

Scott Myers-Lipton, 2021
“ Gaylord Nelson’s Earth Day and the Burying of a New Ford Maverick”



Gaylord Nelson speaks to an Earth Day crowd in Denver, Colorado, on April 22, 1970. You can also [view the speech notes by Nelson](#).

Historical Background:

In 1934, Gaylord Nelson graduated from high school in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. After graduation, Gaylord tried two small colleges in Wisconsin, but realized he didn't yet have the skills to be successful in college, and wasn't yet ready to commit to studying. Gaylord decided to work for a year on road construction for the Works Progress Administration (WPA); at the end of the year, he decided to try college again, and this time he was ready to focus on his studies. Gaylord decided to attend San José State College, as his two sisters had also attended, and his Aunt Gertrude was a voice teacher on campus. San José State was 2,000 miles from home, and the student population was five times the size of Clear Lake. While in school, Gaylord focused on his studies, and he graduated with honors in political science.ⁱ

Gaylord returned to Clear Lake, where he decided to become a politician, first as a State Senator, then as Governor of Wisconsin, and finally, as a U.S. Senator. His passion was the environment, and as governor, he led the effort to pass a model conservation program to preserve wildlife habitat, open space, and recreational land with a one-cent sales tax on a pack of cigarettes. As a U.S. Senator, Gaylord continued promoting environmentalism, as he was the first senator to propose the banning of the pesticide DDT, and he worked tirelessly to ban phosphates in detergents.ⁱⁱ

In 1969, Senator Nelson was touring the West Coast, and it was here that he came up with his biggest idea yet to protect the environment. He had just toured a horrific oil spill in Santa Barbara, and he was flying to San Francisco, when he read an article focusing on how college students were using “teach-ins” as a way to educate the public about why it was important to oppose the war in Vietnam. He thought to himself, why not have an “environmental teach-in” to educate the public on the environmental threats to the planet. He knew there were already plans at several colleges, including San José State, to have campus protests in 1970 focusing on the environmental crisis. He thought, “If we could tap into the environmental concerns of the general public and infuse the student anti-war energy into the environmental cause, we could generate a

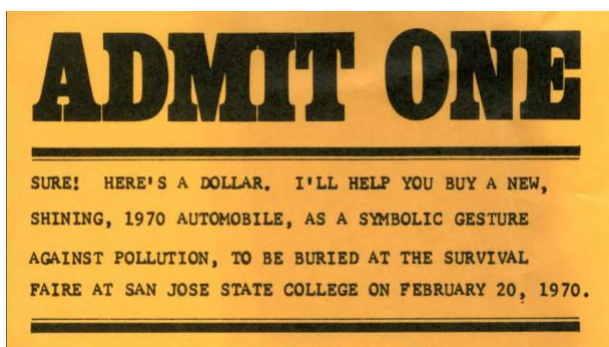
demonstration that would force the issue onto the national political agenda.” In Seattle, Senator Nelson decided to announce a call to hold environmental teach-ins during the following spring, and he chose April 22nd as the day.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Events:



As Earth Day approached, San José State students in a Humanities 160 course created a class project that sent ripples throughout the nation. Dr. John Sperling had encouraged his 19 students, mostly art majors, to learn about a social problem, and then to take action to correct it. His students became interested in the environmental crisis facing the nation and world, and they came up with the idea of burying a car to help bring attention to the crisis. As Peter Ellis, a student organizer, recalls, “We were sitting around and somebody said, ‘We ought to bury an engine.’ Before the night was over, we were going to bury a Dodge Charger, a muscle car.” As part of this “street theater” event, students planned a “Survival Faire”, which included speakers, films, and of course, the burying of a new car, with the goal being to create a symbolic message, similar to the Boston Tea Party, that would galvanize the nation to end the production of millions of gasoline engines that were polluting the planet.

