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Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

Writers this month

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Thank You

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Editor's note:

*More than five years of
 this publication are online at:*

www.yourcountryneighbor.com



Nuthatch about to dive to the birdfeeder suspended below



Sunrise on a cold, foggy morning just north of Auburn

Diary of Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

My husband and I may be the most boring couple in Nemaha County. We most certainly would never be invited to appear on any marriage-themed reality TV program, unless the network was shooting for the lowest Nielsen ratings in television history. Oh sure, we have the occasional disagreement, but generally not about anything titillating enough to entice viewers to tune in.

"I can't believe you went out and bought a new microwave without consulting me!" Mrs. Johnson fumed, her fading red hair seeming to deepen almost to its youthful hue as she unleashed the temper only a middle-aged woman frustrated by a moderate case of midriff bulge can deliver.

"Oh, yeah? Well maybe it's about time I exercised my right as the breadwinner around here to splurge a little!" Mr. Johnson retorted as he tore open the packing box, placed the oven on the countertop and defiantly plugged it in.

Yup, scenes like that would really pull in the viewers.

Mind you, I'm not saying we never do anything "interesting." In fact, after 39 years of marriage, we recently began doing the word *Jumble* and crossword puzzle in the newspaper together. All right, I'm using the word *together* somewhat loosely. Most evenings, when I join hubby on the dual-reclining loveseat, I turn to the Living section of the paper for the puzzles. If I get stuck, I ask him for help.

It never ceases to amaze me when he instantly figures out a jumbled word that I've been struggling to solve for five minutes. All these years, I've been the "word" person in our household and now all of a sudden, he's starting to show signs of competence in my area of expertise. How to explain this? Does he only *seem* more clever because my brain is working more slowly? Or has he been hiding his talent all this time for some reason I have yet to figure out? It brings to mind the confounding pronouncement he likes to use, "I may be dumb, but I'm not as smart as I look." (You may have to read that a couple of times and let it soak in to appreciate it.)

The point is, we are easily amused by ordinary things and usually disappointed by the supposedly exciting things promoted in the media.

For our twenty-fifth anniversary, we took a Caribbean cruise. It rained most of the time. Hubby had sea-sickness the entire first day, causing him to walk with a 30 degree tilt all over Nassau. Our island excursion was cancelled because of high seas. We were finally able to snorkel off the Florida Keys on the last day, but the experience was marred for hubby by recollections of news accounts of snorkelers being left behind in the ocean by inattentive catamaran operators, and either washing up on shore half-eaten by sharks or disappearing completely.

A couple of years ago we attended the Berkshire-Hathaway Stockholders Meeting in Omaha. Rubbing elbows with fifteen thousand other people hoping for some kind of investing insider tip is supposed to stroke your ego, I guess. If you simply enjoy big crowds, go for it. But it was nothing but hype in our opinion.

I suspect the majority of couples are more like us than like the kind who show up on *Jerry Springer* or in the cruise commercials. Here's to finding the "excitement" in daily life, even if it isn't scandalous or glamorous.

PEGGY KUSER

Certified Public Accountant

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Poetry by Devon Adams

BOUQUET OF ROSES

He wanted to buy her roses by the dozen,
but the flower shop was miles away,
and the roads were blocked with
massive mountains of snow.
So he did the next best thing.
Out in the frigid garden were bushes
from the summer roses that she loved.
He dug through the drifts and cut
the stems for roses by the dozen.
She was more than pleased with
his imagination, when she saw the bright
red rose hips glowing with his devotion.

SCARLET AND SNOW

The cedars are holding snow drifts
in their lacy green fingers. They are lifted
by gusts of icy wind that throw dusty
diamond clouds sparkling in the sun.
Also flying in the wind are scarlet
streaks that land among the bucking
branches, waiting for their friends
to come and join the winter party.
Then the fragrant evergreen is full
of cardinals, spaced strategically,
like ornaments on a tree. They are
echoed in their beauty by the women
of the clan, dressed in tans and rusts,
completing the pairs that seem to know
all about creating perfect pictures.

