

Did all the auto companies blow their last chance?

There is a great temptation at the end of a year ending in a zero to do one of these "How about the '80s" columns, which I was intending to resist. But then I heard that Harry Stark is retiring.

Harry Stark is editor of Ward's Auto Reports, where for the past 42 years he was worked at putting out a newsletter that is one of the few sources of hard information in the auto business taken seriously by the automotive community.

ITS ALSO a concise summary of hard news, and its readers have benefited a six-month delay on stories that have surfaced. He's the first asking for help in Washington, GM's decision in the early '80s that its cars needed downsizing, the shift to front-wheel drive and the first hint that the U.S. government was about to legislate fuel economy issues that ultimately had a tremendous effect.



auto talk
Dan McCosh

feet upon the industry.

Harry was well-established when David E. Davis was still in high school, and his retirement marks the end of the longest continuous career in automotive journalism. Pondering the retirement of someone like Harry Stark is worse than years with zero in them to get you thinking about the past and just where we are now.

IT'S EASY enough to see that we are at a point when all the foreboding of the past decade or so is coming to pass. There is an echo of voices coming from down some hall in time that still is warning about diminishing energy resources, clogged roadways and the enormous economic growth potential of the third

world.

In the 1980s, gas prices dropped, Japanese exports were constrained, and Europe turned inward to develop some economic strategies that only now are beginning to emerge.

It would be easy to write off the 1980s as the decade where the U.S. auto industry had the gold ring in its hand and threw it away. Hopefully it's a bit too early to say that for sure.

STILL, THE largest reinvestment of capital in history in a single industry took place largely in the 1980s. Most U.S.-owned plants were completely rebuilt and retrofitted — albeit mainly with Japanese stamping presses. The cars were redesigned, the engines refurbished.

But oddly enough, few of the new cars directly address the issues that seemed so important at the end of the last decade. Led by a Japanese industry that dropped all pretense at conserving either fuel or materials, most of the new designs introduced in the 1980s seem to be tailored to fit the psyche of a mid-life crisis. Even modern family sedans at a reasonable cost are scarce indeed — just when the baby boomers began having babies.

PLASTICS PROLIFERATE: just when landfills and incineration are becoming monumental national problems. The sheer technical complexity favored by today's engineers is a time bomb waiting to land on the people stuck with eight-year-old used cars.

Raw speed (a half dozen cars to day have top speed in excess of 150 mph) is pursued at odds with traffic congestion that is near paralysis in the major cities that depend on cars for basic transportation.

No manufacturer, even in such byways as Malaysia or Korea, has addressed the problem of mobilizing the 80 percent of the world's popula-

tion that has almost no transportation at all.

We know, of course, that it takes time to address these problems, and the hard work done in the 1980s won't show up on the roads until the mid-1990s. Maybe an ecologically

sane, serviceable car is deep in the bowels of an auto company somewhere, just waiting to take on the world in the next few years.

I hate to think we had our chance and we blew it in the 1980s.

Procrastinators must inherit

By Sid Mittra
special writer

It's that time of the year again. If you are like the rest of us, you are ready to put the year 1989 behind you and await the arrival of the new year with great resolve.

In making your resolutions, however, make sure you do not fall into the procrastination trap alluded to by the following poem:

I meant to do my work today but a brown bird sang in the apple tree. The wind went sighing over the land, tossing the grasses to and fro. And the rainbow held out its shining hand. So what could I do but keep my word? I meant to do my work today.

Richard J. Condon

The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers and I wish you the very best in the coming year.

Seminar: Planning Strategies for

the Young and Successful. "How to Tame the Volatile Market," "Annuities — The Only Tax Shelter Left," and "Retiring — Your Best Financial Choices."

The seminar, sponsored by the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers and Coordinated Financial Planning, will be 7-9 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 10, in

the offices of Coordinated Financial Planning, Sheffield Office Park, 3250 W. Big Beaver, Suite 540, Troy. For reservations call 643-8888.

