

Riding the rails

In my most recent column, I wrote about our experience taking the train on our vacation trip this summer. One of the advantages for me of train travel is the opportunity to really engage other people in conversation. That happened frequently for us in the dining car. One woman with whom we talked had a real impact on my thinking. She is an African-American woman in her late 70's who has ridden the train exclusively since 1980. She is intelligent, articulate and has very strong opinions, many of which are because she is black. She is a widow and has adult children, and she spoke about how education fails our young people today. She was not talking about algebra or computer skills, but living skills. She contends that schools need to provide young people with economic "good sense," so they do not become enslaved to credit cards while they are in high school or college nor graduate from college under a mountain of debt. She said our young people become sharecroppers because of the amount of debt they acquire. I have continued to mull over what she said.

Another person we met was a young mom traveling with two small children, 20 months and two months. She was already on the train when we got on, and she was headed to a city outside Los Angeles. The two-month-old cried when he was hungry, but other than those times he was quiet. She carried him in a sling when moving about the train. Other people in our coach offered their help and held him for long periods of time. The 20-month-old was not so quiet. She easily tired of sitting in the seat and wanted to be up and moving around. Others tried to help entertain her, but she sometimes eluded her mom and raced in the aisle of the car. I admired the mother's willingness to take her children on such a trip; she told me her mother had paid for her train tickets so she could visit. Apparently someone was unhappy about the toddler's energy and enthusiasm for engaging other people, because the train steward came and moved this mom and her children to the lower level of the car. The mom seemed sad that someone had complained and that she would lose the support and assistance she had received.

Our last meal on the train was an evening meal, and we ate with a young man we had briefly encountered on the platform in Los Angeles. He was wearing a tee shirt with the caption:

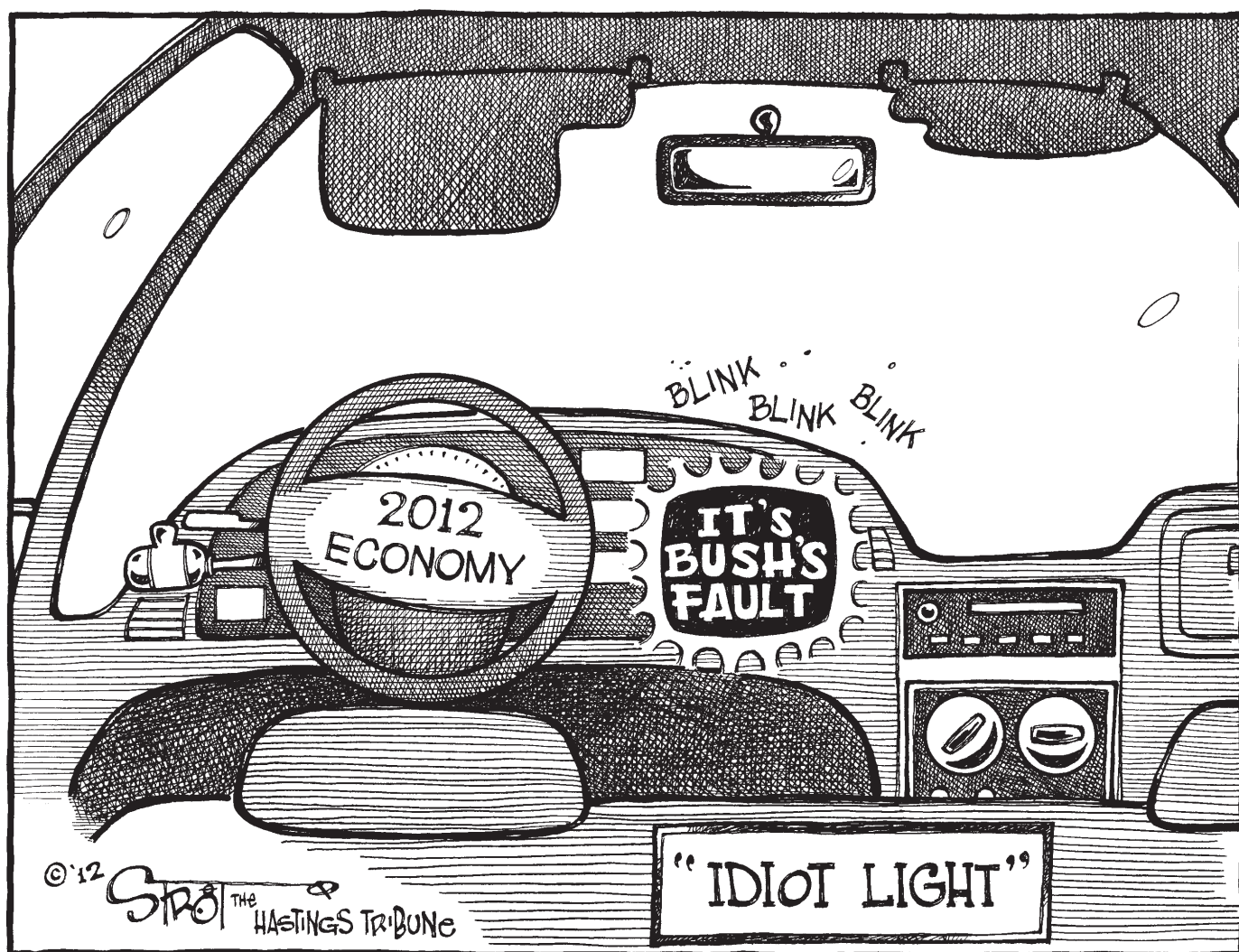
"I have kidnapped myself. If you ever want to see me again, pay me \$100." When I laughed at his shirt, he asked if I wanted to give him \$100. We had dinner together, and we learned he lives in Russell. He made the old adage about its being a small world so very true. He has a brother who used to teach at Northern Valley. He had met the one person we know in Russell. We had lunch with this friend yesterday and he told us our tablemate from the train had sought him out and told him he had met us.

