

Celebrating the birth of our nation

The fireworks are over, the picnic eaten, the boat put away. America is back to work today.

Our country is another year older, marking its 235th year on Monday.

Back at the office, the field, the highway, the Legislature, we face the same old problems: not enough money, too many needs, too many demands, too much poverty, schools that do only part of what we want them to do, roads with too many potholes and not enough lanes.

The list is endless.

Are we right to celebrate our country?

It was, and is, a grand experiment. When the Founding Fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence, no nation on the face of the Earth held out the ideals of democracy and self-government, of freedom and liberty, they proclaimed.

Men were ruled by kings and despots. Brief flirtations with self-rule by Greeks and Romans were but footnotes to history.

Yet, English noblemen and European thinkers had begun to articulate a higher standard. The English, still subject to the will of the king, had won certain rights. Philosophers talked about the "natural" rights of man.

But our forbears, led by the pen of Thomas Jefferson, took this a step or two further. They declared the "inalienable" rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness granted to men by "Nature and Nature's God."

Having declared Independence from the English king, and fought for and won it, they set about creating a nation founded on those principles. It was not easy, nor did it come quickly.

Even the Constitutional Convention, which gave us a framework for government, did not address our rights as humans. That was left to a group of Virginians concerned that the new government would become so strong it would oppress us, even as the king had.

They gave us the example of a Bill of Rights, later adopted into the federal Constitution. The Bill guaranteed our liberty, from the right to bear arms to the right to a speedy trial when accused by the government.

The First Amendment alone is a marvel of spare and efficient language. In just 45 words, it gave us the rights to free speech, a free press, worship, assembly and protest, and to petition our government.

And so we began our grand experiment under a system like no other.

Perfect? Far from it.

The Declaration, with its high ideals of freedom, came from the pen of Jefferson, who owned slaves. The Constitution, as the Founders understood it, granted rights only to free white men.

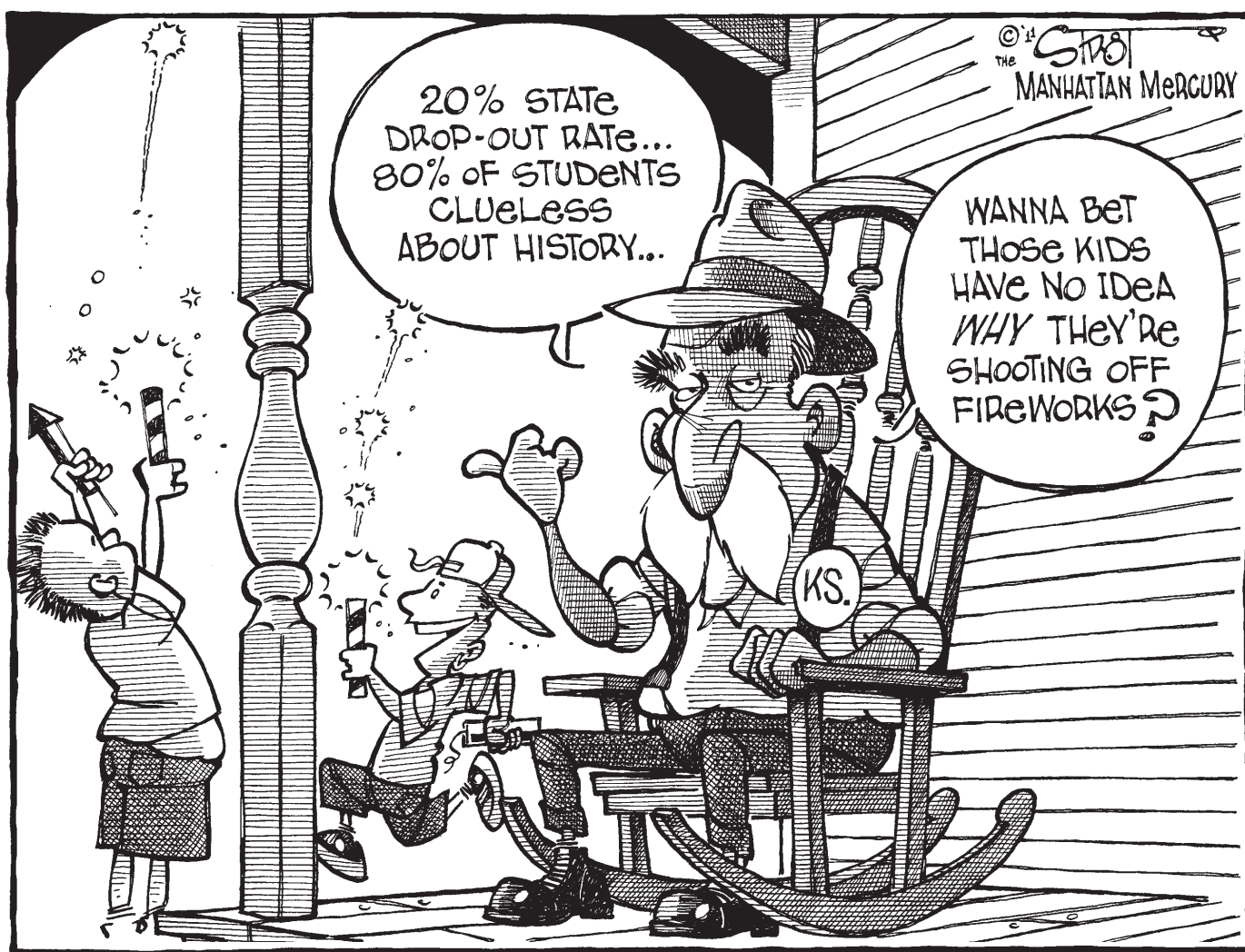
We'd have to fight a Civil War to settle the issues of slavery and secession. It'd be another century before we began to address the second-class status of blacks and other minority groups, of women and others.

