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January 2010



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Voices from your Valley

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Voices from the Valley of the Nemaha

Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

Writers this month

Devon Adams
Merri Johnson
Shirley Neddenriep
Vicki O'Neal
Karen Ott
Joe Smith
Josh Whisler

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Your Country Neighbor

P.O. Box 126
Peru, Nebraska 68421

countryneighbor@windstream.net

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Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

I hesitate to use the phrase “new year’s resolution” in the first sentence of a January column. If I were you, I’d be likely to stop reading right now. It’s such a tired subject. No doubt last month, lifestyle columnists all over the country dug out last year’s new year’s resolution column, changed it up a bit, and submitted it to their editors before leaving on extended holiday breaks. But, really, what can be said on the topic that hasn’t already been said?

It’s bad enough that writers bore their readers with the annual rehash of tips for making and keeping resolutions. The dirty little secret is that resolutions are exactly the opposite of what their proponents purport.

Resolutions are supposed to improve you in some way. Maybe they do, for awhile. But I say they’re a crime against nature. *Your* nature, to be precise. Why, if you were meant to be or do whatever you pledge to become or accomplish in your resolution, you wouldn’t need to resolve to be or do it!

So, swear off the resolutions already. If you simply must alter your life in some way in the new year, stick to simple things that won’t stress you out too much in the doing, or depress you when you fail – again – to follow through.

Here’s an easy one to exercise your brain: start writing 2010 on all your checks. You say you only use a debit card these days? OK, try this: rearrange your silverware drawer. You’d be surprised how much concentration it takes to get used to putting the knives where the spoons used to be.

Or just try not to lose too many things. Last year, my husband and I both misplaced our set of keys. The mental gyrations we went through trying to recall every step we’d taken since we last absolutely knew we had possession of the keys was exhausting. If we put the same mental energy into safeguarding the keys every second they weren’t in the car’s ignition, our brain cells would probably start multiplying like rabbits.

But maybe you feel compelled to improve your appearance (or perhaps your spouse feels that you should feel so compelled). If you know what’s good for you, you’ll resist the urge to buy a piece of exercise equipment or join a fitness club. Sports-type injuries can be very debilitating, not to mention expensive. And who wants to do all that sweating, anyway? Better to just invest in a new, more flattering wardrobe.

Of course, you could actually exercise a bit more just by cancelling your snow removal service and scooping your own snow. Just take it

easy. No need to be an over-achiever at this point in your life since you obviously aren’t one yet, or you wouldn’t be thinking of making a foolish new year’s resolution to get in better shape!

If personal finances are your bugaboo, just let me say that you should definitely put that item on the back burner. By the time you get over your spendthrift ways, the federal government will have messed up so many other aspects of your life that you’ll forget all about ever worrying about money.

So, that’s my advice for you in 2010. Relax. Accept yourself. Just say “no” to new years’ resolutions.

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SHADOW DEER

They are the ghosts of the forest,
invisible, except when they move
against the grayness of the trees.
But out in the open fields they
move with precision and grace,
like ballet dancers listening
to a silent symphony, executing
leaps and turns and mad dashes
across the outdoor stage.
They pause and become statues,
unaware of their beauty.
To watch them is to read the poetry
of symmetry and balance, to see
perfection in it's purest form.

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Poetry by Devon Adams

MEMORIES OF LIGHT

We may not be able to touch the past,
but we can see it on any clear night.
Up there, out there, in the deep of the sky,
is proof that yesterday still exists.
Some of the stars that are visible
may have blown up a long time ago,
but the traveling light from their explosion
has been racing through space for years,
and is only recently reaching the retina
of our curious eyes, not to mention the
regions of our brains that try to understand
that kind of distance and the immense
sweep of time that swallows all of us.
But, even though we mourn the passing
of those dear to us, their existence remains.
It is still visible on some wavelength
that waits to be discovered, coming back
to us, like a cat using another of its nine lives,
returning from certain death.
Indeed, for all we know,
we are already part of the past,
being viewed from the future present.

WINTER MOONRISE

The brittle moon rises
like a frozen pizza,
covered with frost,
and easily shattered,
in danger of falling
from the sky in pieces.

