



YOUR COUNTRY NEIGHBOR

River Towns & Prairie Communities



February 2026

February 2026 is a turning point issue:
25 Februarys of publication
in America's 250th year.
Showcasing people,
places, and businesses
that endure.



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The "Greater White-fronted Geese" are rarely seen, but often migrate with the Canada Geese.



Enduring, Proud, Unmatched
The American Bald Eagle

What Endures: A Quarter Century and Counting

Windmills, red barns, one-room country schools. These were beloved American fixtures in their day. But as dear and functional as they were, they failed to endure... as did the South Omaha Sun and the Pittsburgh Post.

"Your Country Neighbor" continues to grow in readership. But the publication is not the only avenue that is extended to the public. Its website is averaging more than 100 visits per day which generate over 400,000 hits per year. This reader interest is generated by how "Your Country Neighbor" handles photography, literature, and history.

And that is handled by how it responds to its market. Rather than chasing trends or abandoning what works, "Your Country Neighbor" listens to its community—adapting while staying rooted in the authentic storytelling and visual documentation that readers value. It's this balance between tradition and evolution that separates fixtures that fade, from publications that endure.

This is “Your Country Neighbor” Territory

Auburn • Brownville • Cook • Falls City • Johnson • Julian • Nebraska City
Nemaha • Papillion • Peru • Rock Port • Syracuse • Tecumseh • Verdon

Your Country Neighbor

Voices and Views from the Valleys of the Nemaha

Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

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www.yourcountryneighbor.com

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ADVERTISING RATES ARE ON PAGE 10

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Thank You!

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou

“Age affects appearance, behavior affects health.”

Stephen Hassler

Getting old doesn't make you sick, a life of bad behavior does. So avoid drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Exercise, eat nutritiously.

February

by a country neighbor

If January clears the slate, February tests our resolve. It arrives without ceremony, carrying the weight of Winter rather than its novelty. The days are still short, the nights long, and the cold has settled in for the duration. By now, Winter is no longer an event—it's a condition. The landscape hasn't changed much since last month, but our relationship to it has. We know what to expect, and we're still here.

Outdoors, February can feel stark. The fields lie exposed, their patterns etched by snow, wind, and time. Trees stand bare against the sky, all structure and no ornament. Yet there's a subtle shift if you pay attention. The light, though still low, has a different quality to it—clearer somehow, more deliberate. The sun doesn't just appear; it announces its intention to stay a little longer.

This is the month when patience is practiced, not preached. We've moved past the fresh optimism of the new year and into the quieter work of endurance. Projects begun in January either find their footing now or fall away. Routines reveal themselves as habits, for better or worse. February asks fewer questions, but it expects honest answers.

There are signs of life if you know where to look. Bald eagles return to familiar nesting sites. Waterfowl gather where open water allows, waiting out the last hard freezes. Even on the coldest mornings, there's motion along the river and across the prairie—life continuing, adapting, holding its place. It's a reminder that Winter isn't merely about waiting; it's about persistence.

February doesn't promise much, and that may be its strength. It offers no grand milestones, no built-in celebrations beyond the small ones we make ourselves: a valentine wish, a shared meal, a clear afternoon. These are enough. They carry us forward.

This is our twenty-fifth February of publication, arriving as the nation enters its two hundred fiftieth year. It seems fitting that neither occasion announces itself loudly. Endurance, after all, is built quietly—by people, by places, by businesses, and by communities that show up again and again.

From my place between the river and the prairie, February feels like a door—still firmly Winter, but opening a bit. The year is underway now, whether we feel ready or not. May this month grant you steadiness, a bit of borrowed warmth, and the quiet confidence that endurance, too, is a form of progress.

Warm temperatures in early January allowed open water at the Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge, and that invited snow geese and other waterfowl.

Warm temperatures in February will bring them back, especially near the end of the month at migrating time.

View my amazing video of Snow Geese on my YouTube Channel.

Copy and paste the address below into your browser window.

www.YouTube.com/@yourcountryneighbor



Trumpeter Swans “on final.”



A Juvenile Bald Eagle lands on a Muskrat Lodge where it surveys food options.

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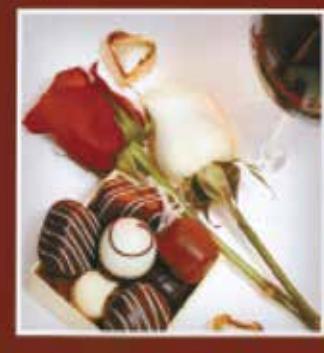
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Happy Valentines Day



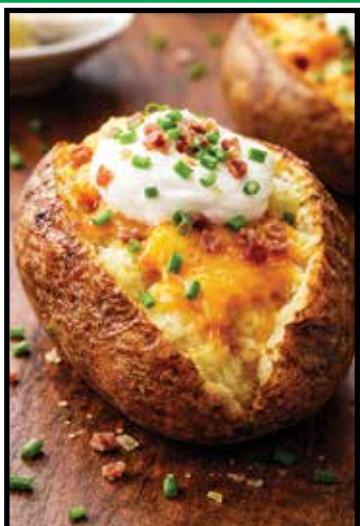
February Wine-Tasting Hours:

Thurs through Sun 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm
(Closed Monday through Wednesday)

Remember that our "Loft"
is a good venue for your
social gatherings.

Brownville Historical Society

Annual Potato Bake
Saturday, February 21st
5:00 - 7:00 PM
In Brownville's Town Hall



Join us for the BHS Annual Potato Bake Saturday, February 21st in the Brownville Town Hall! Enjoy delicious baked potatoes 5:00 to 7:00 PM, with a variety of toppings, delightful homemade desserts, and great conversation with neighbors and visitors alike. It's a local favorite and a fun, casual way to celebrate good food and community spirit in historic Brownville. All included for a free will offering.

BROWNVILLE, NEBRASKA

BROWNVILLE, NEBRASKA



Re-printed from Brownville 150th Anniversary Publication
Approaching the “Gold Coast” at Brownville
Nebraska Territory, 1860.
Stephen Hassler, Peru

Imagine you are traveling up this river on a Steamboat in 1860. You are just minutes away from Brownville, a prosperous town in the new Kansas-Nebraska Territory and the “jumping off” point for passengers and freight moving west. “Gold” was a reference to prosperity and wealth, not mining. It was the heyday of Steamboat travel on the Missouri River, and you are standing at the bow of a modern, steam-powered river boat. You are going to meet your brother, or your husband, or you are about to begin a lonely, but adventurous journey to Oregon or California. You can feel the deck vibrate beneath your feet as each blade of the paddle wheel breaks the river’s surface. Your face feels a gentle mist as the bow cuts through the water and the river breeze is wet with spray. Five days out of St. Louis, and you are almost there!

