

Other Viewpoints

Others compete; fairs stand strong

Even amid the competition, events stand the test of time. As has happened for generations, Kansans are heading to county fairs.

The annual events have changed over the years, yet continue to attract people of all ages and interests.

It's always encouraging to see crowds at the fair, even as so many other activities compete for people's time.

In Finney County and elsewhere, fair organizers do their best to incorporate new and interesting activities as a way to help the events evolve and stay relevant. Who during the first county fairs more than a century ago could have imagined monster truck exhibitions at the gatherings?

At the same time, it wouldn't be the fair without the usual staples in livestock shows and 4-H competitions, the kind of traditional offerings that help youngsters better understand the heritage of their community and state.

Indeed, a focus on all that's good about rural life has remained the highlight of the county fair.

Consider competitions over the best livestock, baked goods, crafts and other endeavors. The good work displayed by 4-H members and other fair participants who may or may not have farm ties always warrants recognition, especially in a part of the country powered by agriculture.

Another feature of each county fair that won't go out of style would be affordability. Many activities are free, making the fair one of the best entertainment bargains around.

Fair-goers will have access to as much as the 121st Finney County Fair, set for July 23 to 27 at the fairgrounds.

Here and beyond, the county fair tradition has been a source of community pride for generations. Early county fairs in the 1800s in Kansas were considered by many to be the social event of the year.

Perhaps county fairs have been such a given over time, that they're often taken for granted.

Many other entertainment options have come and gone. Anyone who has passed on a recent visit to the fair should plan a stroll around the fairgrounds to check out what they've missed — and see for themselves why the annual events have had such long, enjoyable runs.