WHITEOUT

Drowning in snow,
with your breath stolen
by a vicious wind,
and your vision lost
to a white infinity,
you hang on
to anything solid.

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DIGGING THROUGH THE PAST

There is a fresh mound of dirt
piled at the entrance to a tunnel that
leads to the new home of a grouchy
old badger who doesn't like company.
The bank faces south, so that the
packed soil becomes a patio with
sun exposure, good for snoozes,
and for defending one's territory.
He doesn't know much about history,
except for yesterday, so the old rocks
that he's thrown out of the way
have no meaning for him.
But they would tell him a story,
if he would listen, about years
that go back too far to count.
He has cut straight through a layer
of sand and stones that runs
along the river bluffs, just above
the massive blocks of limestone
that anchor the prairie.
If he could read the words that
are written in fossil language, and
in the chips and grooves of stone tools,
he would know that others have come
this way before, leaving clues about
their ways of living, and their ages.
But right now, he is reading the wind,
and he's caught my scent, and
he isn't saying, "Howdy, Ma'am."
So, I'm out of here, and archeology
will have to wait for another day.

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THE BARN

by Joe Smith

My wife and I went down to my son's in Missouri last week and spent several days there. He was in the process of building a new barn. Cut all posts out of oaks on his place. He has a lot of post oak on his farm. He has my sawmill down there to shape them like he wanted. He lives in Amish country and had a crew of the Amish boys helping him. The average age of the crew was around 22. They seem to know what to do. In about three days they had the frame up, or most of it anyway. I talked to my son today and he said, they had the tin on except for a piece or two. It will be a nice barn to say the least. Jason wants to raise Missouri Trotters. They have a real smooth canter. The barn will have stalls for about eight horses, a place to bathe them, plus a bathroom for the human side too.

This barn was made like they used to make them. Jason called and said they had all the tin on the roof and it looks like a barn now. The interesting part was the Amish crew. They were very friendly people. They call us ENGLISH for some reason which escapes me. They can use power tools as long as they belong to someone else. Same about the telephone. They can't own one but can borrow yours. They can ride to town with you but can't own a car. There is a lot about the Amish people that I don't know, and there are different groups of them. They all go to a different person's home each Sunday for their service. They don't have church like we have. Their women folk make their clothes for the whole family. I think the women are actually the main force in their families. But they do like their beer and have large families. They have no TV or radio, so I guess the men folks spend their spare time either making love or drinking beer. I can't knock that life style. The family that lived across the road from Jason's place had 14 kids before they moved, and had two more after that. So they are interesting people to say the least.

Jason and Terry have probably eight horses, two miniature ponies, two dogs, and a bunch of cats. So they have chores to do every day. That should keep them out of trouble. JOE SMITH

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WINTER SCENES ALONG HIGHWAY 67
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Back in January, 1999

by Shirley Neddenriep



From the south window is winter stuff: The mop hanging limp from the clothesline, forgotten since a flurry of pre-Christmas house cleaning. Bare branches of Burr Oak and Hackberry holding on to last summer's robin nests. Snow covers the mound of wood chips so it looks like a fresh grave site. The scene has a cold, inviting look. It looks inviting because the snowy scene is Christmas-card pretty, but I know it is bleak and testy and stinging cold and I don't want to go there.

But I do need to. The sidewalk at that back side of the house should be swept of snow. A get well card to a friend needs to be carried to the mailbox at the end of the driveway in time for the mailman to pick up. The bird bath ought to be filled to keep its water level above the heating element.

The mop: dried out long ago and forgotten after Christmas. I had used it and a bucket of warm water laced with vinegar to clean the vinyl floor of the kitchen. What a paradox: expecting an onslaught of a dozen grandchildren and owning squeaky clean floors, at the same time.



But I had to do that, its so country. The mop, rinsed and wrung and relegated to the backyard clothes line dripped and dried and later caught rain or snow and then froze.

It hangs now in a string-straight teenage "do" with a ludicrous cap of ermine. I ought to go out and rescue that mop. It owns a hook behind the shower room door. That is where it lives, not hung by the neck until dead from a clothesline.

The scene is so winter. The farmer came stomping in from it frosty-breath'd, eager for a hot drink and I hoped, conversation. But he'd brought the daily. We ate sausage from a new butchering, mashed potatoes, cole slaw, creamed peas, Brot and Budder. (I'm not German.)

