

A VENT WINDOW VIEW – *The Three “G’s”*

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Too many of Missouri’s farm country roads lacked an all-weather surface until the Fifties. And, even when the roads were graveled or oiled, the culverts and bridges on quite a number of those byways were not upgraded. Eventually, some of those collapsed and (or) the roads they were serving were bypassed after rural populations began to decline and traffic decreased. This was most apparent in the years following WW II when many small farms were consolidated into larger holdings. High acreage holdings validated the purchase of more efficient machinery for planting and harvesting. By 1970 estimates suggested that the number of rural residences in some counties had declined to about one fourth as many as existed in the Thirties.

Prior to 1960 farm homes in the Midwest were seldom located more than a half mile down the road from the next; this meant everyone shared in the cost of paving their shared route to civilization. Need forced neighbors to forge an agreement about who paid how much for the gravel or the “oil” used to pave a road so that their farmsteads were not isolated during rainy periods.

These groups could manage the costs for resurfacing a road but lacked the funds for bridge repairs or replacements. Such expensive projects were left for the counties to maintain; sadly, those entities also lacked funds enough to repair very many bridges, especially those spanning the larger creeks. Most folks, fifty and up have at one time or another crossed one of those wooden-planked bridges. Framed and supported by steel I-beams usually coated with a rusty-red paint that blended nicely with the oxidation that increased over the years, those spans gave rise to some thunderstorm rumbles when a speeding car rolled across those planks on a warm summer’s night.

Bridges of this type were used only to span streams that flowed year round although, in summer months, many carried barely enough water to keep the frogs croaking. However, anticipating spring rains, builders elevated the roadbed on both sides of these spans so that floating detritus during high water times would have room to pass beneath the structure’s floor. When flood waters overflowed creek banks the roadways approaching these crossings often disappeared under a foot or more of water for an eighth of a mile in both directions from the bridges. The spans were seldom flooded, but the flows rushing beneath them were scary to behold. That is a fact that I can attest to for as a little kid, my parents and I once crossed such a bridge on foot in the dark of night.

In Missouri, it was not uncommon for a summer thunderstorm to dump an inch of rain in less than fifteen minutes. When that happened ten miles upstream from a bridge while an unwary family was enjoying a Saturday night over in the county seat, their trip home became a dicey affair. It was worse for high school kids out on a date.

When driving my date home from a night at the movies I found the most direct route flooded, making it necessary for me to drive an extra 20 or 30 miles to circumvent the problem. This became a double-jeopardy situation for me as not only was I under the gun to have the girl home by midnight, Dad had told me not come home with an empty gas tank. The extra miles to meet the first obligation meant the second could not be honored because in that era there were no “all-night” gas stations in rural communities.

The needle was leaning on the “E” for “empty” when I reached home and went to bed; my face, however, was registering “G” for guilt. Or was it “G” for girls? Or “G” for gas? Looking back at that night, I think I knew then that Guilt, Girls and Gas would plague me for many years to come. And, BOY, was I was right!