

from our viewpoint...

Post Office heading in wrong direction

The management of the U.S. Postal Service may have the best of intentions, but we all know where that road leads.

The venerable agency appears headed, if not for outright oblivion, at least to an obscure corner of the economy where it won't bother anybody much.

Except those of use who've always depended on it.

The Post Office was not exactly the first of federal agencies; it came before. The founders thought it so important to bind the states together that the postal department predates the Constitution by about a year.

Since 1775, the Post Office and later the Postal Service have provided what is called "universal service," the idea that you could send a letter anywhere in the country for the price of a stamp.

Today, however, that very bedrock idea is in danger.

With first-class mail, and the profits it once brought, fading fast, the service seems to believe it can restore its financial health by cutting service and driving even more mail out of the system.

That's not much of a "business model," but it seems to be what management has left. First, the leadership decreed that mail sorting in small towns could be done more inexpensively in larger cities.

Thus, across the country, mail "processing" was moved wholesale from smaller section centers such as Colby and Hays to the next-largest town, Salina in our case. The service estimated it would save \$139,000 a year by eliminating the equivalent of four jobs in the two smaller towns.

All that was part of a plan to save \$1 billion nationwide, out of a projected loss of around \$8 billion this year. Later, however, the service said it hired 13 people in Salina to replace the four jobs eliminated by the change.

At the same time, headquarters decreed a plan to close mail processing plants in all but one or maybe two cities in each state.

In Kansas, mail processing work would be moved from Liberal, Dodge City, Hutchinson, Colby, Hays, Topeka and Salina to Amarillo, Wichita, Kansas City and perhaps even Denver. A letter to your next-door neighbor will travel so much, it will take two to three days to deliver.

Is the service about to abandon rural America? Already, 3,700 post offices are on schedule to be closed, with another 7,000 to be put up for "study." That means closing nearly one-third of all post offices, including many in towns you have heard of.

