

## Proposed consolidations great threat to Kansans

Perhaps the greatest threat to rural Kansas life today is the misguided movement to consolidate both counties and school districts.

Plans have been proposed to combine all of the state into just 40 school districts and 36 similarly sized counties, though boundaries would not be the same.

These plans are touted as saving the state millions while promoting efficient planning and management, "like Wal-Mart and McDonalds."

Thus, says Richard Shrock, an Emporia professor and education columnist, if your town is big enough to have a McDonalds, it may be big enough to have a high school school.

And if that comes to pass, the future is bleak indeed for western Kansans, where less than a dozen high schools might remain.

Of course, these plans beg the question of whether any of us wants our schools and counties run with the moral and ethical values of Wal-Mart or the nutritional content of a McDonalds' menu.

These proposals, however, have caught on with both good-government liberals and tight-fisted conservatives, at least to some extent. Inflated claims of savings upward of \$700 million look good to planners in a state facing a possible \$600 million budget gap.

Proponents tell us, of course, that we'd still get the same level of service that we get today from both counties and schools. Only "excess" job and surplus buildings would be dropped.

But those jobs and those schools are vital to the economy in many a Kansas county seat, where public employment is often the biggest factor in the job market. Take away the school, the courthouse and the hospital (and believe us, that will be next), and what's left in the average county seat?

It's likely that proponents like Dr. Shrock

and Sen. Chris Steineger, who introduced a bill to study county consolidation, have no concept of rural life. They only know the state needs to save money.

It's theoretically possible to serve all of the northwest corner of Kansas with one courthouse and one high school, presumably in Colby, but do we want to live that kind of life? And what kind of government would rural people have when many have to drive 70 to 100 miles to get to the courthouse, or when high school students are on a bus two to three hours a day?

The consolidation might be good for Colby in the short run. But after a few years, how many people would be left in the outlying towns to come into the "big" city to shop, buy license plates or go to school?

This is a proposal for depopulating much of the High Plains to save the state a few bucks. Even those savings might not be what's projected. Government consolidations seldom reduce employment or spending. Mostly, the same employees and budget are shuffled into a bigger office.

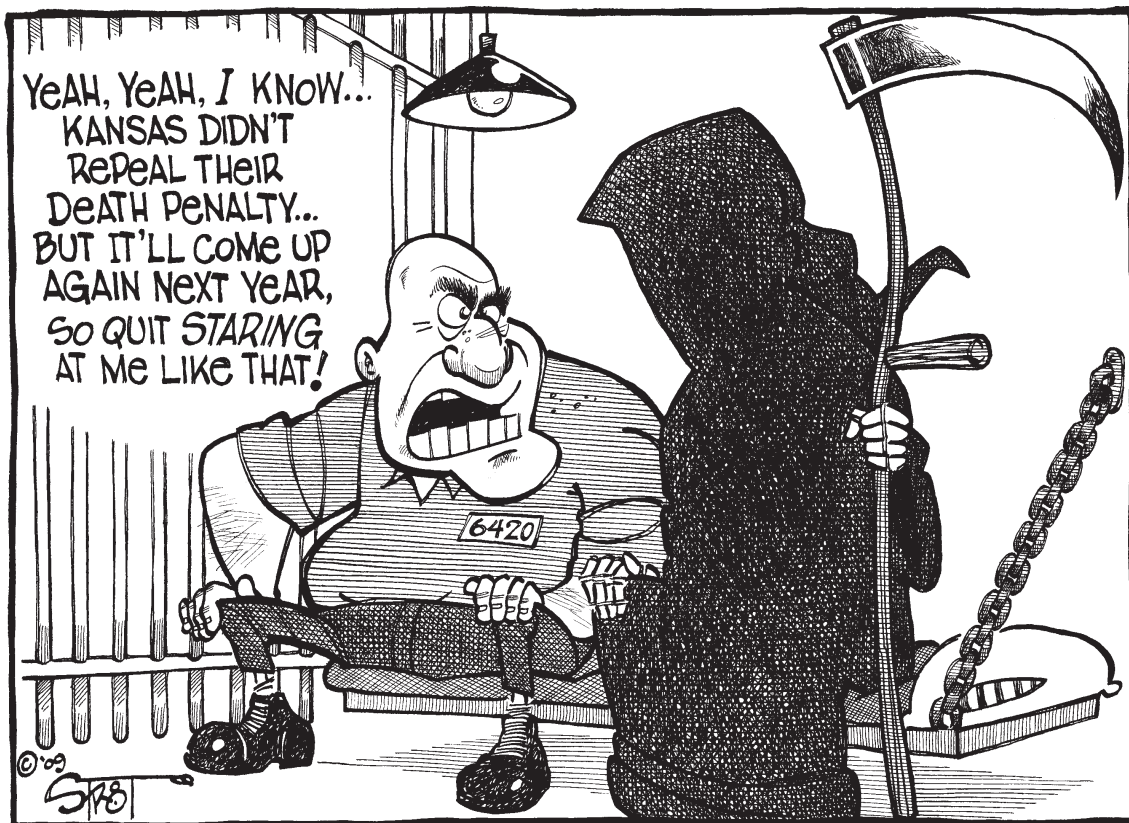
In the end, the counties, school districts and state would have fewer people and fewer dollars as people flee to Denver, Kansas City and Lincoln.

