

Election leads the news in Washington circles

In the words of the carol, “fast away the old year passes.”

So what has the old year brought us? In Washington, it’s all about the election, believe us. Gridlock dominates as tea-party Republicans force the House farther to the right, and liberal Dems and a few Republican friends pursue a big-spending agenda.

The president has proposed another increase in the debt ceiling – by \$1.2 trillion up to \$16.4 trillion this time. Congress may refuse it, but the president apparently can veto the refusal. That’s a neat trick, since the Republicans can claim to have fought the increase, but the government won’t shut down.

Score one there for the GOP. Meantime, Mr. Obama won points for pushing a two-month extension on the Social Security tax cut and extended unemployment benefits, giving Congress time to stall for another two months before coming up with some last-minute compromise.

He comes off as the champion of the middle class and the working man, trying to make things work, while Congress looks like the one holding up the works. Score that one for Obama.

While the economy is not great, it’s slowly getting better. There’s even talk that unemployment might slip below 8 percent by fall. That would be good news for Obama, since no president in recent times has been re-elected with unemployment above that level.

Voters may look at the economy next fall and, if it’s improving, feel good about the president even though they suffered during his recession. His policies have hampered the recovery and helped keep employment down,

but in politics, it’s all about “what have you done for me lately.”

The Republican candidates have jostled all year without anyone emerging as a strong contender. You might have thought Gov. Rick Perry of Texas would show some charisma, some leadership, but he fell flat on his face.

Former Speaker Newt Gingrich? Can you see women voting for someone who filed for divorce while his wife was fighting cancer?

Gov. Mitt Romney seems the solid candidate, the survivor, but solid is not very sexy. He’s not viewed as much of a conservative and won’t fire up the tea party wing. He’s no great speaker. He’s, well, solid.

Will that carry the day against the president with the million-dollar grin? (And don’t ask what that man is smiling about!)

He may be part and parcel of the old Chicago machine, but Mr. Obama knows how to polish his image. He’s got that electrifying something that makes for excitement in politics – and the Republicans don’t have a Ronald Reagan to trot out against him.

At midyear, remember, Washington commentator Charlie Cook said the Republicans couldn’t miss IF they found an electable candidate. So far, everyone who steps forward falls out, except Mr. Romney.

And he’s about as exciting as his father, George, a very nice man who never snared the nomination.

What will the new year bring? More of the same, or a savior for the GOP?

From here, the race looks like even money, but the year ought to be a little better than the last anyway. Stay tuned, as they say.

— Steve Haynes



Post office on suicidal path?

It’s hard to tell whether the U.S. Postal Service will kill itself off before the Internet gets it, or the venerable agency will survive to serve the nation for another century or two.

Ben Franklin, revered as the first postmaster general (among other things), was one of the founding fathers who realized that a young nation connected mostly by ocean transport would need a means to knit its populace together.

That’s why the post office is the oldest federal agency, predating the Constitution.

But in the last five years, the service has fallen on hard times. First-class mail volume has dropped by 40 percent, the agency is losing \$9 billion a year and there’s talk it might not make it.

A nation without mail? How would we survive?

If customers across the nation are anything like the ones who turned out for a regional public meeting last Monday in Colby, though, you can rest assured, people want postal service.

And they can see what the Postal Service is doing to itself in its rush to cut back.

These people were not fooled by promises that somehow, taking all the mail into a few big cities for sorting will either solve all the Postal Service’s problems, or even work.

They know what “service” is like when mail has to go through those big-city sorting plants today.

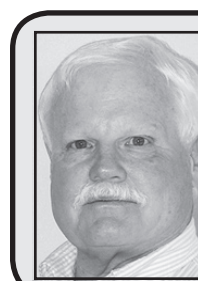
They can’t see the need to haul in-town mail to Denver for processing before it comes back.

The Postal Service can. It has to cut costs, and labor is its biggest expense.

It has to cut every hour it can, even though union contracts make that difficult.

Postal managers envision a world where every letter is sorted down to “walk sequence” by big machines in the city offices, then placed in trays for shipment out to carriers.

Carriers, who today spend an hour or two “casing,” or sorting, mail in the office would just put the trays in their trucks and go to work.



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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Offices would be consolidated, routes lengthened and employees trimmed.

Just in mail handling, the service hopes to get rid of nearly 35,000 jobs.

That after it has slimmed down from 880,000 workers five years ago to 559,000 today, nearly one-third of the workforce, all without any layoffs.

The only way this scheme will work, however, is if the service can use its big sorting machines 18 to 20 hours a day.

Now, they run six to eight hours, sorting overnight.

It wants to run them from 8 a.m. to 4 a.m., sorting all that mail down to delivery sequence.

But to do that, it must give up the idea of overnight delivery to nearby addresses, something consumers have come to expect.

On the surface, it makes no sense to send a letter to my neighbor to Denver for sorting, but it would cost money to sort that letter here.

Someone would have to handle it, the carriers would have to deal it into his or her trays and all that would take time – and money.

Only presorted mail like newspapers and, perhaps, some advertising would be exempt.

So, despite the cries of protest, it’s most likely your mail will be taking a trip by sometime next year.

It may not be to Denver, however. Roy Reynolds, the postal manager from Omaha who ran the meeting last week, seemed to pick up on the notion that depending on trucks to get mail from Colby to Denver and back is not a good idea.

“West is not the way to go,” one resident said, “unless you want to go skiing.”

It’s even money that the service will realize that Wichita, which currently sorts most of our inbound mail, would be a better bet.

Mr. Reynolds admitted it’s likely no one at the Postal Service has thought of weather when they decided our mail should go to Denver. It’s 50 miles closer than Wichita; that’s all.

