55 Years Of NAFA

Al Cavalli on Economic Turmoil, Massive Growth, and NAFA’s Most Ambitious Project

By Gary Wien

“THINK OF SAFETY AS good business. If we could eliminate the expense resulting from accidents, which includes the cost of physical damage repair - liability payment, workers’ compensation, downtime, and lost productivity - wouldn’t that make a dent in your fleet operating expense? This is all part of our responsibility to our respective companies or government agencies - keeping costs down. But beyond that, I feel we have a moral and social obligation to fulfill. To do what we can, and more than we’ve been doing - to take advantage of the unique position we hold to reach the vast number of drivers, to advance not only the need for but the means to achieve driving safety.”

The preceding words were spoken in 1969, but could just have easily been said today. They came from the Keynote Address given by Al Cavalli as he began his term as President of NAFA. Serving from 1969-1971, Cavalli led the Association through a period of tremendous growth despite economic difficulties.

Cavalli was with NAFA from the very beginning. He was a member of the old Round Table Group and recently celebrated his 55th year with the Association. He remembers when the Round Table was limited to just 20 members and lamentations that NAFA has gotten so big, not everyone knows each other anymore like they did in the old days. During his term as President, Cavalli noticed the rise in membership numbers and even predicted the Association would have close to 2,000 members by 1980 if the numbers continued on their current path. NAFA had five active chapters when he first became President and 10 when he left. With membership soaring to well over 500 members, the Association struggled to stay on pace financially. In 1970, the Board of Trustees unanimously voted to raise dues for the first time in the Association’s history – a decision that did not go over well with the membership.

“It almost wrecked NAFA,” Cavalli recalled. “We found it necessary, at the
time, to increase membership fees. They started out at fifty bucks and we raised them to a hundred, and there was an uproar. In fact, the West Coast said they were going to leave and start their own group. After a lot of discussions, we managed to keep everybody in house, and the Association lasted."

Cavalli’s fleet industry career began in 1948 at Universal CIT Credit Corp. (UCIT) working with his mentor, Emil Ames. He spent several years there, becoming Vice President of Client Relations and Director, retiring in 1981. He then joined Avis Car Leasing as Manager of Sales and Service, before retiring for good in 1989. His road to fleet began by attending the Academy of Aeronautics (now known as Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology) in New York after high school. While studying aircraft mechanics, the war broke out and the government took over the school. They offered students the opportunity to complete an abbreviated one-year course and then go on to work for the government, and Cavalli took them up on the offer. He spent time at an army base in Delaware before serving three years in the service. When his term was completed, he returned to New York to start an automotive repair shop in Brooklyn with his brother-in-law. A year or two later, he joined Universal CIT, and the rest is history.

One of his best memories of NAFAs involves his work with the NAFCAR and NAFVAN/NAFTRUCK projects. These projects were among the most ambitious in NAFAs history. What began as a comprehensive survey of the membership about their opinions, attitudes, and experiences with passenger cars, vans, and trucks, ultimately led to drawings and plans for vehicle enhancements that helped shape the industry over the next two decades. The results were then presented during NAFAs Annual Conference in 1976 as both a Keynote Address and via a panel discussion with several automotive manufacturers.

“I think the most important highlight, not only of my career but of NAFAs, was the NAFCAR/NAFTVAN project,” said Cavalli. “It’s amazing how that impacted the automobile industry. Cars that came out – the sub-compacts and compacts – were very close to the image produced from that survey. And it’s a shame there hasn’t been a follow-up.”

It’s not clear why a follow-up survey has never been realized, as the Keynote Presentation described the original intention to be “only the first step in what we hope to be a continuing line of communication and cooperation with the automobile industry.”

It’s clear the OEMs spent time reviewing NAFAs work because NAFAs Bulletin (the Association’s print publication of the time) ran special advertisements designed to respond to the survey by three separate manufacturers in the months that followed.

“It was really amazing how manufacturers took to it,” said Cavalli. “Whether they admit it or not, many of the innovations they came out with were in that survey.”

Cavalli has been officially retired from fleet management for decades, but still pays close attention to the industry, writing articles for industry publications every now and then. He says he still misses being in the trenches of fleet, but is glad that his son, Bob, is in the business. “I guess I live on through him!” he said.

When asked what he thought was the biggest challenge for fleet managers today, he says, “Operating costs. No question. That’s the monkey on everybody’s back. Through history – up until recent years – depreciation was, by far, the largest expense item. Now, we’re getting to the point again where gas and operating costs are. It’s mainly because the way the price of gas is going it will reach or pass depreciation.”

Never afraid to speak his mind, Cavalli has often been outspoken in his disagreement with the green fleet movement. While he does believe in downsizing and switching to smaller, 4-cylinder engines, Cavalli believes those are simply smart business decisions, not ways to help save the planet.

“If a fleet manager found out that this 4-cylinder compact can do the job it’s been assigned to, why wasn’t it done a long time ago?” he asked.

In the end, it all comes back to the NAFCAR/NAFTVAN project. When fleet managers were given the opportunity to have their voices heard by the industry, the OEMs learned what was truly important to fleet managers. That knowledge helped them design better vehicles. Cavalli, who was recognized by NAFAs with the Association’s Distinguished Service Award for his contribution to the industry, may not believe in the green fleet movement, but he probably played a role in starting it!