Out here in the sticks, though, we had better get organized if we want to fight this kind of thinking. These people think they are doing the right thing, even though it means the end of rural life as we know it.

At least the high school kids would be able to sneak out for some good food at the nearby McDonalds in the few remaining school/county seat towns, huh?

— Steve Haynes

Next week: An alternative to mindless consolidation into megacounties and huge school districts.



## Culprit taken to edge of town

Sometimes, I feel like every chicken that sets foot on our place is signing his or her own death warrant.

Remember last year when I told you that one or two of our chickens were showing up dead every day? And, I shared with you how last summer we hatched out 11 chicks of our own?

Well, one by one, they began to drop off. Two escaped the pen, never to be seen again. One fell victim to the dreaded "pecking order." Another just woke up dead one morning. Then, last week, the real massacre began. We found the remains of a chicken every day. Even the feisty old rooster fell victim. We were down to three hens when Jim decided to fight back.

He secured the hens in the coop, then set his live trap in front of the opening. Sure enough, the next morning we caught the culprit, a fully-grown raccoon. And, was he mad. Not too cooperative about being coaxed out of the trap and into a "gunnysack," either. If he ever finds his way back to our place, he probably has a built-in GPS.

I'm not sure if there is a moral to this story, but we have 15 new chicks, safe in a box, in the bathtub, and I want them to know we didn't murder their cousins.

The chicks are old enough to graduate to the chick brooder outdoors. They'll still need a heat lamp, but we promise to do everything we can to keep them safe.

We thought, surely, we would get some of the precipitation predicted



## Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts  
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for this area. But, just like so many times before this winter, it went all around us. Friends to the south reported they couldn't get out of their driveway over the weekend. My brother Bob called Monday morning to say they were just getting dug out.

I know it rains on the "just and unjust" alike but, Lord, we sure need some moisture.

— ob —

Our Bible group finished our study of Philippians. To celebrate we had a potluck. Isn't that how Christians celebrate everything? We cook and eat.

Everyone brought finger foods and we had a gourmet feast. As a group, we decided our next study would be on heaven. The Bible actually says very little about heaven, so it will be interesting to see how such a big book could have been written on the subject.

After our meeting, we played games. And considering the rowdiness of our bunch, it's a wonder the cops weren't called.

A group mixer called, "I Never," had everyone laughing and, in some cases, on the floor. Later, we divided into two groups to play board games. My group played "Balderdash," a

word definition game. Words are my "thing" and I thought, "Oh, yeah, this will be fun."

However, these are words no one has ever heard. Oh, they're real word, but certainly not in anyone's vocabulary that I know. Words like "scerfy," "sangbag" and "conchers."

The object was to write a definition that might fool your opponents into thinking it is correct, while you try to guess the real meaning. The only thing I was good at was writing the phony definitions.

We have some real comedians in our group. And, it was agreed, "There is no fun like the fun Christian brothers and sisters can have."

## From the Bible

As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more but the righteous is an everlasting foundation.

The righteous shall never be removed: but the wicked shall not inhabit the earth.  
Proverbs 10:25,30

## Heaven now has a little angel

We suffered a loss on Sunday. It was just a little loss, such a little thing, but we will miss it and mourn for what might have been.

Youngest daughter Lindsay called about a month ago with the news that she was expecting. This was the first child for her and Bradley, the first grandchild on either side and my mother's first great-grandbaby.

We immediately called our brothers and sisters and told all our co-workers the good news. Steve was on Cloud 9. Then we found out we weren't supposed to tell anyone before she saw the doctor.

Well, darn it kid, you should have told us that before we blabbed it all over Kansas, Colorado and California.