SUDDEN IMPACT

Life was normal and there were no warnings.
One day seemed ordinary, until it wasn't.
Then time was squeezed into a small space,
like calendar pages glued together.
Visibility was limited to the past,
because the future was not available.
The story was over, like a book whose
last chapter was rushed to deadline,
where the plot just stopped, without explanation.
The rest of us won't know what happened next,
until we also find ourselves on our last page.

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PLANTING SEEDS

The child watched his mother open the envelope
and shake out a handful of small seeds.
She dragged a groove in the loose, warm soil
and dropped the tiny lives into the future.
“Will they grow?” he asked the person who had
answers to all his questions, even the silly ones.
“Some of them will,” she said, “and some of them
will become part of the soil and help others grow.”
Several days later, he watched her bury his favorite
goldfish, who had been floating, belly up, that morning.
“Will he grow into another fish?”
“He will do that, but it will take awhile,” she told him.
“Some day he will be part of the air, and the water
in the river, and another fish will live because of him.”
“So, he isn't really dead?” the child asked.
“I think you're right son, he really isn't.”

Where Life Is Good

by Marilyn Woerth

One year I sat down and listened to the same segment of a movie (Fellowship of the Ring) twelve times. As I listened I wrote out the words (till I got them right) to the most romantic conversation between two people I had ever heard. Then I typed it up, added one of our wedding pictures, framed it and gave it to my husband for our wedding anniversary. He took it work and put it on his desk. One day a co-worker picked it up and said, "I wish my wife was romantic".

Whoa, what? That statement has stuck with me all these years. Aren't all women romantic? We claim to be, or do we just want to be romanced? So which sex is the most romantic? An age old question I presented to a family and friends. Here is a smattering and smidgeling (yes I know that is not a word) of what I heard.

From the fairer sex; one relative wrote, "Women want romance, but men produce romance." From several friends, "Women are; they multi-task better than men," and "I'm thoughtful and kind but I'm not sure I'm romantic." And from a youngster, "Of course women." Okay, so when asked what she had done romantic lately she drew a blank.

From the manly side I received only two replies. From a retired gentleman, "If I would do something romantic my wife would wonder what I had been up to." Then there was the philosophical friend, "Romance really is a moment in time...when two lives are in tune with each other...impossible to reproduce every time and very precious."

The highest volume of responses seems to back that thought up; special kisses, romantic meals, romantic moments in time... in ordinary or not so ordinary places, romantic gestures, all produced by both sexes in sync with each other.

So during this romantic season out here where life is good, let's all get warm and fuzzy inside as we contemplate this question, "Am I romantic and how could I be more open to romance?"

Happy V-Day out there where I know romance is in the air and life is so romantically good.

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REMINISCE

by Shirley Neddenriep

Yesterday I baked a dozen 'hamburger buns' and brushed their brown tops with butter that melted and pooled with suffocating aroma! For what smells better than home-made rolls fresh from the oven?

I made them for my movers. Two Men and a Truck guys. (No truck, just guys) And, this part is unbelievable: they turned down the rolls!! They said they had the tractor running.

This move entailed moving bedroom furniture from the living room and other rooms of the house back into the clean neat bedroom. That bedroom had been the only room without a facelift and now that it is drywalled and painted, it is nearly time to start over with the first rooms done about 40 years ago.

Yep, back in 1972 the farmer sold a couple loads of boars and turned the check over to me. What would any farm wife do? Build on a kitchen and garage, of course. But getting back to the more recent move; sometime in November, the box springs and mattress were set up in the middle of the living room floor. A very comfortable unorthodox arrangement.

The two men set the bed frame in the sewing room, jamming access to the closet which held quilting supplies. Blocked access to water the hanging

Christmas cactus. A friend came by wanting to quilt. Not to be denied, she moved the bed frame to the hallway, where it partially blocked access to the upstairs where she slept.