From one of the seven hills in Brownville, children hurriedly abandon their desks and their teacher’s objections to race toward the sound of the shrill whistle calling them from their studies. They race each other down the hills and through the streets of Brownville to the water’s edge, eager to be the first to glimpse this majestic traveler from far Saint Louis as it rounds the distant bend in the river. It brings adventure and adventurers, gamblers and pioneers, nails and plows. There is a young wife on the deck leaning to catch a glimpse of her husband’s face in the teeming crowd. There is a brother or cousin, here to join a spiritus pioneer. There are workers readying the wooden cages of chickens and swine, crates of tools, and sacks of seed; necessities for a new town. Pioneers, prospectors, preachers and planters, many of whom only intended to stop briefly at Brownville on their way to mine the foothills of Pikes

The spirit of those riverboat days lives on in the “Spirit of Brownville.”



Long before America knew what it would become, this river taught patience, attention, and endurance—qualities that still define the places we call home.

Peak (Pike’s Peak or bust!), plow the plains of Nebraska, or plant the seeds of a new life in a new land.

In your view from the deck you can see crowds of people waving from the stone landing. Workers and merchants, relatives and children, all eager to see the approach of the river boat Nemaha, and the unloading of a bountiful cargo from the great city of St. Louis. After moments of intense exchanges between boatmen and shore men, the Nemaha is secured, the bridge plank is lowered, and the passengers disembark.

You step off your floating hotel and onto America’s newest frontier, making your way through the noise and the crowd, the horses and wagons, carts and carriages. And then you see someone waving, and you realize it is he who has been waiting for you, the one you have followed after. Your adventure together begins.

Today the Missouri River at Brownville, Nebraska looks like the river pictured above, but riverboats like the Nemaha are now romantic history or museums. Still, Brownville remains a town on a new frontier. And the townspeople are there on Main Street to welcome you.

PERU CITY NEWS

Communication • Information • Pride In Community

A volunteer project
supported by the Peru Community.
Thank you to everyone who participates!



Peru State Athletics invites the community, alumni, and friends to gather for food, fun, and hoops! This annual event features chili, cinnamon rolls, and women's and men's basketball on Saturday, February 7, in the Al Wheeler Activity Center on the Campus of a Thousand Oaks. Activities will begin with a Bobcat women's basketball game against Missouri Valley College beginning at 2 p.m. A men's game with the Vikings will begin at approximately 4 p.m.



PSC defeats MidAmerica Nazarene 68 to 66
January 21, 2026

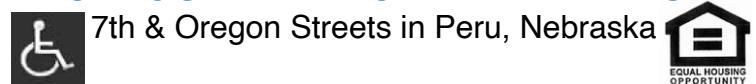


PSC lost to Benedictine College 73 to 76
January 26, 2026



PSC Women fall to MidAmerica Nazarene University, 44 to 53
January 21, 2026

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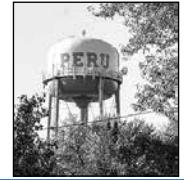
PERU CITY NEWS

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My Back Fence

Stephen Hassler

It was never the proverbial neighbor-to-neighbor back fence written about in quaint urban stories, where the ladies of the houses chatted or gossiped, or where weekend blue-collar men spoke of ballgames and the weather. In my thirty years, it was just a boundary—a lattice for climbing vines and a border to a shallow wash, and sometimes a deer trail.

One time a brown thrasher tried to fly through the grid. I found its remains: a golden clutch of feathers halfway through, but no farther.

Another time I looked out my back porch and was surprised to see that a pickup had rolled down the slope, taking out a post and some wire, which the driver later repaired.

There was no neighbor to the south, just a rising bank that sloped up to the college parking lot. No reason to rest elbows between posts.

It did serve a good purpose while my loyal retriever was with me. It kept her close but allowed her a play area, a place to sniff and investigate her surroundings beyond the old living room chair.

My front yard has no fence at all, and creatures are free to come and go across the lawn.

Between these two boundaries is the accumulation of thirty years of joy and sorrow.

Tuesday Literary Club Reads

DiAnna Loy, Tuesday Literary Club

The Tuesday Literary Club is celebrating America's 250th birthday this year by reading books about America's history. The book Cecilia presented was *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes. As the book begins, we find Johnny as an apprentice to the silversmith, Mr. Lapham. Johnny is quick, intelligent, proud and hardworking. He has a natural aptitude for silversmithing. Mr. Lapham also has two other apprentices but they are lazy and basically inept. They are not happy when Johnny tells them what to do. Mr. Lapham's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Lapham, and her four daughters are also part of the household. Johnny has few possessions and they all fit in one trunk that he brought with him. His mother arranged for his apprenticeship when she became ill so she knew he would be taken care of after she died. One of his few possessions in his trunk was a silver cup. His mother told him to never show it to anyone but if he was ever in dire trouble, he should take it to the Lyte household and show it to the Master of the house. Johnny does show it to one of Mrs. Lapham's daughters.

One day John Hancock comes to the Lapham's shop with a request that they make a new sugar bowl to match the cream pitcher he has brought. He insists it must be completed by the next Monday. Mr. Lapham is unsure but Johnny insists that it can be done. The bowl is done in no time but Johnny is having a hard time getting the shape of the handles right. Mr. Lapham is no help so Johnny takes his work to Paul Revere, a noted silversmith, and asks for help. Mr. Revere gladly shows him where he is going wrong. Johnny thanks him and heads back to Lapham's shop to complete the work. Johnny gets the mold for the handles completed but since no one is allowed to work on Sunday, he doesn't know how he is going to cast the handles and complete the piece.

Mrs. Lapham finally gives Johnny and the other boys permission to work on Sunday. The other boys are not happy to have to work on their one day off and they care nothing for the reputation of the shop so when Johnny asks them to get a mold from the cupboard, they knowingly bring one that has a crack and will come apart when the mold is filled with the molten silver. When Johnny pours the liquid into the mold, it indeed cracks and the boiling silver spills to the floor. Johnny slips in it, burning his hand badly. Mrs. Lapham sends for an old midwife, not a doctor, as she is afraid they will get in trouble for working on the Sabbath. She wraps his hand and keeps him semi-conscious with laudanum. When the wrap comes off, she has wrapped it with the thumb against his hand and it now cannot be straightened or pulled away from his hand. His hand is of little use; he can no longer be a silversmith or do any work with that hand.

