

from our viewpoint...

'C' word big thing for next few years

The "C" word. Consolidation. It's going to be the Big Thing over the next few years in Kansas, but don't hold your breath. There's another "C" word — Change — and people don't much like it.

Nonetheless, we'll be forced to change as the world around us pushes on into the 21st Century. Consolidation of government units will be part of that, just as consolidation has changed farming, business and our economy while we weren't watching.

Right now, consolidation is next to impossible for Kansas cities, counties and local governments. The state has nearly a thousand local units, way too many by anybody's standards, but state law does not allow them to consolidate easily.

Wyandotte County had to go to the Legislature to accomplish a city-county consolidation, one of only 33 in the nation. That's wrong. Most of our counties cling to outdated township governments.

If the Legislature does anything, it ought to write clear laws allowing local people to make decisions on consolidating whatever they want. Counties should be allowed to consolidate. Cities and counties should be able to merge. Local government should be able to cooperate easily on any function they choose, all without "permission" from the Legislature.

The boys and girls in Topeka, after all, have more important things to worry about than whether Goodland and Sherman County want to consolidate law enforcement or road crews.

Today, only schools have a clear path to consolidation, and it's neither easy nor popular. Only a couple of districts, including nearby Rawlins County, have consolidated since the mass school mergers of the 1960s.

That era gave consolidation a bad name because many small towns felt it was crammed down their throats by the state. Thousands of school districts disappeared, and many towns died with them.

Let's hope that's not a model for future consolidation. Let's hope whatever comes is positive and voluntary. Let's hope we see consolidation because people want better government, not because somebody in Topeka says so.

We think that's the future. A few Kansas counties may give up the ghost, but not many. A few school districts will throw in the towel, but only because their population has left them.

We want our county seat nearby and our school across the town, not across the state. For the most part, we can afford to pay the price.

But there is no magic in having a two-man sheriff's department and a three-man police department.

There's no reason for having city and county road crews when one might do. Many counties have a unified dispatch office. There's lots of room for consolidation. We suspect there's more likelihood of local consolidations — sheriff and police, city and county, combined offices or crews — than county consolidation.

Having one county seat in northwest Kansas, for instance, is not an appealing idea. Sharing costs and functions among agencies while keeping local control is.

In an era when taxes are rising and people want service, what's to say most Kansans need or want separate city and county offices that often duplicate their efforts? Why have a city council and a county commission when it's hard enough to find good people to fill one board some years?

Those issues Kansans ought to get to decide. The Legislature and the governor need to step aside. Yet, when two bills passed last year to allow law enforcement consolidation, the governor, responding to political pressure, vetoed them. That's not good. But why should the Legislature decide? Why not let the people decide?

And let the "C" debate begin. — Steve Haynes



My calendar says 'It's Christmas'

I don't know about you, but my calendar says, "It's Christmas!"

The one time of year when people are kinder and more generous. I'm making plans to be with one of my sons' family, so I'm not singing "White Christmas." I want everyone to travel safely.

There are so many things written about Christmas. I hope they won't become archaic, lost in a sea of political correctness. There are wonderful expressions of the season, bringing out the best in human nature. I thought I'd just share some that I have enjoyed or spent time considering.

This is an e-mail I received from someone who sent it from Brett Blair's Sermon Illustrations, 1999:

"What have you heard and seen this Christmas? Oh, you say, had I been there at Bethlehem that night, I would have understood. I would have known it was the Christ child. Would you? There is one way of knowing:

"When you watched the 6 o'clock news, did you see chaos and strife, or did you see sheep without a shepherd?"

"When you went out to do your shopping, did you see only hordes of people in the stores, or did you notice the worried expressions on some



lorna gt

• commentary

of their faces — worried because they are facing this Christmas without employment or enough money, and they don't know how they are going to make ends meet?

"What did you hear this Christmas? "Did you hear only the blast of music and carols, or did you hear the silent sighs of the lonely and the bereaved who may be dreading Christmas because it accentuates their loneliness?"

"And in the midst of the sounds of honking horns and people arguing over parking places, did you hear faint sounds of laughter coming from (a church) mission project because you furnished food and toys for families and children?"

"You see, so often what you see and what you hear is not dependent upon the event, but upon you. If you did in fact hear the cry from the lonely, the laughter of poor children; if you saw the sheep without a shepherd, then, and only then, might you have noticed the events

that took place in Bethlehem that night.

"If you lacked that spiritual seeing and hearing, then you probably would have been with the 99 percent who were present but who saw or heard nothing out of the ordinary.

