

from our viewpoint...

## Passport delay mess a security fiasco

The current mess with passports is a great example of government planning, which is pretty much an oxymoron anyway. The Homeland Security people decided that to beef up border security, Americans would have to have a passport to return from neighboring countries, including Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean islands, at least by air. U.S. immigration officials have never required a passport for simple cross-border visits, but in this age, there's an insane desire for security people to control every movement. This may sound like a good idea, but it has little to do with fighting terrorism and a lot to do with police power to watch and control all of us citizens. Police agencies have wanted this for a long time, but Congress resisted. The Sept. 11 attacks gave them the chance to get what they wanted. As usual in Washington, if something sounds like a "really good idea," it can fly through with little thought to the consequences. That's how we got the present mess with passports. The security guys said it was a good idea. Terrorists might be infiltrating through Mexico or Canada, they claimed, though there's not much evidence of that. The only terrorists we know of coming through Canada got caught. And on the Mexican border, there's no telling who might be coming in, but really, it's unlikely terrorists could pass themselves off as Latino illegals.

There are ways for terrorists to get into this country, but most of them involve sneaking in through regular channels, on regular flights, right under the noses of the authorities. Customs and Immigration officers usually are too busy checking ordinary people to see the real terrorists. They spend their time harassing Arab visitors and other friends of America.

But regardless of whether the passport deal was a good idea, it's created a mess. No one asked if the State Department could issue a passport to every American planning to travel this year. Passports that used to take a month to get now take three. The "expedited" service that used to take a week — at a cost of \$60 — now takes three or more. People with tickets and hotel reservations find themselves stranded. Even pleas to congressmen can't speed the process much.

Even after the initial crunch, no provision has been made to beef up the passport offices for increased business. In fact, the State Department has had to hold employees who planned to retire to keep the pipeline flowing at all.

We're obsessed with identification in this country, but the real benefits of beefed-up ID aren't for terrorism control. They're just for control. Terrorists find ways around such things. Ordinary people just have to put up with the new rules.

Even with supposedly foolproof "Real IDs," passports and computer tracking, in the end, a terrorist who's well trained and sophisticated, as the dangerous ones are, will find a way. It takes good police work and good intelligence to find those guys and block them. Meantime, the new rules have cost billions and inconvenienced millions for no real purpose. It's a sham, an expensive charade and a real nuisance. Not a benefit to our security.

The smart thing would be to eliminate the passport requirement — it only applies to airline flights, not to land crossings, anyway — and go back to the old system. That's not likely to happen, because it's too sensible and the security hounds are in the driver's seat. — *Steve Haynes*

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## It was a restless night in Walsenburg

We were late getting out of Oberlin last Tuesday. Usually we leave about 1 p.m., right after our Rotary meeting.

However, Sen. Pat Roberts was making a sweep through northwest Kansas and he was slated to be in Oberlin from 2:45 to 3:45 p.m. We've been to see Sen. Roberts at his office in Washington and, when he's in town, it seemed like a good idea to take time for him.

Besides, Kim figured she could talk me into writing the story — which she did and I did.

So it was about 4:30 p.m. when we finally pulled out of our driveway with Annie the dog in her kennel in the back and April Alice and Molly Monster, the cats, on the back seat in their carriers.

The trip to Creede, in southern Colorado, takes about nine hours without too many stops. With giving the dog breaks and grabbing supper, we were in Walsenburg about 11 p.m. when we both decided we were too tired to keep going and that we should stop for the night. Walsenburg isn't a great town for motels, and



**cynthia haynes**

• open season

the most likely choice — a Best Western — was full. We checked into the one up the road. It had been new in the 50s and, although some work had been done, it showed its age.

The couple running the motel was from Oklahoma and didn't have any idea what they had gotten themselves into. I checked in and took the key — a real room key with a yellow diamond-shaped plastic tag — to Room 112.

Room 112 was clean but smelled strongly of deodorizer. I turned off the air conditioner and opened the window.

