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December 2009



November Landscape, Resisting the Season's Ice and Snow

Voices from your Valley

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Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

Writers this month

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Vicki O'Neal
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Thank You

Your Country Neighbor

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Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

In case you haven't noticed, it's Christmas!! "The hap-happiest season of all," according to Plus One's song *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*.

But perhaps you aren't feeling especially merry. There are certainly plenty of reasons for gloom. Maybe you're more in the mood for a little bah-humbug instead of a heart-warming TV special. You've decided to root for Scrooge instead of Tiny Tim this year. Watching re-runs of that great classic, *A Christmas Story*, has you feeling sympathetic for the Scott Farkuses of the world instead of for the Ralphies.

If you find yourself identifying with *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, we here at *Your Country Neighbor* hope that by the time you finish reading this month's publication you'll be in the Christmas spirit in spite of yourself.

For my part, I'd like to share a few moments from my own holiday experiences. Perhaps they'll trigger a humorous, or even heart-warming, memory for you to share around the Christmas tree with your family.

Two particular episodes come to mind when I think of Christmas celebrations, celebrations that almost didn't happen.

The first took place when we were just getting started farming in northwest Iowa. It must have been the late '70s or early '80s. That year, we were hosting Christmas dinner for my husband's family at our farm. The weather in northwest Iowa is known to kick up a bit around Christmas, and people are used to the possibility of facing poor travel conditions to spend the day with their loved ones.

As I recall, we had not even gotten to church on Christmas morning due to drifted roads. But my husband was determined to get his family through. He donned his insulated coveralls and knitted ski-mask and fired up the John Deere 4020, plowing a single lane through the drifts on our half-mile of gravel, opening a path from the blacktop road to the end of our lane.

I'm sure he plowed our driveway, too, but by the time his family arrived, it was drifted shut again. Our guests had to park at the end of our 200-foot driveway and slog through the drifts to our house. Just one problem: my mother-in-law was wheelchair-bound and there was no way that wheelchair could be pushed through those drifts. With heroic effort, my husband and his brother-in-law hoisted her, wheelchair and all, and carried her to the house. The party broke up by mid-afternoon, with family members following my husband on the tractor as he re-blazed a snowy trail back out to the paved road.

Several years later, after becoming Nebraskans, we were preparing for our annual trek back to northwest Iowa. It was the late '80s or early '90s. Our children were still at that wonderful age of actually wanting to spend time with the whole clan (actually, they still are). But, a bone-chilling, arctic cold front had everything in its grip, including the battery of our car, which was parked in our single-car driveway behind our single-car garage, in which was another car whose battery was good. Once again, my heroic husband braved the frigid conditions and managed, with a little help from a buddy, to somehow push that frozen car out of the way. We hopped into the other car in absolute glee and made the 220-mile trip in time to spend Christmas with our extended families.


Of course, bad weather isn't the only thing that can threaten to spoil Christmas. On some occasions, you might actually wish for a blizzard to spare you the agony of a holiday meal like the one my husband's Uncle Gunnard served one year.

Neither one of us is quite sure which holiday it was. Could have been Christmas. Could have been Thanksgiving. Could have been somebody's birthday. In fact, we aren't sure if "Uncle Gunnard" was actually an uncle, or maybe a cousin. Not sure if he was related to my husband's mother or his father, either. One thing's for sure, the entrée was memorable.

If you've ever eaten roasted goose, you know there isn't a whole lot of meat there, and what there is, is mighty greasy. But that's not what my husband recalls. No, it was the pin feathers that made an impression. Lots of big pin feathers still stuck in the skin. Neither of us remembers much of anything else about that day. But thinking about those pin feathers is guaranteed to produce a chuckle.

So, are you in the holiday spirit now? Have I triggered a memory of a bygone Christmas that is just begging to be passed on or re-invented this Christmas? I hope so.

I hope you make a new memory this year to be re-lived in Christmas Future as you once again gather with your loved ones to celebrate Christ's birth.



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HUNGRY EYES

He rises from a bare branch
and catches a ride on a thermal,
sailing through the blue like a
paper airplane, gliding on forever.
His eyes are focused far below,
looking for movement in the grass.
Suddenly, he plunges in a spiral dive,
aiming at a mouse who won't get
any older, and has no clue to his fate.
It's over in a second, as a life goes out
like a candle flame, and becomes
part of another being. Energy can't
be created or destroyed, but instead
continues, carrying yesterday into
tomorrow, seeing with the
infinite eyes of the hawk.