We listened as KFAB's Tom Becha interviewed Governor Ben Nelson who retired that day. We heard Roger Flemmer tell that hogs were up \$2. We sneaked time to watch 96-year old President pro tempore Strom Thurman swear in Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist for the Senate trial of William Jefferson Clinton. It was an historic moment.

After dinner, I carried my card to our rural mailbox and found the snow not as deep as it looked from the window, but the cold more intense. Temperature is discernible only in its effect. My shoes made crunching sounds in the snow. It felt like walking in sand.



Nearby the farmer tended his roaring tractor and clamoring grinder. Little puffs of frozen breath emerged from where I knew his face to be, sheltered by his cap and hooded sweater. He stood poised like a left parenthesis, curved toward his work as if to enclose it. He waited and watched while the machines finished the grinding. Corn flowed into the grinder, swept there by an auger from a big round bin. Everything else stood very cold and very still, except for the farmer, who shivered. After sweeping snow off the stoop and carrying water to the heated bird bath, I hurried to the warm inviting indoors to fix a hot supper on Thursday, January 7, 1999.

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Whisler's Hunting & Fishing Report



by Josh Whisler
(Photo provided by Author)

Fishing:

The Missouri River has lowered and ice flows have been common this past month with the sever change in the weather. If you can get to the river since the blizzard, you'll see the rock formation pretty prevalent. This gives you a better idea of why the rock formations are there to channel the River in a specific direction to harness its incredible power. The river near Peru is a unique area to see this engineering marvel with its winding trek down the Missouri River Basin. Rip Rap Rock is continuous on the outside of the turns of the river, or as fishermen say, "The fast side or fast water". On the insides of the river turns are trail dikes and wing dikes. Both dikes help channel the river from side to side. The trial dikes are long rock formations that run parallel with the river with water usually running outside of this dike and water sitting still on the back side during normal flow. The wing dike is much like the description; it's a wing or extension straight out from the river's bank. The wing dikes are the dikes that are usually related to the violent whirlpools and swift swirling water. The Wing Dikes take the river current head on. While pushing the water toward the channel, the turbulants wash deep holes behind this formation of rocks often to depths of 30 feet or more. This makes it ideal for fish to gather, feed, and spawn. And where there are fish, there are fishermen.

Not any weather to fish on the river right now, but the ponds and lakes will soon have enough ice on them to start panfishing. Care must be taken when approaching the ponds and lakes right now with all the snow on them. The snow acts as insulation on top of the ice and does not give the good clear ice that ice fishermen desire to get out on.

Hunting:

Winter is here and it's all about the clothes when it's cold and snowy. You can put too much on and it's real easy not to have enough. Layers are the way to go. The saying about layers goes; you can always take it off if you're too hot, but if you don't have it, you're out of luck. Your mobility is cut way down with winter clothing but you can stand to stay out for long stints of time if dressed properly. And there is always the head – it's your thermostat, and at the end of the vent of your layers. It's hard for me to keep my head covered but it's the most important area to keep warm while out in the cold. It seems like if your head, your feet, or your hands get cold, the fun is over.

TURKEY – Turkey season runs until Dec. 31 this year. A permit allows a hunter to kill two turkeys. They are grouped up right now so they are pretty to get close. But they also have to come out to eat, so feeding areas that they frequent are where to be in this weather.


DEER – Deer Muzzleloader season is open right now and there has been a fair amount of success. And with the sudden snow storm there are still quite a few corn fields that have not been harvested. So hunters have been limited by the crops this year. It gives them a very good place to hide and eat.

Winter is here which always slows things down. Be patient and success always seem to prevail whether it's hunting, fishing, or life. 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."




This month's picture is of the ice flow in the Missouri River.

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The Face of Drought

by Karen Ott



When Willie Nelson's country and western ballad "Pancho and Lefty" hit the charts in 1983 Pancho Villa's military exploits had long since faded from the American consciousness, after all, he'd been dead sixty years, and was one of Mexico's heroes.....not ours.

