



Nick Yablon. *Remembrance of Things Present: The Invention of the Time Capsule.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 384 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-57413-4.

Reviewed by Ellen Adams (Alice T. Miner Museum)

Published on H-SHGAPE (March, 2020)

Commissioned by William S. Cossen (The Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science, and Technology)

When Westinghouse Electric created its Time Capsule in conjunction with the 1939 New York World's Fair, it introduced a new term but not an entirely new concept. As Nick Yablon demonstrates in *Remembrance of Things Present: The Invention of the Time Capsule*, the practice of placing objects into a sealed vessel to be opened at some future date first emerged around the time of the United States centennial celebrations of 1876. These early repositories were limited to photography, but the essential ideas behind the time capsule were already present at that date.

Yablon identifies a number of major concerns and desires that motivated the creation of time vessels. First, there was the desire to mark the passage of time, usually in conjunction with a significant date (such as a centennial or the turn of the century) in order to assert historical continuity, and to foster national identity through the imagining of a shared future. They were also motivated by anxieties particular to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: fears of potential threats to civilization, whether from political revolution or the effects of future unknown technologies, that required the safeguarding of cultural knowledge; doubts about the efficacy of traditional institutions charged with guarding public memory, such as monuments and archives; and an overwhelming sense of information overload due

to the amount of ephemeral material constantly being produced, which seemed to call for some kind of preselection or curation of items that were worthy of being preserved.

Historians of public memory and commemoration have demonstrated the various ways that constructions of the past shape communities' ideas about themselves in the present. Yablon argues convincingly that conceptions of the *future* also play a significant role in representing and shaping community identity. In deciding what objects and messages they wanted to include in time vessels, individuals and communities were encouraged to develop a sense of obligation and even affection towards posterity that might shape their actions in the present.

Although most time capsules were managed by elite organizations or individuals, they had the potential to be—and often were—more accessible and collaborative than many other traditional memory projects. Women, people of color, and working-class Americans all had opportunities to contribute to time vessels. And in an era when most libraries and archives limited their collections to the written records of “important” people, time vessels preserved the materials of everyday life and were quick to embrace new media technologies such as photography. As Yablon puts it, time capsules were not inherently or necessarily

intentionally politically progressive, but they could be used in progressive ways.

Yablon begins his account with two projects associated with the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. Anna Deihm and Charles D. Mosher each assembled collections of photographic portraits of politicians, literary figures, entrepreneurs, scientists (and, in Mosher's case, anyone willing to pay to have their picture included), which, following the exposition, would be placed in safes in secure locations—Deihm intended hers to rest in the US Capitol Building's Statuary Hall; Mosher's in Chicago's city hall—until they were opened in 1976. As Yablon notes, beneath the surface of the centennial celebrations was an undercurrent of anxiety about threats to the nation: continued sectional conflict, racial violence, political scandal, and labor unrest. Yet there was still hope that these problems would be resolved in a more distant future, and the bicentennial came to represent a "horizon of reconciliation," a future "utopian state" in which the problems of the present day have somehow been resolved (p. 31). Deihm's and Mosher's bicentennial photographic vessels, in confidently assuming that there would still be a United States a hundred years hence, reaffirmed the ultimate stability of the nation.

Three years later, dentist Henry D. Cogswell of San Francisco made his own deposit, which he called "a great Antiquarian Postoffice." Cogswell's vessel was part of a larger monument that included a statue of Benjamin Franklin and a water fountain (to promote the cause of temperance). Cogswell, an eccentric millionaire, intended his time vessel to memorialize his own life, career, and role in the history of San Francisco, but he also extended an invitation to San Franciscans of all ages and walks of life to contribute. Unlike Mosher's and Deihm's purely photographic collections, Cogswell's "P.O. Box to the Future" included material objects of everyday life and a comprehensive archive of local newspapers and magazines intended to assist future historians.

While the time capsule made frequent appearances in fiction during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, actual vessels were scarce in the 1880s and 1890s, only to reemerge at the turn of the century. Yablon devotes two chapters to analysis of seven "centennial vessels" deposited in 1900 and 1901 by institutions (Harvard College, Mount Holyoke College, the First Congregational Church of Rockland, Massachusetts, and the Peabody Institute Library) and municipalities (Kansas City, Detroit, and Colorado Springs).

The turn-of-the-century time capsules all shared a commitment to capturing the typical and the everyday through, for example, photographs of campus buildings and journals of daily activities. They also explicitly looked ahead to 2000 or 2001 and included predictions about the future and messages addressed to descendants—both blood relatives and professional or official successors. Because contributors had the option to seal their messages unread, they often felt emboldened to criticize aspects of their institution, city, or the nation as a whole and express doubts about the inevitability of unbroken progress. But when they looked ahead one hundred years, it was generally with optimism that the problems of the present would be resolved by then. Yablon identifies these messages as "utopian wishes" which should be taken seriously as expressions of hope for a future in which anything was possible. In contrast to the "closed, deterministic future of the scientific experts, the future imagined in the time vessels was an open-ended realm of potentiality" (p. 106). Moreover, the time vessels encouraged people to look at everyday life with fresh eyes and could potentially spur action on behalf of posterity. Louis Erich, the organizer of the Colorado Springs time capsule, coined the term "posteritism" to describe this sense of duty to future generations; for Yablon the affective bond that time vessels can create with people who do not yet exist is one of the most powerful arguments in their favor as instruments of social change.