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Poetry by Devon Adams

FORMAL CLOTHES

The crowd has gathered
in their usual places, but
they have changed from
the gaudy rags they wore
for the bawdy autumn party.
It was a wild mixture of
fermented fruit and the
drunken birds who ate it,
staggering through the riot
of blazing leaves rusting
on the frosted ground.
All the leafy costumes
flashed in the golden sun,
as their owners swayed
in the dancing winds,
whirling away their bright
shirts and skirts, with tattered
fragments falling fast.
But now the time is cold,
and the days are short.
It is a somber crowd that
stands along the hills,
dressed in formal clothes
of black and brown, with
white shirts that glisten
under a distant light.
Winter is serious business,
not a time to party with the
wild abandon of an equinox.
These folks will wait for warm
days and the new green leaves
that will sprout from their stiff
and frozen branches, when
life will bubble like champagne.

CEDAR BERRIES

The trees are loaded with pale blue
berries that look lovely against
the cedar greens of late autumn.
Like an early Christmas card, the
graceful sweep of fragrant branches
defines the particular shape of the
tough and durable country trees
that draw birds like powerful magnets.
The hundreds of tiny orbs compete
against the gaudy red-orange of bittersweet
and the even brighter hues of the magenta
berries of the native wahoo bushes.
Cedar waxwings and robins stop
in their migrating tracks to savor
the flavors of the wild fruit harvest before
the breath of the north blows them
south to places that are forever summer.

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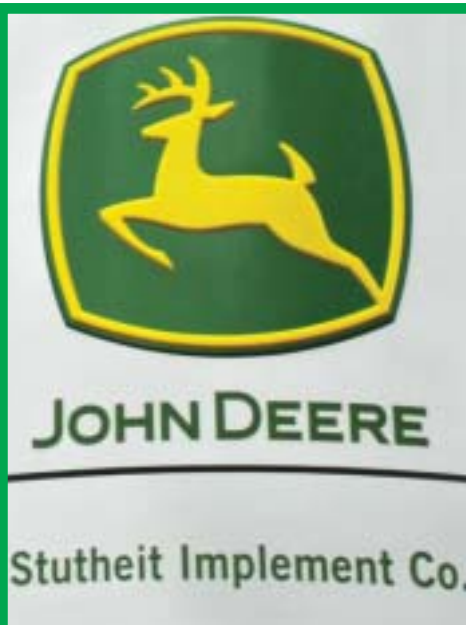
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HOME FOR CHRISTMAS by Shirley Neddenriep

The wreath it was hung, there were songs in the air, in hopes that the children would come bringing fare, when out in the yard there arose such a roaring, we knew they were here and our hopes just went soaring, for '98 Christmas would never be boring.

We snatched at each grandchild, each 'great' gave a hug and deposed them all snug; in rockers and couches, the rugs and the floor, they spread themselves everywhere, the place was aglow,

Their eyes how they twinkled, they stood in a row, we asked a fine blessing, then the food they did stow! Our cooks we saw keenly collapsed in a heap, too tired to bust loose or even to eat!

They all kept on coming, in cars and in pickups, 'til the walls of our house, why it did get the hiccups, so what did we do when the last bite got swallowed? We opened the gifts and made a great wallow, of paper and ribbon, of gifts quite unheard of, Godiva, Gold Canyon, Knott's Berry Farm, too; split cowhide and Thinsulate-days will get nippy! Old Navy and - you call the brand, the 'Leanin'Tree' cards, and photos that stand, all the Joy of the Season with no one forgot!

And then when the cooks, recovered and fresh had gathered the ribbons and paper and trash; we played a fun game of "Remembering When," and the guessing got wild; spawned more tales of 'back then' - and out in the living room card tables sat for grandkids and spouses, boy friends and that; they played, they conversed, their laughter and giggles floated all through the house 'till it's rafters did jiggle!

Then what to our wondering eyes should appear but a sleigh pulled by Belgians, so near, one great grandson ran fast to sit astride the big horse; his mom saw from the

window, right smart did she snatch up her coat, to her cap gave a tweak, to run to his rescue and not note the creak in the door or the fact that his father had put him up top of the horse and great grandson sat happy, he had no remorse.