We've come a long ways since then. We're a better country now than 50 years ago, but still not perfect. So many problems to solve; so many things not even our government can fix.

And yet, our ideals remain so much higher. If you made the argument we have the best system on Earth, who would disagree. We just need to keep making it better.

Happy Birthday, America. — Steve Haynes

On the
Prairie Dog
Steve Haynes



Silent sentinels on the high plains

Perched atop the weathered wooden posts, the western boots stretched nearly one mile into the horizon. Brown, black, green, gray and blue were the colors. Torn and frayed was their condition.

All the boot heels pointed toward the blue, spring sky. Some of the toes still held their shape — jutting out from the fence post. Others dropped toward the grass like the tongues of cutting ponies after a full morning of sorting cattle.

This boot fence can be found on John Smith's Boot Hill Ranch. Located on K-25 about a mile and a half north of Russell Springs, nearly 500 boots dot the top of the five-strand, barbed wire fence that runs north and south.

"The number depends on how many have been stolen on any particular day," Smith said with a glint in his eye. "Those boots don't just jump off the posts and walk away."

Locals will tell you a boot fence is one method a rancher uses to signify he is just that — a rancher and not a farmer. A few will tell you it's just a "crazy" hobby and nothing to take too seriously.

Smith fitted his first pair of boots on the fence line 20 years ago. The boots were 1948 vintage and hand-made by Charles P. Shipley Saddlers & Mercantile, Co. of Kansas City, Mo.

"They were located down by the stockyards and they made boots for ole' Jesse James," Smith said, proud to have owned a pair of boots made by the same company that had fitted the famous outlaw. "I got married in mine back in '51."

After Smith put the first pair of boots

Insight

John Schlageck

on his fencerow, it seemed only natural to add more. Before long, friends and neighbors were helping him stock the line. They'd throw worn out pairs in the back of his pickup at auctions and cattle sales. Some dumped the boots next to the fence.

Smith never turned down a pair of boots and it didn't matter what condition they were in. At one time, he figured there were close to 700 boots on the fence. He'd been known to wear a pair that may have still had a little life left in them.