— *The Garden City Telegram, via the Associated Press*

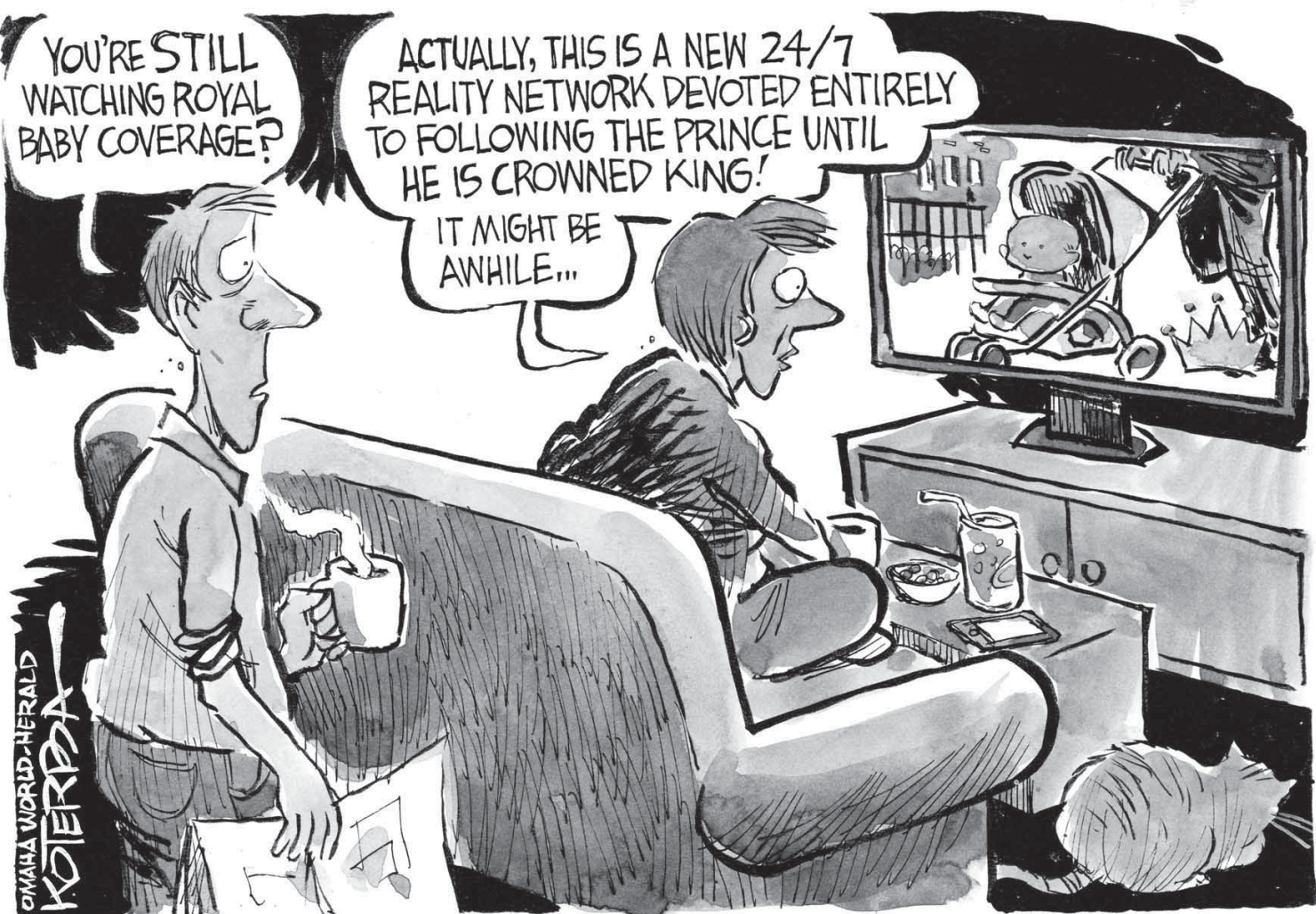
Write us

The *Colby Free Press* encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise. Nor do we run form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous from this area should be submitted to the Want Ad desk.

Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses not pertaining to a public issue.

Before an election, letters (other than responses by a candidate) will not be published after the Thursday before the polls open.



Is this drought the worst ever?

Hundred degree days coupled with 30 to 40 mile-per-hour winds and little moisture spells crop and pastureland failure for western Kansas. It's like putting the corn and grass in a giant outdoor oven and turning a fan on.

Forty-year-old Ben McClure, Stevens County, says the extended drought that began during the summer of 2010 may be the worst drought ever in southwestern Kansas — and that includes the infamous droughts of the Dirty '30s and '50s.

Although McClure didn't experience those two droughts some veteran farmers and stockmen did. They've told him this drought may be the worst ever. He's looking at three consecutive years of failed dry-land crops.

His irrigation crop yields fell by as much as 30 percent in 2011. While the Stevens County farmer believes he's fortunate to have the availability of flex accounts, he's worried about using up his pumping allotment in two or three years and no more water to irrigate with if the drought continues.

"It's bad," McClure says. "Since the drought started during the summer of 2010, we've received less than 17 inches of rain and no measurable snow."

Average rainfall for Stevens County is 17 inches annually. McClure's land received no precipitation of any kind during a recent 13-month period.

The hardest part of such a drought, McClure says, is putting effort into growing a crop and watching it die. His family has farmed the Kansas soil for five generations.

"I believe you don't farm as a chosen career," he says. "It's a career that chooses you." Watching the precious top soil blow during



John Schlageck

• **Insights**
Kansas Farm Bureau

this three year drought is especially painful. At this point there's little a farmer can do to stop erosion.

"You can pull a shovel or a blade through the soil that's bone dry a foot deep; all you'll be doing is turning over dry dirt," McClure says. "Because we haven't really grown any crops for three years now, there's little residue left to hold the soil in place either."

Last winter the Stevens County farmer watched the soil blow down to the hardpan (a layer of soil so compacted that neither plant roots nor water can penetrate). That's gut-wrenching. It leaves a scar on a farmer and the land.

McClure says the wind has blown crop residue drifts four and five feet deep on his family's driveway. Last winter, corn stalks blew into his yard, drifting around his farm equipment like snow.

Strong southerly winds have also uncovered fence rows he's never seen before — probably relics from the '50s or even the '30s Dust Bowl days.

The livestock situation is dire in Stevens County as well. McClure pulled his cow herd off pastures early in 2011 and placed them in a dry lot in 2012. He's reduced his cow herd by one-third.

Many of his neighbors have sold their entire herds.

"Some neighbors tell me they'll buy cows again, but I wonder if they'll be able to because they don't want to go through another heartache of losing something they spent a lifetime building," he says.

McClure is trying everything he can to keep his cow herd. He's grazing irrigation corners and grass he labels "wasted" just to put roughage in his cattle.

"We flashed across the pastures for a week when a little shower moved through earlier this summer," he says. "The pigweeds, Kochia and thistles all came up but now we're back to feeding hay."

To cope with the three-year drought, McClure has changed his cropping practices. He's reduced corn acres and replaced some with wheat. He's also shifted to 500 acres of cotton. Like other producers in the region, he's looking to grow more drought and heat tolerant crops. He'll plant mostly milo on his irrigated land next year instead of corn.

"It's been a tough few years," McClure says. "I hope I can persevere and my kids can see me be successful."

"At times I've been paid well for what I do," the Stevens County farmer/stockman reflects. "Other times I've done it for free and at times I've paid dearly. But I love farming and I wouldn't change it."

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Farmers and ranches pay plenty of taxes

To the editor:

The July 3 *Free Press* carried a front-page article entitled "Appraisals low on land values." The county appraiser presented the commissioners with figures showing land was appraised at a smaller percent of selling price values than residential or commercial property. To me the reason is obvious. Farming is a very risky business and commodity prices are extremely volatile. Hence, farmland appraisal is based on what the land can produce rather than what the land might bring if it was sold.

