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OPINION   COLUMNS

# Watching Henry Ford's ethanol vision come to life

Some vehicle manufacturers in the 1920s favored adding lead to gasoline to increase octane and to reduce engine knocking. Ford thought ethanol could do the same while also helping farmers.



Henry Ford with Model T, at Hotel Iroquois, Buffalo New York, in 1921. Author unknown. Photo used under Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication

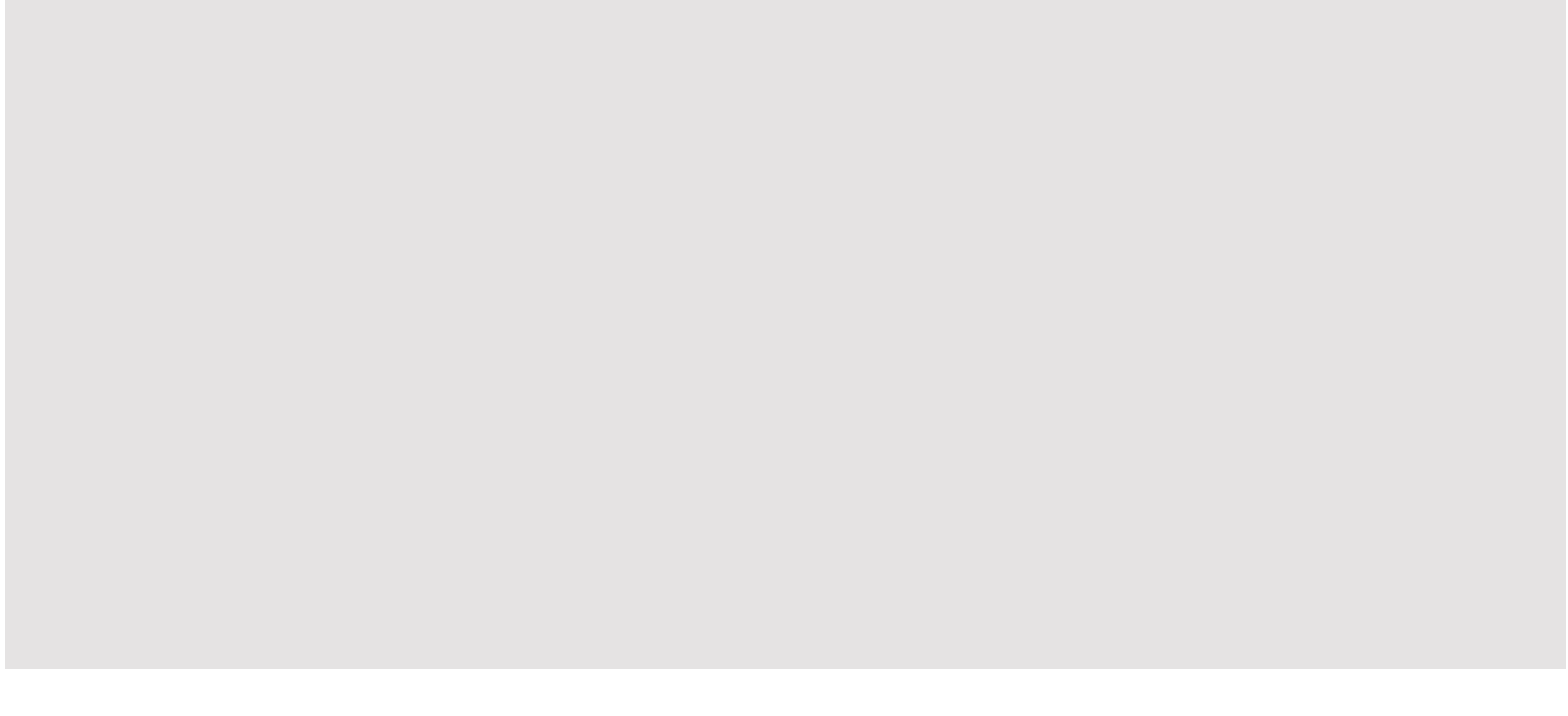
By Mychal Wilmes

August 31, 2021 at 4:30 AM

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Henry Ford — famed for creating the factory assembly line that cranked out inexpensive Model Ts that consumers could purchase in any color as long as it was black— thought farm fields could meet the nation’s expanding energy needs.

In an interview with the New York Times in 1925, Ford said “the fuel of the future could come from apples, weeds, sawdust and almost anything.”



Ford’s Model T was built to run on kerosene, gas and ethanol . The auto industry and farming were at a crossroads in 1925. Farms were struggling financially, which troubled Henry Ford.

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The fossil fuel industry won out — until decades later when new life was pumped into plant-based fuels. The work started with farmers, some of whom built small fuel-producing units. In the 1970s, I visited with a couple of Minnesota farmers who were experimenting with on-farm ethanol production. Efficiency of size and rudimentary equipment were huge hurdles, along with lack of financing. However, the end-product worked fine in their tractors.

Perhaps if farmers banded together, facilities could be constructed, and financing obtained. Ford’s vision had moved closer to reality in the 1980s when more than 100 corn ethanol manufacturing plants operated in the country. Motivation came from the OPEC oil embargo of the 1970s and skyrocketing energy costs.

