

## Let rural Kansans make own decisions

What can people in rural Kansas do to preserve our way of life from the depredations to eastern legislators bent on making government efficient, "just like Wal-Mart?"

How can the state encourage better and more efficient government far from Topeka without forcing consolidations that would gut our county-seat towns and leave kids and taxpayers on the road for much of their lives.

The simple answer is, let us take care of our own problem.

In this day of centralized solutions, that may seem odd, but why not?

In the last few years we've seen a movement among small school districts to either close when the time comes or merge with nearby districts to form a stronger unit. Sometimes this just sort of happens; other times, there's a plan and a public vote.

In tiny Greeley County (population 1,534), voters agreed to merge the county with the city of Tribune. They hope government will become more efficient and more affordable.

Closer to home, the Jennings School District just went put of business when its enrollment dropped. In Herndon, voters agreed to merge with the Atwood schools.

Other counties have talked about merging law enforcement and other functions with their dominant city, though not much has happened. One reason is that under Kansas laws, it's difficult to merge government functions.

It takes — really — an act of the Legislature, and that is hard to accomplish, as Sherman County reformers have learned. A few recalcitrant officials can thwart the will of the people and prevent an election on any kind of reform — often for years running.

Basically, legislators don't want to get involved if they sense there's a fight. It's not worth their trouble. And sometimes, public officials seem more concerned about their jobs than what the people want.

So what to do?

One bill advanced this year in Topeka had

the right idea: just leave decisions up to local officials and local voters. As it has to some extent with school districts, the state should just step aside and let rural people decide how they should be governed.

The Legislature should let us decide how much we want to pay to keep our schools or to keep the courthouse open. We can look at the figures and decide.

As far as saving money goes, the state should stay out of it. If it's state "aid" money, just let them keep it. Let cities and counties and school districts raise their own. Then it won't be a state problem.

What we have today is a patchwork of government, brought on largely by state aid rules. Many counties share tax assessors, a move brought on by state requirements for high-end training. Others share emergency preparedness directors (a really bad idea, but increasingly popular) and still others extension districts.

While all of these could be seen as preliminary moves toward county consolidation, often the sharing goes several directions for a single county. Same with school districts. There's no plan or pattern.

Rural cities and counties and school districts could accomplish a lot with local plans for consolidation at the local level, avoiding 150-mile-wide megacounties and two-hour bus rides for school kids. But that's only going to happen if the Legislature makes it easy to merge and combine, then steps back (the hard part) and lets it happen.

Put our fate in our own hands, and we can deal with it. And given the chance, we must. It's the only way to avoid forced consolidations on the Wal-Mart model, where if your town is too small for a supercenter, it's too small to live.

—Steve Haynes

**Next week:** Suggestions for consolidations that make sense.



## Trio of babies a lot of work

Mixing formula, sterilizing baby bottles, midnight feedings. All we're missing are burping and diapers.

Did I mention, everything is in triplicate since the three "babies" came to live with us. Baby calves, that is.

It is almost springtime, and we knew our farmer/rancher friend might be having some "bum" calves. He usually has a couple that get orphaned or their mother won't claim them for some reason. We're always prepared with big bottles and at least one feeding of milk replacer formula on stand-by.

A late afternoon phone call said calves were on the way over. Jim spread some fresh straw in a little shelter we keep for the babies and all was ready. We were just a little surprised when three calves emerged from the trailer.

Our friend's hired man and his wife made the delivery. One of the calves is a dwarf: Cute as the dickens, but noticeably smaller than his two heifer penmates. The man's wife had been bottle feeding him since he was born and had become quite attached to him. She had named him "Bear."

I wasn't sure she was going to let him stay with us. Like adoptive parents, we had to assure her we would take good care of him. We even told her she had visitation rights and could come see him anytime she wants.

So now, our lives are regulated by feeding schedules and making sure we have plenty of formula on hand. Among the three of them,



## Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts  
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We're feeding almost four gallons of milk a day. They are definitely eager eaters. Son James has taken over most of the duties (especially the late night feeding) and will say to me, "If you'll 'milk the cow,' I'll feed the calves." Measuring, mixing, filling bottles and cleaning up is still a good trade for not having to bundle up and brave the cold.

— ob —

Sometimes what I write has repercussions. For example, after the column about Jim and the sour cream container, we have heard countless jokes about leftovers and Tupperware. Whenever Jim picks up a few groceries, the clerk asks, "Need any sour cream with that?"

You'd think he would have learned his lesson. After all, "the pen is mightier than the sword." Now, he doesn't know this, but I found the hiding place in my cabinets where he has stashed two empty sour cream containers. He's got something planned, but I'm ready for him. Bring it on!

— ob —

Crazy as it sounds, we made homemade ice cream Sunday night. While snow was on the ground outside and the wind chill factor was -2 degrees. At 9 o'clock at night.

You're kind of "on your own," food-wise, at our house Sunday nights. If you can't fend for yourself, you go hungry. So, obviously, I didn't have anything planned for an evening meal and had taken a very long, late afternoon nap. About 8:30, Jim said, in a pleading sort of way, "Boy! Some homemade ice cream sure would taste good about now."

To which I replied, "Sorry, but we don't have any cream."

It was a trap. Jim came back with, "Oh, yes we do. Remember when I ran into the grocery store to pick up some juice? Well, I picked up a quart of cream, too."

There was no way out. He had been planning this all day. I was going to make ice cream. And I did.