Though Johnny still has many trials, he eventually acquires a horse and helps the British by delivering messages to outposts from Boston. While doing this he is able to intercept the information and get it to the Colonial troops without gaining the suspicion of the British. He goes on many of these missions for the British. He works for a local newspaper delivering their papers around the countryside gleaming information as he goes. Partly because Johnny is small for his age and is considered a cripple, he goes unnoticed being able to bring much reliable information back to Paul Revere and other Colonial officers. Right as the American Revolution is about to start in earnest, Johnny meets a doctor that promises him that his hand can be fixed enough for him to hold and fire a weapon so that he can fight in the war.

"Happy reading!"

PERU CITY NEWS

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When I Can Open the Kitchen Window

Stephen Hassler

It won't be long--maybe later this month, I'll notice the first pointed green shoots of daffodils pushing up through snow crystals. A yellow bud and bloom follow. Not a fancy hybrid, just the plain-o simple variety. Plain in a nice way.

Daffodils were a visual awakening in one of the most memorable scenes from the movie, "Doctor Zhivago." Winter frost melted into a field of yellow faces each waving toward the sun, unable to hold still against the Spring breeze.

Outside the front door of my house in Texas, a large flower bed of daffodils surrounded a tree. They came up out of the ground the end of January and early February, like a recording from the old movie replaying itself.

The first Autumn, at my home in Peru, I planted daffodil bulbs, and every Spring they say hello. When they do, I can open the kitchen window.

Your Country Neighbor

**Your "2-cups-of-coffee" break
including local photos and articles
with the flavor of rural America.**

Owen Fletcher Neal

John C. Chatelain, Omaha

I have fond memories of family picnics in the beautiful park on the south end of Peru. It was a gift to the community from Owen Fletcher Neal in honor of his mother, Laura Bradford Neal. In January 1935 the city received a deed for the four acres of Neal land along with \$500 to improve it. The park was dedicated on April 26, 1935. Plans were drawn by Leo Sondereger of Beatrice. 1

In 1938, Fletcher gave \$1,000 and the WPA contributed \$360 to improve the park with a shelter house and limestone and brick entrances, along with limestone paths, concrete-lined drainage channels, and two goldfish ponds in the middle of the park. The park was later endowed in the amount of \$30,000 in property backed by 2,000 acres of Kansas Farmland donated by O. F. Neal. 2

Fletcher was the grandson of Dr. John Fletcher Neal. J. F. Neal was born at Champaign, Ohio on March 3, 1835. After his arrival in 1859 Dr. Neal purchased farmland on the southeast corner of town from Wilson Swan, one of Peru's first residents. J. F. married Martha Peery, daughter of Dr. Peery, Peru's first doctor. Dr. Neal, a firm believer in education, did as much as any other person in making Peru State College a success. 3

William T. Neal was born to John and Martha in 1866. He also became a doctor and practiced in Peru before moving his office to Nebraska City. William married Laura Bradford, who had come to Peru as a small child. In addition to Fletcher, other children of William and Laura were Martha Louise, John Russell and Helen Neal (Eberhart). 4 Mrs. Eberhart lived for many years in the stylish brick house just east of the park.

Fletcher was born in Peru, February 17, 1892, but spent his later boyhood in Nebraska City. On December 24, 1914, he married Marie Orrell Forsythe, also a native of Peru. In 1930 he moved to Omaha where "almost at once he entered on a business career, which brought him amazing success and provided wide opportunities for a shrewd and imaginative mind." 5

Neal became manager of the western division of Ohio National Life Insurance Company, with operations west of Missouri all the way to the Pacific Coast. His enterprises included Midwestern ranch and farm operations. At one time he owned the Nebraska City National Bank. 6

Peru's lovely park was just one of Neal's many philanthropies. He worked to bring the Nebraska City utilities under municipal control and was one of the original members of the Utility Board. He served on the board of the Salvation Army and contributed richly to that organization as well as numerous other civic and charitable organizations. Fletcher had political interests as well. He served as treasurer of the Nebraska Democratic party and knew Harry Truman before the Missourian went to the White House. 7

A plaque on the southeast corner of the Nebraska City Memorial Building reads, "In grateful memory of Fletcher Neal, whose generosity made this Memorial Building the property of the people of Nebraska City, 1943."

Fletcher died September 4, 1949, from a heart attack in his Athletic Club apartment in Omaha. Funeral services were held at the Peru Methodist Church. The long list of honorary pallbearers was impressive. Mr. Neal is buried in Mount Vernon Cemetery near his parents. He and Marie had a son, William Richard Neal, who was then living in Los Angeles, California. 8

1 Across the Wide Missouri, Peru, Nebraska 1854-1991, by Ernest Longfellow, p 144; 2 Ibid; 3 Ibid, p. 36, 4 Ibid. 5 Nebraska City News Press, September 6, 1949. 6 Ibid. 7 Ibid. 8 Ibid.

Slim's Stories by Tom Combs

Submitted by Cheri & Nick Petrillo

Life's stories! Everyone has them. Most people don't think their stories are important enough to write down and share. But as time passes and our lives change dramatically, we begin to realize that even stories about ordinary lives are not only worth telling, but can be very interesting.

This is a collection of Lawrence (Slim, Friday) Combs stories that he shared with me during his life

My dad was 45 years old and lived to be 100, so I heard many stories, some of them many times. By the time he was 60, the stories became a conversation ritual every time we talked. He told them to everyone. His barber, Dean Coulter, said he really enjoyed them and since he'd been cutting hair for over 50 years, I'm sure he'd heard a lot of stories.

Dad was a good story teller and he always supplied the extra details so the listener could visualize what was taking place. In many places I quoted him word for word. I also added some of my own words along the way. Trying to be as accurate as I could, I obtained information from various sources, to give the reader more insight about the setting of the story, the people involved and the history of that era.

Lawrence Homer Combs was born in Auburn, Nebraska on May 24th, 1909. The 4th and last child born to Homer and Della (Nincehelser) Combs. The Combs had a long history in Nemaha County starting with their great grandfather, Jefferson Lee Combs.

