

SUMMER SOLSTICE IN A TIRE SHOP

By Fred Hobbs

At the age of 14, I hadn't thought much of the fact that the summer solstice occurs "exactly when the axial tilt of a planet's semi-axis in a given hemisphere is most inclined towards the star that it orbits." Nor did I know or care much about the fact that various cultures around the world have interpreted the summer solstice as a sign of fertility, a reason to celebrate big pagan holidays or annual rituals.

For me, those many years ago, the summer solstice was the time for school to let out and for me to begin my trip to Idaho to spend the summer with my sister and brother-in-law. We went on salmon fishing trips, camped out, attended the annual rodeo, Jaycees picnic and other local summer events. I earned part of my keep by occasionally baby-sitting my four-year old niece. But my most enjoyable time was spent riding along on business trips with my brother-in-law, Al. He was district manager for O.K. Rubber Welders, franchiser of equipment and marketing tools for stores specializing in recapped tires, a major business during World War II and shortly after when new tires and other rubber products went directly into military operations.

Al's territory extended all over the Pacific Northwest and a bit beyond, from Utah to Montana, from Seattle to Northern California. Most of the tire shops were in small towns such as Hood River, Oregon; Twin Falls, Idaho; Moses Lake, Washington; Yuba City, California; and Hardin, Montana.

The proprietors of the tire shops were "salt of the earth" types, generally good at the manufacturing aspects of preparing used tires for a wrapper of new synthetic rubber and then "cooking" the tires in electric molds and painting them with a black solvent so they'd look like new. This was a fascinating process to me. Al, however, was more concerned with helping the franchisees with their sales and customer service techniques, something that proved helpful to me years later when I ran my own public relations business.

Most of the shops were pretty messy places, bits of unused synthetic rubber, tools and wrappers scattered about, a grimy office with a girly calendar on the wall. But Tom, the OK tire shop operator in Sunnyside, Washington was the one who stood out to me. I was impressed that his shop was clean, neat and orderly. The recap machines were immaculate, the floor was shiny and the operator was dressed in neatly pressed coveralls. I noticed on the front door a sign which read: OPEN on one side and GONE FISHIN" on the other. "Gee Al, I said, I'll bet this guy is really doing a good business." My brother-in-law was to give me an important lesson in practical business operations as he replied, "actually, Tom is one of our lowest-performing operators. His GONE FISHIN' sign is on the door more than the OPEN one is. He doesn't do enough business to make the shop look like someone works there."

Lessons learned in a summer of travel, not through high adventure, but observing a slice of commercial Americana. Sometime later in my high school science class, we touched on the subject of solstices and their scientific importance, but in 1946, I was content to mark the beginning of summer on the road with Al.