

Amtrak just rolls along by the skin of its teeth

Poor Amtrak.

Created in 1971 to lift the burden of failing passenger trains off of then-failing railroads, the unlovely government corporation was thought of as sort of an elephant burial ground — a place the passenger trains would go to die. The railroads were mostly relieved. Even those who still loved their passengers, and still made a little money on them, like the Santa Fe or the Union Pacific, saw that they could never afford to replace their aging coaches.

A couple of mavericks stayed out of Amtrak and kept running their own trains. Eventually, they too gave in.

But on the way to the graveyard, a funny thing happened: The first energy crisis of 1974.

As gasoline prices soared past 50 cents, you couldn't buy a seat on an Amtrak train. Long strings of old coaches labored over mountain passes and whizzed across the prairie, their decrepit air conditioners wheezing and gasping, passengers either freezing or sweltering. Amtrak was full. Amtrak was in. Amtrak was here to stay.

But only, year after year, by the skin of its teeth.

Republican presidents vowed to kill it. Democrats often tried: Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton were hardest on the trains. A hair-brained scheme had the corporation charging off to find freight to balance its budget. Passengers spent hours waiting for boxcars, but the company never did make money.

And chances are, it never will.

At one point, Amtrak promised to shrink its losses to nothing inside a decade. They just grew. Now, Congress is considering a bill to increase subsidies from about \$1.4 billion a year to around \$1.9 billion.

Amtrak will have to "reform" itself again and shrink its losses.

Think that will happen?

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, a Democrat and Californian President Bush held over from the Clinton administration, is fond of saying that Amtrak is dying. One cartoon shows him with his hand around its throat.

For five years or more, Mr. Mineta has been trying to kill Amtrak. Like legions of bureaucrats before him, he's failed.

So Amtrak rumbles on, never with enough money to make the trains worth riding. Never quite dead. The program actually has a lot of support, because trains make sense in a lot of markets.

Its trains could be a lot better. Today, they're often run by and for the benefit of the employees, not the rider. Some airlines are like that, too. But Amtrak does a surprisingly good job with what it has. New cars ordered in the '70s boom give a good ride.

No, trains will never make money, not like they used to. Passenger transportation is a money loser the world over. Airlines are broke. Bus lines are cutting back. Every civilized country subsidizes its passenger network, and not just trains.

Congress just passed a \$286 billion transportation bill, which includes federal subsidies for highways, trucking, airlines and mass transit. Amtrak's measly \$2 billion is hardly in the same league with the other modes. Yet Congress and the administration keep starving the trains.

Amtrak deserves better.

We're not going to kill it, so why not make it worth something?

That probably makes too much sense. Congress will keep on giving Amtrak just enough to get from crisis to crisis, but never enough to run like it should.

It's the American way.

— Steve Haynes



Four sizes fall away in year's diet

I didn't reach my goal, but it was a good year and I'm making my new resolutions right now.

Nope, this isn't a New Year's column that got lost in the shuffle. It's an anniversary celebration for my diet.

On Aug. 15 last year I decided that I was tired of not being able to button my jeans, of wearing only elastic waistbands and of being pleasingly plump.

I decided that I would lose 20 pounds.

Steve pointed out that if I lost a pound a week for an entire year, I would lose 52 pounds. This got me to thinking that I could be back down to the weight I was when I got married in 1971.

At the same time, I found a weight and height chart that claimed I was obese.

Obese, not overweight, not pleasingly plump — just plain fat. And, unfortunately, I had the too-tight pants to prove it.

So I hit the diet trail.

The first few months were exciting. Over the first few weeks, I lost a pound every three to four days. This was good. This would be easy.

Then came the holidays, and the



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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losing slowed down. After that it was a pound a week for several more months.

Then came the summer, and things slowed to a crawl as I lost a pound every two weeks. Then from July 1 through Aug. 15, I lost just one pound.

And that's where I am. Down 37 pounds in 52 weeks.

The good news is I've gone from a size 16 pant size, almost ready for an 18, to a tight 10.

The bad news is nothing fits. I'm watching the sales and hitting thrift stores and yard sales, so I'm rebuilding my wardrobe.

Still, I'm not done. There are 15 pounds of fat still sitting on my hips and butt and they're going to have to decamp.

So, I'm taking a deep breath, giv-

ing my old clothes to the thrift store and planning my next campaign. Those size 10 pants I bought are really too tight and I need to shrink into them.

☆☆☆☆

I have been resisting the temptation to write a cat column, but some stories have to be shared.

I have to stop leaving my windows down.

I was in Norton earlier this week and ready to head for home. I started the car and turned around to check to see if there was anyone behind me on the street. There wasn't any traffic, but there on the back seat was a pretty little tabby.

"Meow," she said. "Out," I said.

Sorry kitty, I'm full up in the cat department.

Town hopping this weekend

If any out-of-towners drove through our little burg Saturday, they would have thought we were a "jumpin'" place. Cars were lined up on Main Street, adults were in charge of games and kids were everywhere.

In a little town, it takes a lot of people to make something good happen. (Funny how it only takes one person to make something bad happen.) But, nonetheless, something good happened in our town over the weekend.

First, someone had an idea. They thought it would be good to have a day dedicated to the proposition of "fun." Nothing too sophisticated. Just plain, simple, old-fashioned fun.

Next, a date was set and plans were made. Help from different quarters was enlisted and the plan began to come together. Businesses donated prizes and money, locals gave their time and talents.

Country kids and town kids alike considered this their "last hurrah" before school starts this coming week. Parents saw it as a break from the hubbub of county fairs and a work-filled weekend. It was a good excuse to leave the dusting and laundry 'til another day.