Nebraska Territory opened up for settlement in 1854. That spring Jefferson and his family crossed the Missouri River into the newly opened Indian Territory. On that crossing the Combs along with six other families settled in the hills that later became known as the Peru Township. His group of first settlers had spent the previous winter of 1853-54 on Sonora Island. Some historical data I found said, these families arrived late in the season and were ill prepared to spend the winter in such an area. They quickly tacked together makeshift shelters and experienced freezing temperatures that first winter, surviving on limited supplies. Sonora Island was an early cross over point on the Missouri River located due west of present day Watson, Missouri.

The Combs traveled from Peru, Illinois where they had lived in close proximity to a similar river town situated in the bluffs along the Illinois River. They shared this adventure with the Swan's, Horn's, Hall's, Tate's, Mellick's, and Metcalf families. Most of these families were interrelated, the Swan's being Jefferson Lee's in-laws.

In this group of first settlers was a 10-year-old boy named Monroe Jackson Combs. This boy would later become Lawrence's grandfather.

THE EARLY YEARS

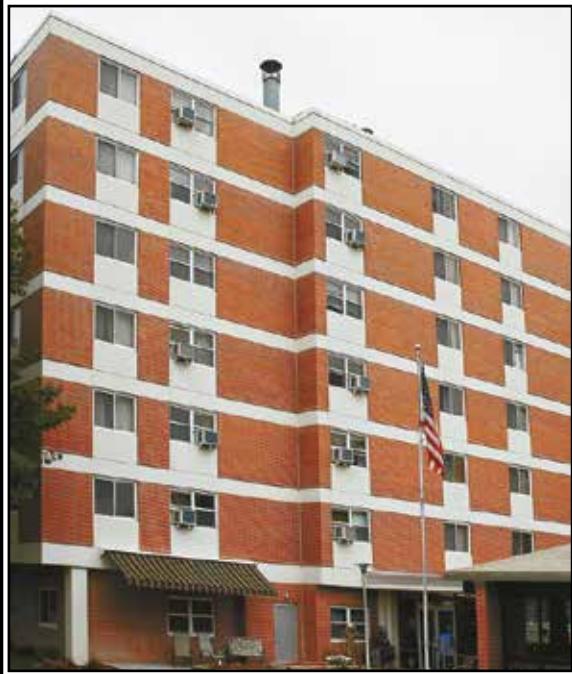
At school, during recess, dad played marbles across the street from Antioch Elementary School. He said the kids had to play across the street because the teachers wouldn't let the kids play on



"...the teachers wouldn't let the kids play on school grounds. The teachers considered the game a form of gambling and they played for keeps, marbles that is!"

school grounds. The teachers considered the game a form of gambling and they played for keeps, marbles that is! He still had a lot of old marbles from when he was a kid.

There were two elementary schools in Auburn in those days, Antioch in North Auburn, and Athens to the south. There was also a Catholic School at one time, located north of the present day church. The Catholic School was built in 1899 was destroyed by a fire in 1936, and was never rebuilt. Later in 1959 the two old public school buildings were torn down and new buildings were erected. These schools were renamed Calvert and Sheridan after the two original towns that merged into Auburn in 1882. Dads elementary years lasted from 1915 to 1921.



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The Face of Drought

A Farm Report from Western Nebraska (circa 2008)
by Karen Ott, a former "regular" in YCN

For the first time in years we're experiencing a real winter... and I don't like it one bit. Daytime temperatures rarely climb out of freezing territory, and even if they do it's only for an hour or so... not nearly enough time to melt the packed snow and ice that has accumulated since November.

Even though we've had more than our share of storms, and the landscape has been white for over a month, we really don't have a serious accumulation of snow... maybe five inches or so here on the home place. (An all-day snow on Thursday left us with an additional inch). Our real problem is the snow never has the chance to thaw but instead has slowly settled down to a crusty ice; just walking across the yard takes courage, perseverance and a perfect sense of balance.

But walking and driving are the least of our worries. For weeks now the men have been hauling feed as the hard layer of ice/snow makes it impossible for the cows out on corn stubble to find anything to eat... and calving season is just around the corner. (That's a nightmare in the making.)

Our Christmas day proved a bit hectic. While I entertained family and friends, Dale and our son Matthew sat in the hospital's emergency room with a screaming five year old. Ordinarily we would have taken Devon to his pediatrician... or the Morrill medical clinic... or QuickCare... or Urgent Care, but on Christmas day not a single option was open but the super-busy, understaffed ER.

After spending most of the afternoon with a loud, frowsy haired woman in a pair of fuzzy pink bunny slippers, an over-sized gal too big to fit in a conventional wheelchair, a man who had thought cleaning his clogged snow-blower with his bare hands was a good idea -- and a myriad of other ill-fated citizens of Scottsbluff county -- my unlucky three-some arrived back home hungry, cranky and out of sorts. According to Dale, Hollywood has never produced a TV show with as much medical drama.

It was one of those days we'll file away in our book of Christmas remembrances, alongside "The Chicken-pox" Christmas, "The Broken Ankle" Christmas, "The Blizzard/Snowmobile" Christmas, and the unforgettable "Someone Forgot The Mashed Potatoes So We Had To Eat Chips" Christmas.

I'm hoping New Year's Day turns out to be a bit less memorable.

And now for a public service announcement:

Wednesday morning a single father and his two kids came to the tire shop in search of a large inner tube. "Taking the kids tubing," David said as his young, blond-headed son and pretty teenage daughter chattered about previous spills and thrills riding a tube pulled by a fourwheeler. Less than forty minutes later the flight-for-life helicopter was landing in the large lot just a block east of the



tire-shop. The boy had slipped from the tube (his father was driving the fourwheeler) and slid head-first across the packed snow into a light pole. He was awake and crying when they loaded him on the gurney... and tonight he's lying in the Scottsbluff hospital with severe head injuries, his life irrevocably altered.

SO... start the New Year off right. If you're snowmobiling, tubing, fourwheeling or pulling someone around on the hood of an old pickup (something we frequently did when the boys were young), make everyone involved wear a helmet.

Nine chances out of ten they won't need them... but maybe... just maybe they will.

Stay safe and warm this week.

I don't want to guess why Karen stopped writing. I might be wrong, and I'm afraid I might be right. But I thought it fitting in this, our nation's 250th year and my 25th year with "Your Country Neighbor" that Karen should have a place in it, and this page provides it. Thank you Karen.