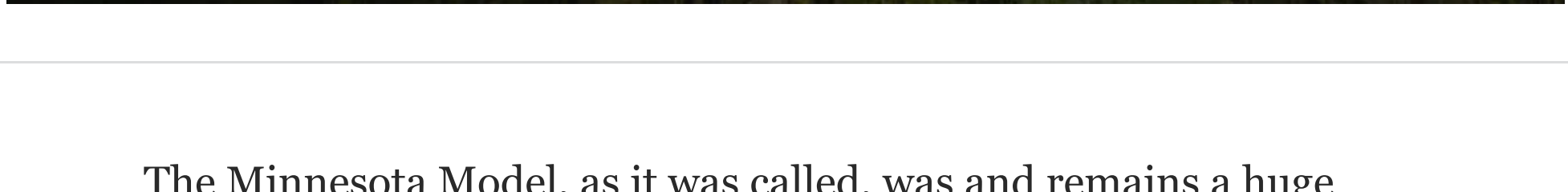
Momentum stalled in the following decade when fossil fuel supplies increased, and oil prices plummeted. Federal and state subsidies helped some ethanol manufacturers survive the storm.



Jim Nichols, a Lake Benton, Minnesota, farmer, served as a state lawmaker and Minnesota agriculture commissioner. Minnesota Legislative Reference Library photo.

Ethanol found a strong supporter in Jim Nichols, a Lake Benton, Minnesota, farmer, state lawmaker, and Minnesota agriculture commissioner. Nichols, who led the ag department through the depths of the 1980s farm crisis, was among those who thought ethanol plants formed as cooperatives and located in rural communities would provide a desperately needed economic boost.

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The Minnesota Model, as it was called, was and remains a huge success.

Ethanol production (based on the most recent available information) amounts to 15.5 billion gallons annually. Iowa leads in output, Minnesota is fourth, South Dakota, sixth, and North Dakota, tenth.

The industry endures profitability ups and downs like any other and continues to suffer slings and arrows from fossil fuel interests and environmentalists. The industry seeks to protect market share while environmentalists disparage ethanol’s environmental benefits. Ethanol is bad, critics say, because adding it to vehicle tanks decreases fuel efficiency, damages engines, and increases corn and overall food costs.

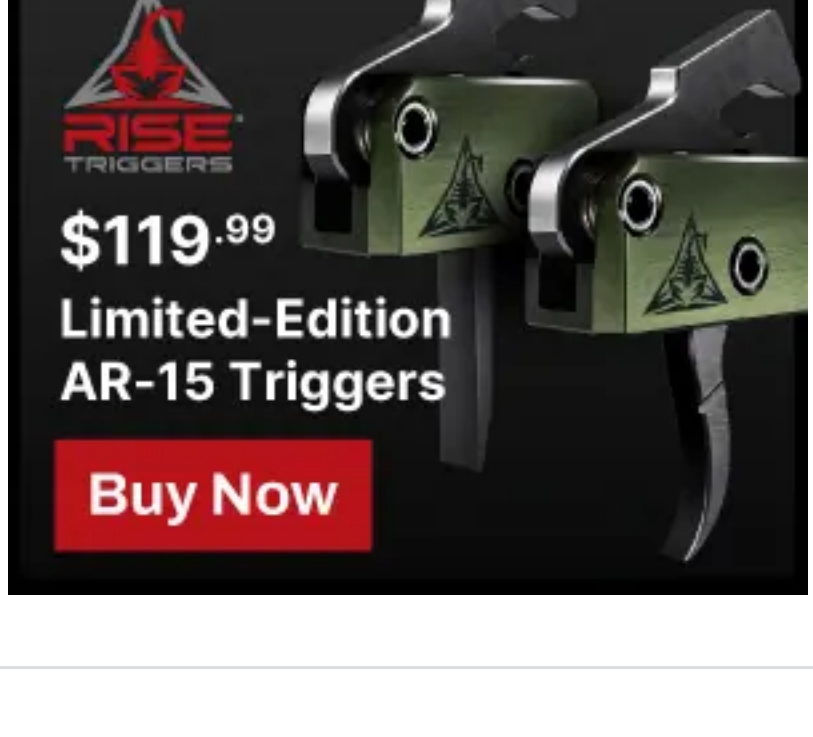
However, the benefits of reducing dependence on fossil fuel imports and ethanol’s contribution to a cleaner environment have gained traction with consumers.

Other biofuel plants are producing economic benefits in the Midwest. Iowa’s 10 biodiesel plants produce 450 million gallons annually. Minnesota plants generate 33 million gallons a year. The ADM Velve facility in North Dakota has been a boon for canola producers. The plant consumes 700,000 canola acres and boosted prices for the crop.

Researchers continue to work on developing other industrial uses for crops. Safflowers, guar beans, and kale are being researched to determine their potential for industrial use. The United States is home to more than 250,000 varieties of flowering plants that potentially could be useful.

Those who doubt need only look at soybeans. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. farmers grew 50,000 acres of beans, mostly for forage use. By 1959, acreage increased to 240,000 — a pittance compared to the acres growing soybeans today.

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Henry Ford’s earlier vision remains a work in progress.

Credit is due to farmers and their willingness to invest in cooperatives and private entities. Ethanol and biofuel mandates have helped the industry along the way, but the commitment wanes from time to time.

To read more of Mychal Wilmes’ Farm Boy Memories, [click here](#).

Mychal Wilmes is the retired managing editor of Agri News. He lives in West Concord, Minn., with his wife, Kathy.

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