But when I heard Willie croon, "Pancho was a bandit boy, his horse was fast as polished steel." it was suddenly New Year's Eve 1969, and I was standing in the foyer of Monterrey Mexico's Gran Ancira, a fashionable hotel made famous when the charismatic revolutionary corralled his horse in the lobby and later rode it up the wide marble staircase.....just because he could.

My parents had planned the trip that fall, spending their November evenings mapping out a route from our Nebraska farm to the heart of Mexico and back again, an over-the-rainbow vacation no one would dare take today for fear of being kidnapped and held for ransom by lawless drug lords...or the police. Back then my Dad's biggest worry was that one morning we'd find our car sitting high and dry on cinder blocks, stripped of everything valuable....but that never happened.

My family, and Dale, whose parents had reluctantly allowed him to accompany 'his girlfriend', left Nebraska the day after Christmas and headed south. We made the border crossing at El Paso/Juarez and drove through 150 miles of dry nothing to reach Chihuahua, Pancho Villa's headquarters during the Mexican Revolution. Told his elderly wife still lived in the hacienda they had shared those tumultuous years, we parked on a nearby street, and after being mobbed by dozens of beggar children, made our way to her front door. Within a few minutes we were inside...and with an inviting handshake and grandmotherly smile Maria Luz Corral de Villa turned the cold, dusty skeleton of history to warm flesh and blood.

"She was a real beauty in her younger days," she said, pushing at a stray lock of gray hair which had slipped free from the bun at the nape of her neck, "a real beauty." The picture-covered walls supported her claim. "When things got bad he sent me to Cuba," she sighed, "I didn't want to go, but he was afraid for me."

With pistols and sabers, uniforms and sombreros, newspaper headlines and handwritten letters she brought her husband to life; the modern world might have been one of mini skirts and beatlemania, but inside those dim rooms the revolution was only a heartbeat away. When she'd finished she asked

softly, "Would you like to see the car?"

It happened Friday, July 20, 1923. Some say Villa and his entourage of bodyguards had just picked up a consignment of gold when they were ambushed, others say he was on his way home from a baptism when the seven riflemen fired 150 bullets into the black Dodge. Pancho was hit sixteen times.

The 1919 roadster, riddled with jagged holes, dozed in the bright sunshine of the quiet courtyard. I ran my fingers over the wounded metal and reflected on the death of a man who rose from the obscurity of mountain bandit to General of a populist army 50,000 strong, a man whose political stature grew to such heights at one point El Paso banks accepted his privately printed currency at face value.

Willie Nelson says "No one heard his dying words" but legend tells a different tale: "Don't let it end like this, tell them I said something."

After several days of sightseeing we turned north

and made our way to Monterrey, the city of mountains, to celebrate a New Year's Eve of frivolity and fireworks. It would turn out to be the only December thirty-first I would ever spend away from my panhandle home...at least so far.

Luz Corral de Villa died in the 80's and the home we visited all those years ago is now a museum. But pressed between the pages of my mother's photo album is a black and white print of Luz, my family, and the boy I'd soon marry. A gentle reminder that time marches on, you can't slow it down, turn it off, or adjust it. Yesterday is lost

Happy New Year from the High Plains.

Karen

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New Year's resolutions....?

My resolution will be to quit procrastinating and to get myself organized! I'm going to do it, too—as soon as I can get around to it.

The other day was our First Wedding Anniversary. Unfortunately, I was no more organized than I'd been on our Wedding Day. I kept putting off what I had to do. There were gifts to wrap and cards to sign. But I didn't get anything done. Not 'til the Anniversary morning.

When Michael went for his early morning jog, I jumped out of bed and went into action. Started breakfast. Got out a bottle of fake "champagne"... and our piece of frozen wedding cake. I lit the candles. Put on special music...Our favorite love songs.

I dusted off the wedding albums...and put a big red bow in my hair. Put on my black fishnets and spike heels.

My spike heels...? What's with them, anyway?

One of them had White-out splashed on it. (Must be from that day at Staples Office Supply when I dropped the bottle of White-Out at the checkout stand. It went all the floor. All over Michael. Messed up his day...His dignity. Ruined his best suit. But my husband took it all in stride...he always does.)

I put on the spotted spike heels. They didn't look too bad.