The Bernina was moved to the kitchen table and a quilt spread out, blocking usage of the table for any other use. A carpenter and an electrician had to squeeze sideways beside the bed frame with tools and equipment to work on the bedroom walls. A dresser with a mirror sat where there had never been a mirror and kept reminding me how awful I looked around home. My clothes were in odd places and the closet doors were covered with cardboard.

It got to be so confusing that everyone left and spent Christmas several states away. I remember coming home to find the Christmas cactus in full bloom.

Now it is time to sort the collection of books usually stored in a bedroom bookcase, but for a month setting on chairs here and there. I found a set of ten volumes "Boys and Girls Bookshelf" copyright 1912. They had been a childhood gift to my mother. My sister, brother and I used them until the pages were dog-eared, relying heavily on those "Big Red Books" for entertainment.

Next my own sons read them, although the phrases may have seem a bit jingoistic. Even my grandchildren have had a jab at those old books, time and distance aided in damage control! The information is clear and timely, but the books are aged and dusty. Spruced up a bit, they are back on the shelf with a note for the next owner, a grandson who asked for them when he was about age eight.

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Whisler's Hunting



by Josh Whisler

& Fishing Report

Fishing:

The River has finally settled out to its normal winter level – LOW – in the past month. The Army Corp of Engineers who control the flow of the river system made a statement last week stating that the Dams up river had finally reached their normal levels and discharge would no long keep the river at or near flood stage in our area. I'm not sure what that means for this spring and summer due to discharge from the Dams is relevant to the snow run off from the Rocky Mountains. We will just have to wait and see.

Lake & pond fishing:

It's still a little risky in places to get out on the ice in our area. The ice was coming on pretty good and then the week after Christmas we had a 70 degree warm up that brought warm winds with it. This is not good for ice on a pond or lake. Although cooler weather followed, the damage was done on some pond & lakes and the 8 to 10 inches of snow we got later didn't help either. Most bodies of water during the warm up had substantial amounts of water on top of the ice which doesn't make for very good support when it refreezes. Last weeks near 0 temps has finally started to put some good clear ice on the waters. The reports are now 2 to 3 inches of smoky ice with 3 inches of clear ice below. The ideal thickness is 5 inches of clear ice. Night crawlers are available locally but wax worms are a commodity this year. So it may be time to break out the gigs and power bait.

Hunting:

Hunting seasons are about to run out for this year – with a few season hanging on to the end of January and as always the rabbit season lasting to the end of February.

Soon the Game & Parks Commission will meet to set this year's seasons and I'm sure they will throw a few new surprises into the mix. I don't really know how hard it would be to go hunting

or fishing because I have done it my whole life. But the Game & Parks usually comes up with a couple dozen new rules a year. Many times it's just too hard to fish or hunt with all the rules involved to do so. With changes so frequent it's hard to stay in compliance with all the rules – thus it discourages some folks from trying it at all. And I don't think that is the objective of the Game & Parks at all. And let's not forget the raise in fees for fishing, hunting, & park permits. I know that the state's budgets are stretched and someone has to pay – but everyone else's budget is stretched too. Hopefully there will be some common sense & common ground reached so folks not only have a place to enjoy but are not deterred from having some fun.

There is still plenty of time for ice to form on lakes and ponds so don't count ice fishing out yet. And with the New Year comes new seasons – the fist to come to mind is Spring Turkey. Need to keep a watchful eye to see when the Spring Turkey application window opens and when the seasons start. 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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The Face of Drought

by Karen Ott



It snowed again Wednesday; by ten am vehicles began sliding into ditches, by eleven schools called for early dismissal, and by two in the afternoon local radio stations were announcing cancellations of various evening activities.

Around noon the short stretch of state highway 26 between Morrill and the Wyoming line, a hilly, curvy, two lane death-trap which has claimed countless lives and caused millions of dollars in collateral damages, snared yet another group of unsuspecting victims: the young mother and two small children who slid down a steep embankment were only shaken up...but we've heard nothing about the other drivers involved.

I was eating lunch at my tire shop desk when the emergency vehicles...lights flashing, sirens wailing...screamed past. "Looks like a wreck out west." I said to a waiting customer. "Another one?" she replied with an air of resignation, both of us conscious of the fact that accidents....snow or no snow....are a common occurrence on this dangerous section of the state's hi-way system.