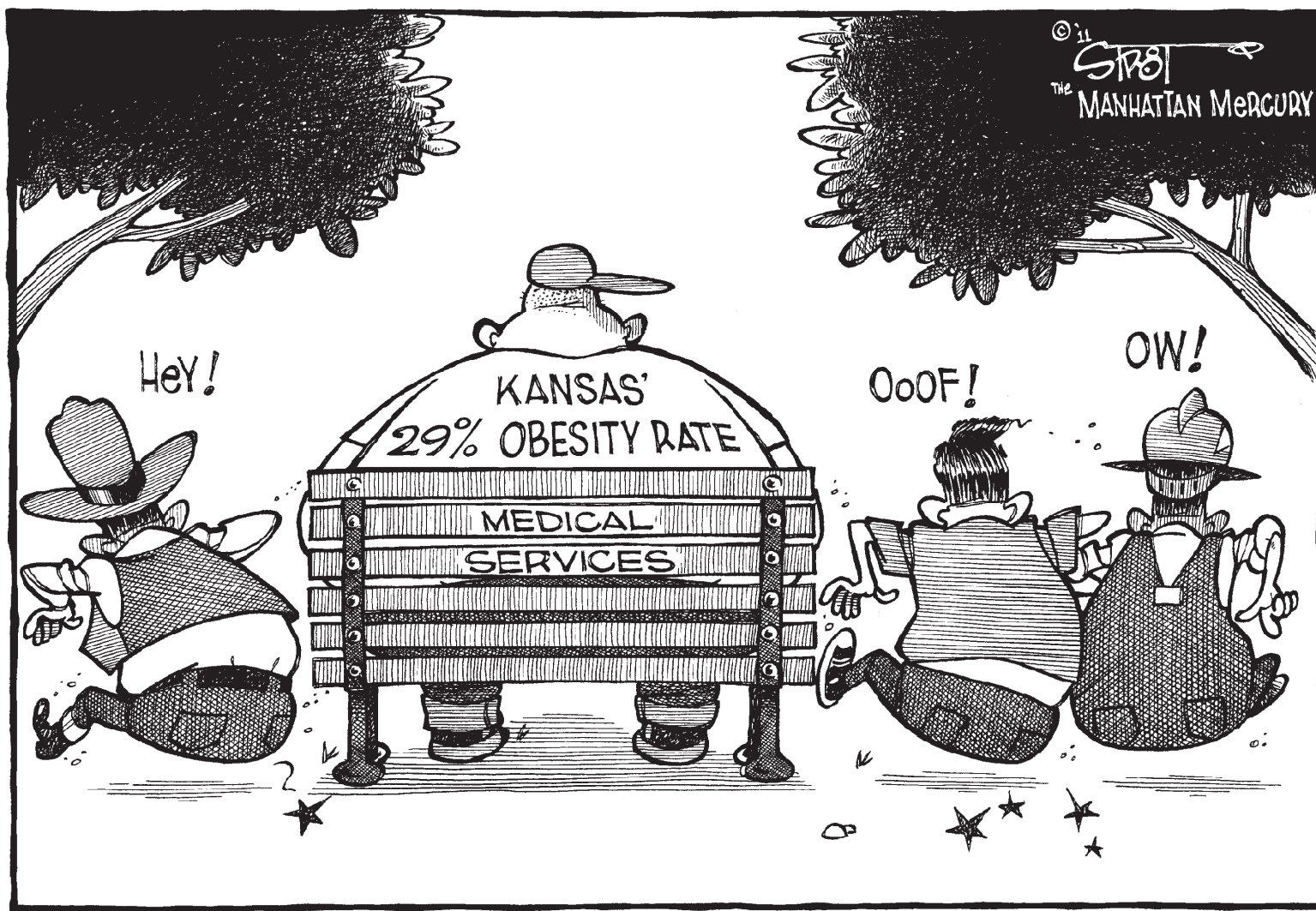
The implication of this is staggering. It means the end of overnight delivery for first-class mail. Businesses, banks, cities and counties that count on the post office to promptly deliver checks and bills will have to find some other way to send them.

Newspapers won't be able to count on the Postal Service to deliver their product on time, and they'll have to bail out. "Service" will no longer be a part of the agency's product, even if it remains in the name.

Good jobs will leave smaller towns, moving work to big towns where the work ethic is poor and labor problems abound. What business is left will flee the mails, leaving only advertising fliers (what people call junk mail), Christmas cards and the less-profitable end of the package business. Saturday delivery will end, followed most likely by a shift to every-other-day mail.

How the system will sustain itself on this meager cash flow, who knows. Once the idea of universal service has been abandoned, Congress will have little incentive to save what is left.

What the founders valued highly, it seems, could become one more wreck on the Internet highway. We all will suffer the consequences. — Steve Haynes



Perception of what is can be fleeting

The keynote speaker at a conference we were at last week pointed out how fleeting our perceptions of what is can be.

Dr. Lowell Catlett is an economist and dean of the School of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Science at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces — and one heck of a speaker. He combines the cadence of a black Baptist preacher, the folksiness of a Panhandle ranch kid (which he is) and the insight of a keen observer of what is and will be.

When he was in school, he recalled, a scientist declared that the world's known reserves of oil would be used up by 1980.

"And I didn't even have my driver's license yet," he complained.

But every year since 1960, those reserves have risen as drillers find more oil. The Bakken field in South Dakota, stretching to Canada and Montana, is said to be larger than those in Saudi Arabia. Beneath it, too deep to recover today, lies another, still larger pool.

We've been told we depend too much on foreign oil, he said. Today, the U.S. imports about 8 percent of its energy; tomorrow, we could be self-sufficient.

So much for running out of oil, at least in our lifetime.

His point, of course, was that what seems so certain today has a way of changing tomorrow.

We all remember the Population Bomb, and how it was supposed to bring on mass starvation before the millennium. The "best science" of that day did not account for changes in hu-



steve
haynes

• along the sappa

man behavior — having fewer children — or on the magic of modern agriculture — growing more food.