A Prairie Love

Chapter Eleven: The Dance – June 1924

The last bell of the school year rang out like a hymn of freedom. Cora stood in the empty classroom for a long moment after the children had gone, her hand resting on the worn edge of her desk. Chalk dust floated in the shafts of sunlight pouring through the open windows, and the scent of lilacs drifted in from the bush outside.

She was free for the summer, but her mind was not. The teacher's institute in Lincoln still tugged at her thoughts. Her letter accepting the offer lay sealed in her satchel, but un-mailed. Not yet.

That Saturday, the townspeople gathered for the annual summer dance in the town hall. Lanterns were strung across the rafters, casting soft pools of golden light over the polished floor. A local trio played waltzes and reels while laughter echoed through the open doors.

Cora wore a cotton dress the color of bluebells and pinned her hair back with a comb her mother had once given her. Lyle met her at the entrance, freshly shaved, with a shy bouquet of daisies in hand.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," he said.

"I wasn't sure either," she replied, taking the flowers.

They danced three times. By the fourth, they'd found each other's rhythm—steps in sync, hearts quietly thudding to a tempo of their own.

Later, they walked outside to cool off. The stars were out in full, and in the distance, a windmill turned slowly, creaking as it caught the prairie breeze. They paused beside it, the gentle whoosh of its blades spinning above them.

Cora looked up. "That sound reminds me of growing up—of summers that never seemed to end."

Lyle took her hand. "I reckon we could build a few of our own."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Maybe we already are."

The breeze stirred her skirt and ruffled his collar. Beneath the summer sky, with the old windmill turning like a steady heartbeat, they stood together—not in a hurry, not quite certain of what came next, but rooted all the same.

To be continued...

Letters from the Prairie

June 12, 1888

11th Letter from Anna Wilhelmine Bauer to her sister Klara in Germany

My dearest Klara,
The fields shimmer in the midday heat, and even the birds seem to hush in the high hours. It is a slower season now—less of the frenzied planting and more of the tending. I move through the garden with basket in hand, brushing squash blossoms aside to check the soil, speaking quiet encouragement to the beans and cabbage.

Johann has taken to rising before first light, working before the sun finds its strength. He says the soil has a mood of its own in June, and he means to catch it before it turns stubborn. I believe him. We all move by the rhythms of this land now.

Lena's sunflower has sprouted, thin and awkward but persistent. She waters it with a tiny tin cup and sings to it as if it were a pet. "It's listening," she insists, and I do not doubt her.

Our new neighbor Margarete came by with rhubarb and questions. Her English grows sturdier by the week, though her homesickness clings like a shawl she can't quite shed. I made tea, and we sat on the porch while our children played in the yard. She wept a little, quietly. I let her. Sometimes tears are part of the journey west.

There was a storm two nights ago—sudden, loud, full of wild wind and flashing sky. It knocked the wash line loose and blew branches across the yard. But the next morning, the air was sweet with ozone and damp clover, and the world felt rinsed clean.

I think often of you during these long evenings. I imagine you walking along the river path behind our childhood home, the same breeze that touches me finding its way to you. Is that fanciful? Perhaps. But the prairie encourages such thoughts. It is wide enough to hold them.

With love from across the miles,
Your Anna

To be continued...

Westward With Lewis & Clark

Chapter Nine: Signs Along the Bank

Late August 1804, above the Platte Confluence

The river above the Platte does not hurry. It spreads itself thin and wide, broken into shifting channels that test both patience and judgment. Sandbars appear where none were the day before. What looks like deep water betrays you without warning.

We learned that quickly.

The men took turns at the poles, boots sinking into the soft riverbed as we pushed and steadied the boats. More than once, the current caught us sideways and spun us before we could correct. It was labor without drama—no single moment of danger, only the steady wearing down of arms and backs.

Captain Clark walked the bank often, pacing ahead to read the water. He had a way of studying the river as if it might speak to him, and sometimes I think it did.

The land here opened wide. Cottonwoods thinned, replaced by low grasses and long stretches of bare sand. The sky seemed larger than before, if that was possible. Even the clouds traveled differently—slow and deliberate, as though measuring the country.

It was Drouillard again who noticed the signs. Fresh tracks along a muddy inlet. Not many. One man, perhaps two. They ran parallel to the river for a time, then veered away.

Clark knelt to examine them. "Not running," he said. "Watching."

Lewis said nothing at first. He studied the far bank through the glass, scanning the ridges and folds of land. If he felt concern, he did not show it. But the order came soon enough: the men were to stay close, camps tighter, watches doubled at night.

That evening, we saw smoke. Not a column—just a thin thread rising briefly before vanishing. It came from far upriver, beyond a bend we had not yet reached. Too distant to follow. Too deliberate to ignore.

No one spoke of the stranger on the ridge, but he was with us again, carried forward in thought if not in sight.

The wildlife grew more abundant as we moved on. Great flocks of waterfowl lifted from the shallows at our approach, their wings catching the sun in quick flashes. Deer watched us from the banks, motionless except for their ears. Once, we spotted a lone buffalo bull standing knee-deep in the river, unmoved by our passing, as if we were no more than driftwood.

At night, the prairie revealed its other voice.

Wolves called from a distance—never close, always circling. Coyotes answered, higher-pitched and restless. The men grew quiet after dark. Even laughter softened, as though the open land absorbed sound differently.

I took a late watch one night, the moon bright enough to cast shadows. The river whispered against the hull, and the grasses hissed in the breeze. Somewhere across the water, a night bird cried out, sharp and sudden. I found myself scanning the ridges again. Nothing moved.

Still, I had the unmistakable feeling that we were no longer alone—not followed closely, not threatened outright, but known. Seen.

In the morning, Lewis remarked on the quality of the light and the unusual number of birds along the banks. He sketched a plant I did not recognize, its leaves narrow and silvered.

Clark noted the river's breadth and the difficulty of navigation.

Between their observations lay everything else—the unspoken awareness that we were passing through a country already familiar to others, whether they chose to reveal themselves or not.

We broke camp and pushed on.

The river bent northward, and with it, our path into lands that would offer fewer signs, fewer certainties, and no turning back.

— Elias LeGrand

To be continued...

Haunted?