While the mom and the dad nervous watched all the tussle, their baby asleep in the arms of his Nana, and immune to the hustle, the running for stocking caps, blankets and mittens. "All board!" called the horseman, "The sled carries nine," the scramble for seats, some wait for next time. To his team gave a whistle and away they all rode like the down of a thistle.

No snow on the ground but what if there wasn't? We rode on the wheels, the dry dirt we cussed it.

The trolley returned, new faces aboard, while frozen ones hurried to see what the score, the game, the game is the thing for cosmopolitan persons, poor things! Had they stayed, they would know what we knew: A small driver, lively and quick! We knew by the pace, that gave us a clue, great grandson he slapped that great horse in the rump and the horse he did go; I held to the bracing while biting my lip; and wondered while cutting the breeze - would we tip!?

Our driver, our savior took over the reins, he slowed the fast pace and gently reminded great grandson whose urge was to race; that control of the horses, is better and safe; what a ride it had been, but the day had to end. The great Belgians went now, away to their barn, his horses so stout would need to be curried before going out on a ride, but its good for a horse, he said to us all, to pull out the trolley and give folks a chance to sing in the wind 'till they're hoarse!

The daylight is softening now into dusk and some they are taking their leave for they must get their little ones bedded, their news of each other does give them all cheer 'til they meet once again in another New Year!

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Doom and Gloom? No Thanks

by Joe Smith

I belong to a group on the net that varies from good to bad as far as ideas are concerned.

Lately there has been a lot of talk about attacks like 9-11. Some feel that fear brings more fear. Fear seems to expand rather fast at times; some people remember all the hoop-la over the year 2000. All of the things that were supposed to happen, that never did. It seems the news media love this type of thing because it sells papers or gets you tuned in to your TV.

We are lucky to live in a rural area, where we can grow our own food or a lot of it any way. Our freezers are crammed full of food. The area we live in is full of game. We have a much better chance of surviving than somebody in the middle of a big city. The more you listen to this stuff, the worse it gets. Positive thinking is a way to beat the doom and gloom group, the fact that people live from paycheck to paycheck doesn't help. We have nearly spent ourselves out of a place

to live. We all have the desire to go buy something. My wife and I are wondering what we are going to do with all our things we thought we needed. We still grow a nice garden; we used to grow our own meat. Our livestock is limited to one dog (who thinks she is the boss), and about fifteen cats. Most of which are gifts from our neighbor's Toms.

You get warm several times with wood heat. When you cut it, stack it, bring it in the house, and carry out the ashes. Wood heat is still the best. I love to watch the flames and feel the radiated heat coming into the room. Today we have a big pot of chili stew cooking on the wood stove in the den, deer meat, lots of things from our garden, and potatoes too. It helps a lot on our heating bill. The furnace hardly turns on much any more. There have been times we were out of electricity four to five days and the woodstove really came in handy. We still could have those storms again, Winter has just started. We have our problems in the country, but I still say it beats living in town.

We have on our group the "Doom and Gloomers" then the "Voice of Reason group" and even the "concentrating on sending love group". It kinda balances out in the long run.

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Whisler's Hunting & Fishing Report



by Josh Whisler
(Photo provided by Author)

Fishing:

The Missouri River is running kind of high for this time of year. Knowing that all the dams upstream are full may be the main reason. But if there is one thing for sure, the water is pretty clear, which tells me that the water is not run-off from rain storms. There have been boats on the river in the last month but not for fishing but rather for water fowl hunting. With the water fowl come the eagles. They are pretty common place right now and you know one when you see one because they are huge, standing 4 foot high with a six foot wing span. We have two different eagles that migrate though the area, the Golden Eagle and the Bald Eagle. The Bald Eagle is the most visible with its white head and tail feathers. The Golden Eagle sightings you know that proportionally it's not a hawk, though they share the same colors, but then you see as you get nearer that they have a large hooked beak and you can actually see their talons. You kind of say to yourself, "I'm fifty yards away and can see the beak and talons on this bird?" That's when you know that they are truly a huge bird. Also, it looks like they are here for awhile, so head out to the Missouri River Bottom and see if you can catch one posing atop of a Cottonwood.