And of course, we all knew the threat of nuclear annihilation would be with us forever. Just as the Soviet empire would be. Just as the threat of terrorism will be. And global warming.

And, of course, Dr. Catlett said, we've all heard about the the rising cost of medical care and how it will break the nation. That'll never happen, he told us. Why?

Right now, somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of all medical-care expense comes in the last six months of life. Most of it is wasted, doing little to improve either the length or the quality of our final days.

America has changed dramatically in the last century, he said. A hundred years ago, most American were born at home and most would die there. Today, we're born in a hospital and most of us will die in one.

But that's not how he sees his life, he said. And he asked the audience, most of us aging Baby Boomers like him, how many of them wanted to spend their last six months in the hospital, enduring needless pain and expense. Few hands went up.

No, he said, the Boomers — and Hospice — will solve the crisis with Medicare and health costs. Government "death panels" won't be needed. Politicians will have to find something else to scare us with.

The way we act, Dr. Catlett said, can be explained by something called Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; a theory of human behavior that dates back to the 1940s. Abraham Maslow postulated that people respond first to basic needs, such as air, water, food and shelter. For centuries, perhaps, that's all that mattered.

But today, we are well off enough that most Americans can worry about the tip of the needs pyramid, which Dr. Maslow designated as "self-actualization." We worry not about living, but the quality of life.

It's the difference, he said, between eating and organic.

One more story he told: growing up on a west Texas ranch, all he could think of was leaving. When his mother called a few years ago, he told her he did not want the ranch, that she should sell it. It was good for nothing but raising short grass and dust, he thought.

Last year, a fellow speaker at another conference told him he'd been signing up Panhandle ranch land for wind-tower leases, minimum of \$10,000 a year. His neighbors landed 100 towers, he said. \$1 million a year in long-term, triple-net leases.

It just goes to show, he said, you can't assume what is today always will be.

The Goodland Star-News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

Member: Kansas Press Association

Inland Press Association Colorado Press Association

National Newspaper Association

e-mail: star.news@nwkansas.com

Steve Haynes, President

Tom Betz, Editor

Pat Schiefen, Society Editor

Advertising Department

Jessica Corbin, Lisa McNeely and Jeff Dreiling

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Nor'west Press

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Gary Meyer, Judy McKnight



nwkansas.com

N.T. Betz, Director of Internet Services

(nt.betz@nwkansas.com)

Evan Barnum, Systems Admin. (support@nwkansas.com)

Published every Tuesday and Friday except the days observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main Ave., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Star-News, 1205 Main Ave., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: star-news@nwkansas.com.

Advertising questions can be sent to: goodlandads@nwkansas.com

The Goodland Star-News assumes no liability for mistakes or omissions in advertising or failure to publish beyond the actual cost of the ad.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$29; six months, \$46; 12 months, \$81. Out of area, weekly mailing of two issues: three months, \$39; six months, \$54; 12 months, \$89 (All tax included). Mailed individually each day: (call for a price).

Incorporating:

The Goodland Daily News

1932-2003

The Sherman County Herald

Founded by Thomas McCants

1935-1989

THE SHERMAN COUNTY STAR

Founded by Eric and Roxie Yonkey

1994-2001

Nor'West Newspapers

Haynes Publishing Company

Doodlebug and jitney

As a youngster my dad used to read two newspapers daily. His newspapers of choice were the *Kansas City Star* and *Denver Post*.

Both arrived on the same day and both contained the latest news from that date in history. The doodlebug or jitney brought the two papers from K.C. 358 miles to the east and Denver, 255 miles to our west. We farmed outside the small Sheridan County community of Seguin.

For you younger readers a doodlebug was the common name for a self-propelled railroad car. Doodlebugs sometimes pulled an unpowered trailer car, but were sometimes used singly.