The Ghost in the (Old) Peru State College Theater by a quiet observer

When the house lights fade and the stage glows under rehearsal lamps, there's a hush in the Peru State College Theater that invites imagination. Actors waiting in the wings say they've heard footsteps where no one walks. A door in the costume shop—one that leads to the balcony—sometimes opens or slams for no reason at all. And when it happens, everyone seems to say the same thing: "That's just Steve."

No one knows exactly who Steve was, or if he ever lived. There's no record of a custodian, student, or instructor by that name meeting an untimely end in the theater. Yet for years, the name has clung to the space like dust in the rafters. Some claim to have seen a figure moving through the narrow doorway between the shop and balcony. Others have felt a brush of cold air across the stage, as if someone unseen had just exited stage right.

Peru State's campus is no stranger to ghost stories. Across the lawn stands Eliza C. Morgan Hall, said to host its own restless spirit. Residents tell of quiet knocks and shadows on stairways long after midnight. Whether these tales are theater tricks or echoes of memory, they've become part of the school's lore—retold each October with the same mixture of laughter and unease.

Still, the theater seems to have a presence all its own. Actors rehearse under the creak of old timbers and the smell of sawdust from past sets. The building remembers every performance, every burst of applause, every stumble in the dark. Maybe "Steve" is simply that memory taking form—the energy of all those stories refusing to fade.

Whatever the cause, one thing is certain: when a door slams unexpectedly during rehearsal, no one volunteers to check the balcony alone.

So the next time you find yourself in an empty auditorium, the lights dim, the seats silent, listen closely. You might hear the whisper of lines long forgotten—or perhaps the faint tread of Mr. Steve, still making his rounds above the stage at Peru State College.

Wildlife Watch

Stephen Hassler, Peru

It's February, and birds at the Refuge that migrate are getting antsy. By the end of the month, Snow Geese will be flying north by northwest, as well as many species of ducks. Almost all the Bald Eagles will be gone by Spring, except those few pairs that are nesting locally. Not long after the geese are gone, the Pelicans will arrive, but it seems they move on in just a week or so. There aren't many of them, so a sighting is almost rare, but on the right day, they will be at the Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge. By April or May come the egrets; the Snowy Egret, the Great White Egret, and the less common, Cattle Egret. The Great Blue Heron is around during many of the Spring months, and are often seen throughout Southeast Nebraska, Spring and Summer.

The Red-winged Blackbird is the sign that Spring is here for sure. I am always pleased to see his flash of red and hear his ricochet warning call because I know it's a valid sign of Spring. But the bird song I am hearing less often is that of the Western Meadowlark. I will try to listen this May along the road near a pasture. Sometimes he sits on a fence post and sings.

One doesn't expect to see butterflies until warm days in June, or May at the earliest, but on warm days in March there are a few that come out of their suspended metabolism state (technically not hibernation). The squirrel is like this. He comes out on warm days in Winter to look for food, but then returns to a deep sleep.

So when hiking this Spring on a sunny day on your favorite trail, watch for an orange and brown butterfly that looks much like the Painted Lady butterfly you may be familiar with. It's called the "Comma" butterfly due to a small marking on its under hind wing. More uncommon is the Red Admiral, but he comes out early too. About the same size, but black with a red band on its wings. Both of these little insects fly fast, so it's hard to identify them until they land, but the only other species to come out of its "slumber" is the "Mourning Cloak" butterfly. I've seen him as early as February on a 60 degree day just sunning himself around the eaves of my house, then in Omaha. I feel lucky to see this beautiful butterfly at any time of the year.

Come May, watch for the Monarch, various Swallowtails, and the Painted Lady, which should be arriving on its annual migration north.

ARBOR CITY NEWS

Morton-James Public Library Calendar of Events February 2026



All activities held at Morton-James Public Library (unless otherwise noted), 923 1st Corso, Nebraska City, NE 68410
For questions call 402-873-5609 or visit morton-jamespubliclibrary.com

All Programming is Free and Open to the Public

Lego Club

Monday, Feb 2 3:30PM - 5:00PM

Free build with Legos at the club or bring your own sets to work on. Ages 8 and older.
Free to attend.

AM Story Time - We Love Penguins

Wednesday, Feb 4 10:00AM - 10:30AM

We Love Penguins Story Time! We will sing a song, learn signs in American Sign Language, and read stories about penguins. We will then make a paper bag penguin puppet craft. Story Times are geared toward children ages 2-6. Free! Families are welcome!

Repeated on 2/5 at 4 pm.

Yarn Crafters Club

Wednesday, Feb 4 1:30PM - 3:00PM

Join us to work on your crocheting or knitting from 1:30-3:00 PM on the first Wednesday of each month. This is for all levels of crafters. Bring your own hooks, yarn, needles, whatever you need to make your yarn craft. Club members will be here to help those beginning, and MJPL will have some patterns available. Free to attend. Everyone is welcome who is 15 and older!

PM Story Time - We Love Penguins

Thursday, Feb 5 4:00PM - 4:30PM

We Love Penguins Story Time! We will sing a song, learn signs in American Sign Language, and read stories about penguins. We will then make a paper bag penguin puppet craft. Story Times are geared toward children ages 2-6. Free! Families are welcome!

Humanities Nebraska with Diane R. Bartels

Sharpie: Nebraska's Queen of the Air

Thursday, Feb 5 6:00PM - 7:00PM

This presentation is based on Bartels' extensive research and book about Evelyn Sharp, a pioneering, teenage aviatrix who became a war hero. Sharp taught men to fly and was one of the first women to ferry U.S. Army Air Force fighters during World War II, freeing men for combat. The program is appropriate for students as well as adults.

Paint Together - Flamingos

Saturday, Feb 7 10:00AM - Noon

Make memories through painting! Register yourself and one other person for our partner painting class. We provide all of the materials and refreshments for free. Must be 8 years or older. Call the Library at 402-873-5609 to reserve your spot.

