

## Despite poor funding, Amtrak is hanging on

Poor Amtrak. Created in 1971 to lift the burden of failing passenger trains off of then-failing railroads, the unlovely government corporation was thought of as sort of an elephant burial ground — a place the passenger trains would go to die.

The railroads were mostly relieved. Even those who still loved their passengers, and still made a little money on them, like the Santa Fe or the Union Pacific, saw that they could never afford to replace their aging coaches.

A couple of mavericks stayed out of Amtrak and kept running their own trains. Eventually, they too gave in.

But on the way to the graveyard, a funny thing happened: The first energy crisis of 1974.

As gasoline prices soared past 50 cents, you couldn't buy a seat on an Amtrak train. Long strings of old coaches labored over mountain passes and whizzed across the prairie, their decrepit air conditioners wheezing and gasping, passengers either freezing or sweltering.

Amtrak was full. Amtrak was in. Amtrak was here to stay.

But only, year after year, by the skin of its teeth.

Republican presidents vowed to kill it. Democrats often tried:

Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton were hardest on the trains. A hair-brained scheme had the corporation charging off to find freight to balance its budget. Passengers spent hours waiting for box-cars, but the company never did make money.

And chances are, it never will.

At one point, Amtrak promised to shrink its losses to nothing inside a decade. They just grew. Now, Congress is considering a bill to increase subsidies from about \$1.4 billion a year to around \$1.9 billion.

Amtrak will have to "reform" itself again and shrink its losses.

Think that will happen?

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, a Democrat and Californian, who President Bush held over from the Clinton administration, is fond of saying that Amtrak is dying. One cartoon shows him with his hand around its throat.

For five years or more, Mr. Mineta has been trying to kill Amtrak. Like legions of bureaucrats before him, he's failed.

So Amtrak rumbles on, never with enough money to make the trains worth riding. Never quite dead. The program actually has a lot of support, because trains make sense in a lot of markets.

Its trains could be a lot better. Today, they're often run by and for the benefit of the employees, not the rider. Some airlines are like that, too. But Amtrak does a surprisingly good job with what it has. New cars ordered in the '70s boom give a good ride.

No, trains will never make money, not like they used to. Passenger transportation is a money loser the world over. Airlines are broke. Bus lines are cutting back. Every civilized country subsidizes its passenger network, and not just trains.

Congress just passed a \$286 billion transportation bill, which includes federal subsidies for highways, trucking, airlines and mass transit. Amtrak's measly \$2 billion is hardly in the same league with the other modes. Yet Congress and the administration keep starving the trains.

Amtrak deserves better.

We're not going to kill it, so why not make it worth something?

That probably makes too much sense. Congress will keep on giving Amtrak just enough to get from crisis to crisis, but never enough to run like it should.

It's the American way.

— Steve Haynes

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Office hours:  
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Phone: (785) 877-3361  
Fax: (785) 877-3732  
E-mail: telegram@nwkansas.com

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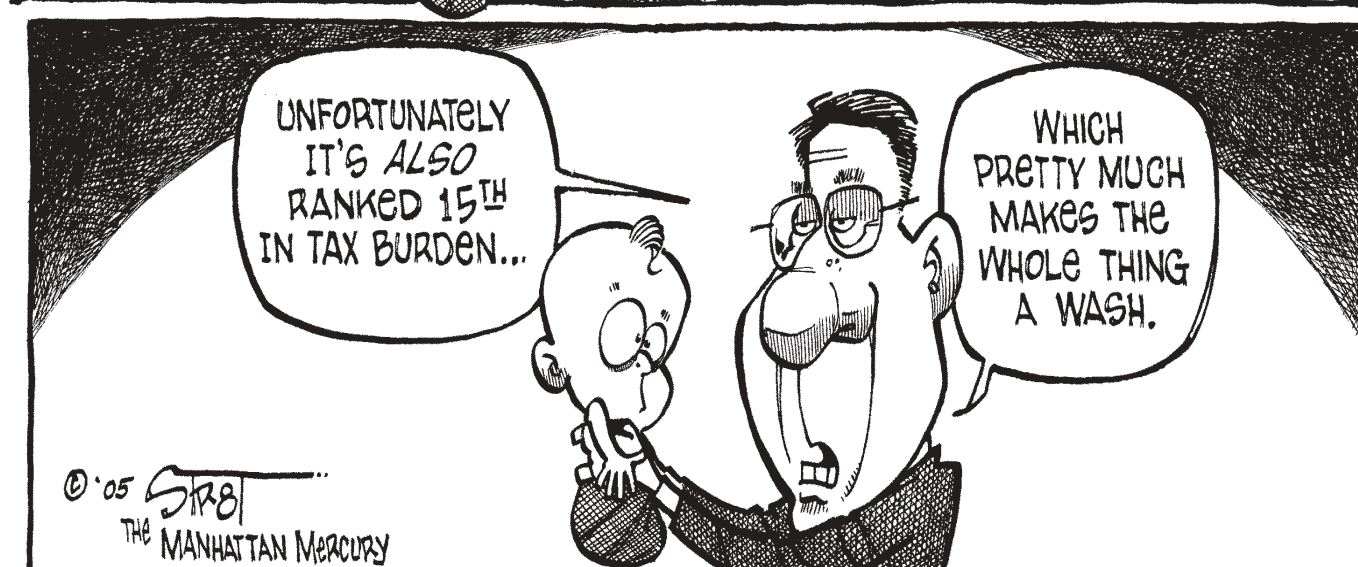
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## Simple fun is still the best yet

If any out-of-towners drove through our little burg Saturday, they would have thought we were a "jumpin'" place. Cars were lined up on Main Street, adults were in charge of games and kids were everywhere.