They were popular with some railroads during the first to middle part of the 20th century. Jitneys provided passenger and mail service on lightly used branch lines, often in rural areas with sparse populations.

By operating these two-car trains in northwestern Kansas, the Union Pacific didn't need to use conventional trains consisting of a locomotive and coaches. Several railroads, mostly small regional and local networks, provided their main passenger services through doodlebugs in a cost cutting effort. This freed up the UP to use its locomotives for the transportation of wheat, milo, barley and livestock.

Our home was located a little more than a block north of the tracks and from the time I saw my first train I was fascinated by the sound, smoke and the sight of these hulking metal monsters. I couldn't wait to see them, hear them, count the cars and eventually ride on one of them.

Doodlebugs were considerably quieter than the steam locomotives that carried millions and millions of bushels of grain from the breadbasket of the world where I grew up to hungry mouths across the globe. These two-car trains were typically equipped with a gasoline-powered engine that turned a generator which provided electricity to traction motors, which turned the axles and wheels on the trucks.

The doodlebug that stopped in our little village, population 50 with dogs and cats, usually came mid-morning, about 10:15. Back in those days you could almost set your watch by its arrival.



Insight
this week

• john schlageck

And that's how my dad received his two daily papers on the same day. A half century later after the rail lines were torn up and steam engines were a distant memory my dad subscribed to the *Salina Journal*. One of his neighbors, Elmer Reitcheck, subscribed to the *Hays Daily News*. After they'd read their copies they'd swap.

The funny thing about this is Dad and Elmer were now reading yesterday's papers. To be more exact, it often took two days to receive their daily papers. That's right. With all our technology, and lightning quick U.S. Postal Service required two days to deliver a paper 94 and 188 miles.

Talk about old news. You know the old saying, "That's a heck 'uva way to run a railroad." Well, I can't remember how many times I heard my dad say, "bring back the railroads."

I guess, you could blame part of the demise of today's papers on transportation and the government, but then both take a beating daily anyway, so back to the story of doodlebugs and those days of yesteryear.

I took one of my first train rides on a doodlebug. I also accompanied my dad to see our relatives in Denver by way of the Rock Island Rocket. That was nearly 60 years ago and the 250 mile trip on this streamliner took less than three hours. We literally flew across the plains traveling at speeds of 90 mph in this red and silver rocket. It takes four hours to cover this same distance traveling on I-70 today.

For my sixth birthday, I asked my parents for a train trip from Seguin to Oakley. It was a little under 50 miles by train and Mom and Dad drove part of the way, beside my sister, Cathy, and me as we dawdled in the doodlebug on our way to Oakley. This slowpoke traveled half the speed of the Rocket — maybe less.

During part of the trip the engineer allowed me to put my hand on the huge silver, metal throttle and as I told my friends later, "I drove

the doodlebug part of the way to Oakley."

But I couldn't get anywhere near a train throttle or computer-operated engine room today. SOPs (standard operating procedure), rules and regulations being what they are.

Maybe I really didn't go on this train ride across the High Plains back in the mid '50s. Maybe this story is all a dream. Something I thought up to fill this column.

Don't count on it. It was real. It was a birthday I'll always remember. Now those were the good old days.

And who knows maybe one day trains will once again play a vital role in transportation on both coasts. One thing is certain, they won't carry newspapers anymore.

John Schlageck of the *Kansas Farm Bureau* has been writing about farming and ranching in *Kansas* for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.



from our
readers

• to the editor

Scouts have great time at Smoky Gardens

To the Editor:
Thank you to the group of people who have worked hard at Smoky Gardens.

I am a Weblo Cub Scout in Goodland's Troop 142. Recently the Bear and Weblo group had a meeting at Smoky Gardens. It was a lot of fun.

I especially enjoyed the nature trail that had been added. It allowed our group to go on a small adventure.

We also used a new fire ring to build a fire and made doughnuts and peach cobbler.

It is really nice to have such a great place to camp and explore.

Manten Crow
Fourth Grader at Central School