Hunting:

Fall hunting seasons are wide open. You can about pick your season now. But be aware of the other seasons that are running in parallel. When


hunting during deer seasons make sure you can be seen. Though hunter orange is not required for some of the other seasons that are open now, it is probably a good idea to wear some during the firearm seasons. Better safe than sorry!

TURKEY – Turkey season runs until Dec. 31 this year. A permit allows a hunter to kill two turkeys. New this year - turkey hunting is allowed during the November firearm deer-hunting season. Turkey hunters hunting during deer season must wear at least 400 square inches of hunter orange on their head, chest and back.


DEER – Deer seasons are open right now and there has been a fair amount of success, although there are still a lot of corn fields that have not been harvested. The newspapers are predicting a record kill this year because of the abundance of deer in Southeast Nebraska along the Missouri River.

The hunting seasons are wide open right now and you need to get out and enjoy them. The weather has been perfect for hunter success. If you like Fall hunting, now is the time to get out – I guarantee you won't regret it. 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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Dillion Lee from Rock Port with a fine Whitetail Buck taken during the Missouri State Youth Hunting Season. Nice job, Dillion!

The Face of Drought

by Karen Ott



Thursday morning, 19 November

With the exception of the guys and gals from India who read from carefully crafted phonemic scripts intended to match my linguistically neutral, boringly nondescript, Midwestern accent, I rather enjoy talking to, or should I say toying with, telemarketers. Foreign call centers are often staffed with employees who lapse into Pidgin English at the simplest off-script question, but our home-grown, 'American' speaking, telemarketer/survey-takers, those meddlesome busy-bodies who phone at odd hours with nosy-nora, pseudo-survey questions about items or causes I have little interest in purchasing or discussing are fair game.

For example.....A call last week from the National Rifle Association went something like this:

Rringggg.....

"Hello?

May I speak to Dale Ott?

No.

No?

That's right. No.

And who might you be?

I'm his screener.

His screener?

Yes. I screen his calls.

Around here we call that a secretary.

Around here we call it a wife.

(Laughter)

He wouldn't be interested in answering a few questions about the NRA?

The NRA...is this a joke? We don't own a single gun....when foxes killed eighteen of my hens he borrowed a rifle, a ton of ammunition and missed every shot...even though the darn things were hiding inside a twelve inch wide gated irrigation pipe.

(More laughter)

So he probably isn't interested?

Let me put it this way. He couldn't hit the broad side of a barn for love nor money; if we were a pioneer family dependent on his hunting skills for survival we'd have starved to death ten years ago.

(Loud laughter)

Would you like me to remove his name from our calling list?

I think that would be best.

Goodbye."

Thursday evening 9:30 pm.

A few moments ago I fielded yet another call from a woman asking for Dale. "I'm conducting a short corn survey and need to ask him a few questions." she said purring innocently, not realizing the person she was speaking to was an over-tired woman with a sore throat, runny nose, and zero patience.

If I hadn't felt so lousy I'd have responded with one

of my personal favorites, "The rat ran off to the Caribbean with the church secretary". Instead all she got was the naked truth.

"He's asleep" I said, my voice as husky as a Russian wrestler's, "He's been working all day in wet corn fields and I'm not waking him up unless you're paying at least \$50.00 for his opinion."

Click.

Oh well...there's always the next time.

"Buckingham Palace, the Queen speaking: How may I help you?"

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I know. I know. You don't really need this bit of advice.

You have your own methods for dealing with December's madness. But maybe we can brainstorm together and explore new possibilities!

This time of year, no one has time to dream up creative ideas. Amid the chaos of the holidays, everything gets swept under the rug—like the crumbs of fruitcake and gingerbread that Aunt Fanny forgets to pick up with her dustpan.

So—today we're going to use our imaginations. And a little countrified ingenuity.

We're all on a tight budget this Christmas which is why we must use our imaginations more than ever. I assure you—there are ways to get past this financial crisis. By using Crazy Vic's Holiday tips, everyone can still have Christmas presents....Everyone can still open their gift boxes and smile a fake smile that says: Thank-you-so-much...(But-now-what-am-I-going-to-do-with-it?)

Why should we spend hundreds of dollars at Dillards when a few bucks at the local Dollar Store can bring the same results?

Here's what you do, my country neighbor. You pick out something from the Bargain Rack. Peel off the "Made in China" sticker on the bottom. Spit-polish it a bit and wrap it up fancy.