Time capsules were not without their detractors. Within the Harvard community, for example, critics argued that capsules were unnecessary because future historians would have no shortage of documentary materials to work with; there was no way to know what material would be thought interesting or important in a hundred years. They questioned the objectivity of sources, particularly the journals that faculty and students were asked to keep, noting that deliberately setting out to create a historical document would inevitably shape the content of the source. But the seriousness with which many people approached their time vessel contributions, and contemplated their relationship with the future, suggests that backward-looking nostalgia was not the only or inevitable response to the upheavals of the present.

Yablon expands upon the idea of a time capsule in the chapter devoted to the Modern Historic Records Association (MHRA). Though it was vastly more ambitious in scope than the centennial safes or chests, aiming to “preserve in imperishable form the records of history” at the national and even international level on an ongoing basis, it was motivated by many of the same impulses. Established in 1911 by New York banker Alexander Konta, the MHRA’s goal was to preserve the details of everyday life, “from regional dialects and folk songs to indigenous rituals” (p. 193). Perhaps more than any other organization or project with preservation goals, it embraced the new technologies of sound recording, photography, and cinematography as mediums for transmitting history (the Library of Congress, by contrast, did not have a film division until the 1940s). Film and phonography held the promise of (apparently) producing objective and authoritative records, and were thought to be less perishable and vulnerable to the ravages of time and the elements than paper documents. The MHRA also experimented with various methods of creating records using metal plates and stone or clay tablets.

The MHRA received criticism similar to that leveled at the centennial vessels. Observers pointed out the inherent contradictions in essentially trying to predetermine which contemporary events would someday be of historical importance. As one critic stated, all people could really do was save what they could and hope for the best: “Take your chances on having stored away the essential things. The historians of that older age will then make their own selections and draw their own conclusions” (p. 233). In its zeal to provide the future with a complete record, the MHRA inevitably let its own present concerns shape the contents of the archive.

Yablon concludes by looking at three interwar time capsules that illustrate the changes undergone by these projects as they (like so many other aspects of American life) fell under the influence of corporate and technocratic power. William Harvey’s *Pyramid* (1925), Duren Ward’s *Records to Future Ages* (1928), and Thornwell Jacobs’s *Crypt of Civilization* (1935) were not collaborative enterprises but were tightly controlled by single individuals in consultation with scientific experts. Their vessels would be sealed for much longer than earlier time capsules—thousands, possibly even hundreds of thousands of years—and they were motivated by the organizers’ certainty of imminent civilizational collapse. Like Westinghouse’s 1939 time capsule, which included many examples of its own products, these vessels emphasized new industrial technologies and the transmission of “objective” data to future experts, thus eliminating the affective relationship with posterity that had characterized earlier vessels. These time capsules’ creators were also wholehearted in their embrace of eugenics as “a cure-all for a range of social problems” (p. 271).

These accounts of real time capsules are interwoven with analysis of their frequent appearances in popular fiction throughout the time period of the study. Fictional accounts often involved time travel to a distant future when American civiliza-

tion had collapsed and the surviving population has reverted to “primitive” conditions. The contents of a time capsule, discovered by the time travelers (and which only they had the knowledge to interpret) provided the foundations for rebuilding society. In other variants of the time capsule story, a small number of texts or artifacts were all that remained in a post-apocalyptic society; because these sources were accidental survivals, they were contextless and only partially intelligible. These types of stories, Yablon argues, “implied a need for deliberate efforts to speak to posterity, via intended sources” (p. 199).

When time capsules were opened (if they were opened at all), they generally failed to produce the kind of fanfare and transports of joy among historians that their creators had anticipated. One Capitol staffer, present at the opening of Anna Deihm’s Centennial Safe in 1976, remarked, “Mrs. Deihm did not seem to have a very good concept of what would be important and interesting a hundred years later,” thus bearing out the criticisms that had been leveled at time capsules by some contemporaries. Once the vessels were opened, their contents were “consigned to archival oblivion” and in many cases dispersed into the larger collection (pp. 293-94). Historians have shown little interest in time capsule contents, and indeed Yablon is the first scholar to examine many of these materials.

As historians, it is perhaps inevitable that we think primarily about how the past shapes the present. Yablon’s exploration of the time capsule is a powerful argument for paying equal attention to how historical subjects thought about the future. As he demonstrates, whether real or fictional, time capsules are “good to think with,” offering a venue for explorations of the passage of time, the nature of the historical record, and our duties toward posterity.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Ellen Adams. Review of Yablon, Nick. *Remembrance of Things Present: The Invention of the Time Capsule*. H-SHGAPPE, H-Net Reviews. March, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54398>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.