

Let's rid state lawbooks of antiquated libel crime

It's popular to make fun of old or outdated laws, like those requiring horsemen to yield the right of way on city streets, or banning members of certain groups from spending the night in town.

You have to wonder, then, why we still have a criminal defamation statute in Kansas, which likes to consider itself an enlightened state.

A Kansas law (KSA 21-4004) makes it a Class A misdemeanor to "communicate to a person orally, in writing, or by any other means, information, knowing the information to be false and with actual malice, tending to expose another living person to public hatred, contempt or ridicule; tending to deprive such person of the benefits of public confidence and social acceptance; or tending to degrade and vilify the memory of one who is dead and to scandalize or provoke surviving relatives and friends."

And that might seem fairly ordinary, unless you realize that 32 states have done away with libel or defamation as a crime. Most experts see these out-of-date laws as an affront to the First Amendment right of free speech.

Doing away with criminal libel laws doesn't mean that people can say or print anything they want. We still have laws allowing civil action for libel, or untrue publications.

People, especially "private persons," those who are not in the public eye or public officials, can and do sue if they think they have been wronged by a newspaper, television station, Internet site or pamphlet.

Because people can protect their name in court, and collect damages if necessary, there is no justification for maintaining criminal sanctions for libel.

Criminal libel law winds up being used by

people who cannot collect damages in civil court and should not be able to bully those who criticize them.

In Colorado, a student who published an online "blog" poking fun at the university administration wound up having his computer seized by the police. He had been turned in by a professor who was often the butt of his pointed satire.

In Kansas, city officials and a publisher were the targets of the most recent criminal libel charges. Though the case was thrown out of court, it illustrated why this law is so obnoxious to the First Amendment.

In this country, no public official should be allowed to have his critics booked and thrown into jail, no matter how briefly. That does not jibe with our ideals of free speech and free and open political debate.

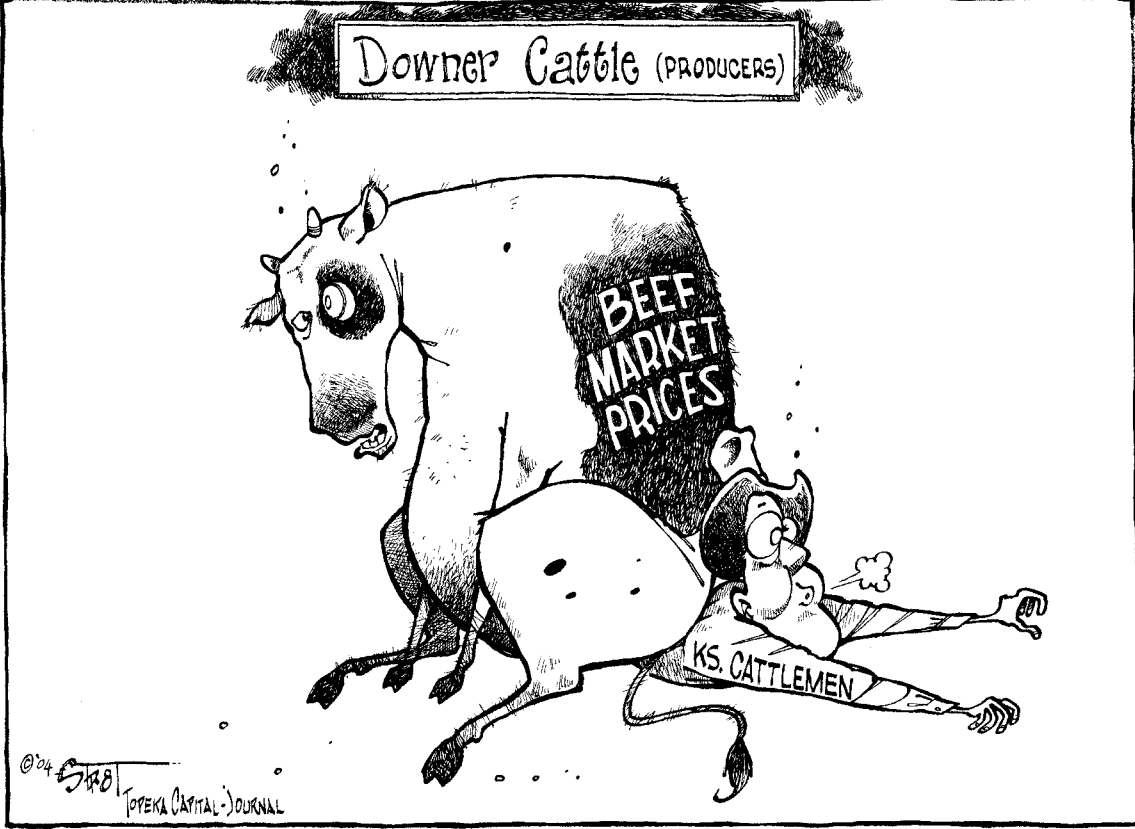
Nor should any publisher — Internet, newspaper, magazine — have to explain his political opinions to a criminal court. No voter should be called on to justify an opinion on a public official, whether it's the college president, the mayor or the town clerk.

