

I won't rail against the past

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—If you drive long enough in snow and ice, you will eventually get stuck in snow and slide on ice.

Legends rarely spring from getting stuck, but even a half-decent out-of-control slide will, at least, entertain viewers of “Cars Gone Wild!”

An argument can be made that the longer you drive on snow and ice, the more likely it is that you will either get stuck or twirl like a pinwheel no matter how careful you are. Theoretically, I reject this argument—if I’m always cautious and defensive, I will always be safe. Practically, I know that’s a crock.

Life cannot be perfectly managed. Sooner or later, I will goof up. Or conditions will change. Or equipment will fail.

Around the farm and on the highway, I try to drive as idiot-proof as possible since I’m pretty familiar with whom I’m dealing.

Getting stuck in snow is humiliating. It typically happens when you try to ram through a deep drift that packs in under the vehicle, causing the tires to lose traction. Then you have to either shovel out or “get drug out.” Snow beats speed just like paper beats rock.

Ice driving should be the opposite of competitive ice skating. Drivers never want to try a triple axel—even if it’s landed cleanly. My own short ice-driving programs have featured going downhill backward with my foot on the gas pedal; double 360s; and a free-skate slide into a front yard that did not appear to be an active part of the Virginia highway system. I have fish-tailed going up grade and slid broadside coming down.

None of these youthful experiences resulted in an accident. They did, however, convince me that driving slowly on ice is the best way to avoid winning a gold medal.

The one advantage gained from surviving an ice-driving adventure is that you’re more confident the second time through the routine. You know that you need a slow hand and a gentle touch. You also know that you can affect your destiny, but only at the margin.

Snow-and-ice driving was part of growing up in Pittsburgh. Until the mid-1960s, the City even threw in a little twist to keep its drivers alert: ice-loving steel rails laid into cobblestone streets.

Pittsburgh, like many cities, had an all-electric, public transportation system that used streetcars. The 48-foot-long trolleys rode on embedded rails. They were powered by an overhead electric wire. A spring-loaded pole on the car's roof carried 600 volts of direct current from the live wire to the electric motor that drove the trolley's steel wheels.

The heavy cars were handy for squishing pennies when you needed to replenish your supply of squished pennies. A streetcar would also turn a nickel into a disk that could occasionally pass for a quarter in a pop machine. This was, however, a high-risk maneuver that cost more than it made over the years.

Streetcars of the 50s were reasonably reliable and fast, spacious and fun to ride. They had fans and large drop-down windows. The coal-fired plant that powered the entire system polluted the air, but trolleys were green on the street.

Fixed-rail trolleys were, I think, safer than buses, which had to weave in and out of traffic.

My guess is that streetcar drivers were much less stressed than bus drivers, as well. A friend who drove a trolley for 10 years once said he liked the security of knowing where he was going.

Because a streetcar system required overhead electric lines and steel rails, it was more capital intensive than a bus fleet. Pittsburgh Railways Corporation (PRC) was only profitable when in bankruptcy and spared having to make debt payments. Today, streetcar systems are much cheaper than light rail and less expensive to operate and maintain than buses.

Most cities had switched to diesel buses by the late 60s, helped by a coordinated takeover of trolley systems in 45 cities by the bus interests, including General Motors, Standard Oil of California, Firestone Tire, Mack Truck and others.

Many Pittsburgh streets had four rails, which let trolleys pass each other going in opposite directions. Teenagers with learner's permits were instructed in how to straddle these rails and cut over them, back and forth.

While riding four tires on the parallel rails was smoother than bumpy-bumping over cobblestones, a driver sometimes felt like the trolley tracks had taken control of the steering wheel. That was in nice weather.

Rails were always icier than pavement. And if you happened to get four tires on two of them when the ice was just right, you could lose either steering or traction, or both.

Not every Pittsburgher was completely on board with the idea of locomotion over embedded tracks.

A girlfriend of many years ago tells the story of her mother driving the two of them in the family car on a busy Pittsburgh street.

Things were going swell until the car conked out. It rolled to a stop, straddling the tracks. A Pittsburgh trolley, its Cyclopedian headlight bright in the rearview mirror, approached. The car would not start. The trolley stopped. It sounded its gong. Traffic backed up; other trolleys stopped; other gongs gonged. Horns chimed in, blowing back up.

The stalled driver cranked her engine again and again. Nothing. Finally, she stuck her arm out of her car window and waved to the trolley behind, "Go around. Go around!"

Many of us have to choose between operating on life's tracks or straddling them. The idea of going around has always appealed to me.

Streetcars are much beloved in Pittsburgh memory. They still serve, though not there. A few restored Pittsburgh cars sit motionless in museums. Asphalt now covers their tracks.

In other towns, they're coming back. Twenty-eight U.S. cities operate trolleys. Five cities -- New Orleans, Portland, Seattle, Tucson and Washington, D.C. -- are building systems. And more than 60 others either have proposed or are planning them. Done right, they have a good track record.

Lacking snow and ice this winter, I've grown nostalgic for riding the rails. Now, it seems like fun. But, as Pittsburghers say, memory is "rill slippy."

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