Recently I forwarded an email that rang true, "Cheating at the Gas Pump." I'd had similar experiences and wanted to pass on the word. Now I realize I should have taken time to explain my own instead of relying on forwarding someone else's. Several readers directed me to snopes.com, a website that, I learned on accessing the same, somewhat debunked the email I forwarded—though it acknowledged that the stories of the circulating emails contained a "Mixture of true and false information." In other words, the original story contains a kernel of truth.

My forwarded email featured two examples. The first was of a truck owner in Georgia who went to fill up when his gauge showed his tank to be 1/4 full. By his calculations, it meant he'd need about fourteen gallons. "To my surprise it went to 15, then 16. I even looked under my truck to see if it was being spilled. It was not . . . It stopped at almost 18 gallons." Then he heard on the evening news that 1 out of 4 gas stations had calibrated their pumps to show more gas had been pumped than a person actually got. He recommended to stop at ten gallons and check to see if the price was exactly ten times the per-gallon price; if it was not, to report the gas station to the Georgia Ag Dept.

The second incident reported in the email came from Canada, where the amount on the printed receipt was $11 higher than what the customer had calculated it should have been. She raised a stink with the cashier and was reimbursed. It stated, "There is a [telephone] number on each pump that you can call and complain." Maybe that's true of Canadian gas pumps; I haven't seen ay such telephone numbers displayed at gas stations locally.

Snopes.com speculates that the "Cheating" emails proliferate whenever gas prices rise, but I know for a fact that such cheating happened to me.

I drive a 2006 Toyota Prius that averages 45 mpg; accordingly, its gas tank (like the auto itself) is modest-sized. I think the tank barely holds 10 gallons of gas. Even after driving it on "empty" for thirty or more miles, on fill-ups I've never gone beyond 9.8—until last year, when on my way to California, I stopped at stations directly off I-80 and on at least two occasions the pump registered well above 11 gallons. On one of those occasions I was running on fumes and ascribed it to that exigency, but the other time I had one-tenth of a tankful of gas left; hence, it should not have been lower than nine gallons. My first thought was to go inside and raise Cain but I chickened out, reasoning that something was going on beyond my powers of observation. It was the height of traveling season and the place was crowded. I preferred not to raise a ruckus among all these people.

Snopes first explains that two separate issues are discussed in the emails: 1.) whether gas pumps accurately report the amount of gasoline dispensed, and 2) whether gas pump accurately register the proper charge for the amount of gasoline dispensed. It adds that

"Vendors of gasoline are subject to a variety of state and federal laws requiring them to maintain adequately calibrated dispensing equipment and calling for periodic inspections by government regulatory agencies to ensure that they are in compliance with said laws. However, this does no guarantee that every gas pump you might encounter will necessarily be accurate."

Instances of malfunctioning or improperly calibrated pumps are not necessarily indicators that a particular vendor is cheating, says snopes. Worn-out equipment can be difficult to spot. And "Unfortunately, much of the responsibility for spotting such irregularities and reporting them . . . falls upon consumers." Snopes acknowledges that learning the system goes via "trial and error." Begin with a good idea of how much gas your car may need at a given gauge reading, though the reading is subject to a bit of fluctuation, the site recommends. As for the proper charge, the ten-gallon check is a good way to determine this. In case of reporting a problem, "the phone numbers are on inspection stickers." (This assumes, of course, that the station has been inspected.) In the Georgia instance mentioned in the email, snopes says the Georgia Ag Department "told us that the pumps referenced in the quoted email had been checked" and were "re-checked in response to the email" and found to be accurate.

On the downside, "Some regulators' equipment might itself be inaccurate, [and] understaffed agencies may not be able to adequately enforce compliance."

As for myself, I've never had reason to doubt a Cheyenne station, though I rotate between several for continued comparison. As stated before, my personal experience was with stations right off the interstate.

Excepting long drives, I also avoid filling up in the heat of the day. Gas expands in warm weather, which means you get less gas for your buck than if you tank up in early morning.

Two years ago I drove from Salt Lake City all the way into Laramie on one tank of gas. That's a trip of over five hundred miles! The wind was in my back; still, I wondered whether I'd make it to my favorite station downtown, near the university—the gauge had sat on "empty" for what seemed a very long time. I did, and the fill-up was below 10 gallons. But only just.

P. S. After this essay appeared in print, several readers informed me that the distance between Salt Lake City and Laramie is 450 miles, not the 500 stated above. I stand corrected.