Our freedom is founded on the idea that ideas are sacred and the principle that each of us is entitled to form his own and, more importantly, speak them without fear of retribution.

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, after all, anyone could have an opinion. And be shot or tortured for espousing it.

If we have learned anything after more than 200 years under our precious Bill of Rights, it is that free speech and open debate will not hurt us.

Let's outlaw criminal libel. — Steve Haynes



White collar theft really a crime

No one likes to admit they've been conned by an embezzler. Banks and brokerages, especially, will go to almost any length to sweep this crime under the rug.

It looks bad when people find out that one of the loan officers has been tapping the till. It's worse when a stockbroker has been accessing the customers' accounts.

It happens all the time, but few embezzlers are actually prosecuted, and that's a shame. If more of them went to jail, it might cut down on this peculiar white collar crime.

The board of the Kansas Press Association had mixed emotions last year when the accountants told them their executive director had been "loaning" himself money from association accounts.

There may have been some sympathy at first, but by the time the final total had rolled in at \$117,000 in alleged misappropriations, there was not a tear to be shed for the group's ex-leader.

The board voted to turn the case over to the police and district attorney, and more power to them. It was embarrassing to be sure to have to admit it had happened on their watch, but the members had the courage to act.

Let me say up front, I have no sympathy for embezzlers. My father's law partner cleaned out the firm's accounts, leaving Dad with a stack of bills and an empty checkbook.

The fellow went to court and



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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promised to make restitution, giving up his license to practice law. He never did repay Mom everything he owed, though. Last time I heard, he was a city official in an unnamed Midwestern town.

Dad had a stroke a couple of years later, and Mom always blamed the financial mess for putting him in an early grave at 55.

My dislike for embezzlers runs deep.

You'd think more people would be angry when they find out they've been taken, but oddly enough, the first impulse often is to feel sorry for the thief.

That's because embezzlers are likeable people. We wouldn't trust them with the checkbook or the bank bag unless we thought they were nice guys.

And that's what makes embezzlement such a rotten, despicable crime.

A stickup man walks in, points a gun at you, tells you to fork over the money or he'll kill you. That's relatively straightforward.

An embezzler smiles, shakes your hand, asks about the wife and kids,

pats you on the back. And steals everything he can get his hands on.

Some are cynical thieves. Others are exposed to temptation, pressed by financial needs, expensive habits and weak morals, perhaps. None has much integrity or moral fiber.

Nice guys indeed. One I know of, when confronted, reportedly looked at the assembled accusers and said, "Why are you doing this to me?"

And some among the victims felt sorry for him.

Not me. I felt sorry for the people who had donated the money he stole, for the board members who had trusted him, for the customers whose accounts he may have pilfered. But not for him.

As a Christian, I wouldn't presume to judge any human soul. We're all sinners, and I'd pray for our redemption, all of us. But whether you see it as weakness or deceit, or both, you can't condone stealing, lying and weaseling.

It's a rotten crime, one that deserves to wind up in court, on the front page, in a prison cell, because the more embezzlers we let go, the more weak souls will try it.

She's short on hair, long on love

Hair!