The implication in the rest of the article seemed to be that farmers and ranchers were not paying enough property tax. People with residential and commercial property were therefore subsidizing them, the article said. This premise is a crock and here is why:

1. The county appraiser conveniently failed to mention the fact that appraisals on farmland have increased in the last four years — some as much as 101 percent. This gives the county an automatic increase in revenue. Where is this extra money going?

2. Farmers own homes, too, and pay the same tax rate as anybody else. So, does that mean they are subsidizing themselves? Then, who would you guess pays more fuel tax, a resident with a couple of cars or a farmer with multiple trucks paying 50 cents a gallon tax on diesel. Fuel tax presumably pays for our roads. Are farmers subsidizing the roads the commissioners use to get to work?

3. Even at present appraisal figures, the average farmer-rancher pays several times more



Free Press Letter Drop

• Our readers sound off

in total property taxes than the average non-farm resident who owns a house and a couple of cars. Taxes paid on trucks, trailers, farm buildings, etc., aren't taxed at any lower rate than those paid by anyone else. Then throw in the land taxes on top of that and there you are.

4. As far as commercial property goes, many businesses just raise the price of the product or service they provide to cover the taxes they are billed. The customers end up paying the taxes. Guess you have noticed continuing price increases of food and most everything else. Farmers and ranchers are the biggest customers of many local businesses. Don't believe it? Just start counting them up and see how many are directly or indirectly ag-related. Can farmers increase the price of their grain to keep up with increasing taxes? I think not. They take what the market gives them.

5. A good way to eliminate agriculture from the county would be to tax it away. If ag land was appraised at 94 percent of sales prices and taxed accordingly, farmers and ranchers would be hard pressed to stay in business. Historically, farm prices do not stay up for long.

In bad times, taxes still continue. Many old land abstracts show sheriff sales when landowners could not pay their taxes and the land was taken from them. One commissioner was quoted in the March 20 issue of the *Free Press* as saying, "We'll get the money or we'll sell the land."

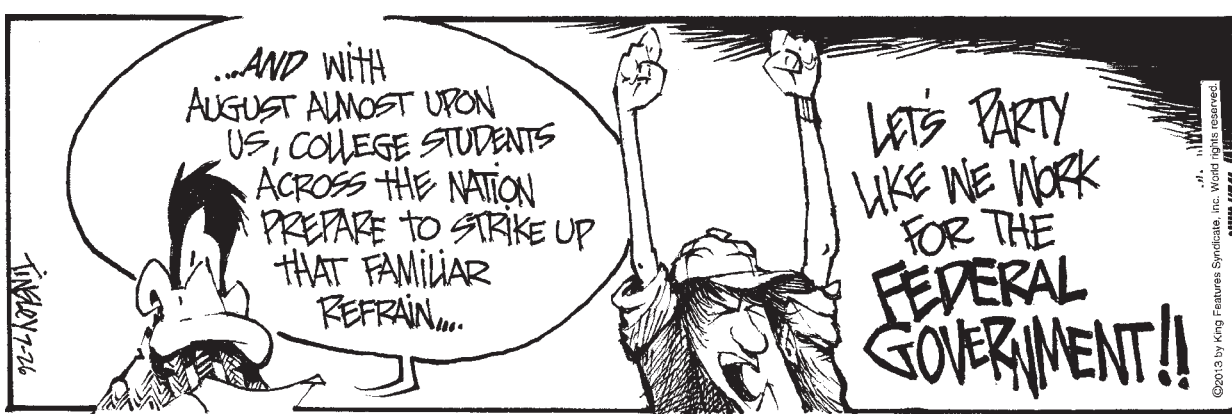
6. If you're not selling land, it doesn't matter what the price is. If a farmer sells his land, he has nothing to farm — that's the factory. Farmer income is based on what the land can produce, not on auction price. In a drought year, such as this year, production could be little or nothing. Expenses and taxes still continue. There is a reason why farm and ranch land is appraised on the basis of what it can produce, not on what some new York investor is willing to pay for it. Right now, farmers are able to get around 12 cents a pound for their corn or wheat. What else in this world can you get for that price? Figure out how many pounds of corn it takes to pay a \$10,000, \$20,000 or larger tax bill.

In the article I just mentioned, one of the commissioners was quoted as saying, "We're paying their taxes for them," presumably meaning homeowners and other non-farmers are paying farmer's taxes. Such logic reminds me of a joke I occasionally told when I was teaching biology which involved two genetic scientists who wanted to cross an abalone with a crocodile in hopes of getting an abodile. They did this, but instead what they got was a crock of baloney.

Vernon Flanagin, Colby

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley



THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan., 67701, and at additional mailing offices. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72