

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 18, 2011

Gasoline Brands in the 1930s: For the most part, gasoline prices were quite stable during this period. In Delaware, almost everywhere regular gasoline, about 72-octane, was 16 cents per gallon, and “high-test” or Ethyl (roughly 76 octane) was 18 cents. Pennsylvania was usually 1 cent higher, as the state tax was 4 cents instead of Delaware’s 3 cents (federal tax was 1 cent). Tetra-ethyl lead was commonly used to boost the octane, but two popular brands in the East, blue Sunoco and high-test Amoco, were lead-free.

A few oil companies were worldwide, but many were localized. Naturally, this young man knew the ones that had retail service stations in the East, some of which are recalled here. Most Sunoco gasoline came from the Sun Oil Company’s refinery at Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, owned by the Pew family (who also owned the Sun Shipbuilding Company of Chester). Blue dye in the end product gave the liquid this pleasant coloring. Amoco was made by the American Oil Company, which, in addition to the high-test no-lead Amoco, made regular leaded gasoline called “American Gas,” which had a yellow coloring. Esso (Eastern States Standard Oil) was a big seller in the East, and the Esso brand itself was available in most Eastern States from Maine to Florida (Exxon did not start until the 1970s). The mighty Standard Oil Company had been divested into many regional companies, sometimes competing with Esso. For example, Mobilgas was sold in this area by the Mobil Oil Company, whereas in New York it was Socony (Standard Oil Co. of N.Y.) Mobilgas. Sohio was Standard Oil of Ohio, and Standard Oil of Indiana later owned the American Oil Company (mentioned above). No doubt Standard of California and many others were spun off from John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company.

Gulf Oil and Texas Oil Company were also big players in the Eastern competition. Both Gulf and Texaco stations were everywhere and were very popular. Sinclair HC was a good seller (this was absorbed later by British Petroleum), but Shell, Conoco (Continental Oil Company), Richfield, and Union Oil of California were practically unknown in the East until many years after World War II. Many local companies sold a lot of gasoline in this area, however, most notably Atlantic Refining Company of Philadelphia (there was Atlantic White Flash, and Atlantic Ethyl). Atlantic was taken over by Richfield to form Arco in the early 1970s. Tidewater Oil Company built a new refinery near Delaware City in the late 1940s, but the product was around for a long time before that (the Motor Oil was called “Veedol”). Pure Oil Company called its regular gasoline “Purol Pep.” We had not heard of Chevron, Hess, or Valero.

Country stores and many small service stations sold more than one brand of gasoline. I recall seeing a few stations that would have an island with at least five brands! Gregg’s Store in Yorklyn sold Atlantic, both regular and high-test, but it also had a pump with American gas. For a short time, Cicero Ham sold Esso near the Yorklyn bridge at the location of Charlie Webb’s business.

When we went west in our 1937 Packard in 1941, we were exposed to a promotional service provided by Standard Oil of California. The company had a series of 60 color prints of scenic western vistas, and they were given free for the purchase of gasoline. Each station would have about five from which to choose, and duplicates were permitted. When the Packard tank was filled at a Standard station, we would trade some pictures and pick up new ones. When the trip was over, we had assembled about 50 of the 60 total. My mother considered some good enough to have them framed, and they hung in my bedroom at Auburn Heights to remind us of a wonderful trip. “Union 76” was the regular gasoline of Union Oil of California, and a big “76” decal was displayed at Union stations. Since 76 was our Delaware license number on the big Packard, my father acquired one of these decals and hung it on the front of the car whenever it was to be photographed. This shows in the photo of the Packard and my parents under the famous Wawona tunnel tree at Mariposa Grove in Yosemite National Park