Library Board Meeting

Wednesday, Feb 11 4:00PM - 6:00PM

Overwhelmed to Empowered

Thursday, Feb 12 6:00PM - 7:00PM

Parents, caregivers, and teachers: we see you, and we're here to help! The Library is partnering with Amanda Drier of Northside Behavioral Health Group here in Nebraska City to guide you toward a better understanding of childhood emotions and behaviors. Learn how to manage outbursts and feel more confident when working with kids! This program is intended for parents, caregivers, and teachers. This program is free and open to the public. Attendees can enter to win a free gift card to Royal Med Spa! Questions? Call the Library at 402-873-5609

Book and Treat

Friday, Feb 13 5:00PM - 7:00PM

Get ready to meet your perfect match in time for Valentine's Day! We're setting you up with a blind date. Come browse some mystery books, find one that sounds nice, have a snack while you're at it, and bring your date (book) home for a two week relationship (check out period)! Adults 19 and older are invited to match with their next great read at the Library in the Kimmel Gallery anytime between 5 and 7 PM, enter to win a gift basket, and get a treat. Free! No registration! Questions? Call the Library at 402-873-5609.

Youth Valentine's Day Party

Saturday, Feb 14 10:00AM - 11:00AM

Join us for a youth Valentine's Day party! Youth and family are invited to this free event where we will make a Valentine's day craft, enjoy cookies, coloring pages, and selfie station with our mascot Mr. Oakley!

Puzzle Tourney Sunday, Feb 15

Check in 12:30PM Competition 1:00-4:00 PM

Registration REQUIRED for teams of 2 ages 15 and older.

Call 402-873-5609 Deadline to sign up Feb. 6, 2026

Lego Club

Monday, Feb 16 3:30PM - 5:00PM

Free build with Legos at the club or bring your own sets to work on.
Ages 8 and older. No registration, free to attend.

Afternoon Book Club

Tuesday, Feb 17 2:00 PM

The Frozen River by Ariel Lawhon

AM Story Time - We Love Elephants!

Wednesday, Feb 18 10:00AM - 10:30AM

We will sing a song, learn signs in American Sign Language, and read stories featuring elephant characters. We will then make a paper elephant craft. Story Times are geared toward children ages 2-6. Free! Families are welcome! **Repeated on 2/19 at 4 pm**

Evening Book Club

Wednesday, Feb 18 5:30PM - 6:30PM

Ask Again, Yes by Mary Beth Keane

PM Story Time - We Love Elephants

Thursday, Feb 19 4:00PM - 4:30PM Repeated

We will sing a song, learn signs in American Sign Language, and read stories featuring elephant characters. We will then make a paper elephant craft. Story Times are geared toward children ages 2-6. Free! Families are welcome!

Writers Workshop

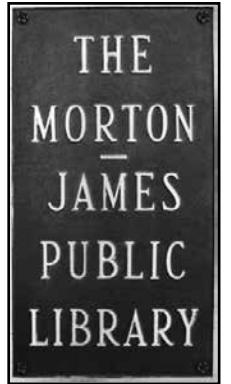
Thursday, Feb 26 10:00AM - 11:00AM

Join us for a roundtable-style writers workshop! Share writing and give feedback to others. Zoom option available. Please email mjplibraryww@gmail.com to have a Zoom link sent if you cannot attend in person. Bring a short piece of your writing to share!

Chess Club

Every Thursday 4:00PM - 6:00PM

All ages and experience levels are welcome to join Chess Club that meets on Thursdays between 4:00 and 6:00 pm. If you have never played, members will teach you! Chess boards provided. Questions? Call the Library at 402-873-5609.



ARBOR CITY NEWS



News from Nebraska City

Heroes

Bruce Madsen, Nebraska City

When I was little, there were boys in the hood
Older than I by several years or so
They grew up in a time when everything seemed good
And I, was going to follow their example in life if I could

High school, then the service, they did the whole routine
Then came back home when their commitments were done
They came back to begin a new life
Found a girl to love and made her his wife

Me, being younger, I thought they were cool
Not that I knew anything, but I liked their style
Some came back to farm the family land
Or at least came back to give their Dad a helping hand

It may seem odd to think about way back when
But it was a time when people shared, a time when people cared
There was a strong sense of what was wrong or right
Plus a feeling of belonging, neighborhoods were tight

I thought about my life when I was a boy
Growing up with rural roots
About the neighbors and friends that influenced my direction
That today gives me reason to feel grateful and affirms my connection

Today I felt a wave of emotion
It snuck up on me and caught me by surprise
Just a touch of reminisce and sorrow
As my mind took me back to yesterday's tomorrows

I feel this way as I sit in this pew
In a church full of people who came to remember
This man that was part of the hood back in the day
He was the last of my little boy 'Heroes,' it was his funeral today

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J. Sterling Morton Mansion in Winter

Arbor City News

a monthly news section in

Your Country Neighbor

A Nebraska Regional Magazine (w/News)

ARBOR CITY NEWS

News from Nebraska City



Almost Finished.



Wildwood House in Winter

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Sheila Tinkham, Lincoln

In Japan often a broken teacup or bowl is mended with gold and urushi lacquer
Once mended the new cup is considered both stronger and more beautiful than before

We too are broken, imperfect, flawed human beings

Let God, nature, the universe mend us

By putting us together with golden ideas and memories

Let this month of love, February,

See us us rise healed and whole

More precious and beloved

Our Beauty lying within...

Commodore Stephen Decatur

Sheila Tinkham, Lincoln

Traveling the highways and byways of America

One name often arises Decatur

This is the story behind the name

Commodore Stephen Decatur joined

The navy at 19 and rapidly flew up ranks becoming youngest Captain ever

Years ago upon the frothy waves

Commodore Stephen Decatur battled HMS Macedonia

Decatur's boat had more guns and more men.

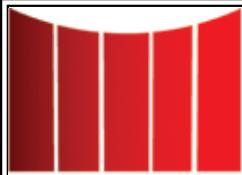
It was a fierce fight, but USS United States was victorious on the 18th of October 1812
The Macedonian was taken back to the United States, the first English War ship to ever do so...

Decatur fought Barbery pirates and won.

Alas he dueled a fellow navy man James Barron and both shot the other,
However Decatur succumbed to his injuries, bleeding to death March 22, 1822

Ten thousand people attended his funeral

That is why Decatur lives on in the places so named...

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Poetry

by Devon Adams, Nebraska City

Poetry

by Devon

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Nebraska City

Catt

BEFORE DARK

Subtle shift changes follow the lingering light, as the sky glows a delicate lavender rose overhead and a band of deep blue and pink settles on the rim of the hills. Critters who work during the day move into cover for protection, while the night hunters shiver the air with warnings of blood curdling screams by coyotes, and deep murmurs that owls are prowling and ready to strike with lethal talons that glide on silent wings. You can listen for the screams to follow the action.