The students choose Feb. 20, six weeks before the 1st Earth Day, to bury the new car. In the month leading up to the first Earth Day, the students put their plan into action, raising \$2,500 by selling shares of the car, enough to buy a new Ford Maverick. The students purchased the new Maverick from a Los Gatos car dealership, and they pushed it 12 miles to San José State. Once on campus, they put the car on display next to a prototype of a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) car, with one representing the past, and the other the future. As Dr. Sperling recalls, “This was part of the whole movement for the first Earth Day, and everybody in the whole university was watching them...I was there for the car's arrival...They put it in the middle of campus with velvet ropes around it. It was really quite a handsome thing.”^{iv}



As the day for the burial approached, local and national TV and newspapers began to take notice, as well as some campus advocates for the poor. In fact, students from the Black Student Union (BSU) argued that instead of money going toward a symbolic action of burying a new Ford Maverick, it should rather be used to help people of color and the poor. A professor was so moved by the BSU that he committed to raise \$2,500 in a week for the Equal Opportunity Program.^v

On the day the Ford Maverick was to be buried, the students held a parade, pushing the car through the streets of downtown San José. The students walked as if in a funeral, along with three ministers and the San José State marching band playing in a dirge style. Students had dug a twelve-foot “grave”, right where the Cesar Chavez Plaza is today. With thousands of students watching, the new Ford Maverick was rolled into its grave, symbolically marking the death of the gas engine and car.^{vi}



A year later, the car was exhumed with the hope of being crushed into a small block in order to serve a cornerstone of the first rapid transit station in Santa Clara County.

In 1970, 20 million people participated in Earth Day. On that day, Senator Nelson stated,

How we survive is the critical question. Earth Day is dramatic evidence of a broad new national concern that cuts across generations and ideologies. It may be symbolic of a new communication between young and old about our values and priorities...Environment is all of America and its problems. It is rats in the ghetto. It is a hungry child in a land of affluence. It is housing that is not worthy of the name; neighborhoods not fit to inhabit. Environment is a problem perpetuated by the expenditure of billions a year on the Vietnam War, instead of on our decaying, crowded, congested, polluted urban areas that are inhuman traps for millions of people...Our goal is not just an environment of clean air and water and scenic beauty. The objective is an environment of decency, quality and mutual respect for all other human beings and all other living creatures.”

Today, 1 billion people participate in Earth Day in almost 200 countries.^{vii}

Resources:

- Gaylord Nelson’s First Earth Day Speech, <https://doorcountypulse.com/sen-gaylord-nelsons-earth-day-speech/>, (accessed September 3, 2021)
- Gaylord Nelson’s First Earth Day Speech, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oASqut7aSo (accessed September 3, 2021)
- SJSU Earth Day Collection, King Library, Digital Collection, <https://digitalcollections.sjsu.edu/earth-day> (accessed September 1, 2021)

FOOTNOTES

ⁱ Sheila Terman Cohen, *Gaylord Nelson: Champion for Our Earth* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2010).

ⁱⁱ Cohen, *Gaylord Nelson: Champion for Our Earth*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, “Gaylord Nelson and Earth Day”, *University of Wisconsin, Madison*, www.nelsonearthday.net/earth-day (accessed October 27, 2017), Keith Schneider, “Gaylord A. Nelson, Founder of Earth Day, Is Dead at 89,” *NY Times*, July 4, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/04/politics/gaylord-a-nelson-founder-of-earth-day-is-dead-at-89.html> (accessed October 27, 2017).

^{iv} Sam Whiting, “San Jose Car Burial Put Ecological Era in Gear,” *SF Gate*, April 20, 2010, www.sfgate.com/green/article/San-Jose-car-burial-put-ecological-era-in-gear-3266993.php (accessed November 3, 2017); John Woestendiek, *Dog, Inc.: How a Collection of Visionaries, Rebels, Eccentrics, and Their Pets Launched the Commercial Dog Cloning Industry*, E-book (Garden City, NY: Avery Trade, 2012).

^v Sam Whiting, “San Jose Car Burial Put Ecological Era in Gear,” *SF Gate*, April 20, 2010, www.sfgate.com/green/article/San-Jose-car-burial-put-ecological-era-in-gear-3266993.php (accessed November 3, 2017); John Woestendiek, *Dog, Inc.: How a Collection of Visionaries, Rebels, Eccentrics, and Their Pets Launched the Commercial Dog Cloning Industry*, E-book (Garden City, NY: Avery Trade, 2012).

^{vi} Sam Whiting, “San Jose Car Burial Put Ecological Era in Gear.”

^{vii} “More Than 1 Billion People Will Be Involved in Earth Day”, *Earth Day Network*, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/more-than-1-billion-people-will-be-involved-in-earth-day-300245267.html> (accessed November 4, 2017).