Steve fed, watered and walked the dog while I lugged the cats inside and set up their litter box and food and water bowls.

I hit the very hard bed while the cats prowled the room and Steve read for a while. Before going to bed, he turned the air conditioner back on and closed the window since the outside temperature was above 80 degrees.

I don't know if it was the air conditioner, the strange place, the closed window, the air freshener or just plain cat cussedness, but the felines would not settle down.

Not only did they roam, they voiced their discontent until I was ready to shove them back in the carriers and leave them in the truck with the dog.

The motel wasn't very full and there was no one on either side of us, so we weren't tossed out for causing a nuisance, but neither Steve nor I got much sleep.

In the morning, we recreated the cats and headed out over the last mountain.

The cats slept all the way to Creede.

Next time we get a late start, I'm taking sleeping pills — for all four of us.

## On picnics and social correctness

I did something a week ago I've not done in a while: went to a picnic.

There is a beautiful park only miles from where I grew up. It offers 3,000 acres of rolling green hills, open fields and walking trails. It has 63 picnic groves and I picnicked at many of them as a kid.

There were a lot of reasons to picnic then. Family reunions, church gatherings or neighbors getting together. Schools, companies, unions and other organizations often staged annual events.

The park was packed: Kids running around, footballs and Frisbees being tossed, water balloons flying through the air. While the kids played, the adults talked and laughed and sipped ice-cold beer.

The park was vibrant then — people routinely waited in line to secure their favorite grove one year prior to their event — and the spirit of people, connected to each other in a million different ways, filled the summer air.

But people don't picnic like they used to.

According to Robert Putnam, author of "Bowling Alone," the number of picnics per capita was slashed by nearly 60 percent from 1975 to 1999. This reflects a larger trend of the breakdown in social-connectedness that has taken place in the past 30 years.

Why the breakdown? For starters, argues Putnam, there are lots of dual-income couples. Both mom and dad are slugging away in the workplace and when they get home at night they are exhausted. Who has time to go to a PTA meeting or plan a neighborhood outing?

When I was growing up, most moms were home during the day. They collaborated with each other to assist with school events and sometimes joined each other for tea and coffee. They worked together to watch over their kids and their work made our community extraordinarily tight. Television and the Internet are also breaking



**tom purcell**

• commentary

down our connectedness. Putnam says that "time-budget studies in the 1960s showed that the growth in time spent watching television dwarfed all other changes in the way Americans passed their days and nights."

That makes a lot of sense. Before there were 300 channels — before people zoned out for hours in front of the tube — people sat out on their porches at night, sipping lemonade and talking with each other.

Now we sit in our air-conditioned homes sending text messages to each other or posting photos of ourselves on social networking sites.

Putnam says transience is also contributing to our breakdown of social links. Many folks are uprooting themselves from great Midwestern towns such as Pittsburgh, Pa., to move to big nutty metros, where most of the dough and the jobs are.

Such "repotting," says Putnam, tends to weaken the roots that foster strong connections.

I lived in Washington, D.C., for nearly eight years. Most folks spend hours in traffic jams and hours more at the office. There is very little time to talk to, let alone connect with, your neighbors. And as soon as you get to know them, they take a job in another city and off they go.

Putnam says there are other reasons we're less connected. Most importantly, younger generations just aren't as civic as older folks, whose values and civic-mindedness were shaped by the experiences of World War II.

All I know is I'm glad I live in Pittsburgh again. I'm glad I went to a picnic a week ago. It's an annual event that has been organized by an old high school friend for 23 years now. He does all the work and planning, so that the rest of us can reconnect.

We eat cheeseburgers and drink ice-cold beer. We talk about family and work and long-lost friends. We fill the old park grounds with much-needed laughter and closeness — usually into the wee hours.

Putnam says rebuilding our connectedness is not going to be easy. That's why it's important that all of us do something to set things right. Here's a great way to start:

Go on a picnic.

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