CALENDAR DAYS

By the book, it is February, but by the brook, spring is springing and running water gurgles and bubbles and it isn't ice. Yet. It may freeze later, or not. It doesn't matter about tomorrow because now is all that is real. And we are present, like being in a classroom. You are there or you are not there. So do not worry about something impossible. We can't hide in the past or escape to the future. Life is a gift for as long as we have it.

HEARTS ON FIRE

If your heart starts off like a bomb booming in it's beats that go faster and faster, and your eyes wear happy glasses so rosy that you are blind to reality, you will go on a ride around the moon until you crash and burn. Sometimes the real thing isn't flashy and loud. It is true all the way through. In silence and whispers that grow into truth, you both know without words that this is the place and the time and the right one.

REFUGE

Eagles soar over the water and perch in the towering cottonwoods that frame the refuge. A strange warm time when temperatures should be icy is making survival less of a problem, unless you are someone's lunch. Eagles were almost a memory a few years ago, when man made poison was killing them. Now their numbers are both a miracle and a deadly message. Civilization isn't civil when it kills citizens, no matter what their species. We are all here by grace and design.

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VACATION TIME

So, you have a precious time to run away and stay and play somewhere else? Counted against all the days of a year, how big is that slice of the pie? Not much! Enjoy your trip to the island. But you can have break time every day, if you want. Think of time as more valuable than money. Cut out some minutes for yourself every single day, as though your life depends on it, because if you squander your time you won't have any left. And when you live your last minutes, you want to be inside a memory that means love to you.

WELCOME TO YESTERDAY

You have so many, and so little time to file them all away. So you have boxes, and envelopes and even empty frames. One day, you are old and have to move away from your faithful house. But you take your memories with you, in your mind and in your boxes. You find the moments you had forgotten, when you just threw the photos in the box, because it was a birthday day and there wasn't time to sit and see the day before. Welcome to yesterday!

Window On Fifth Street (reprinted)

Stephen Hassler, Peru

One evening on my porch in early April it felt like a quiet Summer evening. It was between dusk and darkness, seventy degrees, and very still. The birds had ceased their evening chatter. My laptop computer and I were in a comfortable chair not quite of living room quality. As the darkness approached, the street lights awakened with a gentle glow, then brightened to half-way. The gray-blue sky darkened to a satin black, and the silhouettes of the trees blended into the dark, distant hills.

The sudden change in light made me feel as if there were some other place I should be, as if I were staying up late on a school night and my mother would catch me at any moment. I paused to deepen my awareness of the magic feeling, but moment by moment my eyes registered fewer and fewer shapes and the stillness said nothing to my ears. Various memories teased my senses.

One was of my father carrying milk pails to the milk-house, the country yardlight illuminating the side of the barn, the warm white stuff sloshing over the rims, and kittens scampering at his heels. Another was of me with my first steady girl-friend watching a full moon rise over the Missouri River, and below the overlook, a barge's pusher-tug swept its spotlight from one bank to the other while chugging up the river.

There seem to be moments in my memory that would leave holes in my life if they were absent; special Summer evenings, perfect Friday afternoons, or a Winter's snowfall watched through the dining room window. Often in our tedious lives such moments are like beacons that flash, and then they are gone, but they are reminders that there is more in life than tedium.

I went to visit a friend the other day. It was late morning, but he had fallen asleep with the television on. These days he was more of a tired soul than the friend I used to joke with, have lunch with, visit with... and now he was becoming one of those special moments... a late evening silhouette soon to be one with the darkness, a hole in my life.

I closed my computer and went inside, knowing that the magic was gone until next month or next year when a pointed awareness would make me wish I could stop time and make the feeling last. Time doesn't stop, but that in turn guarantees that tomorrow's dawn will bring more possibilities of special moments, as well as all the rest of life that happens before dusk, before we fade away into the dark.

Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson, Auburn

Well, here I am struggling to come up with a coherent theme for this month's column. How fortunate that our publisher, Stephen Hassler, shared some writing prompts with all the contributors recently. I remember thinking they could be helpful... if only I could find the email message that contained them! I must have inadvertently – and permanently – deleted that message a few days ago after Google warned me that I was getting close to running out of G-mail storage.

The warning was dire: free up a bunch of storage space or lose the ability to send and receive emails. I immediately began purging my inbox, my trash folder, my spam folder, my sent box, my drafts box, my promotions box. All of that resulted in about a 5% improvement in my storage capacity. How could that be? I had only a small fraction of the previous amount of clutter remaining in my Gmail.

I shared my dilemma with Hubby. "Don't worry about it," he assured me. "They just want you to buy more storage space." Why, those low-down, lousy fear-mongers, trying to trick me into buying something I don't really need.

Speaking of things I don't really need, AI comes to mind. Out of the blue, my email message threads are now being automatically summarized for my convenience by Google AI. It's true that the AI summaries are more succinct than the complete, original messages. If they were business communications, I would find it helpful. But I rather like my somewhat wordy, personal compositions. Perhaps I watch too many British TV programs.

Someone who could benefit from the AI summarizer is our cell phone service provider, who recently texted us a lengthy, convoluted message about some upcoming changes in how they charge for certain services that left us completely baffled as to whether or not our bill was going to go up. (I know what you're thinking right now: AI could have said what I just said in about one-third of the words.) Hubby called them and managed to get confirmation that our account would not be affected by said changes. Well, that's one bright spot in our day.

More things in the "things I don't really need" category include the majority of "promotional" messages in my Gmail. I have tried to unsubscribe to some of those senders, but it turns out the process is not always as simple as clicking on the "Unsubscribe" button. Fortunately, there is no cost to receiving these unsolicited "offers" to acquire more things I don't really need. So, I just keep hitting the delete button on those messages and they just disappear into my trash folder to await their ultimate, automatic trip to the black hole after 30 days.

I am presently trying to reduce the number of things I don't really need in my house. I have a bag half full of household items I can part with. As soon as that bag is full, it is going to St. Francis Gift and Thrift. Can you believe I am having trouble filling that bag?! I open a cabinet door and see a collection of small décor items. Have I displayed them in the last two years? No. But, said items might have been gifts, or I might get the urge to change things up a bit. In fact, just now I happened to glance around my living room and noticed two shelf spaces that are ripe for re-arranging.

If only AI could solve the problem of too many things one does not need in a house as easily as it can eliminate unneeded words on a page.

Hmmm. It occurs to me that I have found a theme for this column after all.



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