

The Two Stroke Motor

... anybody who has a two stroke motor either in an outboard or a rotary lawn mower will be able to identify with this piece from a Steinbeck book written about a trip into some part of South America when the outboard motor was in its infancy and the rotary lawn mower was yet to be invented.

This piece of equipment still brings anger to our hearts and, we hope venom to our pen. Perhaps in self-defence against suit, we should say “The outboard motor mentioned is purely fictitious and any resemblance to outboard motors, living or dead, is coincidental.”

The contraption was a Hansen Sea-Cow; a dazzling little piece of machinery. All aluminium paint, touched here and there with spots of red. The Sea-Cow was built to sell; to dazzle the eyes; to splutter its way into the unwary heart. We took it along for the skiff. It was intended that it should push us ashore and back; should drive our boat into estuaries and along borders of little coves.

But we had not reckoned on one thing. Recently, industrial civilization has reached its peak of reality and has lunged forward into something that approaches mysticism. In the Sea-Cow factory, where steel fingers tighten screws, bend and mould, measure and divide, some curious mathematik has occurred, and that secret so long sought has accidentally been found, life has been created. The machine is at last stirred. A soul and a malignant mind have been born. The Hansen Sea-Cow is not only a living thing but a mean, irritable, contemptible, vengeful, mischievous hateful living thing.

In the six weeks of our association, we observed it at first mechanically and then, as its living reactions become more and more apparent, psychologically. And we determined one thing to our satisfaction. When and if these ghoulish little morons learn to reproduce themselves the human species is doomed. For their hatred of us is so great that they will wait and plan and organise and one night, in a roar of little exhausts they will wipe us out. We do not think that Mr Hansen, inventor of the Sea-Cow, father of the outboard motor, knew what he was doing. We think the monster he created was as accidental and arbitrary as the beginning of any other life. Only one thing differentiates the Sea-Cow from the life that we know.

Whereas the forms that are familiar to us are the result of billions of years of mutation and complication, life and intelligence emerged simultaneously in the Sea Cow. It is more than a species, it is a whole new re-definition of life. We observed the following traits in it and were able to check them again and again.

1. Incredibly lazy, the Sea-Cow loved to ride on the back of the boat trailing its propeller daintily in the water while we rowed.
2. It required the same amount of gasoline whether it ran or not, apparently being able to absorb this fluid through its body walls without recourse to explosion. It always had to be filled at the beginning of every trip.
3. It apparently had some clairvoyant powers, and was able to read our minds particularly when they were inflamed with emotion. Thus the one very occasion when we were down to the point of destroying it, it started and ran with a great noise and excitement. This served the double purpose of saving its life and of resurrecting in our minds a false confidence in it.
4. It had many cleavage points, and when attacked with a screwdriver, fell apart in simulated death, a trait it had in common with opossums, armadillos and several members of the sloth family, which also fell apart in simulated death when attacked with a screwdriver.
5. It hated Tony, sensing perhaps that his knowledge of mechanics was capable of diagnosing its shortcomings.
6. It completely refused to run: (a) when the waves were high. (b) when the wind blew, (c) at night, early morning and evening (d) in rain, dew or fog (e) when the distance to be covered was more than two hundred yards. But on warm, sunny days when the weather was calm and the white beach close by - in a word, on days when it would have been a pleasure to row - the Sea-Cow started at a touch and would not stop.
7. It loved no one. Trusted no one. It had no friends. Perhaps toward the end, our observations were a little warped by emotion. Time and again as it sat on the stern with its pretty little propeller lying idly in the water it was very close to death. And in the end, even we were infected with its malignancy and its dishonesty we should have destroyed it, but we did not. Arriving home we gave it a new coat of aluminium paint, spotted it at points with new red enamel, and sold it. And we might have rid the world of this mechanical cancer.