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FEB 2 1982

## Drivers Ignoring 55 MPH Speed Limit

**I**F YOU want to see the world go by, head your car onto an interstate highway and set your cruising speed at 55 mph.

You may overtake an occasional local truck or overloaded station wagon towing a recreational vehicle. By a score of about 40-to-1 you will be passed by trucks, buses, Texans and "snow birds" from northern states heading south for the winter. And by most Oklahomans!

Statistics showing a record number of 995 traffic deaths in Oklahoma in 1981 may or may not be due to this overwhelming vote of motorists against the 55 mph speed limit. The rising number of fatalities could be due to a combination of others causes.

It is true that a 1981 Gallup Poll showed 75 percent of those interviewed favored the 55 mph limit, but it also showed that only 29 percent observed it all of the time and 48 percent "most of the time."

When the accident fatality figures dropped for a year or two after Congress passed the law, safety experts hailed it as the greatest thing to

come down the pike. Much of its support came from eastern states, where critics argue traffic prevents people from reaching 55 mph. Strong opposition came from western states, where residents claim it is safe to drive on good highways at higher speeds.

A few who favor and many who oppose the national speed limit question whether Congress acted properly in establishing such a regulation. It is backed up by threats to withhold federal highway funds from states that fail to enforce it, in a sort of bureaucratic blackmail.

Claims of substantial fuel savings at 55 mph have not been fully proved. Because not many people keep close check on miles and gallons, they don't know. Most evidence has come from individuals and institutions trying to prove a predetermined point. They usually do.

What has been established is that smaller cars, with smaller engines, carrying lighter loads, and driven at slower speeds, do consume less gasoline than larger, heavier vehicles. Detroit auto makers slipped up

on this fact and lost a lot of customers.

On the negative side, the mix of these smaller cars with large number of trucks and other bigger vehicles results in greater hazards. In the crash of a big vehicle and a compact car, the people in the smaller conveyance usually get the worst of it.

Safety boosters who insist that "Speed kills!" often seem to ignore other significant factors. One is a Department of Transportation study that showed slow-speed drivers are more likely to be involved in accidents than relatively high-speed drivers.

Another is that effective means of keeping drinkers from driving cars is still lacking. About 26,000 traffic fatalities a year, half of the national total, involve drunken drivers. In most instances they are given a "slap on the wrist" and released.

The majority of motorists have "repealed" the 55 mph speed limit, regardless of what Congress and the Legislature may say.