madly stuffing their faces with Big Macs. Through the din of horns and outraged tempers outside, I could hear the mellow tones of Charles Kuralt on my Z-car's radio. He was interviewing an old gentleman from West Virginia who made zithers out of table matches. Kuralt, in his creamy style, finished up neatly with, "And so this is Charles Kuralt, on the road in '76, discovering America." The ball scores came on and my mind wandered even farther afield. Will they be playing tapes of today's radio programs in 2076 to see how we celebrated the Bicentennial? Probably—but will the West Virginia zither-maker tell them much about our time?

Around me, the traffic bellowed and boomed, and it hit me that maybe a 15-minute tape of just the random sounds of traffic on the George Washington Bridge at 5 p.m. would be fascinating to the people of 2076. After all, there may be *no* traffic in 2076. By then, the idea of owning a personal automobile may be as archaic as owning, say, a Conestoga wagon. Wouldn't it be fantastic to have a tape, made right on the spot, at a pony express stop as the Wells Fargo stage roared by in 1876? I don't mean the Hollywood version but the real thing: dogs barking, chickens clucking, harness creaking, drivers hollering at the big brown buggers. That would be a tape worth hearing.

Already plans are under way to preserve parts of our civilization. For example, in Massachusetts there is a historical group that has already marked out a classic Howard Johnson's, a Dairy Queen, a J. C. Penney store and a couple of Mass Pike toll booths for preservation. They have also set aside a Texaco station, complete with grease rack and a collection of current Texaco road maps—which, by the way, are already disappearing from the gas-station scene. And they have already collected a whole warehouse full of contemporary road signs, the kind you see every day—the grim-looking advertising models peering out, saying things like "I smoke for taste" or "I like the box." In a few years, these signs will be as rare and exotic as Bull Durham barns.

So take a good look at the world through your windshield down that great white line to eternity. Because it won't be long before museum-goers will look at the cars and streets in the backgrounds of circa-1976 Robert Redford films and think us as exotic as we do the scenes of 1876 Philadelphia or Williamsburg in 1776. •

TERRY LAMB