It was a nonstop day of activities,



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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including goldfish races, horseshoe pitching, balloon animals, watermelon-eating contests and watermelon-seed-spitting contests, bingo and a kids' tractor pull.

For the grownups, the day ended with a dance on the swept-clean drive of the town's only gas station. A deejay played good dancin' and listenin' music. A little later in the evening, several brave souls tried their voices at karaoke singing. Some didn't sound too bad.

The weather was absolutely perfect. I know the organizers breathed a sigh of relief when the day was done, but the whole town benefited.

Not monetarily. But, in a sense of camaraderie. In a sense of community spirit. And, it proved you don't have to spend a lot of money to have a good time. Nor do you have to go far from home. A good time can be had right in your own back yard.

Home-grown fun is still the best.

—ob—

Received an e-mail this week with pictures of several signs seen outside churches. I especially liked this one:

This is a ch__ch.
What is missing?

From the Bible

My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding: That thou mayest regard discretion, and that thy lips may keep knowledge.

Proverbs 5: 1, 2



Senator defends road bill count

Pat Roberts was on the phone early the day after the Senate passed the new Transportation Bill.

It was unusual, a U.S. senator calling the editor at 7:30 a.m. to tell him about a project south of town. It was a big deal, \$5 million to rebuild K-27 near Goodland.

Sen. Roberts was proud of doing something for the voters in his home state. It's a Washington ritual, taking credit for the pork a member of Congress can scrape out of the ol' barrel for the folks back home.

Usually, the senator's staff sends a press release.

What gives?

A couple of days later, Kansas Transportation Secretary Deb Miller was confiding in Topeka reporters that Kansas had fared poorly in the transportation bill, which gave Kansas an increase of "only" 19 percent in federal highway money over the next five years.

Other states, she noted, got as much as 30 percent more, and only five states did worse than Kansas. The unspoken blame fell at the feet of Roberts and the other Republicans on the state's congressional delegation.

Ms. Miller is a Democrat, appointed by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius to run the highway department. Were her motives were completely pure? Might she some day be running for the Senate? Or some other Democrat, even the governor?

Newspapers jumped on the story, distributed statewide by the Associated Press. Editorials followed, ac-



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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cusing Roberts and the others in the Kansas delegation of failing their duty.

When piles of pork were available, they sniffed, why didn't we get more?

The story from Washington is that under the old bill, Kansas got more money from road taxes than it put in. Powerful donor states, including California, demanded a better split of the pie.

So Kansas, as Miller put it, got squeezed.

We'll be a donor state by 2007, she says.

Presumably, a better delegation, a more powerful delegation, would have kept us on the plus side.

Miller denies being partisan.

"I don't point the finger at the delegation," she told the AP. "I point the finger at the process in Washington."

Roberts isn't buying that. He thinks most state cabinet officers would be happy with a \$62 million annual increase in federal money. He called Ms. Miller's statements "misleading and disingenuous."

"I view the comments as a partisan attack regarding a program that

until now has always been ... bipartisan," he fumed.

The state, he noted, has taken \$800 million from the highway fund to balance its budget and expand aid to schools. Maybe, he said, that's why Ms. Miller is worried about not getting enough federal money to finish the current 10-year highway plan.

It's true, the Legislature has been counting on a big boost in federal money to finish the plan. It's true, they took the money to finance schools.

The senator warned that the highway department might not get such a friendly reception next time they want him to do something.

Miller for her part said she'd reply to Mr. Roberts, but not right away.

"I intend to think very carefully about this," she said.

Probably, she'll also be thinking about how to get money to finish all the state's projects.

Maybe she could get someone to sue, charging the state had defaulted on its constitutional duty to build more roads?

It worked for the schools.

THE OBERLIN HERALD

Serving Oberlin and Decatur County since 1879

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170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749-2243
Published each Wednesday by Haynes Publishing Co., 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749. Periodicals mail postage paid at Oberlin, Kan. 67749.

Steve and Cynthia Haynes, publishers
Official newspaper of Oberlin, Jennings, Norcat, Dresden and Decatur County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, Colorado Press Association, Nebraska Press Association and Inland Press Association.

Subscriptions: One year, \$30 (tax included) in Decatur, Norton, Rawlins, Sheridan, Thomas and Red Willow counties; \$34 (tax included) elsewhere in Kansas; \$37 elsewhere in the U.S. Foreign subscriptions, \$20 extra per year (except APO/FPO). POSTMASTER: Send change of address to 170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749-2243.

Office hours: 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mon.-Fri. (Also open most Saturdays when someone is in.)



Photo Policy

The Oberlin Herald wants to emphasize photos of people doing things in the community. If you know of an event or news happening that we should attend, please call 475-2206.

Please be sure to allow a couple of days' notice so we can arrange to be there.

Space in the paper is limited and so is the time of our staff, so we may not be able to get to every event, but we will try.

Because space is so limited, we cannot run team or group photos, any pictures of people lined up or of people passing checks, certificates and the like. (We will always try to make room for a story about any of these events, however.)

We do run wedding and engagement pictures and "mug" shots with stories and obituaries, when they are

provided to us. Please remember that we need a clear, sharp picture. Dark or fuzzy prints will not work.

We cannot return photos unless you submit a self-addressed, stamped envelope with clear instructions for return. Other photos submitted may be picked up at our office within two weeks. After that, they will be disposed of.

Laser proofs of photos which

have run in The Herald are available for 50 cents each, first come, first served. Special-order laser prints of photos will be available at \$3 each for about two weeks after publication.

We can take passport photos if you provide a roll of color film. ASA 200, 12 exposure works fine.

The charge is \$8.50 per person.

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