Most of our conversations took place in the dining car, including an encounter with a Baha'i couple, but we also had interactions with the steward of our sleeping car. He was grateful for our feedback to him and invited us to pass this on to Amtrak, so it would go in his personnel file (we did that).

I would encourage anyone for whom a trip is about the journey and not just the destination to consider "riding the rails." It is a fascinating way to interact with others.

Life is Good

Rita Speer



Missing the granddaughter, not the mess

Taylor went home last week with her Aunt Halley. And I miss her already. Not because the house feels like a tomb, either. Taylor is not a boisterous child; in fact, she's very quiet. But her presence is felt in other ways. Mainly: stuff.

I don't know how one 13-year old can have so many little dribs and drabs of everything. Jewelry, hair things, clothes, shoes, make-up, accessories, nail polish and digital devices.

What to wear was always the decision of the day. Taylor would ask, "What do you like, Grandma? This pair of shorts or this pair?"

Frankly, I couldn't distinguish any difference between the two, but I would choose one pair with a definitive, "Oh, that pair, for sure."

Then we would move on to the top. Usually I had a choice of T-shirts; blue, red, pink, green, yellow, white or black. Occasionally, she would throw in something with a pattern or a little style. Next: to belt or not to belt. My reply: "If your pants fall down without it, wear a belt."

Shoes are always a big decision. In Taylor's case, what color of flip-flops. That child has worn flip-flops, almost exclusively, since she was about four. Her dress-up flip-flops have sequins.

We haven't even started on the hair. Up, down, ponytail, braided, twisted or curled.

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



One day Jim came in from working outside to use the bathroom. He waited and waited and waited. Finally, he asked me, "How much longer is she going to be in there?"

All I could say was, "Guess it's been awhile since you had a 13-year-old getting ready in your house, hasn't it?"

-ob-

Looks like Taylor left one day too soon. Baby chicks started hatching the day after she left. Right now, the head count stands at nine. Pretty good considering I wasn't hopeful of any hatching. Remember my last attempt resulted in complete failure. At this rate it'll still take two or three more "hatchings" to replace my flock.