It's a beautiful thing. It's been called a woman's crowning glory. Long, flowing, ebony, flaxen, raven, golden, auburn — pick one — hair is stuff romance novelists really go for. Songs and plays have been written about it. Wars have probably been waged because of it.

Men, for the most part, want their woman to have long hair. They think it's romantic. They don't care if she wears it in a pony tail with a baseball cap or loose on her shoulders, just so it's long.

Women, of course, like to please their men, so they try to accommodate them. At least once in her life, every girl has tried to have her hair long. Now, long hair doesn't work for everyone. Some women simply don't look good with long hair and some don't want to take the time to care for long hair.

I once heard a man say, "Nothing is prettier than cared-for long hair, and nothing is uglier than unkempt long hair."

My husband is no exception. He likes long hair. He said it was the first thing he noticed about me. He always got nervous whenever I mentioned having shorter hair.

All this is leading up to the fact that I cut my hair last week. Now let's make sure we are on the same page when I say, "Cut." I don't mean trimmed, I don't mean shortened a little. I mean *cut*. Remember



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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"butch" haircuts for boys? It's in that neighborhood. The top is a little longer, but the back and sides are shorter than Jim's. But I did it for a good cause.

A few months ago, I wrote a story about a girl in Norton whose younger sister had lost all her hair following chemotherapy for a rare cancer. The older sister pledged to grow her hair and donate it to an organization that made hairpieces for children who have lost their hair due to cancer or a condition known as alopecia.

I'm telling you, that inspired me. Inspired me to the point that I checked out the agency's website and learned that they would accept hair that has been colored and/or permed. That did it. I decided to cut my hair for Locks of Love.

Their only requirements are that the hair be at least 10 inches long and in good condition. An appointment with a hairdresser showed that my hair measured 10 inches all over. That meant in order for me to have

any hair left after cutting, I needed to let it grow a couple more inches.

Watching hair grow is about as exciting as watching paint dry. By the time it reached 12 inches all over, I was sick of it. It looked terrible; I couldn't fix it. So when the day of my appointment arrived, I was ready. Snip. Snip. Snip. It was done. Some little kid will be sporting a new "do" of dark brown hair.

What did Jim think? He says he likes it. In fact, he says it's kinda cute and that he's falling in love all over again. He even said, "I think it makes you look younger." Good answer!

From the Bible

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. John 14: 27

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She was totally green with envy

I won't say I was envious. That sounds so petty.

Petty, yes. True, absolutely.

Back in August, Steve got an invite to go with a group of publishers to Tunisia.

The man organizing the trip is from Iowa, but he knows a man in Washington who works for several small Arab countries. These places would like to see more American tourist dollars flowing into their small corners of the world and, oh yes, if we could influence the State Department, that would be nice, too.

The man from Iowa pointed out that since Tunisia is a Moslem country, he was only inviting male publishers.

Steve was hesitant, but I told him he would be crazy to turn down the invitation.

The last bunch of Americans to get a free trip to Tunisia found themselves fighting the Germans outside Tunis, the capital city.

The tour was supposed to take place around Thanksgiving, but the contact said that timing wasn't a strong point on these trips.

Thanksgiving came and went, and there was no call. Then around



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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Christmas, the call came. The trip was on. Could Steve leave on Jan. 10 from Washington or New York? Sure, but which?

Several e-mails and phone calls later, it was decided that the jumping-off point was Washington. The journalists would be flying Air France and, oh yes, the publisher from Iowa was taking his wife.

Now, I like these folks, and he was doing a lot of work to set this whole thing up.

I had no reason to complain or bemoan. He was giving Steve a golden opportunity.

But I was so jealous I couldn't sleep for two nights. I made Steve's life miserable for about a week. Then I mostly got over it.

I put Steve on the plane in Denver

that would take him to Washington and returned home.

After all, I had a lot to do and now I had no man under my feet to get in my way.

Of course, there was no man to feed the dog, do the laundry or help with all those hundreds of other chores that Steve does every week. I was busy. Very busy.

I also took a day off to visit my mother in Concordia. Mom confided that she had had the 24-hour stomach bug the day before.

The next day, I realized that I had brought Mom's bug home with me.

Now, that's just not fair. Steve goes traveling and I get Montezuma's revenge.

If I weren't so miserable, I'd get him.

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