Nevermind that, though. The doctor confirmed the home pregnancy test's verdict. Our little Doodle Bug was six weeks along. She got a sonogram and e-mailed it to us. She wrote her grandmother with the good news and enclosed a copy of the sonogram, noting that the baby was just a peanut right now.

Mom hung the photo in her room next to Lindsay and Brad's wedding photo.

I told everyone, announcing the good news at meetings and when I met perfect strangers.



## Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes  
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I asked if they were going to find out if the baby was a boy or a girl, and Lindsay reminded me that she never had much luck saving her presents for Christmas. There was no way she wasn't going to find out as soon as possible, she said.

But, that didn't happen. Saturday, she said, she didn't feel good and by Sunday she knew something was wrong. Brad took her to the emergency room and she called her sister, who also lives in far-off Augusta, Ga.

She miscarried on Sunday and called us as soon as she was on her way home.

We said all the usual things to both her and to each other.

"She's young, just 30."

"She didn't have any trouble getting pregnant the first time. She'll have other chances."

"The doctor said she'd be OK."  
"In a few months, it won't hurt

so much."

All true, but somehow it doesn't help right now. Right now we all have to grieve a little for what might have been.

After college biology, when I learned everything that can go wrong between conception and birth, I had wondered how any of us ever makes it. But then I had no trouble getting pregnant and produced three wonderful, healthy children. The biology lessons faded from my mind.

They came back Sunday afternoon. Intellectually, I know some problem arose and this child just couldn't make it. But, that really doesn't help much.

All I can do is say a little prayer, asking my dad and Steve's mom and dad to be on the lookout up there for a little soul, because it's such a tiny thing and heaven is so big.

## Will recession be prolonged?

What kind of recession are we in for?

How long? How deep?

I had the opportunity to lunch with Thomas M. Hoenig, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, at an Associated Press meeting a couple of months ago, and he compared the economic "meltdown," as the reporters were calling it, more to the 1980s than the 1930s.

Mr. Hoenig is a career denizen of the Fed, having started in 1973 as an economist after receiving his doctorate in economics from Iowa State University. He's seen every recession since then from the vantage point of an economist and banking regulator, and since 1991, as the top representative of the nation's central bank in the heartland.

When he arrived and was introduced around, an editor asked, point blank, if he had brought "any good news."

"No," Mr. Hoenig said flatly, though he later gave us some hope.

He talked about how we'd gotten into this recession and how we might get out of it. He said he expects the recovery to begin this summer, or in the worst case, by the end of the year.

A year before, he said, the outlook on jobs was positive. For the first nine months of 2008, the economy maintained a tiny bit of growth,



## Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes  
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about 1 percent, despite the bottom falling out of the housing market.

But uncertainty works on confidence, and by fall, the failure of Lehman Brothers and other large investment houses caught up in the housing problem prompted the first government bailouts as the Bush administration was wrapping up.

Today, he said, a lot is riding on the new administration.

As far as monetary policy goes, Mr. Hoenig said, there is a lot of liquidity in the system, if not much movement.

"And confidence is everything," he added.

If the stimulus package takes hold, the government safety net does its job and the infrastructure is sound, he said, then we will see improvement in the first half of the year as the decline starts to halt. Things will get better when consumers start to spend, he said.

Government spending could become a problem, he noted, since we are still fighting a two-front war and the Treasury projects a \$1 tril-

lion deficit.

But if the stimulus works, the second half of the year should see some improvement. If not, then this could be a prolonged recession.

"We are nowhere near a depression," he said, noting that unemployment this year is 7 to 7 1/2 percent, while in the 1930s it was 25 percent.

"It's more like the 1980s," he said. "It could be about that serious."

"Is there hope? Yes, there is."

Like many people, Mr. Hoenig said he's concerned by increasing concentration in an economy dominated by bigger and bigger corporations and banks, and by the unfunded liabilities out there.

"Inflation is one of the great dangers," he said, adding that right now the country is seeing disinflation, with overall prices declining. "When you think three years out, the risk of inflation is there."

The Federal Reserve is doing what it can with monetary policy, he said, but don't expect magic.

"It cannot save the world," he said.

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170 S. Penn Ave., Oberlin, Kan. 67749-2243

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

Steve and Cynthia Haynes, publishers  
Official newspaper of Oberlin, Jennings, Norcatur, 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, \$33 (tax included) in Decatur, Norton, Rawlins, Sheridan, Thomas and Red Willow counties; \$38 (tax included) elsewhere in Kansas; \$42 elsewhere in the U.S. Foreign subscriptions, \$50-\$250 (in US dollars only) 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.

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