

pit stop | The electric farm tractor is an attractive alternative

By Jim Williams

A front-porch discussion on the gloomy prognosis of the automobile as we know it recently turned to possible rescue solutions. One interesting one was the electric car.

A few of these were on display at E-Week, mostly bastardized gasoline buggies with the engine replaced by an electric motor and batteries stuffed into every orifice.

Electricity is one of the more flexible forms of energy, and if we ever learn the trick of generating it from the sun or from hydrogen fusion, we'll have all we want for almost nothing, almost forever.

As a car, though, the electric lags behind the gasoline versions. It's slow, heavy, and if you're planning a trip in one you'd best plan to stop every hundred miles or so for a recharge.

Farmers first

The subject changed to a suggestion that if fuel became really scarce, the last of it probably would go to farmers, since food is more important than almost anything else. That was the missing puzzle piece.

Consider, please, the electric farm tractor. It's never used for long trips and at night it comes back to the charger in the barn. Unlike diesel engines, which produce maximum power at several thousand revolutions a minute and therefore need complex transmissions, the electric develops maximum torque when stalled—it pulls right up from zero.

I can see a big machine rolling on four tractor tires, an electric motor at each wheel. An electronic circuit adjusts the power to each wheel for constant traction and maybe for steering. No unwieldy power take-off shafts or belt-mowers, threshers, and other motorized implements; just plug right in. And if the batteries go dry out in the south

40, a small portable generator can top them up on the spot.

Another holdback to electric cars has been cost, but farm equipment already is stupefyingly expensive; the electric tractor might not seem such a blow. Here's a case where the alternative seems more attractive than what we have now. But I don't know much about tractors—can any of you farm kids see a flaw in this idea?

Dialing out drunks

A little article in a car magazine showed a General Motors invention for preventing drunk driving. A screen displayed five random integers, which had to be punched into a keyboard before the car would start. Cost: about \$100.

It's not perfect—a sober friend could be coerced to do the number. Trying to unlock my bicycle in a hurry recently suggested that a good combination lock might be nearly as effective for about five bucks.

It's not as good as a mandatory one-year suspension, but while our representatives don't mind using auto enthusiasts as a doormat, the boozers are too big a group to antagonize. Maybe the real solution is to have the drunk detectors in voting booths.

First place—nothing less

Those watching the U.S. Grand Prix West coverage saw angry James Hunt denounce Patrick Depaillier. Hunt's stream of frustrated invective as his crumpled racer was hauled off the track didn't quite fit the Little League code of good sportsmanship—not that Depaillier's flagrant bashing of Hunt's car did, either.

These gentlemen's problem is that in a society increasingly insistent on tolerance, passivity and "cool," they were unwilling to settle for anything less than first place. This is not an attractive quality in a friend or a lover, but it's one we can't afford to eliminate entirely.

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