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Bring Back the Economy Runs

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Oil, gasoline and car manufacturers once sponsored "economy runs" — mostly between 1936 and 1968 — to put their products to the test and prove they could help drivers achieve the most miles per gallon, according to University of Dayton auto historian John Heitmann. Author of The Automobile and American Life, Heitmann has given interviews to multiple national and international news outlets including CNN International, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press and National Geographic.

"Oil spills, drilling, Middle East unrest, vehicle design, government regulation and carbon emissions are at the forefront of daily news discussions," Heitmann said. "Perhaps it's time to bring back the economy run, if for no other reason than to raise public awareness concerning the values of thrift and conservation."

Heitmann will discuss the history of the competitions Thursday, April 14, in Detroit at the annual meeting of the Society of Automotive Engineers. Automotive History Review published his research on the competitions in 2008.

If companies held economy runs today, "the consumer would be the real winner," Heitmann said. "The results would show a top-to-bottom list in each vehicle class based on engine efficiency, performance and aerodynamics. The running of a class of hybrids would give us a clear indication of the advantages they do or do not have over conventional, internal gas-powered automobiles. And it might be an incentive to automotive engineers to come up with more fuel-efficient designs."

The economy runs were for American cars of the current year, taken directly from factory and showroom floors. Routes varied in both altitude and temperature. The MobilGas Run was the best known, evolving into a coast-to-coast event, Heitmann said.

"During the 1950s and 1960s, these annual competitions were the most publicized of all corporate promotions, making them the largest single public relations effort of any corporation during the immediate post-WWII era," he said.

Companies expected big payoffs, and winners secured bragging rights for the year. Pitchmen proudly proclaimed, "I get more miles per gallon from Red Lion than any other gasoline." Studebaker bragged its car was "The Thrifty One in 1951." Car manufacturers began using the event in sales brochures; Dodge tooted its own horn with "Dodge Tops All 8's in 1953 MobilGas Economy Run."

In 1935, renowned "economy driver" Austin Elmore achieved a record run of 34.04 mpg, driving from Los Angeles to Reno in a V-8 in a Gilmore Oil-sponsored economy run. Gilmore not only gained great publicity but also used Elmore as a spokesman, Heitmann said. He would show drivers how to get 11 to 41 percent better mileage by practicing good driving habits: smooth acceleration, maintaining a steady speed, shifting into higher gears whenever feasible, avoiding brakes unless necessary, and always thinking ahead.

The results of the runs showed even heavier six- and eight-cylinder vehicles could achieve good gas mileage. A six-cylinder 1961 Ford Falcon had 32.68 mpg. An eight-cylinder 1938 Ford got 28.85 mpg.

"Despite the widespread use of computers and aerodynamic design in modern automobiles along with lightweight materials such as plastics and aluminum, pre-WWII automobiles could hold their own in mile-per-gallon ratings compared to current models," Heitmann said.

Economy runs began in the late 1920s, reflecting concerns that petroleum reserves were limited and that gasoline might suddenly become scarce, Heitmann said. Gasoline rationing during WWII fueled continued interest in the runs, as did the Korean War in the 1950s.

With America at war again in the 1960s, the economy runs seemed destined to remain a fixture of the American automobile industry. As one consumer researcher at the time said, "The motorists' fascination with gas mileage seems not to wear out — just as sex appeal has held its ground over the ages."

The competitions, however, started sputtering in the late 1960s. MobilGas lost ground in efficiency ratings and there were
changes in engine pollution controls and shifts in corporate advertising strategy, according to Heitmann.

"After the 1950s, Detroit lost its way, and the American auto industry became notoriously unresponsive to fuel economy until the recent past," Heitmann said. "An old-fashioned economy run pitting hybrid, electric, hydrogen and gasoline technologies against each other might be just what is needed to spur innovation and reignite America's passion for the automobile."

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