"In the end, perhaps one of our carol's words it best:

"No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Then on a lighter side, this is a poem by J. Harold Gwynne entitled "Who is Santa Claus":

*"Don't be surprised while I confide,
He may be standing by your side!
He's every wish and fervent prayer;
He's every kindness everywhere.
He's love wherever love is found;
He's one's best self the year around.
He's every Christmas melody,
He's every gift 'neath every tree.
He's in each handclasp of a friend;
He's Christmas cheer that has no end.
He's faith, and hope, a dream come true....
Why yes, of course, he could be you!"*

Hope your Christmas is as special as the first Christmas was!

I like the season, but not intolerance

I'm not a scrooge. I like the season. The music, lights and general happiness are great.

I put up a tree, bake cookies and think of how I can make life better for others. But I am fed up with some of the religious intolerance associated with Christmas.

I grew up in a house divided. My father was born and raised Jewish, although he doesn't practice any religion today, and my mother is Lutheran, which from the little I know it, seems to be a fairly relaxed religion.

So when people run around all December and November with greetings of "Merry Christmas," I wonder about the rest of us. What about those of us who don't exactly celebrate the birth of Jesus, but more of a combined version of a winter holiday?

I believe wholeheartedly in the spirit of the season. I love Santa and snowmen, the candles and the lit-up houses.

But maybe more of us should consider wishing people a Happy Chanukah or Kwanza? You could even, with little effort, wish people an all-inclusive Happy Holidays. Why does everyone have to make it so specific?

I don't try to make anyone put up a menorah or subject them to endless renditions of the dreidel song, after all.

Last week while shopping at Wal-Mart, I went down the card aisle in search of a Chanukah card for my uncle. Amongst the millions of Santa and Christian themed cards, I couldn't find one. I finally found a card at Hallmark, where they offered a few. They even had one or two Kwanza cards. Maybe I am the only person in town who bought a non-Christmas card, but at least they did consider me.

I tap my toes to "The Jingle Bell Rock" on the radio and I generally enjoy the music, but



kathryn burke

• commentary

recently I heard the X-Pressos sing at a holiday event and at the senior dinner at the high school.

Aren't X-Pressos a school-sponsored singing group? Don't they practice inside the school? Well if they do, what happened to separation of church and state?

I'm not so worried about "Jingle Bells" as I am "Go Tell It On The Mountain" or "Silent Night." The lyrics "Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born" don't even fall into a fuzzy gray area.

The group sang well and was very entertaining, but what if one of those kids wasn't a Christian, but a hybrid like me? Would he be able to withstand the pressure of the group and say he didn't want to sing? Isn't peer pressure pretty powerful at that age? Isn't that part of the reason we don't allow religion in schools?

Now look at it a different way. Separation of church and state is considered a bad notion by many Christians because it disallows public celebration of religious holidays. But how would those people feel if we threw out the Christmas tree put up a Jewish menorah, a candle holder that is used in the Jewish festival of lights commemorating the people's victory over the Syrians. Separation protects your religion, whatever it may be, from governmental corruption, not just mine.

Last week, I read Lorna GT's column and I noticed that she was upset about having to remain politically correct about Christmas. I'm

just asking for some common decency and consideration.

When Lorna says, with some disgust, that nativity scenes have no place in public areas, she's right. You can easily put a nativity in your own lawn or a church lawn and not make me, the taxpayer, pay for your holiday. Lorna also suggests if we stop celebrating Christmas, that we also stop celebrating any other religion's holidays, but that's already true. I've never seen a huge Kwanza sale at the mall. The federal government doesn't shut down for Passover, like it does for Christmas, every year.

I don't want anyone to stop their celebration, but just try to not alienate everyone who doesn't believe the exact same way you do. Believe me, non-Christians have to do a lot more tolerating of your religion than you do of theirs.

Can anyone tell me the meaning behind Kwanza, Ramadan or Chanukah? Because I'm sure Africans, Muslims and Jews all can tell us the story of Christmas.

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The Goodland Star-News

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

Member: Kansas Press Association

Inland Press Association Colorado Press Association

National Newspaper Association

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Published every Tuesday and Friday except the days observed for New Year's Day 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@nwksansas.com. Advertising questions can be sent to: goodlandads@nwksansas.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, \$24; six months, \$42; 12 months, \$76. Out of area, weekly mailing of two issues: three months, \$34; six months, \$49; 12 months, \$84. Mailed individually each day: 12 months, \$119. (All tax included.)

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

garfield