Now, I've never made ice cream using a cooked mix, so don't read any farther if you have a "thing" about raw eggs. I just whip up five or six eggs (depending on the size), stir in 2-3 cups of sugar, about three "glugs" of vanilla and a dash of salt. Pour in a quart of heavy whipping cream and fill the rest of the way with whole milk. Maybe it's bad for the arteries and the hips, but homemade ice cream has got to be one of life's greatest pleasures.

## Feeders full of messy birds

Four and twenty black birds baked in a pie.

Or in the case of my yard, three and twenty blackbirds and one fat dove hanging out at the bird feeder.

I have four feeders up. Two are just plastic tubes with six or eight holes and little plastic perches at each opening. The little birds really enjoy perching on those pegs and enjoying the bounty within. The problem is, they are messy little birds. It seems that they spill about as much as they eat.

The bigger birds pick up the stuff on the ground but can't sit on those tiny little perches. I did see one enterprising black bird hang on for dear life on the perch and reach around the feeder to a hole on the other side. It sort of worked, but seemed like quite an acrobatic feat. Most of the blackbirds don't want to go to that much trouble.

So they were really happy when I put up the second pair of feeders.

Again we have a pair of plastic tubes with itty-bitty perches, but on the bottom of the plastic tubes are dishes to catch the spilled seeds. It



## Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes  
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keeps the ground so much cleaner and provides a nice large perch for a hungry blackbird or dove.

Or so it seemed until I realized that the big birds love sunflower seeds but don't eat the hulls. Now the ground is littered with black sunflower-seed shells.

I have the big-bird feeders in a tree out back and the small-bird feeders on the side of the house. So far we've moved the small-bird feeders a couple of times.

The first time I wanted them nearer the trees to give the birds more cover. The second time was to move the mess off the grass and into a flower bed. This way, Steve can mow the yard when the time comes and if one of the lost seeds decides to germinate, I'll just pull

it as another weed.

Actually, that happened to us a couple of years ago, even before we had bird feeders.

We ended up with several giant sunflowers growing in the corners of the garden. We just let them grow and they were really pretty until they got overage. There's nothing sadder than an overage sunflower, head drooping toward the ground. The birds might like the seeds but I sure didn't like the seedheads.

I guess the birds must have enjoyed the seeds, however, because I left the seedheads until late fall and then cleared them when I cleaned up the dead tomato vines.

The next year, we didn't get any giant sunflowers. The birds must have done well.

## Postal service broke by fall ?

The U.S. Postal Service, broke by fall?

It's not just a bad dream, though it's not likely that mail service will stop or the steady stream of ad mail and bills by your front door will dry up.

But Postmaster General Jack Potter isn't kidding when he talks about cutting back from six days a week to five, or eliminating hundreds of tiny rural post offices that don't pay their way. More than 4,500, he noted, serve less than 100 customers.

Postal volume is down 13 percent this year with the recession, Potter said in a meeting with rural editors and publishers, and the service faces a \$6 billion budget gap this year. That's despite cost cuts that included 50 million work hours and 20,000 jobs last year and perhaps 50,000 jobs this year.

"No one is predicting a quick turnaround," the beleaguered postal chief added.

Even the view from the top floor of postal headquarters, with its sweeping panorama of the Potomac and northern Virginia, offered little solace.

The service is cutting costs like mad. It's closing and revamping bulk mail sorting centers that have run out of work and automating sorting of "flats" — big envelopes, newspapers, magazines and advertising fliers — that now have to be "cased" by your mail carrier.

Still, the service is not asking for rate increases beyond the cap allowed under the postal reform bill passed a couple of years ago. Rates will go up next month, but they'll be close to the rate of inflation.

Postal volume has been affected not just by the recession, Potter said, but by the shift to electronic mail for much personal correspondence, business mail and even billing. The post office is left with advertising mail and specialty products. Oh, and Christmas cards, in season.

Anti-paper groups are pressing to end even that business, harping on people to send e-cards and pay bills electronically and "save trees." (They don't seem to realize



## Along the Sappa

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that most trees made into paper are grown as a crop these days.)

Over the years, the postal chief said, there's always been something to replace lost volume, but not this time.

Another big problem is a law forcing the Postal Service to pay into a "trust fund" to pay future retirement benefits. Potter notes that regular government agencies don't have to do that. He's proposing a change to allow the service to skip that payment and use the trust fund to pay current benefits, saving \$2 billion per year.

A compromise offered by Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and other Republicans would allow a two-year hiatus for the payments while Congress "studies" the problem. A barrier to passage is the cruel fact that such payments into the Treasury count against the budget deficit.

When Washington balances the books, then, the Postal Service really is paying for deficit spending — and you're being taxed every time you buy a stamp.

Collins, for her part, said she fears cuts could spell the end of the Postal Service. She'd rather give the service a couple of years to come up with a better plan.

"If they raise rates and cut service, it could trigger a death spiral," she told the editors. "I believe this will cause more of the Postal Service's customers to look for other ways to deliver products."

She noted one problem Potter does not like to talk much about: expensive union contracts. It's not so much the pay rates as the work rules that cause problems. The president's budget, she said, included a proposal to save the

Postal Service \$9.5 billion over 10 years through labor reform. It was quietly withdrawn, she said, after protests by union leaders.

"The financial picture of the Postal Service is bleak," Collins said. "The postmaster general hopes volume will come back, but some of that is lost forever."

Potter himself remains optimistic.

"We're at a tough juncture," he said. "A lot of tough decisions have to be made...."

"Ultimately, we want to make sure that there is a healthy Postal Service, not for our good, but for the good of America."

## From the Bible

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

Revelation 3:20-21

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