

Drivers of today, 1926 much the same

By Jerry Bowen

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Transportation seems to occupy a lot of space in newsprint today. High insurance rates, drunk driving, overcrowded highways and the huge number of cars on the road all seem to be a big problem.

Other tribulations include where to route roads and highways. Faulty tires causing major accidents also get a lot of attention as well as the high accident rate for juveniles.

I couldn't help wondering what things were like in the past, say 75 or so years ago. Are we repeating history? Have we learned anything from the past?

In 1926, compulsory auto insurance was being debated in the back rooms of our legislators. A local newspaper editor who was against the proposition stated in an editorial, "Only in 39 percent of cases investigated were automobile drivers at fault according to a survey." He went on to conclude, "The thing most essential today is to reduce the number of accidents, and not make it easier to have accidents at the expense of somebody else." Looking back from today, I guess you would have to say he was right on target.

Another survey conducted in 1926 concluded that the highest death rates in auto accidents were attributed to young folks aged 15 to 25. Unfortunately that's one statistic that repeats itself year after year.

On the subject of overcrowded highways, a 1926 article headlined, "1,475,913 cars in California in 1925," a net gain of 9.2 percent for the year. That may not seem like a whole lot today, but in those days there were fewer good highways and roads. Most were gravel and dirt and only a few of the newer "modern" highways were paved, and of course we had fewer people.

In 1926 highway designations were changed from names to numbers. For example, Lincoln Highway was re-designated as US-40. All major highways running north-south received odd numbering and east-west highways even numbers.

US-40 was a work in progress and it was built in what seemed to be random stages and later changed to the Interstate 80 we love to hate today. Even with the new numbering system, a portion of US-40 from Reno to Sacramento was also designated as the "Victory Highway" to commemorate winning WWI. The rest of the Victory

Highway followed the route along the Sacramento Delta on levees (today's Highway 160) to Antioch and finally to Oakland after much debate.

Tires in the early days of autos were pretty bad. Tire wear on macadam was 17 times greater than on concrete roads. Generally, a poor tire was good for 2,000 miles and on rare occasions the best tires of that day could get 34,000 miles. Life expectancy of a car in 1926 averaged four years.

In 1926, we were in the early stages of the Volstead Act; in other words, prohibition. Of course that didn't stop the flow of spirits and may have even contributed to increased consumption. Of course drunken driving was an escalating problem. In the 1920s drunken drivers were treated nonchalantly in the courts, usually getting off with a light fine.

An interesting story in Solano County illustrates just how drunk drivers were treated.

George Scoggans and J. D. Dunfield left Colusa to spend Christmas in Oakland, and were alleged to have admitted that they partook in excess of a little of the local moonshine.

Driving a new Dodge car on Christmas Eve, they skidded and turned it over near Cordelia. Sustaining minor injuries, they were taken to the county hospital where Dr. S. G. Bransford treated them.

The doctor attended Scoggans first and while he was looking after Dunfield, Scoggans took the doctor's car, intent upon getting to Oakland. But he was apparently still muddled and had lost his sense of direction. Instead of continuing west he weaved his way back to Fairfield. He drove down Empire Street to the courthouse and roared down the paved narrow driveway between the courthouse and jail at a high rate of speed.

Deputy Sheriff E. W. Newman's car was in the driveway and Scoggans drove up on the steep bank to avoid it, tearing off the car's top as the cars passed. Undaunted with the close call, he proceeded down Union Avenue and then Main Street in Suisun, still traveling at high speed, where he ran the car into the tules at the end of the street.

He abandoned the doctor's car and started to retrace his course on foot. Mrs. C. Ray Murry was driving her roadster when Scoggans jumped on the running board and ordered her to take him to Oakland. Screaming bloody murder, she rammed the car into the curb, and ran into a nearby store.

Scoggans ran down Main Street and found County Horticultural Commissioner Carl Spurlock's almost new Hupmobile in front of the post office. He leaped into the front

seat, started the car and is said to have made the trip to Oakland in less than two hours.

Spurlock swore out a complaint and a warrant was issued. Undersheriff Ernest E. Lockie located Scoggans in Oakland after talking with Dunfield about where they had planned to go. When confronted, Scoggans is said to have denied knowledge of the car at first, but nevertheless he somehow managed to find it and drove it back the next day.

A conference was held that night which ended with the promise of a new car for Spurlock, as he refused to accept the other one after what he believed was a trip which might have greatly decreased the value of the machine.

Dr. Bransford stated that he did not know to what extent his car had been damaged, but at the time the article was written, no offer had been made to settle for the cost of repairs.

The article didn't mention any punishment other than the reparations above.

There was one other thing I found of interest from 1926. Because of the increased valuation of property and the accumulation of a surplus in the street bond and sewer funds, the tax rate for the city of Fairfield was lowered 10 percent. Well, on that note, I guess that I'll have to admit that history doesn't always repeat itself!

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