In a little town, it takes a lot of people to make something good happen. (Funny how it only takes one person to make something bad happen.) But, nonetheless, something good happened in our town over the weekend.

First, someone had an idea. They thought it would be good to have a day dedicated to the proposition of "fun." Nothing too sophisticated. Just plain, simple, old-fashioned fun.

Next, a date was set and plans were made. Help from different quarters was enlisted and the plan began to come together. Businesses donated prizes and money, locals gave their time and talents.

Country kids and town kids alike con-

### Out Back Carolyn Plotts



sidered this their "last hurrah" before school starts this coming week. Parents saw it as a break from the hubbub of county fairs and a work-filled weekend. It was a good excuse to leave the dusting and laundry 'til another day.

It was a non-stop day of activities, including goldfish races, horseshoe pitching, balloon animals, watermelon-eating contests and watermelon-seed-spitting contests, bingo and a kids' tractor-pull.

For the grownups, the day ended with a dance on the swept-clean drive of the

town's only gas station. A deejay played good dancin' and listenin' music. A little later in the evening, several brave souls tried their voices at karaoke singing. Some didn't sound too bad.

The weather was absolutely perfect. I know the organizers breathed a sigh of relief when the day was done, but the whole town benefited.

Not monetarily. But, in a sense of camaraderie. In a sense of community spirit. And, it proved you don't have to spend a lot of money to have a good time. Nor do you have to go far from home. A good time can be had right in your own backyard.

Home-grown fun is still the best.

—ob—

Received an e-mail this week with pictures of several signs seen outside churches. I especially liked this one:

This is a ch\_\_ch.  
What is missing?

## The pounds are slowing down

I didn't reach my goal, but it was a good year and I'm making my new resolutions right now.

Nope, this isn't a New Year's column that got lost in the shuffle. It's an anniversary celebration for my diet.

On Aug. 15 last year I decided that I was tired of not being able to button my jeans, of wearing only elastic waistbands and of being pleasingly plump.

I decided that I would lose 20 pounds. Steve pointed out that if I lost a pound a week for an entire year, I would lose 52 pounds. This got me to thinking that I could be back down to the weight I was when I got married in 1971.

At the same time, I found a weight and height chart that claimed I was obese.

Obese, not overweight, not pleasingly plump — just plain fat. And, unfortunately, I had the too-tight pants to prove it.

So I hit the diet trail.

The first few months were exciting. Over the first few weeks, I lost a pound

### Open Season Cynthia Haynes



every three to four days. This was good. This would be easy.

Then came the holidays, and the losing slowed down. After that it was a pound a week for several more months.

Then came the summer, and things slowed to a crawl as I lost a pound every two weeks. Then from July 1 through Aug. 15, I lost just one pound.

And that's where I am. Down 37 pounds in 52 weeks.

The good news is I've gone from a size 16 pant size, almost ready for an 18, to a tight 10.

The bad news is nothing fits. I'm watching the sales and hitting thrift stores and

yard sales, so I'm rebuilding my wardrobe.

Still, I'm not done. There are 15 pounds of fat still sitting on my hips and butt and they're going to have to decamp.

So, I'm taking a deep breath, giving my old clothes to the thrift store and planning my next campaign. Those size 10 pants I bought are really too tight and I need to shrink into them.

☆☆☆☆

I have been resisting the temptation to write a cat column, but some stories have to be shared.

I have to stop leaving my windows down.

I was in Norton earlier this week and ready to head for home. I started the car and turned around to check to see if there was anyone behind me on the street. There wasn't any traffic, but there on the back seat was a pretty little tabby.

"Meow," she said. "Out," I said.

Sorry kitty, I'm full up in the cat department.

## Costs go up while care-time goes down

Today's hospice care, like the rest of the healthcare system, has seen enormous progress and change.

Hospice is caring for more people every year — continuously upgrading services. But, compared with 20 years ago, more intense levels of care, shorter lengths of service, and more advanced and expensive treatments now typify today's care.

Change and progress have come with challenges. The costs have skyrocketed, and Medicare has not kept pace.

The Medicare Hospice Benefit is more than 20 years old.

Since hospice legislation was passed in 1982, the benefit has provided more than 4 million Americans with end-of-life care. But 20-plus years later, the payment plan needs to be updated.

Today, Medicare for routine home hospice care does not cover the costs.

A study of hospice care found that hos-

### Hospices Services, Inc.

pital costs exceed revenue by about 10 to 20 percent. The percent was larger for rural areas.

The study identified two problems.

The intensity of hospice services has increased resulting in an increase in the cost per day. The rapid growth in prescription drug and outpatient costs has contributed to this increase.

In addition, Medicare does not reimburse for grief and bereavement support and necessary volunteer coordination.

The length of time patients receive hospice services has decreased resulting in an increase in daily costs for each patient, while daily reimbursement has remained flat.

In the future, this combination — the

downward trend in average length of service, the current structure of Medicare reimbursement, and the increased intensity of care services, will lead to increased financial shortfalls for home care hospice services.

Most hospices have, historically, depended on charitable contributions to meet their budgets. Current dynamics suggest that hospices will face increasing pressures to cut costs and increase fundraising and donations.

In the final analysis, however, it is not about money. It's about our grandparents, our parents — all of us. To ensure that more Americans benefit from the services of hospice care, it is time to ensure that future of hospice care. It's crucial to keep pace with the cost of care because the value to our society of dignified, life-affirming care for America's dying and their loved ones is immeasurable.