The snow was a bit of a surprise, coming as it did on the heels of some most-welcome spring-like weather.

Following weeks of watching winter batter the land into submission the brief January thaw stoked the dampened fires of wishful thinking, and had farmers breathing sweet Hallelujahs. They tossed insulated coveralls in the corner, turned weathered faces to the sun and drank in the warmth like a cup of hot cocoa...not the microwave low-calorie stuff, but the genuine article, made with whole milk, real sugar and topped with two fat marshmallows.

They should have known it was too good to last.

After the storm's arrival shattered those hasty hallelujahs the men grudgingly holstered their expectations; it's only January after all.....and at this time of year winter always out-draws spring.

Wednesday night was bitter, in the single digits, but Thursday morning dawned clear-skied and sparkly; minute ice crystals tumbled through the air, flashing like millions of diamonds as they refracted and reflected the sun's rays....but that was only half of the show. Twin pillars of rainbow-bright colored light shot up, then arched like heaven's gate, mimicking the curvature of the sun, an optical phenomena I discovered later is common to earth's Polar Regions. (Yes, it was that cold.)

I also learned that what I believed to be 'frozen fog' was something much more refined. Called 'Diamond Dust' in meteorological circles the crystalline pieces of ice, shaped like tiny six-sided pencils, form

when temperature inversions mix cold surface air with warm, vapor laden, upper air, an explanation I find much too rational for something so deliciously magical.

But be that as it may the experience was a nice interruption to the mundane, auto-pilot side of deep winter when life's number one priority is staying warm, and excitement in general plays second fiddle to the regulation of household heat.

And with that I leave you with this weather tidbit: in the last 63 years the lowest reported temperature for our area was -42 degrees, making those single digit readings we've been griping about seem downright toasty.

Keep warm.

As Always, Karen

Melinda D. Clarke, CPA

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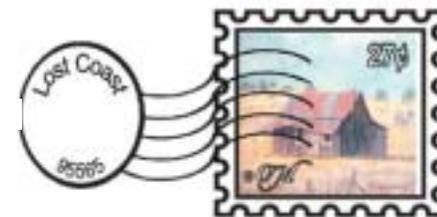
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Lost Coast

Of Vinegar, Varmints, and Valentines

By Vicki O'Neal



With a bottle of vinegar in one hand and a drumstick in the other, I chased my departing husband down the driveway.

“Wait!” I shouted after him. “You’re a sick man with a terrible cold... And now you’re running off without your chicken and vinegar! You don’t even have your coat on!” I was fuming.

I managed to overtake Michael at the end of the driveway. I gave him a dose of vinegar.

“There now!” I said. “Vinegar will kill every varmint in your throat! That’s what my Granny always said.” I handed him the drumstick. “Eat this when you get hungry, Mr. O! It’ll kill those cold germs—you hear? Oh...but wait! I forgot your hot tea!” Running back to the house, I fetched his Thermos.

I kissed Michael goodbye—reminding him to put on his coat and his seatbelt...Reminding him to get well before Valentine’s Day. Reminding him to cheer up.

“At least,” I said, “It’s not as bad as the last time I gave you vinegar...Your buddies weren’t looking on, today!”

My husband drove off grumbling. Men! What we have to go through to keep them healthy! And all they do is grumble.

The experts say: “A married man will live four years longer than if he were single”—but I don’t think it even matters to these menfolk!

They’re so strange and moody, at times. They retreat into their “cave” of silence. They don’t want marriage counseling. No Marriage Seminars. And when they get lost, they refuse to ask for directions—no matter how dire things might be. Worst of all, they seldom remember our birthdays and anniversaries...or even Valentine’s Day!

“It’s a man thing...” everybody says. “Men just need a little TLC.”

Ah yes. My Michael needs a lot of TLC. But he’s worth it, I reckon.

