

"The Energy Crisis"

Carroll County Times Article for 7 February 1999

By Jay A. Graybeal

I recently filled up my minivan with gasoline, a unremarkable event to say the least. Twenty-five years ago, however, I could not have done so because the nation was in the painful throes of the "Energy Crisis". Nearly every week, the local press carried front page news stories about the crisis and there were frequent editorials about causes and solutions. My clearest memory of the crisis involved driving to Frederick, waiting an hour for 10 gallons of gas and feeling proud of my accomplishment.

This newspaper carried two stories about the crisis in the February 14, 1974 issue of the paper under the headline of "Shortages Bring Hard Times To Station Owners". The first story, "Rival's Closing Brings Frowns" described the impending closing of the Gulf station in Manchester:

"When Ken Gerst's Gulf station closes at the end of the month the competition at Manchester's two remaining service station's won't be smiling. "It's going to be terrible for the rest of us." said Mobil station operator Leon Miller. "We simply don't have enough gas to take care of his customers." Speaking about the problems he and BP station owner Donald Rhoten will encounter next month. Miller said, "We've got to come up with 5,000 gallons apiece and we haven't got it." "It's going to ruin me," Rhoten said of Gerst's closing. "What am I going to do? With half of my allotment I can't take care of his (customers) and mine both. No way," said the Main street BP dealer whose been selling gas in Manchester for 25 years. The second story bore an astonishing title by today's standards, "Gas Available By Appointment". It described how a Westminster station owner was handling the fuel shortage: "As gas supplies dwindle, service stations may go the way of the doctor's office and the beauty parlor-customers by appointment only. Marion Wilson who owns a Sunoco station in Westminster, began Tuesday morning to turn away customers who had not arranged in advance to come and get their gas. By Tuesday afternoon Wilson had filled two and a half pages in a little notebook with names of customers who would be served then or Wednesday. Anyone who just drives up to the pumps and asks for gas has to copy the station's phone number from an "appointment only" sign and then call in his order. "People come to me and they're ready to fight," Wilson said, waving a cigar in his right hand. Last weekend cars were backed up for about two blocks on each side of his station waiting for fillups, but not all of the drivers got what they wanted. "I was filling my regular customers up and anybody I didn't know got a dollar's worth," Wilson told a visitor."

The February 14th issue of the Carroll County Times also carried an editorial about the crisis and urged local citizens to contact their legislators:

Legislators Should Hear Energy Complaints

The gas shortage in Carroll county is more critical than in other parts of the country not because Carroll county uses gasoline faster but because of a nation-wide policy for distribution. The fault can be attributed to a number of sources, including the Congress, the past several administrations, and the oil companies themselves, but talking about fault will not ease the strain here. Remedies should be uppermost in our minds. One good remedy is to write your Congressman. He in turn can inform William Simon, czar of energy resources in Washington, and bring home our indignation. Simon is the man with the power. He can transform the county from a gasoline poor county to a gasoline rich county with the flick of a telephone switch. Here's how: Simon controls the assignments of gasoline country-wide. He is the big-picture man. If he decides that Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the rest of the east coast is hard-hit, he can divert gasoline from other states. That is precisely what he accomplished last week, but only after

there were reports of starvation and crisis in the Cumberland and Western Maryland regions. Simon chose to tell gasoline rich states such as Ohio, and some areas of the southwest, that they would have to ship more to Maryland and less to themselves. The decision came late. It will have no helpful effects until sometime next week. It may be idle to speculate on why gasoline was not diverted to the east earlier but one guess is that the east is not the Nixon administration's favorite sector of the country. The south, southwest, the midwest, and the far west all are more Nixon-oriented than Maryland. When Nixon ran with the now-tarnished Spiro Agnew in 1968, Agnew couldn't carry his own state. So it may be that when the chips are down, Maryland along with Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey find themselves holding the shortest end of a very short stick."

Fortunately, the energy crisis eventually eased and the gas lines and closed stations were a thing of the past. Gone, however, were the notions that there would always be cheap unlimited gasoline and that Americans did not want small fuel-efficient foreign cars.