WINTER DRIVING

Winter can mean snow, ice, cold temperatures, fog and wind. If you need to drive when conditions are bad, as most of us do, it would be well to prepare yourself and your automobile for the experience. Coming up will be winter #38 since I first started driving. I will share with you some ideas and techniques that I have learned (often the hard way) in hopes that they may be of use to you in preserving your own health and general welfare.

Winter brings out the worst in automobiles. If anything is weak you will quickly find out as the weather gets colder. Now is the time to get the car in shape so it doesn't fail you when you need it.

Check the antifreeze. The radiator can freeze even while driving.

Check the wipers and fill the washer with non-freezing solution.
Check your headlights.

Check the heater and defroster.
Check all hoses and belts.

Tune up the engine.
Consider installing an engine heater if you don't have a garage.

Check the tires. Good tread is a must.
Check the battery and alternator.

Make sure you have a jack, lug wrench and spare tire.

Often the reason people get into trouble on the road in winter is failure of the auto itself. Poor tires are a big factor. The so called all season radials are OK if all of your driving is on cleared and sanded streets, but if canyon driving or back roads driving is part of your agenda I would highly recommend some town and country tread. Good tread means the difference between getting there or not.

You can't get moving at all if the car won't start. That is where the engine tune up and engine heater comes in. Gosh, it's frustrating when you have to be to work and the car won't start. If your battery is nearing it's expected lifetime consider replacing it now instead of the day you can't get started. Save yourself some frustration.

Even if you have done all of the above mentioned items there comes to most of us that day when for some reason we are stuck on the road. This is usually a traumatic and dangerous event. You may think that someone will stop and help. HA! You may die of hypothermia before that happens. I was broken down one time in Dry Lake so I opened the hood and got back into the car to wait for a good Samaritan. It was dark, 15 degrees and the wind was blowing. Pretty soon I was shivering so I got out and tried to flag someone down. Nothing doing. I'll bet there were 200 cars that had passed me up as though I didn't exist. By now I was really getting cold and decided that I would run down to Sherwood Hills (run, I say, because hopefully that would generate some much needed heat). The real question here is how far could I have run, and could I have made Sherwood Hills before exhaustion or hypothermia took over. I was already in the early stages of hypothermia. Fortunately for me a young couple saw me running down the road and stopped. Rescued! God bless those people and to ____ with the 200.

This brings me to my next topic. Get together a survival kit and keep it in the car. While you

are at it make sure that you have a good spare tire, lug wrench and jack. The survival kit should contain the following items.

Blanket or sleeping bag.

High energy food that will keep.

Flashlight

This is the bare minimum and will allow you to stay in the car out of the wind and avoid hypothermia while you wait for help. If it is possible to run the engine remember to open a window a couple of inches to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Here are some other items that may be useful.

Insulated coveralls

Warm gloves

Flares

Any medication that you are on and must take on schedule

A small first aid kit

A small tool kit with which you may make minor repairs

Hat or stocking cap

Moon boots or insulated foot wear

Shovel

Bag of salt

Jumper cables

A gallon of gas in an approved and tightly sealed container

Tow rope

Tire chains

Ice scraper and snow brush

The gloves, coveralls, hat and boots will come in handy if you need to change a tire or decide to walk for help. The salt should be in a container that won't leak salt inside your car because it is corrosive. If you find yourself stuck against the curb and can't back out, a handful of salt behind each drive wheel will get you moving. Tow ropes used to be handy when cars got stuck and there was something to hook onto, but the new cars don't have a good place to hook up. You could have a mechanic bolt some hooks to the car that would serve that purpose.

You think that is too much junk to keep in your car?? Nonsense. Most women carry nearly that much in their purse.

Should you find yourself stuck in cold weather the recommendation is stay in the car and keep warm while you wait for help. Raising the hood is the recognized HELP signal. However, as I mentioned earlier, it may be a long wait, so please keep a sleeping bag and some candy bars in your car.

People freeze to death every year trying to walk for help in cold weather. The human body simply cannot generate enough heat to stay ahead of the losses. The first symptom is

uncontrolled shivering. If you find yourself in this condition, it is your last chance to do something about it. The next symptom is loss of brain function, at which point you lose the ability to think or help yourself. Now your only chance for survival is that someone will find you and warm you up before you cache it in.

HYPOTHERMIA IS NO JOKE, IT IS DEADLY SERIOUS

OK, now that the car is in shape and the survival kit is in place, lets hit the road. Two things make winter driving much different than summer driving. They are; loss of traction and loss of visibility. Rain, snow, ice and fog do a dandy job of obscuring our vision. We can keep the lights, wipers and defrosters in shape to help us out with that problem, but still our visibility will be severely restricted at times. The recommendation here is don't overdrive your visibility. What that means is that you must be able to stop before you hit an object that suddenly appears in your lane. Keep in mind that if the roads are slick it is going to take much longer to stop than on dry roads.