Voila!...There's a fine gift that will put that same Thank-you-so-much...But-now-what-am-I-going-to-do-with-it smile on Aunt Fanny's face!

See? Same results....and it's much less costly.

Ok. That's Vic's Number One Tip for the holidays. Now, let's move on to the next item.

Christmas cards. Right! A nice box of cards costs a fortune...and then you need postage stamps to mail them! A monstrous expense.

Well. I think we can solve that problem, too, without breaking the budget.

If you really think about it, folks....you already have all the Christmas cards that you need. You received them last year from all your relatives and friends.

Now stop. Don't roll your eyes like that. This really is a simple solution.

You don't need to White-out all those old signatures on the cards. That's plain tacky. Instead, you just cut off the used portion of the card, leaving a lovely picture on the front.

And there you have it! A beautiful Christmas Postcard...For Free!

As an added bonus, it only costs you half as much to mail a Postcard as it does to send an actual Christmas card. So, you'll wrack up quite a savings. (Just don't send the postcard to the person who sent it to you as a Christmas card, last year! That could get awkward.)

Now—for the next tip....

We need to talk about Preparing-for-the-Kinfolks who will be dropping by. This means getting out the old gifts that they got for you last Christmas. Be sure to display the items in prominent places...But scuff them up, first. They need to look well-used and appreciated, of course.

With company coming, you'll also need to think about finger-foods for your guests. All those little things that makes Christmas special. Kipper Snacks for Uncle Dan. And those dark chocolate truffles for Aunt Sal.... And don't forget the toothpicks. (We must talk about the 'picks! Remind me later, would you?)

Food prep is always a sticky problem...And you know it. You've still got last year's caramel candy buried deep in the carpeting—courtesy of the grandkids. My friend—what you really need is some old-fashioned snacks like peanuts and pretzels. They're cheap and they're not at all goopy and—

You say what...?

Oh yes! The toothpicks. Thanks for reminding me. Make sure you get a big stack of 'picks for the Teeth-Swishers. Otherwise, those folks will drive everybody crazy. All that swishing and swashing. It's worse than the Ice Crunchers—

Um. Let's not even go there. Because I'm one of the worst Ice Crunchers around.

We have to hurry, folks. We're running out of time for this Holiday-brainstorming-session—so we've got to wrap it up. We're going to get serious, now. Real serious.

The most important part of the Christmas season is Giving-of-yourself to others. So what are you going to do about that, my country neighbor?

When you get to January 1st, you want to look back on the holidays and feel satisfied....like you actually accomplished something this year—unlike the dozens of past holidays that disappeared in a swirl of Christmas rum and eggnog.

So—here's a final tip for the season. You head down to the local Nursing Home. You walk in the door with a big plate of gingerbread cookies for all the Grannies and Granddaddies sitting there in the front room...The weary warriors in the Battle of Life...Those dear old souls who long for a kind smile to get them through the lonely holidays.

You pass out the gingerbreads. You pass out hugs. You sing Silent-Night and Midnight-Clear. Maybe even Drummer-Boy. You squeeze their hands—gently, of course...Arthritic old hands need lots of TLC.

Go ahead...Doll the old folks up a bit. Paint the grannies' fingernails. Dab perfume on their wrists. Then splash a little Old Spice on the old men.

Listen to their stories. Stories about Christmas during the Depression Days. Crackling wood-stoves. Ice in the wash-pan every morning. And not one gift beneath the Christmas tree!

You'll hear all about it. You'll learn to appreciate the Here-and-Now. You'll realize that Dollar-Store gifts are splendid things, and that Christmas Postcards are ingenious. You'll understand how truly blessed we are, today.

And then you'll go home...Home to all that caramel candy still squished deep into the carpet. You'll look about you with gratitude, and you'll love every peanut and pretzel and toothpick. Every symbol of our modern, pampered existence here in America.

And best of all—you won't mind the fake smile on Aunt Fanny's face when she opens your gifts at Christmastime. You'll know if Auntie leaves your presents behind, you can always take them to the Nursing Home the next time you go there.

The weary old warriors won't mind a gift from the Dollar Store. It will warm their lonely hearts. It will make them smile....and not a fake smile, either.

You'll know one thing for certain...The true spirit of Christmas lives on in the Heartland!

Merry Christmas everyone! And have a sane and sensible New Year!

With Love from Crazy Vic

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