

from our viewpoint...

# There are things we are thankful for

Three years of drought, at the end of a recession, troops at war on distant continents, an impasse in Washington.

What do we have to be thankful for?

It might be our schools. They're losing enrollment and fighting budget cuts, but they're mostly the best. They turn out kids with high test scores and a low ratio of violence. They're long on sports and character, short on dropouts, discipline problems and failure.

They are, for the most part, places where students go to learn and have fun. They're schools, not warehouses. They get the support they need when the chips are down and the budget is tight.

Or maybe it's the weather.

Yeah, I know it's been dry. But we live in a place where the summer is bearable and the winter is (usually, not this weekend) sunny, bright and warm. The humidity stays low most of the time and you can be outdoors most days.

There are those long, lingering sunsets in the fall, awesome thunderstorms in the summer. The Lord usually sends us enough moisture to grow a crop and keep some trees.

What more do we need?

Well, it'll rain again some day.

We've got miles of wide-open vistas to be thankful for. Back east, you can get claustrophobia driving down the highway. Here, you can see 50 miles on a clear night. In Denver, half the time, they can't see the mountains across the valley.

Maybe it's living in a place where government is both honest and efficient. In Kansas, we take it for granted that the folks down at the courthouse are working for us, not to get into our pockets.

Let one step over the line, take just a few bucks, and they'll wind up in jail.

If the war is dragging on, remember that we were attacked. If we don't vanquish our foes, they'll be back — again and again.

America is the last, the only superpower. We didn't ask for the job of policeman to the world. There's nobody else to take it.

We should be thankful that we're still able. Imagine a world without some sort of order, a place where dictators run rampant and democracy is on the run. Imagine the world in the 1930s, for instance.

And be thankful.

We should appreciate living in the best and most free country on earth.

It's not perfect, not by a long shot. But it's a much better place than it ever has been. It's free, safe and, even in a recession, prosperous.

In America, we live better than any nation has in the history of mankind. In America, we're free to think and live as we please, to pray and work as we please. If our country has some faults, that's the price we pay for freedom.

But thankfully, there aren't many.

Out here, we should be thankful that we live among the nicest, most generous and friendliest people anywhere.

We live where you can walk down the streets at night and feel safe. Where you can leave your house or your car unlocked and expect things to be there when you return. Where people wave when they pass you on the road.

We've got game, fishing, open fields and the open road.

What more could we ask for?

Yeah, there's a lot to be thankful for. — Steve Haynes



## My vacation is my 'silent retreat'

I don't know about you, but I just took a vacation.

I'm calling it my Silent Retreat. I went to Hawaii (again) — one of my favorite vacation destinations.

But Hawaii is changing, and not for the better, in my opinion. Tourists have corrupted it, I'm afraid. It used to be exciting and a little mysterious. Almost gone are the matching muu-muus and shirts for lovers, and with the loss of that tradition, we have lost the romance too. Today you see T-shirts and shorts — just like you see here at home. Somehow the effect is not the same.

It must be terrible to live somewhere that has tourists visit 365 days a year. Much of the friendliness and welcoming has gone — even though it was sorely missed the few months after the September 11th tragedy, I was told. Hotels had to lay off workers, businesses closed, the streets were empty.

During my Silent Retreat, I stayed in a won-



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• commentary

derful hotel with excellent dining facilities, but it had changed also. Instead of smiling people intent on experiencing Hawaii, I saw people who were no more friendly than they'd be back home. No one seemed caught up in the unique atmosphere that USED to be Hawaii. People were still buying pineapples to send home, but there was little of the electricity I used to see.

Granted, over the years I've probably changed also. I'm not as exciting, or mysterious or romantic as I probably was.

But I tried. I smiled. I said hello to people. There were few hearty responses. In the two weeks I was there, I doubt if I spoke out loud a total of 2 hours.

Just try to vacation around people paired off into couples (mostly senior citizens) and see how much fun you have!

I had a lot of time to meditate and to analyze myself — at times joyfully communing with God and sometimes spiraling down into depression, accepting that I was old, ugly and alone. Then one night, near the end of my trip, I was seated in the open-air restaurant, looking as good as I could and dressed in a favorite muu-muu. I was enjoying good food and private thoughts, when a woman at a nearby table waved. I looked to see if she were waving to someone behind me.

She smiled, stood up, walked away from her husband to take a seat at my table. She cheerfully said, "Are you traveling alone?" I assured her I was. And she said, "What a shame! Such a lovely lady having to be alone."

We had a short, friendly conversation, during which I realized that God always sends angels when we need them the most.

## Nottoway Plantation was ahead of its time

During a vacation trip to New Orleans with a couple of British teachers, my wife decided one thing we were going to do was to visit a plantation.

Once we arrived in New Orleans and took our trip up the Mississippi on the Steamboat Natchez, my wife, Ava, and Liz Mills set their sights on finding a plantation to visit.

When they had found the one they wanted, they gave the directions and we headed west for White Castle, La., between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

As we drove, I asked if this was the closest plantation they could find, but my wife's answer was, "It was not the closest; it was the biggest."

We turned off I-10 heading south and crossed the Mississippi River on the Sunshine Bridge before arriving at the Nottoway Plantation west of White Castle.

The mansion was built in 1859 by John Hampden Randolph and his 11 children. Today the mansion is a bed and breakfast inn, allowing people to stay in one of the 13 guest rooms.

The women liked the furniture in the bedrooms, with their special designs and wonderful beds. The Grand White Ballroom has beautiful fireplaces, which make great backdrops for weddings or other special events.

Since the house was not handicap accessible, my wife was unable to see the upper floors. She was able to maneuver around the ground floor, which is referred to as the basement, and where the overnight guests are served a plantation breakfast.

Besides the ballroom, the main floor has a gentleman's study and a large dining room with a long table that could seat over 20 guests.

There were a number of things about the mansion that made you appreciate the ingenuity of the Randolphs in building this large house. The family owned 7,000 acres around the mansion. The land was part of Randolph's



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sugar cane operation, which made him a fortune.

Randolph was well ahead of his time: his



Knowing he was building close to the mighty Mississippi, Randolph used concrete and bricks for the foundation and basement floor. The curved part of the ballroom was built with wood timbers that were soaked in the river for about six years.

During the Civil War, Randolph took all his workers and slaves to Texas to work, and left his wife and children behind to take care of the mansion. The Union troops let it be known that any Southerner who did not try to interfere with their advance would be left alone.

One day, the story goes, a maid spotted a blue-uniformed man carrying a white flag headed from the river to the mansion and told Mrs. Randolph. She hurried all the children and servants to the basement, then put a dagger in her waistband before walking out to meet the soldier.

The Union officer said he was with a detachment of gunboats, and that he had been a frequent visitor at the mansion before the war. He assured Mrs. Randolph that he would see that her property was protected. She thanked the officer and welcomed the troops, who set up camp near the river in front of the mansion.

At some point, there was some cannon fire near the mansion. One cannon ball hit a column on the front, and lodged in place. It stayed there for over 130 years, but one summer day it came loose and fell to the ground.

The visit was capped by a wonderful Louisiana Cajun and Creole lunch at the "elegant yet casual" Randolph Hall Restaurant.

After lunch, we headed back the 50 miles to New Orleans for another night on Bourbon Street. I again asked if this was the closest plantation and was assured it was not the closest, but it was the biggest.

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