Every year we have major multi-car pileups. What causes pile-ups? Over driving your visibility. The cure? SLOW DOWN! Some say that when driving in fog they don't slow down for fear that someone will zoom up on them and rear end them. Maybe so, but consider this. If you are traveling 35 MPH in a fog and someone comes up on you too fast to avoid hitting you he will try to avoid you by braking or steering around you. Either way he will most likely slow down considerably before he hits you. At the moment of impact the speed difference may be from 0 to maybe 15 MPH. This may pop your head back against the headrest but your chances of survival are very good, and you can very likely keep the car under control.

On the other hand you are cruising at 50 MPH and all of a sudden there is an 18 wheeler sideways in the road, no way to steer around it, so you hit the brakes. By the time you hit the truck you may have slowed to 40 MPH, but the collision is going to cause major mayhem to you and your car. Then you also run the risk of getting hit by the next driver who is also over driving his visibility. Take your pick.

I will say it again. **SLOW DOWN**. Don't overdrive your visibility.

When roads are slick you must do everything gently. Accelerate slowly. Brake gently. Turn gently. Sudden changes cause the tires to lose their grip on the road, the result is loss of control. As you begin to move, accelerate gently so that your tires don't spin. If you tromp it down your tires will spin out and burn a hole but you won't move much. When braking, if you hit it hard, the tires lock up and you not only don't stop but you lose steering control. This is the thing that gets inexperienced drivers every year at the first snowstorm. Don't freeze up on the brakes! If you feel traction break let up then brake again more gently. The trick is to brake just hard enough that you don't lose traction. When approaching a planned stop, such as a stop sign, slow down well in advance to avoid the need for heavy braking.

Now lets talk about skids. A skid is caused when the drive wheels lose their traction. Or even worse when all wheels lose their grip. In a skid you have to do some immediate remedial steering. Steer the car in the direction you need to go to stay in your lane. At the same time you need to correct the condition that caused the skid. Too aggressive acceleration will cause the drive wheels to spin and put you into a skid. The remedy here is to let off the gas enough to let the tires regain traction. Be careful not to let off so much that the engine slows the tires to the point of going too slow or that will cause a skid also.

Letting off the accelerator too quickly may cause the car to skid. The remedy here is steer, and at the same time give it a little more gas. Avoid the impulse to hit the brakes as this will compound the problem, and may send you into a spin. Correct a skid with judicious use of the steering wheel and accelerator.

Four wheel skids are usually encountered when you go into a curve moving too fast. These are very scary if you are turning toward the right because you begin to move out of your lane into the lane of oncoming traffic. In this case ease off the accelerator and steer gently toward your lane. At first you won't get any response from the steering wheel, but as the car slows the steering will respond. If you save it, take a deep breath and slow down.

Four wheel skids are also caused by heavy braking. Be gentle.

Hills are often a source of frustration to drivers when the roads are snow covered. Good tires are a must, though much can be gained with driving techniques. As you approach a hill pull the gear shift lever into 2nd range. Accelerate a little as you do so. You don't want the car to shift half way up the hill or you will lose it. Now accelerate a little more, just enough to feel the tires begin to spin. This may cause you to skid a little so be alert with the steering wheel. Now very gently ease up on the accelerator, just to the point that the tires cease to spin. Hold it steady there and continue. If you again feel the tires begin to spin ease off the accelerator ever so gently. If you quickly let up you will lose it. The trick here is to apply just enough gas to keep the tires right on the verge of spinning, but not spinning. Your pace may slow as you go up the hill but, it you get to the top when other drivers don't, who cares?

If you need to start from a dead stop on a hill accelerate very gently and try to keep the tires from spinning. This will usually get you going but there are always those times when it won't. Sometimes when the snow is right fresh you can get the tires spinning and burn down to traction, but if the snow is packed forget it.

Beware of black ice. Freeway overpasses are often covered with ice even when the rest of the road is bare and dry. The reason is that the cold air gets under the bridge and keeps the road surface frozen, whereas the rest of the road gets some heat from the earth so it will melt and dry. An overpass that is also on a curve should be approached very carefully. This is one of those situations that can put you into a four wheel skid. Areas that are shaded all day are also often covered with black ice. Then there are those times that the whole road may be covered with black ice. This may be after a rain when the temperature suddenly drops or sometimes the rain freezes as it hits the road. Be alert. Be careful. Slow down.

Leave early. Allow yourself more time to get to your destination so that you won't feel rushed. Watch the weather forecast so that you can get up earlier if snow is expected next morning. By leaving early you may also avoid some traffic.

With the car in good shape and with good driving techniques, it is most always possible to get to your destination. It is the other drivers that so often cause us trouble. Be alert. Allow more space between the next driver than you normally do on dry roads.

After a snow, find a deserted parking lot or empty road and cut a few shines. This is a good way to get the feel of the car on slick roads and you can practice steering out of a skid, stopping, accelerating, etc. At 20 MPH hit the brakes hard and see what happens. In this way you can experience all these things without taking your life in your hands, and learn the techniques that will help you get safely to your destination.

Be prepared. Be alert. Be safe.
See you when the tulips come up.
- James Lofthouse -
November 1, 1994