It remains to be seen, however, whether anyone will use the mails after service slips from overnight to three days for a cross-town letter.

One postmaster at the meeting, Darrel Evans of Quinter, said, “We are shooting ourselves in the foot for \$14,000 (the estimated savings from the Colby move).”

Others said they’d heard banks and businesses would bail out if their bills have to take an interstate trip before delivery.

“It doesn’t look to me that cutting back service will save you any money,” one said, considering the prospect of losing even more business.

Apparently, no one thought to study the mail and see if most of it goes east or west from this area, which could affect the cost.

Mr. Reynolds assured everyone that, strapped as it is, the Postal Service has made no decisions and wants to hear our thoughts.

If you have any to add, you can send them to the district office, addressed to “Manager, Consumer and Industrial Contact, Central Plains District, Box 199504, Omaha, NE 68119-9504. Write by Tuesday, however, or you’ll miss the mail truck.

Your letter will go straight to Omaha, after going to Salina to be sorted, then to Wichita, then, well, you get the picture.

Doing it all’s doing them in

Living through the holidays has been our goal. And if we don’t weaken before Saturday, we should make it.

Jim and I both think we can do it all.

Those days, however, may be coming to an end.

We tried to cram three major events into one: preparing for our Mexico mission trip, preparing for Christmas and preparing for the Christmas party for our Bible study group at prison.

Each one, in and of itself, is a major undertaking. But roll them all into the same three-day period, and you have a meltdown in the making.

We’ve made it through two of the three and only have Mexico left.

The party was a huge success, with 63 men sharing Christmas treats and singing carols.

Christmas with our kids in Dallas was great. And now, on the cusp of crossing the border, we look forward to seeing a few old friends, making new ones and giving a poor family a much-needed home.

Jennifer’s home in San Antonio is the staging area for Mexico.

Now that all the Christmas presents have been delivered, we can rearrange the van with luggage, the bags and boxes of clothing and shoes we take to the family and to the church where we stay in Mexico.

San Antonio is only three hours



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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from the border, so we will come back to Jennifer’s on the day we leave Mexico.

As usual, I have orders for Mexican vanilla.

And, as usual, I did not write down any names. I remember Ann and Deanna because they were the last to tell me they wanted several bottles.

If you told me you wanted vanilla, be sure to remind me when you see me. I’m buying about four cases, so I will have plenty.

Christmas with little kids is so much fun. Our 18-month old great-grandson, Kayden, would rather play in the box his present came in. But 5-year-old Ani loves everything she gets.

“It’s my favoritest thing!” she declares.

Even if her gift was something practical, she would say, “I luf it!”

Her Aunt Halley sent her pink “fairy” wings, a pink feather boa, a rhinestone tiara, a dozen sparkly rings and a necklace and earrings, all of which Ani had to put on – at

the same time. What a sight.

—ob— This year is almost over. If I were to summarize it into a few words, it would have to be “The Year of Injuries.”

The lead story at the Plotts’ house would be Jim’s close encounter with the table saw, almost losing his thumb, followed by a shard of metal in his eye.

We could subtitle the year, “The Year of Doctors’ Visits”.

We spent more time in hospitals and doctors’ offices this year than all the other years of our marriage combined.

We look forward to next year, because anything that could go wrong already has.

We should sail through 2012. It’s been fun to say, “See y’ next year.” Well, “next year” is almost here.

Happy New Year!

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She wasn’t expecting a robber

It seemed such a simple little task.

What could go wrong? How hard could it be?

Mother died in June, but we kept a small account open in case we needed to pay any more bills for several months after that.

In late November, I went to Concordia and had lunch with my sister. We exchanged Christmas gifts and she asked me if I thought it was time to close the account.

There is only 99 cents in it, she explained, and there hadn’t been any bills for several months.

She thought everything had been paid, and no money was expected to come into the account.

I agreed. It was time to close this last bit of our mother’s financial life.

I just didn’t realize that she was going to go over to the bank right away, before going back to work.

I was picking up a few pairs of a brand of socks that Steve likes and I can’t find back home when I got the call.

“You should have come with me,” she said. “You like adventure.”

“How can a visit to the bank be much of an adventure?” I was wondering.

“I was at the counter,” she said, “and this young, nice-looking clerk – gee he looked about 18 – was helping me fill out the forms when these men with guns walked in.

“I thought they were from a company that moves money like Banks”

“Oh Lordy,” I thought. “The bank was robbed right there in broad



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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daylight.”

But no, that wasn’t it.

The men walked in the front door, she said, made a right-turn and went into a little side office.

“Pretty soon, they came out and went up to the clerk helping me and arrested him. They were from the FBI!”

Well, that part made sense. Banks are federally insured, and if there is a serious problem with the money, the Federal Bureau of Investigation would probably handle the case. But, in Concordia? What the heck was going on?

My sister said that after the teller had been handcuffed and marched off, another came over to help her finish the transaction.

She said the woman was shaking so bad she could hardly write.

I made some enquiries, and my colleagues at *The Concordia Blade-Empire* were able to help.

The young man, Landon Hedstrom, 18, of Belleville, was arrested at the Citizens National Bank in Concordia on Nov. 17 by the FBI and charged with solicitation of another man to commit bank robbery. Concordia officers assisted the federal agents.

Hedstrom has been indicted by a grand jury and is set to face a jury trial on Tuesday, Jan. 24, in Topeka.

The other man is identified in the indictment only as “R.H.” What a start in crime for an 18-year-old.

Anyway, I’m sure glad my sister closed that account.

I would have hated to lose all that money in a bank robbery.

From the Bible

With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King.

Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof; and the world, and they that dwell therein.

Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together.

Before the Lord; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.

— Psalm 98:6-9