I got out the Anniversary cards....all seven of them. One for every day of the week. I'd bought them really cheap at the Thrift Store—unused, of course. They even had envelopes. Special cards that declared my endless, undying love for my man.

I began scribbling on the cards....That was a mistake. As soon as I started writing words, I was doomed.

Writers are so easily distracted by words. Words—tantalizing things. They cast a spell on us. (That is what happened just before our Wedding, too. The computer had beckoned me, then, as it was doing, now. And the rest was history...)

I yielded to the temptation, once more—sitting down at the computer for just a moment to type a few words...sitting there in my red hair-bow and fishnets and spotted spike heels. Downstairs, the steak sizzled away. The toast sat waiting. The hot cereal began to burn on the stove.

I typed on frantically. When inspiration hits, you don't quibble. You type with reckless abandon, because if you don't, you'll lose it forever. It's the curse of writers to be this way.

Suddenly, I lifted my head and sniffed. That smell! Burning meat and hash-browns!

I ran downstairs. The steaks looked like dry slabs of bark. The hashbrowns were beyond recovery. The hot cereal was like the sands of the Sahara. Dry and gritty. I dumped in more water.

I skidded back and forth across the kitchen in my spike heels, trying to rectify matters. I didn't fall down. Not once. And I didn't catch my robe on fire at the stove, either. I was doing well. Compared to my Wedding Day, I was doing marvelous, actually. (At least I didn't have knee-high pantyhose hidden in my hair. Not today.)

But there was something worrying me.... That big window facing the road. We only had sheer curtains there. No heavy drapes. What if someone passed by and saw me slipping and sliding about in my spike heels and fishnets—wielding a spatula and frying pan.

It wasn't a good scene. But it couldn't be helped.

I hurried on....thinking my scattered thoughts—thinking about our First Year Together. The craziness. The love. The upsets. The White-Out on expensive suits. The runaway fruit in fancy hotel elevators. The sick, feverish days when I did strange things... But

my husband made me homemade pizza, anyway—my favorite kind with pineapple and lots of cheese.

The day of the 'Spinach Outbreak' in the kitchen—when my pan of cooked spinach hit the floor and splattered everywhere. 'A pandemic' Michael called it. He'd cleaned it up for me. He always does.

I thought about all the flower bulb "babies" that we'd dug up together on the river bar. Big hunking bulbs that someone had abandoned there in the gravel. Didn't know what kind they were—but knew they needed a good home. My husband scooped them up for me, patiently hauling them home by the hundreds in his big blue truck.

I sighed, remembering those times and more...And all the while, our music played in the background. George Strait singing our favorite song: **"Our love is Unconditional—"**

And it's a good thing, too, I thought to myself. After all I've put that poor man through....

Goosebumps. I shivered. Not from the song—but from sitting here in fishnets. It was cold. Turn up the heat. I can't die of pneumonia, sitting here waiting for my honey to come home.

Straighten up the house. Splash on some perfume. Type a few more lines at the computer. Listen to the crooning of George Strait....

"In all the world, you'll never find—a love as true as mine..."

Where is Michael, anyway? He'd probably forgotten what day it was!

"If I've done wrong—all I can say is 'I'm sorry...!'"

George's voice deepened—slipping from one song to another.

The telephone rang, and I turned down the music to answer it. It was my hubby on his cell phone.

"Baby!" he said. "I'm done jogging and I've decided I'm not going to work today. I'm taking the day off to spend it with you. And now, you need to go make us a good breakfast, and crank up our love songs. Put on something pretty...Your black fishnets and—"

"Michael!" I wailed. "I've already done all that. And now you're ruining it!"

"What?...Oh, I'm sorry, Baby. I didn't know."

He hung up. I turned the music up and went back to typing.

I didn't hear the door open a few minutes later. Didn't see my husband come in. I was too busy. And the music was too loud. And the words were flowing from my fingertips, again.

He found me there on our First Anniversary. Sitting there at the computer in my black fishnets and spotted spikes—typing away frantically while George Strait crooned and the breakfast burned in the kitchen.

Poor man.

It's the curse of a Writer's Spouse. A plague to be endured...A cross to bear. But Michael doesn't know he's cursed, of course. He thinks he's blessed...

At least I *think* that's what he thinks.



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