

pit stop

Car owners warned to winterize before cold hits

By Jim Williams

No funny stuff this week—just cold, hard facts because it's time to prepare your car for cold, hard winter.

Winter affects almost the total car—usually for the worse. To fight back, you need an organized defense.

Tire talk—Snow tires are an obvious need. They should have a good tread and shouldn't leak. Filling a low tire on cold days may make the tire valve freeze open and all the air will escape.

If your car's summer tires are radial-ply (it says so on the sidewall) there's no excuse for not having radial snows. Never mix radial and conventional tires on the same car.

I'm no longer a studded-tire booster. New rubber compounds have cut down their advantages over nonstuds, and on dry pavement they may give a little less traction. For heavy going, there's no substitute for tire chains.

Sluggish oil—Changed your oil lately? Cold, thick oil circulates through the engine sluggishly, so it takes more strain. You may want to check the levels of transmission and rear-end lubricants as well as brake fluid.

Cold oil also makes it harder for the battery to turn the starter. Service stations can test the battery to see if it stands up to the higher drain.

Short winter days make the lights more important, so the head, tail, brake, turn and instrument-panel lights should be checked.

Staying warm—Another obvious item is radiator antifreeze, important because it keeps the engine cool and the heater warm. Antifreeze may last several years, but may be replaced annually when the system is back-flushed. Back-flushing forces water through the system backwards to clean out rust clogs.

A car's heater core is a small separate radiator, which also can become clogged. It must be back-flushed separately through the heater hoses. If the heater works poorly, back-flushing may be worth trying,

but a more common cause is a defective thermostat.

The thermostat regulates the temperature of the engine coolant, and it can go bad in as little as two years. When it does, the engine will never reach normal operating temperature and its life will be shortened. The thermostat is cheap and easy to replace.

Checking the exhaust system for leaks is a must. It is part of the state safety inspection, but it's worth doing again because

fumes from leaks can kill you.

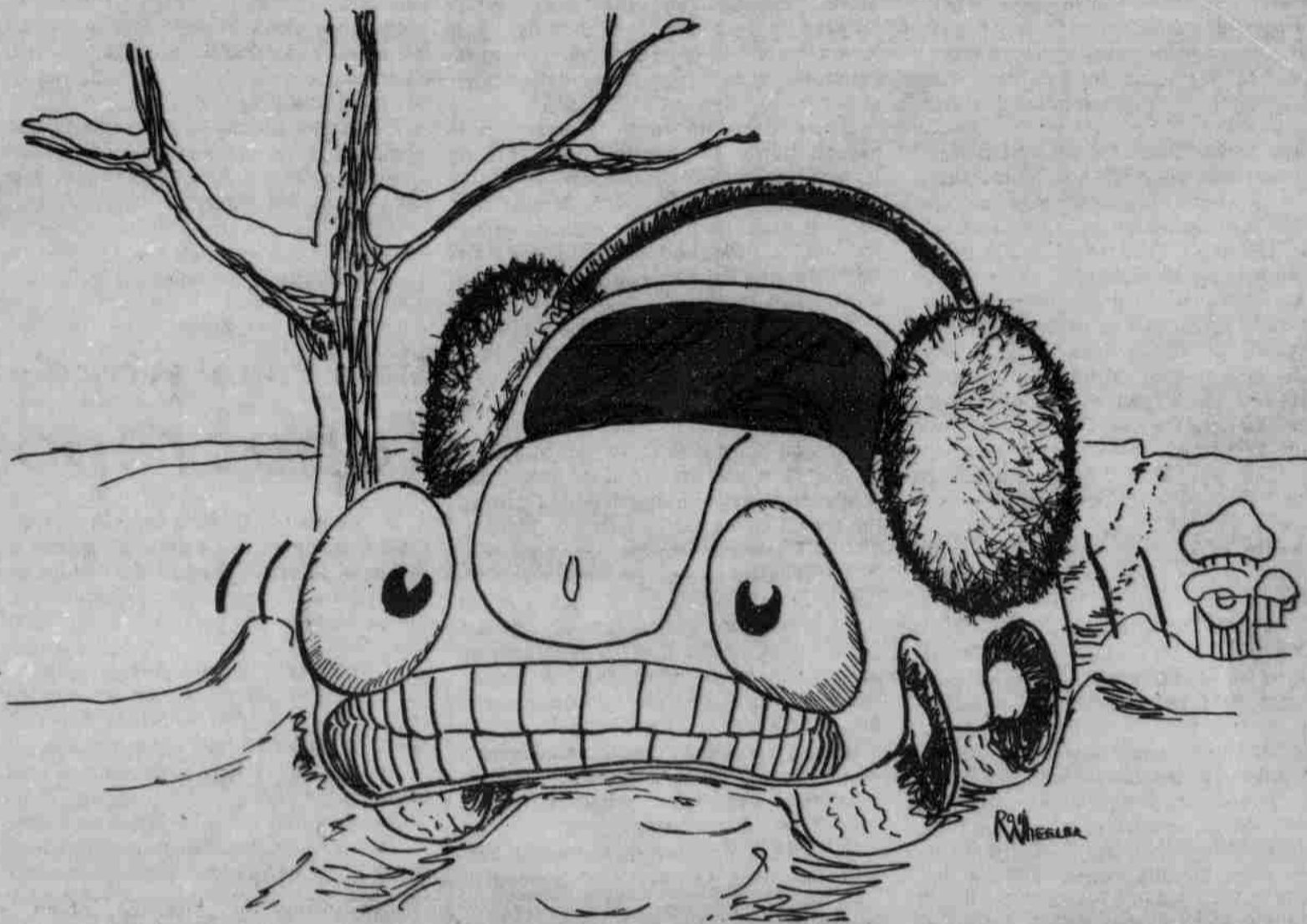
Even after the check, it is wise to drive with a window down several inches, no matter how cold it is.

Any body damage should be fixed, too. Even minor scrapes will let in road salt, causing massive rust.

Just in case—An emergency kit containing extra windshield-washer fluid and sand or kitty litter for traction is a good idea. A light shovel in the trunk and a stout ice-scraper and long-handled snow brush in the

cockpit are invaluable. If you're taking a long trip it's not so silly to toss in a few blankets and some candy bars—blizzards can hit any time, although you're less likely to be caught in one if you call the State Patrol's road-condition hotline (477-9202) before you start.

One more thing—no matter how well you've prepared your car, there may still be a day or two when you're better off staying home. If you are snowed in, poke up the fire and enjoy it.



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