

Remembrance of Things Present: The Invention of the Time Capsule

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tional revision. By 1932, a wave of popular pressure—combined with the Hoover Administration’s enactment of harsh federal penalties for violators of an increasingly inept enforcement regime, the infiltration of prohibition into partisan politics, and the impact of the depression—led to the collapse of state enforcement laws in the Northeast. State conventions, usually elected by popular vote, sped the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment, ending national Prohibition. According to Beienburg, constitutionally conscious antiprohibitionists found a way to assert states’ rights and popular will within a legal framework. He hopes their actions will become a model for contemporary movements harnessing popular constitutionalism.

Beienburg’s reconstruction of state-level efforts to balance states’ rights and national authority will influence future Prohibition research. The sharp constitutional focus and present-mindedness of Beienburg’s study may prove less satisfying to historians. Beienburg examined state legislative journals and newspapers to construct his complicated timeline of legislative debates, but they could be more clearly rendered. Minimal social and political context frames the analysis of debates. Beienburg largely overlooks deficiencies in state enforcement that sometimes predated legislative discussions. The Great Depression probably was more central to Prohibition’s collapse than Beienburg admits. Despite the referenda, popular voices are distant. Legal historians and constitutional scholars have much to gain from Beienburg’s study. Prohibition historians will consult it, but with care.

Remembrance of Things Present: The Invention of the Time Capsule, by Nick Yablon. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 407 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45 hardcover.

Reviewer Benjamin Filene is chief curator at the North Carolina Museum of History. In 1995 he curated *Time Capsules: History Goes Underground*, an exhibition at the Outagamie County Historical Society in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Cultural history can help us glimpse how people from the past saw their world. In *Remembrance of Things Present: The Invention of the Time Capsule*, Nick Yablon achieves this goal in a way that would likely appeal to the eccentric, earnest assemblage of hoarders, hucksters, and visionaries he profiles: he takes seriously the messages they aspired to send to the future, the forces that shaped those aspirations, and their efforts—sometimes successful, sometimes spectacularly short-circuited—to transmit material-culture missives forward in time. In doing so, Yablon takes readers on a wild ride that offers new insights into how

late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans understood historical memory and their own ephemeral place in history.

The premise behind Yablon's undertaking is that a time capsule is a uniquely interesting historical source. Historians, he writes, have traditionally prized "involuntary sources" — traces of the past that have "inadvertently survived" (8). Time capsules, though, were created explicitly for historians. Such intentionality can invite skepticism. Yablon deliciously quotes William James: "It used to be enough for a generation to make raw history. Now we must half-cook it for the future historian, and soon we shall have to compose it for him in advance. What an easy time he'll have in the year 2000 simply unsealing & transcribing a finished work!" For Yablon, though, there is nothing simple about the challenge. He methodically, imaginatively, exhaustively shows that these messages from the past offer historians a window into the values and blindnesses of Americans struggling to make sense of their times.

Yablon's first historiographical intervention is to broaden the definition and chronological range of his subject. The term *time capsule* was famously coined by Westinghouse for the missile-shaped, 800-pound cylinder it lowered into an "Immortal Well" at the 1939 World's Fair (to be opened in 6939 A.D.). Yablon, though, traces to the 1870s the effort to make "intentional deposits" with specified dates for opening, citing "more than thirty" such examples (2–4). With these predecessors in mind, he prefers the broader term *time vessel*. Most of *Remembrance of Things Present* focuses on unpacking meaning from these antecedents: the "Century Safe" that magazine publisher Anna Deihm assembled for the 1876 Centennial Exposition; the "P.O. Box to the Future" that H. D. Cogswell embedded in a monumental fountain in San Francisco; the "centurial vessels" assembled around 1900 in Kansas City, Detroit, and Colorado Springs and at Harvard and Mount Holyoke; and an elaborate effort by the Modern Historic Records Association in New York (1911–1914).

At a glance, these projects may seem worthy of being buried in footnotes, but Yablon connects them to an astonishing array of people, events, and movements — eugenics, women's rights, Christian socialism, dystopian fiction — and such wondrous inventions as cellulose acetate (which enabled microform books) and concrete (which promised eternal solidity). Yablon traces each of these tendrils carefully, offering deeply researched mini-histories along the way and contextualizing with insights from philosophers, cultural theorists, and sci-fi futurists. The result is impressive, but sometimes leaves the reader struggling to see a bigger picture beyond the fact that time vessels were very much in and of their world.

The book feels more grounded, though, when Yablon considers his material through the frame of *posteritism*, a term coined by Colorado Springs vessel-creator Louis Ehrich to suggest (in Yablon's words) "a sense of duty to posterity." Posteritism neatly conveys a recognition of one's place in a flow of time from past to present to future. All of Yablon's quirky characters share that awareness acutely and wrestle with its implications in ways ambitious and, often, painful.

These all-so-human dynamics give *Remembrance of Things Present* its energy and relevance today. Such opportunities for contemporary connection make puzzling Yablon's dismissal of the 1939 World's Fair capsule as "corporate and technocratic appropriation" (236). He convincingly shows that public relations and product placement shaped that capsule's contents, but, by denigrating such projects as inauthentic, Yablon implies that the earlier efforts he chronicles were somehow more pure. Saying that time capsules show "diminishing potential" after 1940, he ends his story just at the moment when the capsules captured popular imagination (20). The hundreds and thousands of "underground history" efforts deposited since 1939 get treated as spin-offs of the "corporate variant," addressed just in an epilogue (297).

The fine-grained determination with which Yablon digs into the earlier time vessels and his relative lack of interest in later time capsules may make *Remembrance of Things Present* less compelling to casual readers. But the depth of his research, the fearlessness with which he pursues leads, and the heft of the questions he asks along the way offer historians rare opportunities to dissect history making in motion. "Half-cooked history," Yablon shows, need not mean half-baked and, in fact, provides rich and sustaining insights.

The Civilian Conservation Corps in Wisconsin: Nature's Army at Work, by Jerry Apps. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2019. xii, 211 pp. Map, illustrations, sidebars, notes, index. \$18.95 paperback.

Reviewer Rebecca Conard is professor of history emeritus at Middle Tennessee State University. She is the author of *Places of Quiet Beauty: Parks, Preserves, and Environmentalism* (1997).

Jerry Apps, who has published more than 35 books on rural life in Wisconsin, has written an engaging book that delves into the experiences and accomplishments of Wisconsin "boys" — teenagers and twenty-somethings — who enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the Great Depression. Although most of those who served in the CCC are no longer with us, public interest remains high in this successful federal program to provide productive work, job training, and some