Today's Cars When Trouble Comes

Modern life is highly dependent on the automobile. Most of us drive everywhere we go, largely because our communities are spread out and things aren't really in walking distance. If we look at the average American city and compare it to European cities, we find that houses are on larger lots, stores are further away, and the overall community covers more land.

That's in part because we have so much land available to us and in part because the Automobile has been such a large part of American history.

Cars themselves have changed considerably through the years. Henry Ford would have trouble recognizing modern cars, other than by the fact that they have four wheels, an engine, and someplace for the passengers to ride. Back in the Model-T days, cars were mechanical contraptions. Today, even the gas burners are totally dependent on their electronic controls to run.

I just bought a new car, and the amount of electronics in it are incredible. Driving it is a collaborative effort between the driver and the car's computer. If the computer doesn't think you're doing the right thing, it will fight you on it; and between the "driver's assist," "lane assist," and "cruise control," it seemed like the car was doing more of the driving than I was.

What will happen to these cars in the wake of a TEOTWAWKI

event? I know that most preppers believe that all cars will instantly stop running in the event of an EMP; but that's not the only disaster that might strike. It's not even the only thing that might take down the electrical grid. We could lose the grid to a massive act of terrorism or cyberwarfare, just as easily as we could lose it to an EMP. That wouldn't make cars inoperable; although it would probably make it difficult to fuel them up.

Allow me to go off on a tangent here, for a moment. I have to say that I don't agree with most preppers in that cars and airplanes will stop operating in the event of an EMP. The EMP commission tested what an EMP would do to cars. While they limited the exposure, trying to avoid totally destroying the cars they tested, the levels they used were consistent with what we could expect in the event of a HEMP attack by an enemy nation-state. Of the fifty-some cars in the test, only three stalled, and they all restarted.

Most cars and airplanes are almost perfect Faraday Cages, protecting the electronics inside from EMP. While there are exceptions, like the fiberglass body of the Corvette, most cars have a metal body. Unless the EMP comes through the windshield, it can't get to the electronics; and coming through the windshield is a rather iffy thing, as radio waves (EMP follows the physical laws of radio waves) see an opening like that, surrounded with metal, as a solid piece of metal.

We Will Need Transportation in a Post-Disaster World

The seemingly insurmountable problem we could face, is that in the case of a TEOTWAWKI event, none of our cars, trucks, SUVs or other off-road vehicles would be usable. Yet, at the same time, we will be in desperate need of transportation. Activities like hunting, fishing, and cutting firewood will require us going to remote areas, as well as bringing a load

back with us. That means some sort of a vehicle, even if it is just a two-wheeled cart.

Many have said that if we are hit by an EMP, it will be like we're living back in the 1800s. While there is some truth to that statement, there's a lot of fallacy to it as well. For one thing, most of us don't know how to live like they did in the 1800s and don't have the necessary tools to do so. But probably the biggest way that would manifest the lack of horses and horse-drawn transportation. While I'm sure that the creative amongst us could come up with some sort of carts or wagons for horses to pull, we can't exactly make horses out what we find in the junkyard.

There are roughly 7.2 million horses in the United States today, compared to over 24 million in 1910. During the same period of time, the human population has grown from 92 million to over 335 million. That's a reduction of one horse per every 3.8 people to one horse for every 46.5 people. You can be sure that horses will be one of the many things people will be fighting over.

Is there a viable substitute for horses? Back in the pioneering days of the westward expansion, oxen were mostly used to pull wagons, instead of horses. While oxen might be slower, they were cheaper to buy, more durable, better able to forage for food and had greater endurance than horses. On top of that, once the settlers established their homesteads, the oxen could be used to pull plows or slaughtered for food. Should the homesteader choose to sell their oxen, they could often get more for the oxen than they could for horses, especially as the horses got older.

Oxen aren't very common today, with only a few thousand here in the United States. However, there are some 87.2 million cattle, many of which are steers (castrated males). While there is a difference between a normal steer and an ox, the main difference is training. Any steer can be trained to do

work as an ox. That may be what we're forced to do, assuming we can get those steers from the ranchers who own them, without getting shot.

Will Older Cars Suffice?

Regardless of whether we are ever hit by an EMP, cars as complex as those we have today are not a good answer in a post-disaster world. As our automobiles have become more complicated and the computers in them have taken over more and more functions, it has become harder and harder for people to work on their own cars. The computers required to diagnose cars properly are expensive enough to be out of the typical DIYer's budget.

Oh for the days when we could open the hood of a car and know what everything in the engine compartment was and what it did. The first several cars I owned were like that. Not only that, but there was enough extra room in that engine compartment for you to crawl in there, sit on the wheel well and work on the engine.

Some have suggested that the solution to an EMP destroying our cars is to buy cars that were built without computers; in other words, buy pre-1970s cars. Would that work? I don't see why not, with a few important caveats. More importantly, I think that those older cars would be just the thing to have in the wake of any TEOTWAWKI event, where we will need simple transportation, rather than a car that tries to take the steering wheel away from you.

What Caveats?

Of course, buying an older luxury car might just negate the benefit of buying an old car, at least in part. While those older cars didn't have computers, things like electric door locks and power windows can be maintenance problems too. Better to have manual controls, than have a window that's

stuck and can’t be operated.

Selecting the right car or truck to provide post-disaster transportation is only the start of the process. Whatever vehicle you might manage to find is probably going to need some repairs and restoration. If you’re a gear-head or otherwise enjoy playing mechanic, that could be great. Otherwise, it could be expensive. But you’re going to have to think beyond that as well. You’re going to have to think about using and maintaining that car, when you can’t get the parts you’re going to need.

That means building a stockpile of maintenance parts; including such things as belts, hoses, alternators, starters, lights, filters, and batteries. You’ll also need the appropriate vehicle chemicals; such as oil, anti-freeze, brake fluid and power steering fluid.

But the biggest caveat, or biggest problem any of us will encounter, in such a time, is gasoline. Unfortunately, gasoline doesn’t store well for prolonged periods of time, as the most volatile hydrocarbons (those which are the most likely to evaporate) are also the most necessary, because they release the most energy when they burn. As a general rule of thumb, gasoline shouldn’t be stored for more than six months before use.

There are a couple of things we can do about that. First of all, we can buy fuel stabilizer, which will double the practical storage time of gasoline; taking it from six months to a year. On top of that, we can extend the life-expectancy of that gasoline considerably (like as much as five times) by storing it in metal cans, rather than plastic ones. I have a 55-gallon drum that I store gasoline in and I’m thinking of buying another one.

Of course, being simpler, those older cars will probably burn less than optimum quality gasoline better than newer cars

will. A carburetor can still get plugged up, but not as easily as fuel injectors can; even though the jets can still get plugged.

Don’t Stop There

Taking this whole idea a step further, we need to consider where we will be able to get more gasoline, once our personal stocks dwindle… actually, before they dwindle. There are a lot of places where gasoline can be found, such as the underground tanks at gas stations, fuel delivery trucks (semis) and the tanks at refineries; even the tanks of abandoned cars. The problem is going to be figuring out how to pump that gasoline out, so that you can use it. That’s going to require some planning and preparation. But considering that there won’t be many people preparing for that, even amongst the ranks of the preppers, you shouldn’t have much competition for those sources of fuel.