Sid Mittra is a professor of Finance, School of Business at Oakland University and owner of Coordinated Financial Planning.



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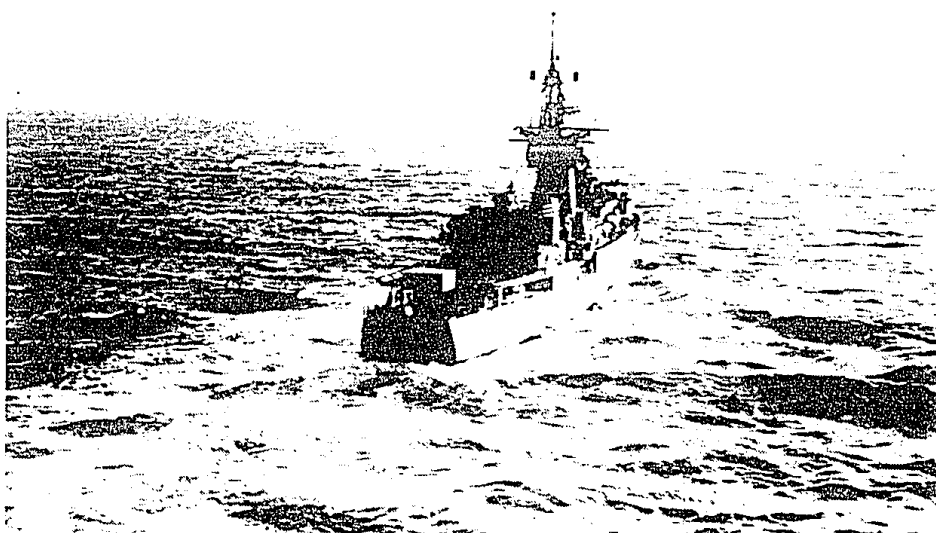
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datebook

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Thursday, Jan. 4 — Free information about legal assistant career offered 7:30-8:30 p.m. near Rochester. Information: Oakland University Division of Continuing Education, 370-3120.
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Saturdays, Jan. 6-20 — Preparation classes for graduate management admissions test offered 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. near Rochester. Fee: \$150. Information: Oakland University Division of Continuing Education, 370-3120.
- **Gre preparation**
Saturdays, Jan. 6-27 — Preparation classes for graduate records examination begin at 9 a.m. near Rochester. Fee: \$125. Information: Oakland University Division of Continuing Education, 370-3120.
- **career night**
Monday, Jan. 8 — Free information about accountant assistant career offered 6:30-7:30 p.m. near Rochester. Information: Oakland University Division of Continuing Education, 370-3120.
- **builders association**
Monday, Jan. 8 — Seminar to help builders and their sales people begins at 10 a.m. at the Kingsley Inn, 1475 N. Woodward, Bloomfield Hills. Non-member fee: \$8. Information: 737-4477. Sponsor: Builders Association of Southeastern Michigan.
- **production technology**
Tuesday, Jan. 9 — Free information about newest production and inventory control technologies offered 6:30-7:30 p.m. near Rochester. Information: Oakland University Division of Continuing Education, 370-3120.
- **Birmingham chamber**
Tuesday, Jan. 9 — Birmingham-Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce meets at 7:30 a.m. at the Baldwin Public Library, 300 W. Merrill, Birmingham. Topic: "What? Me Worry? A Tax Guide for 1990." Non-member fee: \$12. Information: 644-1700.
- **legal assistants**
Tuesday, Jan. 9 — Personal assessment inventory for entry into legal assistant diploma program offered 7:30-9:30 p.m. near Rochester. Fee: \$25. Information: Oakland University Division of Continuing Education, 370-3120.
- **Waiver exams**
Thursday, Jan. 11 — Para-accountant waiver examinations by the Oakland University Division of Continuing Education will be at 6:30 p.m. at OU near Rochester. Fee is \$10 per examination. Register by calling 370-3120 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays.