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Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

Writers this month

Devon Adams
Merri Johnson
Shirley Neddenriep
Vicki O'Neal
Karen Ott
Marilyn Woerth
Josh Whisler

Thank You

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Your Country Neighbor

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Editor's note:

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April 2010

Your Country Neighbor

Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

If there's been a recurring theme in my columns over the past year, it's been *absent-mindedness*, especially as it relates to keeping track of keys. Those of you who read my column regularly may recall that during 2009 both my husband and I suffered the maddening frustration of misplacing our car keys, and worse, the prospect of shelling out \$100 or more to replace them. Fortunately, the lost were found before replacements were purchased.

My husband's episode took an entire column to relate, while mine was covered in a mere paragraph or two in the middle of a story about something else. He has always felt disproportionately ridiculed, so this column should even the score a little. You'll see what I mean.

Recently I was talking with two friends. One was relating a recent incident of double-jeopardy lockout. Not only had she locked her keys inside her house, but her fail-safe back-up plan of entering via the garage door key pad was thwarted by the coincidental death of the key pad battery. I've been known to make use of that plan myself. (Note to self: change key pad batteries pronto.)

The other friend then shared an old tale of locking her then-toddler son inside a running vehicle and having to call her husband to the rescue. I could relate to that one, too, having had a similar experience myself about 25 years ago. But, if memory serves, I called the police to unlock my car and rescue my trapped son and his cousin. I shared that story with my daughter-in-law once. It didn't take long to discern that if I wanted to be entrusted with the care of my granddaughter, it would be better not to "share" memories of parenting screw-ups of that sort.

Anyway, back to the conversation with my friends. Several rounds of stories of locking oneself out of the house or locking children inside vehicles were exchanged, with much nodding of heads in agreement and laughter at the predicaments we had all gotten into, and fortunately, out of, with no harm done.

I mostly listened, feeling vindicated in the company of these women who are considered quite capable in most respects, yet are prone to momentary lapses of attention when it comes to keys. But to my chagrin, neither of them confessed to having to call a professional locksmith to open a car door. I would have to own that embarrassment all by myself.

It happened just a few weeks ago. I had spent a long day in a professional workshop and was making one more work-related stop on my way home. I pulled into the parking lot, turned off the car, and then was apparently distracted by something that kept me from immediately pulling the keys out of the ignition and depositing them in my purse.

I stepped out of the car, and thinking I was being prudent, decided to lock it. I pushed the button on the door, slammed it shut, and went inside. Not until an hour later, when it was time to leave, did I realize what I had done.

By then, it was 5:30 p.m. The locksmith I called sounded *just a little annoyed* at being called out, but he came right away. He was friendly and efficient, motivated no doubt by the smell of a \$55.00 service call for half an hour's effort. And I'm including his driving time and paperwork in that half an hour.

But what could I do? I was stuck in Lincoln. Calling my husband to rescue me was out of the question.

So, there you have it. I didn't really *lose* my keys; I could see them dangling from the steering column, just a few feet from me. Yet, I couldn't retrieve them on my own.

When I told my daughter about it, she gave me a stern lecture on always securing the keys as soon as I turn off the ignition. Point taken. I expect I will not hear the end of this from my husband any time soon, now that he has read this column. I suppose I have it coming.

Poetry by Devon Adams

GRASSLAND

The new blades burst from the winter prison,
reaching for the sun with their green fingers.
Wind breath blows sea ripples in waves
across the rolling prairie fields of brome
and blue stem, making the land move,
even as it is anchored in place.
And below the sky, down in the soil,
are the long roots that weave themselves
through the underground, creating a
buried land of pale strings that send
their dreams of dancing up through
the dark toward the golden light.

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COMING SOON

Those of us who live in the ground
appreciate the thick white blanket
that has covered us all winter.
We were still trying to grow, last fall, when
the November soil was warm and dry,
and sunshine filled the clear skies.
Then the weather flipped into snow mode.
Through all the blizzard nightmares
that raged over us with evil intent,
we were protected beneath this insulating
layer, listening to the distant screams
of the invading arctic demons.
They wanted to hunt us down and kill us,
but we were hidden under their heavy boots,
waiting until they retreated north across
the desolate frozen sea of snow.
Now that the earth has leaned away from winter,
we are exercising our cramped muscles,
so we'll be ready to push up through
weary soil into the early warmth of afternoons
that soften the brittle edges of winter.
Watch for our fresh faces, coming soon,
as our petals flare into bright color splashes,
and we return your welcoming smiles.

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HOW FAR?

So much for modern civilization,
which is only as close as
conveniences that work.
When roads disappear behind
snow drift mountains, and
power lines collapse with ice,
we find ourselves isolated in
cold houses in places that
we don't recognize anymore.
Oh pioneers, you folks had
the key to living simply,
with enough wood for winter,
ready for the cookstove and
the fireplace, and a fruit cellar
full of staples, the sweat of summer
distilled into bottled gardens.
Barns were full of hay and grain,
with animals blowing warm breath
into miniature fogs from welcoming bleats,
and neighs, and moos and quacks and clucks.
News was strictly local, being the day by day
existence of the family, and close neighbors.
Their lives were like puzzle pieces that
fit next to our lives, completing a tight
community that depended on each other.

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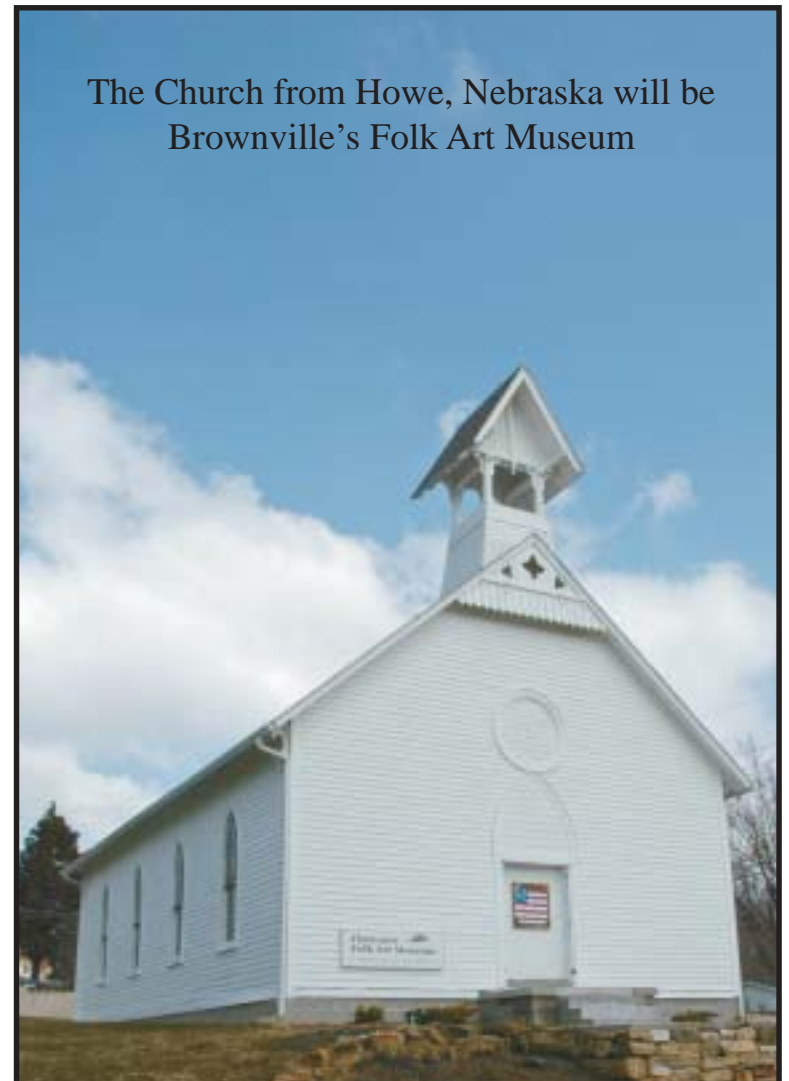
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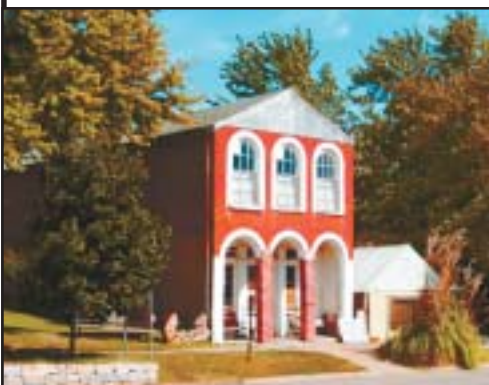
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Where Life is Good

by Marilyn Woerth

Within our three acres we have built a children's garden. As doting grandparents this area has been expanded every year almost as much as our two grandsons have grown. A simple sign, "kindergarten" marks the area formed and enclosed with the weeping branches of several forsythia bushes. When the grandsons reached five years of age, grandpa went, well, completely crazy.

The twenty-something-year-old maple next to the children's garden soon became an extraordinary tree house with (taking a deep breath) a rock wall, tube slide, fireman pole that dumps into a spider web, that dumps into a two-ton sandbox (you could lose a child in that sandbox). Phew, and he loves this tree house as much as any child that has played among its branches. Grandma has not been as enthusiastic.

My chief concern has been where the maple is situated. It is growing at the back edge of the yard proper where our land slopes down into a ravine. The only way into the tree house is the rock wall which is less than six feet high. Besides the rock wall you can achieve descent with the tube slide or the fireman's pole which is located on the downward slope of the yard (about a nine foot drop). Did I mention I was afraid of heights?

Now when you are five years old and looking down into the spider web from the top of the fireman's pole, you might be a little bit intimidated. With grandpa at work, grandma decided to take things into her own hands, literally. What better way to show my grandson how to overcome his fear of heights than by conquering my own.

Joining the youngest of our grandsons we both looked down the pole into the rope spider web. "Do you want to go first?" I asked. The little blonde head moved horizontally, "No grandma, you go first." Fear gripped my face and my grandson could sense it for he soon became my coach and cheerleader. "You can do it grandma. Come on grandma. See, just get the pole and go down. It's easy." Yeah, right kid. If it's so easy why didn't you go first? But I kept chickening out. After about ten minutes and sensing my grandson growing boredom, I bravely pulled from my inner strength and wrapped my arms and legs around the fireman pole and faster than two blinks was down the pole.

My cheerleader was very overwhelmed, "Grandma you did it. See, I knew you could do it." "Yeah, grandma did it," I responded. "Now it's your turn to come down." His little blonde head shook horizontally and down the tube slide he went.

Grandpa is thinking about adding a zip line. Guess what grandma thinks about that? Where facing ones phobias is part of the good life.

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INSOMNIA

by Shirley Neddenriep

Insomnia came to tug at thoughts
... pain's sharp point
blunted by a thousand nights of thought
no longer pierced nor jagged
the place is calloused, impregnable
time and pain, inflictor,
rounded itself.
The circling thoughts
have rounded the edges
so pain no longer pierces
no longer stabs
no longer hurts
as insomnia healed in its deadening way
its dulling of one's senses
the once known love

Is gone.

Insomnia came to

tug at thoughts . . .

I heard the owl crow

the harbinger of night.

As dawn broke

The owl and I, we slept.

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Whisler's Hunting & Fishing Report



by Josh Whisler
(Photo provided by Author)

Fishing:

The Missouri River is well over flood stage now with the recent snow melt and rain runoff. When it decides to settle out is anyone's guess. The flooding has been minor but minor still is not good for low lying ground that is now and will be for sometime a wet bog. Heat is the main ingredient right now to dry some stuff up. Clear skies mean that it isn't raining, adding more water to an already messy Missouri River Bottom. Though it is good to see all the snow gone, it was a good thing it left slowly or the flooding could have been a lot worse. With the snow melt and change in the weather came the water fowl migration back north. And I'm talking droves of birds that haven't been seen in this area for decades. The skies have been literally blacked out by geese at times and the noise is incredible. Along with the water fowl come the Bald Eagles. They seem to be everywhere you look, anxiously waiting for a straggler or weak bird to present itself as an easy meal. Pretty amazing to see the seasons change so drastically but like some say, it's long past due. I have to agree the winter has held on what seems like an eternity. Soon the river will return to normal and things will dry out to get back into fishing. Until then we will just have to wait and see.

Hunting:

Spring Turkey Permits are available now! Permit sales started the second Monday of January - permits are available to buy. This year each hunter

may not have more than three (3) spring turkeys. Permits are for One (1) male bird or bearded hen. And the Spring Turkey Permit is now statewide.

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Shotgun———April 17th – May 31st

Winter is finally ending and spring activities are starting to kick in. Fishing and turkey hunting will be upon us soon and it's time to get ready. So get sharpened up on your turkey calling and restock your fishing tackle box because it's right around the corner. You can never be too ready. Remember, I'm not an expert but I have my share of luck. I wonder if the experts are having any luck today? So until next time "Happy Hunting & Fishing."

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This month's picture is of The Meriwether Lewis River Dredge Exhibit at the Brownville State Park. The Park's boat ramp is covered and it almost looks like the Meriwether Lewis could float off as well.

The Face of Drought

by Karen Ott



In some parts of the world March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb; on the high plains the lion eats the lamb and picks his teeth with the bones.

The weather has been absolutely horrible, complete with gloomy grey skies, snow every other day, and mud up to our eyeballs. Spring might be just around the corner but in our case she's bound, gagged, and locked in the back of winter's trunk.

Temperatures certainly can't be called warm but they're high enough to take the frost out of the ground, turning fields and dirt roads turn into bottomless pits of thick mud. Dale tore the transmission out of his pickup this week during one of his many 'calving checks' and was forced to walk home, the muck sticking to his boots until they were the size of basketballs. I told him to think of the experience in terms of a challenging fitness routine...like running bare-foot along a Hawaiian beach. He wasn't impressed by the flippancy of my analogy.

It's difficult to imagine that with the wet conditions in the valley our watersheds would be in need of snow...but they are.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's March 1 forecast is better than most end-of-February data over the past decade, but the overall forecast of the spring runoff in the North Platte River basin is below average. News that water storage available for delivery to North Platte River irrigation districts is down two percent from the February report is worrisome...but not as much as in recent years; last year's timely rains, and farmer conservation, left storage water in the system for 2010 use. Still, the up and down health of the watersheds is a concern for panhandle irrigators... especially in the face of ground-water pumping restrictions.

We sold a hundred head of cattle this week to a local feedlot and were pleased with the price we received. During years of drought and red ink the United States cattle-herd number dwindled to a level not seen since the 1950's, and the low inventory has finally affected a positive price movement. In true rural fashion the deal Dale made with our neighbor was sealed with a handshake...without a lawyer

present or a written contract.

We're fortunate to live in a part of America where a good name is still the best collateral a man can own.

Corn prices hit the skids when the 20-plus percent of the 2009 corn crop still standing in mid-western fields was reclassified as safe and secure in "on farm storage." I don't know who came up with the idea that snow drifts were as good as grain bins, but whoever it was should have his (or her) head examined; it was a case of agricultural Tom-foolery beyond compare.

Dale checks our binned corn weekly for storage problems.....unlike some local farmers who answer the question, "How's your corn holding up?" with "It was good when I put it in." By keeping a close eye on the temperature and moisture we hope to avoid any nasty surprises come spring when the weather warms. He 'cored' a bin he thought might be experiencing problems and was pleased when the corn

came out in good shape: clean, dry, and free of mold. That's something to be thankful for.

I'll be ordering baby chicks tomorrow, which means my weekend will be spent preparing the brooder house for their arrival. We haven't had fried chicken for months as my family refuses to eat a 'town' chicken; nothing will do but home-raised. Unfortunately, when it comes butchering time they're like the lazy critters in the children's tale 'The Little Red Hen'....excuses fly far and wide when asked to help with the awful job, but when the food appears on the kitchen table they eagerly chomp down the results of someone else's labor without a thought.

I can't blame them....I don't enjoy butchering chickens either.

I'm off to bed and a few hours sleep before tomorrow's demanding schedule calls my name.

Karen

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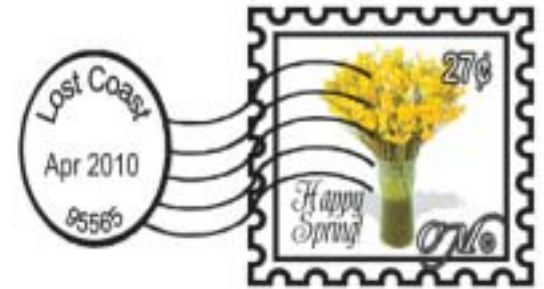
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April Foolishness

By Vicki O'Neal



Springtime....

It has a strange effect on us. Folks act crazier than usual. Kids run wild. Men are strange. Housewives turn loopy.

Like me.

All by myself, yesterday, I went to a pond and played in the water like a kid. I caught frogs in the sunshine. Built dams in the stream. Threw rocks.

But then a frog got squished and died. As if that wasn't bad enough, my Cell phone slipped out of my brassiere and went plunk in the pond water.

I snatched up the Cell fast, but not fast enough. It went to beeping and squeaking. Turning off and on... I've never seen a Cell phone carry on like that. It's worse than a dying frog.

In despair, I watched it struggle. Then Celly died right there in my hand...Just like the frog.

I was beside myself. Still am.

I haven't told my husband yet. You can't tell a man those kinds of things...that his wife plays in pond-water. Kills frogs. Drops Cell-phones from her brassiere. It's too much....just too much for any man.

Michael's already struggling. He suspects we have serious marital problems, I'm sure.

The other day, I called him at work. I'd been working in the garden, and I was fuming. "I need you to bring me home some beer!"

"Beer!...What?!"

"Yes, beer!" I said. "I'm throwing a party."

Michael sounded cautious. "Darling. You know we don't drink beer."

"No—but the slugs do!" I said. "They're destroying my garden. I'll booze 'em up and they'll drown. It's an old home-remedy, you know."

"Oh...right!" He sighed. "Ok, honey. I'll bring you some beer, if that's what you want."

Poor thing. He's becoming more and more leery of my behavior in general. Spring-time only makes matters worse.

Take last week, for example. It was a lovely spring morning and I was eager to resume the transplanting I'd started the day before...My husband had other ideas.

"Sweetie..." Michael said, "You know that big black masonry tub sitting near the potted trees? I need you to fill it with water and—"

I caught my breath. "Oh no!" I stared at him horrified, then burst into tears.

"What on earth?" He reached for me, but I only cried harder.

"Oh Michael! I didn't know that big black pot was your masonry tub! You mix cement in it?"

"Yes, of course...!" He groaned. "Aw honey! You didn't put drain holes in my \$100 masonry tub!"

"S-s-s-sorry...!" I sobbed. "But the spruce tree needed a new pot so bad...It was just bursting out of the old one! I know how it feels to be claustrophobic!"

Poor Michael. I'm always ruining his stuff. Running over things in the driveway...Spilling and dropping and losing stuff...

Last month, though, I experienced a new low.

There I was in my car—parked on the side of the road, searching frantically—while my husband's voice talked to me from far below.

He sounded calm and cool and collected, as usual.... "Take a deep breath, dear."

"But darling, I'm trying!..." I pushed my hand further down the crack in the seat. "If I can just grab you—Ouch!"

It wasn't working. I could hear him slipping...Sliding even farther....down...down.

"Oh, what can I do?" I said with rising hysteria. "I can't even see you any more...and here I am, parked on the side of the road. Cars are coming around the curve and we're going to get hit... But don't panic, darling. I'll get you out!"

"I'm not panicking," said the tiny voice on the speaker phone, "but it sounds like you are. Just calm down—"

"Oh no! You're disappearing! Your voice is getting smaller and smaller. What if I can't get you out?"

"I'll be all right," he said.

"Are you sure? You're not panicking?"

"No."

"Well...I know you're not panicking for yourself....but what about for me? I could get hit by these cars—and you don't even care? That shows that we have serious problems in our marriage, I'm sure!"

Problems, indeed.

I don't know how it can get much worse... But I reckon it could, folks. I reckon it could.

Springtime has just begun...!

Vicki O'Neal
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For Joe Smith's Readers

Joe has been diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrigs Disease). He is in a wheelchair now, can only walk a few steps, isn't able to swallow well, so is on a feeding tube, and can't speak clearly. He hasn't lost his crazy sense of humor, and says at least he still has the use of his right hand. He says he must be really lucky, because only one of every 100,000 people gets ALS and he is that one.

Joe would appreciate cards. His address is 62638 730 RD, Johnson, NE 68378