

village view

by Andrea Leonard

With hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of Americans making small but important changes in their life-styles to conserve energy, why must oil imports increase and why does demand for crude oil keep rising?

Speed limits on the nation's highways have been reduced to 55 MPH to save fuel and lives; while some people still speed, by and large we're driving more slowly. Police are cracking down on scoff-laws.

People who live where winter's cold weather means large consumption of fuel oil to maintain houses and public buildings at comfortable temperatures are insulating, weather stripping, installing storm windows and doors, caulking air leaks and adding supplemental heat producers such as wood burning stoves and solar panels.

Their reasons for doing so may be purely selfish ones, of course; with fuel costs rising rapidly, conserving fuel saves them cold, hard cash. That makes sense even to those who believe the energy crisis is a hoax.

Still, in spite of our efforts, oil consumption in this country continues to rise; over-all statistics are discouraging. Why don't the figures level off and begin to show the effects of decreased consumption? Individually we seem to be using fewer gallons of gasoline in our cars and fewer gallons of oil and natural gas in our heating systems.

Where, then, does the oil go?

Products made from oil surround us on all sides and the demand for them continues to rise; new oil-based products constantly come onto the market and are accepted immediately by purchasers.

What are you wearing as you read these words? Are your clothes made of wool, linen, cotton or silk? If not, they're made from oil or coal. The polyesters are oil-based; nylons, coal-based.

What about your furniture? It may have a wood frame but padding, webbing and upholstery fabric are probably oil-based. Most floor coverings, whether linoleum or carpeting, are derived from oil. So also are modern countertops, the paint on your walls, parts of the shoes on your feet, your wallets and handbags, your toothbrush, the handles of kitchen utensils, and all the electric switch plates in your house.

Your refrigerator is lined with plastic; its drawers are plastic. Your washing machine's agitator is plastic; the face of its instrument panel, and that of your stove, may be plastic. House wiring is insulated with it. Millions of miles of telephone wires are covered with it. Toothpaste tubes and milk containers, bread wrappers and food packages, luggage and radio cases, some toys and home insulations are plastic.

Oil is the basis for so many products it's foolish to burn it for heat unless no reasonable alternative is known.

Consider the car. We all know it uses gas and oil, but do we remember what other ways it consumes oil? Its vinyl top, the tail lights, running lights and turn signal covers, the spacer in the safety glass, its tires, battery case, insulation on wires, fan belts, anti-freeze, windshield washer fluid, interior lining and upholstery, seat padding, the dash padding and covering, floor mats, pedal covers, safety belting, the instrument panel, trunk lining, hoses under the hood, its paint; all are oil-derived products.

Paving a mile of highway consumes many barrels of oil. A car is a steel skeleton covered with oil products, that runs on oil products, and calls for oil products for driving surfaces.

Now we can begin to understand where oil is going. What we save by driving more slowly, improving mileage, car pooling, walking and bike-riding goes to manufacture products which don't look like oil, feel like oil, or appear to have

any of the characteristics of oil.

When did plastics enter the consumer market? It all began during WW2 when nylon was developed. A bright new world was promised Americans when the war ended. And we got it. And we bought it.

Before that, fabrics came from natural fibers. Cottons and linens could be washed and required ironing to remove wrinkles and put creases where wanted. Silks could be washed only with great care. Wools couldn't be washed without shrinkage.

Upholstery was leather or cloth woven of the same natural fibers; webbed with hemp, padded with hair. Rugs and carpets were constructed of wool and/or cotton on hemp backing. Countertops were of wood or metal; shoes, handbags, luggage, wallets, straps of all kinds, came from animal hides.

Cooking pots and utensils were metal; some had wooden handles. Refrigerators were lined with zinc, as were their older counterparts, ice boxes; the latter had wooden exteriors. Washing machines were metal inside and out. Dryers were unknown except in commercial laundries.

If you've an antique electric lamp or appliance tucked away in your attic, look at its wiring. The copper wires are separated with cotton and encased in a silky woven fabric. With use, the fabric frayed, the cotton shredded, the wires shorted. Sometimes a house fire was the result, or badly burned fingers.

Toothpaste came in lead tubes; these may have caused some cases of lead poisoning. Milk was bottled in glass. There were no plastic dishes, cups, glasses, bottles, cans, jugs, flower pots, pails or buckets. Paper plates were flimsy and absorbent. They were paper without plastic.

Bread from stores often wasn't wrapped at all. The crust was considered adequate protection, or perhaps a paper bag. Machine-sliced bread was unknown.

Toys were made of cardboard, wood or metal. Wooden blocks and tinker toys; metal soldiers, cars and trucks; dolls possessed china faces, glass eyes that opened and shut, had arms, legs and torsos covered with soft kidskin sewn around cotton stuffing.

Pillows were filled with feathers; blankets, woven of wool; quilts, sewn of cotton pieces layered with cotton batting. Foam mattresses or chair seats had yet to be offered the buying public.

Automobiles had no safety glass; lights were lensed with glass; tires and innertubes were of rubber as were the hoses, the battery case, the wiring insulation, the floor mats and pedal covers. Safety belts came into use during the '50s, followed by padded dashboards; in prior years the dash was of fine burl wood.

Paved roads, then as now, required large consumption of oil products unless they were built of concrete. Paints were oil-based; oil, turpentine, lead and pigments. Today's paints contain no lead, but it still takes oil to produce them.

Should we go back to "the good old days?" Of course not; not if there's any known alternative. If we're really running out of the stuff, however, we might be wise to resume using some materials once commonly employed, to conserve oil. To protect our oil supplies and reduce the quantities we import, some wood, leathers, and other natural fibers could be phased into use again.

Importing oil cost the American economy seven billion last year and 45 billion this year, dangerously tilting our country's balance of payments (the difference in values between our imports and our exports). The value of the U.S. dollar on world markets declines alarmingly because of this imbalance.

Do we care whether the handle of a kitchen knife is wood or plastic? Will children gain less pleasure without plastic toys? Couldn't we all get along without plastic products in many instances? Linen, wool and cotton clothes are far more comfortable to wear than polyester fabrics, even though they do require more care.

Anyhow, now we know where the oil is going, and why our efforts to conserve it aren't reflected in oil-use statistics.