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Cheap Gas!

Supersized for high-volume sales and maximized for profit, it isn't likely that today's gas stations will ever revive the lost art of the classic American service station.

BY MICHAEL KARL WITZEL

Americans drive more than 2.5 trillion miles per year in cars, trucks and SUVs—a distance equal to 14,000 round trips to the sun! To power this amazing mileage, the U.S. motoring market consumes 146 billion gallons of gasoline every year.

The outrageous prices at the pumps continue to climb, yet few people are willing to cut back on their driving time, even as they shell out close to \$3 for every gallon of gas.

What do we get for our money? Only the refined liquid, along with the privilege of dispensing it into our own automobiles. For good or ill, the gasoline station in America has adopted a business model that is defined by speed and self-service. Much to our chagrin, the present-day definition of “convenience” means “do it yourself.”

For this reason, today's self-reliant automobile owner is burdened with a growing list of car-care responsibilities. In addition to pumping our own gasoline, we must check the level of motor oil, top off the radiator with water or antifreeze, clean the windshield, change out worn wiper blades, replace dirty air filters, and keep our tires inflated to the correct air pressure. Never mind that it costs an extra 75 cents to extract air or water from a vending machine! That's another story.

Travel 50 years back in time and you will quickly discover that the scene at the American service station was dramatically different than it is today. The most obvious difference? The price of gasoline. While economists may argue that today's cost per gallon is well in line with inflation and the current cost of living, there is no denying that refined motor fuel was a good deal cheaper in 1955, no matter how you pump it.

Once upon a time in America, fuel efficiency was not an issue. Our highways were packed with the biggest behemoths that Detroit could build—chrome-plated gas guzzlers. Owners of Ford Country Squire station wagons, Chevy Nomads, Buick Roadmasters and other highway cruisers were unfazed about how much it cost to feed their greedy, four-barrel carburetors.

As miles of virgin tarmac unrolled to service the growing legions of Motor City steel, filling stations proliferated. By 1969, there were 239,000 gas stations in America. (Today, they total around 100,000.)

The resulting competition caused a streetside scramble, leading many American petroleum peddlers to adopt eye-popping structures for their roadside businesses. Almost overnight, the highways were transformed. From the 1920s on, whimsical façades festooned the American roadscape. Along well-traveled corridors nationwide, gas stations shaped like airplanes, castles, Chinese pagodas, dinosaurs, icebergs, lighthouses, teakettles, teepees and windmills made filling up the family flivver a lot of fun.

As it turned out, morphing the gas station's appearance proved only partially effective in grabbing attention. Equally important was how people perceived the product being sold. During the 1920s, tall "visible register" pumps allowed customers to see the gas they were buying. High atop the pump, a clear glass cylinder displayed the fuel before it went into the tank. To differentiate between gasoline grades, companies like Gilmore colored their fuel, as with their Blu-Green brand.

Back in the good old days of gasoline, petroleum refiners captured the public's imagination by enlisting friendly mascots, too. The brontosaurus affectionately known as "Dino" trotted onto the scene during the 1930s, boosting sales for Sinclair gas. In 1959, Humble Oil (later Exxon) put a friendly face on its fuel with the stylized image of a tiger and the slogan, "Put a Tiger in Your Tank!" Standard Oil Company of New York's (later Mobil's) flying red horse was perhaps the most beloved of all gas icons. The neon Pegasus blazed a crimson trail across the sky on top of buildings, branding itself into the hearts and minds of motorists.

But the affable nature of yesterday's gas station was defined by more than personable mascots, wacky architecture and cheap ethyl (the first no-knock, leaded fuel). It was the employee known as the gas station "attendant" who established a real rapport with the public, demonstrating firsthand the art of personalized customer service. His mission was clear: Refill customers' fuel tanks, act as a tour guide, provide maintenance advice, and front as a goodwill ambassador for the oil companies.

To this end, pump jockeys of the gas station's golden age actually looked like they cared. Sporting a crisp uniform—complete with a bow tie and five-point hat—the typical attendant rushed out to your car when the "ding-ding" of the driveway air hose signaled your arrival. After that, it was full service all the way. Attendants cleaned the windows and checked the oil, inflated your tires, and made doubly sure that your car was roadworthy. Indeed, the memorable Texaco ad slogan, "You Can Trust Your Car to the Man Who Wears the Star," was more than advertising hype.

Fifty years ago, gas station owners worked diligently to earn our trust. They used every promotion they could think of to pull in anyone who might buy a gallon of gas. Giveaways played a big part in winning over—and keeping—customers. In exchange for their loyalty, gas station visitors received goodies such as foldout road maps, drinking glasses, dishware, calendars, collectible coins, car washes, matchbooks, trading stamps (remember S&H Green Stamps?) and a multitude of other fun freebies.

Clamoring in the back seat to latch onto the latest giveaway, kids loved filling up, too. And why not? Station owners took pleasure in handing out trinkets to future customers. Coloring books, comics, coin banks, stuffed animals, stamps, buttons, pens, lollipops shaped like station logos, and other gewgaws were the stuff kids' dreams were made of.

Unfortunately, the passage of time has all but erased the memories of how enjoyable it once was to fill up at the service station of old. Now, foreign imports and fuel efficiency dominate the street. The station attendant has evolved into a cash register attendant, and friendly mascots have been stylized out of a job. Station architecture has been revamped to conform with the banality of the mini-mart ideal. Gasoline is just another impersonal—and expensive—commodity.

Supersized for high-volume sales and maximized for profit, it isn't likely that today's gas stations will ever revive the lost art of the classic American service station. The ultra-modern convenience store—with its Big Gulps, triple lattes and lottery tickets—will continue to define the market. Until "big oil" goes the way of Dino the dinosaur, commuters have only one thing to look forward to at the pump: paying more for gasoline.

"Fill 'er up, ma'am?" Well, at least the memories are free.

Hill Country author Michael Karl Witzel has written several books about filling stations, including The American Gas Station, Gas Station Memories, and Gas Stations Coast to Coast.