It's too soon to tell if we'll have hens or roosters. At least it's too soon for me to tell. I'm just hoping for at least 50 percent hens.

Jim reminded me that he learned how to tell from an Internet website. We raise barred rocks and as soon as the chicks get their feathers we can see the

difference. Roosters have extra rows of white feathers and look a little lighter than the hens. Like I said, it's too soon to tell.

-ob-

When my mother got older she started speaking her mind a little more candidly. It was like she had lived long enough and had earned the right to say what she thought. My girls accused me of the same thing.

I had just met a friend of Halley's and besides being a slim, trim, professional musician, it was revealed that April is a cancer survivor. That, of course, opened up a new thread in the conversation. One thing led to another and soon April was showing us pictures of her band and how she looked during her chemo treatments.

All I said was, "My, you were heavier then, weren't you?"

You would have thought I had accused her of robbing Fort Knox. Halley and Kara about fell on the floor in disbelief. In unison, they said, "Why didn't you just say, 'Boy, you were fat.'"

April and I looked at each other. She wasn't offended and neither one of us could figure out why they would have been.

All I could say was, "Look, if she had been skinny and ended up heavy, I never would have said a thing. What? Do you think I have no class?"

You don't have to answer that.

A little comic relief for farmers and ranchers

The dog days of summer can be trying – especially for farmers and ranchers who are experiencing one of the worst droughts in decades. A summer like 2012 brings little rain, grueling heat and fiery winds. This year's drought and string of more than 25 days of 100-degree days has finished off most of the dry-land corn and has now zeroed in on destroying this year's soybean and milo crops. What will happen to this fall's upcoming winter wheat crop remains to be seen.

During this period, it's healthy to interject a little humor into the daily diet. A chuckle or comic relief is good for the mind and body. With that in mind, here's my offering for the middle of August.

I've yet to meet a farmer or rancher that isn't continually searching for new, innovative ways to make profits. This week, let's take a peek at the opposite end of the spectrum. Here are 10 sure-fire ways to cut your profit margins.

1) Blindly follow seasonal trends or patterns. If the market is going up – do not sell – it may go even higher. If the

Insight

John Schlageck



market is falling – do not sell – it may turn around and rocket back up.

2) Never, under any circumstances, trust U.S. Department of Agriculture crop and livestock reports. From all the information available, these reports are "strictly legit." But never mind. Discard these reports at all costs.

3) Blame the big grain companies. Everyone knows they manipulate the farmer and make all the profits.

4) Assume prices and costs are related. No place is it written that because you spend \$1,000 an acre to produce irrigated corn, you are guaranteed a profit on your product.

5) Hold the short crop because less corn, wheat, beans or milo must mean the price of these commodities will increase. In reality, by the time you

hear a crop is in short supply, everyone else has heard the same news and the price has already gone up.

6) Follow the majority. If your neighbor sells his corn, it is probably the right time for you to sell yours too. Ignore most conversation in the local coffee shop, the town hall or other meeting places. Figure out your own marketing strategy.

7) Ignore the futures market and basis because everyone knows that a bunch of speculators are rigging the market. Remember, speculators lose money too and provide liquidity for the market.

8) Never sell until you have a crop in the bin. Often times, before you harvest a crop is the best time to lock in profits. Take a hard look at future contracting.

9) Always, always shoot for the market high. Smart marketers have abounded this philosophy for the goal of "shooting for higher."

10) When all else fails, blame your banker or your wife. You may just want to take a closer look at yourself and your production and marketing strategies.

THE NORTON TELEGRAM

E-mail: nortontelegram@nwkansans.com

ISSN 1063-701X

215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, KS 67654

Published each Tuesday and Friday by Haynes Publishing Co., 215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, Kan. 67654. Periodicals mail postage paid at Norton, Kan. 67654.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Norton Telegram, 215 S. Kansas, Norton, Kan. 67654. Official newspaper of Norton and Norton County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, and the Nebraska Press Association

Nor'West Newspapers
Dick and Mary Beth Boyd
Publishers, 1970-2002

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