To tell the truth, folks—Michael is the best “Valentine” I’ve ever had. Curly blond hair. Blue-eyed. Muscular. Horridly sentimental and overprotective. He’s all man, and part boy. Stalwart. Strong as a bull—and only half as stubborn.

He and I are “Soul-mates” in every sense of the word. He reads my mind. I read his heart. We have the same likes and dislikes. The same goals. Same faith. Same hobbies. Same tastes.

Except for his innate stubbornness, we are just about identical. Like clones! It’s uncanny...Almost scary.

Really, folks—the only thing that we differ on is.... Well. You’re not going to believe it. We disagree about insects. Bugs. Varmints!...Those creepy-crawlies.

They fascinate my hubby and they upset me. Shiny bugs. Dung beetles. Dragonflies. Floppy moths that chew holes in my clothes. Michael loves them all...(except for ants and mosquitoes.)

The first time I killed a flying critter of unknown species, my husband was aghast: “You killed a Skeeter Hawk!”

“Say what?!”

“A Mosquito Hawk!” Michael said. “He’s our greatest friend. He kills mosquitoes voraciously!”

“Hmmp!” Veracious or not, he was big and ugly—and I didn’t care for the likes of him.

Now...On the other hand, our tiny friend, “Charlotte,” is a different matter! She’s a gentle little lady. Charlotte lives in our mailbox. I don’t really mind her. She’s not doing any harm—and like Michael says: the mailbox is big enough for everybody—which includes her brood of babies, of course. About a million of them.

They all live at the back of our spacious mailbox. Charlotte spins her web and brings up her children well, but her husband’s a different story, entirely.

Charlotte has one of those boorish husbands. He has no manners. Overbearing and arrogant, he took up residence at the very front of our mailbox so as to scare everyone away... It upset me badly.

One day, I reached inside the box to check the mail—and the little guy got feisty. I went Postal. SMACK! In a split-second, the husband was dead and Charlotte was a widow—a true black widow.

“Now look what you’ve done!” Michael said. “He was only guarding their home. That was his job—defending the home from invaders. Charlotte’s a single mom, now...She has dozens of mouths to feed by herself.”

I felt remorse. For about two seconds.

Hello?! We’re talking spiders here. I don’t know why I have to feel guilty about killing bugs. After all, Michael doesn’t feel bad about killing ants! He kills them by the millions. He hates them as much as he loves all the other bugs.

In our part of the world we have a tiny invader known as

the “Piss Ant.” Sounds terrible, I know—but that’s what everyone calls them—even Presbyterians.

My husband has a sure-fire way to kill them—the ants—not the Presbyterians. Michael uses Lemon Pledge. Says it works better than any bug spray and it isn’t as toxic.

Well. One day, after my hubby went to town, I was out in our secluded little yard—spraying away—going after the ants with Lemon Pledge, as usual. I didn’t realize I was standing in an ant pile ’til the biting varmints got in my drawers.

My hubby returned home, moments later, to find me dancing a jig and pulling off my clothes in the front yard.

Michael started to laugh. “Just what I always wanted to see! My wife pulling off her clothes and dancing me a jig!”

It made him right happy—much happier than when I’m chasing him down the driveway with a drumstick and a bottle of vinegar. I don’t know why. Men are strange.

But—enough of that. I’m all worn out. I’ve got to quit for now. Before I go, though, we’ve got one last thing to discuss. Just a word of advice to all you gals out there....

If you happen to have one of those “boorish” husbands, like Charlotte. If he’s domineering and thoughtless. If he guards the front door of your home and scares away all your friends. If he won’t take you to Marriage Seminars and he forgets you on Valentine’s Day....

Well—don’t sweat it.

Just go buy yourself some fine chocolates and flowers. Perfume...your favorite kind. Arm yourself with a romantic novel or two. Buy some bubble bath and floating candles. Maybe even a Foot Spa to soak your feet in.

If your man gets defensive about it...If he’s feisty and moody—get out the vinegar bottle!

And if that doesn’t work....give him the old Ant Dance.

Trust me. It’ll work every time.

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American Bald Eagles were numerous in Brownville during January