

The Not-So Good Old Days

By Ronald Talney

It's March 10, 2050. An elderly man is celebrating his 80th birthday. His family is gathered around him. Small children, his grandchildren, are bunched around him, all talking at once. "Grandpa, tell us about the old days. The good old days, as you always say. What was it like then?" Grandpa laughs. He loves to tell his stories of how it was when he was younger, and how the world has changed since then.

"Well, let me tell you about my first electric car."

"Weren't all cars electric, Grandpa?" asks one.

"Oh no. They are today, but not back then. In fact most cars back when I was younger were gas powered. When cars were first invented there was one that used steam to power the car, but then the gas engine was developed and it was much more efficient. And over time that became the standard for powering cars. Eventually, there were millions of them, all around the world."

"Was that bad, Grandpa?" asks another of the small tykes, struggling to get up onto Grandpa's lap.

"Eventually, yes," answered Grandpa. With millions of cars emitting exhaust fumes into the atmosphere, we learned that it was causing the planet to get warmer and warmer. This was bad because the polar icecaps were melting, the oceans were rising and getting warmer, and weather patterns were changing so that we were experiencing hurricanes, and floods, and forest fires, and huge snowstorms, or, in some areas, severe drought. It was just a matter of time before the entire planet would become uninhabitable. All life as we knew it would die."

"That sounds terrible, Grandpa. What did we do about it?" The children were now paying close attention.

"For a long time, nothing. Many folks just didn't believe it, or thought it was just a natural occurrence, a cycle that would right itself in time." He paused again. "But they were wrong."

"What were people here in Lake Oswego doing about it, Grandpa?"

"Fortunately for us, Lake Oswego was then, as it is now, a very progressive and enlightened community of highly educated and informed people. We could understand the science and we were able to take a leading role in our little part of the world." Grandpa paused to take a deep breath. "That is when I decided to buy my first electric car."

"Weren't all cars electric by then, Grandpa?"

"They weren't, no. And those we did have had severe limitations at first. The batteries that operated them were not capable of allowing many miles on a charge. And recharging them took time. But they reduced what is called "greenhouse gas emissions" substantially, which, in turn, reduced the amount of global warming that was occurring. And I wanted to be ahead of the curve. I wanted to do my part." Grandpa paused again, remembering that first electric car he owned. He smiled to himself.

"Lots of folks thought I was nuts. 'It'll never take,' said some folks. 'It's just a passing fancy,' said others. But I hung in there and in time those terrible gasoline-powered cars were completely phased out and electric cars were improved to the point that eventually everyone had one. Lake Oswego was leading the way.

"What did it look like, Grandpa?"

"Well, it looked just like the other cars on the road at that time, except it had a huge battery under the hood instead of a gas engine." Grandpa paused again. "And we had to drive it."

"Drive it? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, it had a round device inside that one used to turn the car one way or the other, a steering wheel they called it. It also had a couple of pedals on the floor, one to make the car go and one to make it stop. And someone had to be in control of the car at all times, a driver. It wasn't like today where cars operate on their own, and simply respond to instructions from the passengers as to where they want to go."

“That sounds like a lot of hassle, Grandpa.”

“Yes, and dangerous too, because sometimes there were accidents as two people driving different cars might want to be in the same place on the road at the same time and there might be a collision. People would get hurt or sometimes even killed. Not like now where cars have sensors that recognize other cars on the road and there are never collisions.”

“Gee, Grandpa,” said his oldest granddaughter, “it doesn’t sound like the “good old days” were that good. Global warming, greenhouse gases, cars that might crash into one another. And the planet dying too.”

She looked puzzled.

“You’re right. Those good old days weren’t so good. But I felt pretty terrific in my new plug-in electric car. I was one of the first in my neighborhood of Mountain Park. And I felt like I was helping out this dear old planet of ours at the same time. What we called a win/win.”

“And with folks in Lake Oswego leading the way, our area was ahead of the game. And someday for you and your future children the “good old days” will be right now, 2050. Not 2016, back when I was young and bought that first electric car. And I hope you will be even more vigilant and inventive about how we can take care of the planet on into the future.” The old man looked at each of the young faces gathered around him and smiled.

“And just maybe we won’t even need cars at all. We’ll just imagine where we want to be and, zap, we’ll be there.”

Ron Talney is a poet, who has lived most of his life in Oregon. He has published poems in numerous literary magazines and anthologies, and has published five books of poems