

## **Car tales offer readers a ride into the past**

**By Jerry Bowen**

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Those of us who poke our respective noses into the dusty pages of the past often say that we can learn lessons from past mistakes and things that went right.

The other day while I was doing some research at the library, using microfilmed pages of our local newspapers, I became interested in the many interesting sidelights, cartoons and column headings of the 1930s that seemed almost like some could have today's date attached. Some items were funny, some political, and some unpleasant.

Transportation issues were prominent as new roads and highways were being built. Today, as we approach the November elections, transportation issues are high on the minds of Solano County citizens. Now switch to the 1930s in an editorial in one of our local newspapers:

"THE LONG SUFFERING MOTORIST - The motorist is a helpless victim of taxation because there is no practical substitute for gasoline.

"For almost any other commodity the consumer can use a substitute. But when it comes to gasoline, it's 'pay the tax or stop driving.'

"The states started taxing gasoline 'moderately' but, as with all special taxes, the gas tax soon became exorbitant. Then the Federal government decided to take its pound of flesh from the motorist.

"Motorists have it in their power to demand a reduction of exorbitant gas taxes, including the actual repeal of the Federal gas tax. They also have the right to demand that gasoline taxes be not used for other than road purposes.

"When taxes run from 25 to 50 per cent of the retail price of any article, as the gasoline tax does, it is high time to correct the abuse."

Now doesn't that sound somewhat familiar, even though it was written 70 years ago? Of course there was some happier news for the harried motorist to read as noted in June 1935:

"Los Angeles gasoline war prices have dropped to a new low, independent dealers selling third grade gas at nine cents a gallon. All grades of gasoline are now four and a

half cents a gallon lower than a month ago. Prices started dropping immediately after the adverse Supreme Court NRA decision.”

That sounded like good news, but we do have to take in account the ravages of inflation over that many years. The nine-cent gallon of gas in 1935 would be about \$1.30 today. Hmmm, maybe that wasn't so bad after all. Also, the NRA wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. No, it didn't have anything to do with guns. NRA, then, was the “National Recovery Administration.”

In 1933, President Roosevelt attempted to relieve the effects of the Depression, with emergency legislation - the National Industrial Recovery Act-, which in turn set up the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The administration was supposed to work with American businesses to set prices, rates of pay, hours of work, and other “codes of fair practices” for each industry. The NRA itself was attacked as being both communistic and authoritarian. Although it was voluntary, only businesses that complied with the industry codes could display the NRA's blue or red eagle symbol in their windows or on their packaging. Those who did not display it were made to seem unpatriotic and selfish.

Since mainly the largest companies drew up the codes, small businesses were hurt. In May 1935, the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional on the grounds that it improperly delegated legislative powers to the executive branch of the government and that the constitution granted to the federal government only the power to regulate interstate commerce, not intrastate commerce.

Another interesting item caught my eye about airplanes of the time:

“The mystery of Stanislaus County's many fires this season has been solved. Particles of burning carbon from the motors of low-flying commercial planes are believed responsible for starting the record number of blazes.”

You just had to keep an eye out for those low-flying planes!

Even though there weren't as many people and vehicles on the road, the automobile accident rate was very high, much of it because of the lack of safety devices we have today. Injury and death rates were particularly depressing as shown in a short column written in 1935:

“In spite of safety campaigns, strict-law enforcement and other measures, the traffic toll in Los Angeles County increased during the fiscal year just ended. Coroner Nance announces that 948 lives were snuffed out between July 1934, and July 1935. During the previous fiscal year 868 were killed.”

Then again, a column written by Dr. Lloyd Arnold; Professor of Bacteriology and Preventive Medicine, University of Illinois, College of Medicine, espoused the health benefits of hitting the road:

“When spring comes, it’s good for us to do like the bears - quit hibernating and get out into the sunshine. And if you have a family bus, it’s time to send out for the latest road map, and get away for a weekend vacation trip.

“The highways have always played an important part in the health and habits of man. There has ever been an effort to make them safe from a health standpoint. In ancient times, lepers, and other unclean persons were excluded from the highways, for it was early recognized that pestilence walked from community to community with the footsteps of man.

“It is intimate contact, such as coughing, sneezing and touching with the hands, that transfers contagious materials. Happy and contented people are healthy folk. You see more laughs and smiles among automobile travelers than you do among the passengers in the staterooms of the deluxe transcontinental trains.

“Do not buy milk unless it is pasteurized. And do not stop by the roadside to drink from a spring unless there is a notice by a state health department that the water has been analyzed and found fit. Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, and not many sweets, and you’ll come home vastly improved by the outing.”

That column reminded me of all those television “news” items that purport to tell you what you need to eat, how to exercise and avoid catching some nasty virus. If you watch some of those newsy tidbits long enough, especially about dieting, it usually isn’t very long before they revise what was bad is good and “here’s the latest diet.”

As the ‘30s headed toward the ‘40s and before we knew we would be involved in World War II, attention was being paid to marvelous advancements in automobiles including, streamlining, saving gas and other items that we are still working on. One particular article was quite interesting in that it had both good and bad ideas:

Two-Wheeled Car Predicted - Automobile of the Future Likely to Differ Greatly From Present-Day Models; Perfect Streamlining to Be the Main Objective.

“Are the third and fourth wheels on our present-day autos as needless as a fifth wheel on a wagon? Will the automobile of the future roll over roads with the greatest of ease on two large spherical wheels instead of the four now in vogue?

“These are the questions that may be popping up in the minds of auto engineers as

they study the recent patent granted to Boris von Loutzkoy, of Berlin, Germany, for what he calls a "Monotrack Vehicle."

"Von Loutzkoy's main object is to get perfect streamlining, and he wants to streamline the tires, too. Ordinary tires do not give such perfect streamlining and then by using four of them you have to provide mudguards, which also create problems in cutting down the wind resistance.

"Two large, pneumatic spherical wheels, like big rubber balls, one at each end of the body, would do the trick, he reasons. You can shape the body over these wheels so that body and wheels co-operate or merge to form a streamlined unit. It looks much like a bullet, with front wheel and windshield forming the nose. Air currents skim off this car with a minimum amount of resistance, claims the inventor.

"Mudguards are eliminated, so are springs. The large wheels give you spring action as well as knee action. Of novel structure all around, their hollow interior is subdivided into compartments or chambers, each of which is blown up with air through suitable valves. It's like having a number of inner tubes in a sphere. If one of these compartments gets punctured, it doesn't mean you have a flat tire, because all the other compartments expand correspondingly and fill up the space. Thus danger of overturning as a result of a blowout is eliminated.

"The volume of air of such hollow spheres surpasses the volume of air of the usual tires by ten times and more, so that the usual leaf or helical springs may be dispensed with. In consequence the weight of the vehicle is considerably less, the cost of manufacture is reduced and through the elimination of the spring elements all deficiencies inherent in such devices are avoided."

Too bad they didn't have a drawing incorporating all those ideas; it would probably have been a doozy!

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