

Threat put an end to '100 mpg' idea

Dick Belland, around Christmas in 1979, received three telephone calls from a man who threatened Belland's life if he and his brothers and a nephew continued developing an automobile carburetor that burned gasoline fumes, not gasoline. Each call grew more threatening until Belland was told he would receive a pair of cement boots if the work continued.



STAFF COLUMNIST

"When the guy told me about the cement feet, I thought he was mafia," Belland said Tuesday. "Hell, I didn't know what to think."
"Did you stop the work?" he said. "The second call made me think. My seven children were too young for me to take a chance. On the third call, the threat was put so strongly that I told the guy I had destroyed the device and I promised not to work on it again. I never received another call."

That was 11 years ago, after a feature story in the Pioneer Press told of Don, Larry, Dick and Bob Belland's Tuesday night ritual of gathering not for poker, or bowling, but carburetor invention. Dick, now 56, was the automobile brains. His brother Larry, a meat dealer, was a former mechanic. Their brother Bob was an electrician. Don, Larry's son, generally was credited with coming up with the fume-burning idea.

"I know other people who had invented similar carburetors, because I was in contact with some of them," Dick Belland said. "But as far as I know today, I am the only one still alive. The others have disappeared off the face of the earth. And I'm not kidding."

This was yesterday, in Little Canada, outside Belland and Sons Auto Repair. Dick Belland climbed down out of the engine compartment of a big Chevrolet pickup truck that had carburetor trouble. Belland's speciality for 40 years. He squirted gasoline from a liquid soap bottle into the engine's open choke chamber and started the truck.

"Yes, I stopped the work completely," Belland said. "I was afraid. There was something in the calls that told me somebody big did not want my carburetor on the market. We hid the invention in the basement of Larry's house, but then Larry got frightened so we destroyed the box."

Dick Belland is convinced the earth would have enough oil for eternity if his device had gone to market. Convinced. And he was scared off it, never called the police, never told the FBI, never told a soul outside his family that he had been threatened.

SOUCHERAY

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I facetiously wondered what Detroit did with shade-tree mechanics who invent carburetors that get 400 miles to the gallon... take them out and shoot them? Among the phone calls responding to that column was a fellow who said, "Read your own newspaper, Dec. 10, 1979, and then call Dick Belland if you want a story."

Through the 1970s, the Bellands worked on a carburetor that essentially was a chamber in which gasoline was burned to create fumes that drove the engine. Dozens of times they nearly gave up. Other people had invented ways to vaporize gasoline, but the Belland boys came up with a new way. The key was simplicity, that simplicity being their secret. When they felt they had a device they could officially test, they contacted Fury Motors in South St. Paul and acquired from Fury Motors president Harold Leonard a new Dodge half-ton pickup with a 318-cubic-inch engine, rated 13 to 15 miles per gallon.

"I even had Chrysler representatives here for the test," Leonard said yesterday. "I tried to do everything I could."

Leonard said he had no idea the Bellands had been threatened off the project.

In the test with the Bellands' crude, home-built vaporizing box, the truck got 35 miles per gallon, ran cleaner and had no deficiency in power or speed. It was so clean-burning that emissions measured at the tailpipe were 50 parts per million of hydrocarbons and one-tenth of 1 percent of carbon monoxide. In 1979, 350 parts per million and 1 percent carbon monoxide was allowed.

"It was a carburetor that had no limits," Belland said. "I mean, with refinement, maybe 100 miles per gallon of gas easy, maybe more."

The Bellands signed an agreement that bound them to Chrysler if and when the device ever was refined.

"I certainly don't think any threatening calls came from Chrysler," Leonard said yesterday.



Dick Belland
Calls scared him

Belland doesn't think so either. He wants to laugh, if it didn't hurt so much. He sincerely believes the device would have helped to preserve the earth's oil for generations unborn. He believes automakers have various carburetors on their shelves that can duplicate what his might have achieved. And he believes other so-called shade-tree mechanics who invent similar devices are dead. After the 1979 newspaper article appeared, Belland was contacted by an inventor in Duluth and an inventor in Wisconsin, both of whom Belland cannot locate.

"Why didn't you ask Chrysler for help, when you got threatened?" Belland was asked.

"It didn't dawn on me," he said.

He said the calls were so intimidating that he literally destroyed the device. He figures he and his brothers and his nephew could get together and build it again from memory inside three weeks, but he has no plans to.

"I'm not doing it any more," Belland said. "I'll never even recover the \$6,000 I spent the first time around, on patent searches and attorney's fees and the parts we bought."

The only thing left to think is that if Dick Belland and his brothers and his nephew could make that carburetor at the kitchen table, Detroit's best engineers could make it. So why isn't such a device on the family car?

"Greed of the oil companies," Dick Belland said.

UNKNOWN SOURCE

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Industry obstructions

The timing of Joe Soucheray's column Aug. 22 couldn't have been better. The column dealt with a group of fledgling inventors who, back in the 1970s, invented a carburetor that potentially could yield 100 miles per gallon. They ceased their research because of anonymous telephone threats.

Only a week earlier, the Pioneer Press published an article describing the difficulty faced by Congress in passing a bill that would require all cars produced in the year 2001 to get 40 mpg. The opposition comes from the auto industry, including U.S., German and Japanese companies.

A spokesman quoted in the article claimed that the technology does not exist to achieve this benchmark. He stated that the only way to get that type of gas mileage is to make cars smaller, thereby endangering human lives.

The aforementioned inventors, more than a decade ago, were able to achieve 35 mpg in a half-ton pickup truck.

I'm no longer mystified as to why more hasn't been done over the last 20 years to develop alternative energy sources or more efficient automobiles. Lack of innovation and pure greed by the automobile, oil and defense industries would rather see us go to war than confront the problem head on.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ
ST. PAUL

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