"Boots keep the water off and the fence posts last longer," Smith told me. "The boots shelter the post top so the moisture can't get into the post and expand it and break it up."

Yep, thanks to Smith, each post has its own leather garage. But not all the boots have stayed on the posts.

A few years back the Logan County rancher lost a pair of women's boots that laced up the front.

"I guess they were old and somewhat of a collectible," Smith said.

After this incident, he never fitted a pair of boots next to one another on the posts. Instead he'd put one boot in the corner of his land and stick the other in some random spot down the line.

To hear Smith talk about his fence and

why he added boots to the post tops, it all goes back to western folklore.

"Cowboys that wear boots have a special attachment to them," he said. "That way when a cowboy died they'd bury him and put his boots upside down on a stick by his grave. People knew each other by the boots they wore, and it was only natural to put a cowboy's boots near his grave so those that happened by would know who was buried there."

And there will be no doubt whose fence is capped with boots on the highway a couple miles north of Russell Springs. Tumbleweeds will continue to roll up next to the wire, stay for a while and keep the old leather boots company. Prairie dogs will peek out of their mound towns and scan the horizon and see the familiar landmark.

Oh, in case you're wondering, I took a hard look at all the boots on John Smith's fence, but I didn't rob any off the posts. I did see a couple pairs that would have made a fine addition to my boot collection and could have been worn for a Saturday night of dancing.

Nope, I wouldn't dare touch 'em. It wouldn't have been right. Those boots were located just where they belonged, on top of the fence posts — silent sentinels on the great High Plains.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

The elements found here in Kansas Life

Water, wind and wain. I mean rain.

Water, because that's what I do every day: water flowers, water tomatoes, water chickens and goats. Although, I'm discovering the chickens drink more water than do the goats. I usually let the hose run a trickle and move it every couple of hours. Plants get a good soaking that way and I can still get other jobs done at the same time. However, there is something therapeutic about standing with a garden hose in your hand, delivering thirst-quenching water to other living things.

Wind, because that was quite a "blow" we had through here recently. We were quietly watching television one night when, the house sort of trembled, trash cans began beating against the fence and, even in our quiet, well-insulated home, the wind became an audible roar. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. It wasn't until the next morning we discovered the damages. A nice, upper branch of our beautiful cottonwood tree was lying in the street; a neighbor lost a huge portion of one of their stately elms; and Jim discovered the roof to one of his sheds was torn to bits. Good news is sheds can be repaired; trees will grow new branches;

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



children running around with a piece of molten metal in their hands. It's a wonder we didn't "brand" each other. But, it sure was fun writing our names in the air.

The Fourth is my brother, Jim's, birthday. Called to wish him a "Happy Birthday" but, missed him at home and on his cell phone. So, will take this opportunity to send him belated birthday wishes.

—ob—
We have one extremely happy granddaughter. Alexandria is the proud new owner of a 2006 Mustang Fastback. It is baby blue, with leather interior and all the bells and whistles any 16 year-old could ask for. Alex is a straight-A student and has set her sights on a career in the medical profession. She will be a high school junior when school resumes next month and with some of her advanced classes, hospital rounds is a requirement.

She texted pictures of the car (from every angle) and we are happy that she is happy about her new set of wheels. Another big step in her growing up process. Oh, the independence it brings.

and no one was hurt.

Wain (rain) because when it did come, it poured. Not very long but, it was a "gully washer" for a few minutes.

—ob—
Another beautiful fireworks display went down in the record books for Fourth of July 2011. We took a friend with two little kids with us this year. The baby was wide-eyed as the explosions shook the air. Her seven year-old brother was "ah-struck". That was what he kept saying, "Ah-h-h!"

I admit I'm as big a kid as any of them. I love the Fourth of July. My mom did not like firecrackers, so they were pretty much banned when I was a kid. But, she did allow sparklers. I'm not sure why. They were probably more dangerous than firecrackers. Think about it. Little

Your political connection

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★ **U.S. Sen. Jerry Moran**, Russell Senate Office Building Room C-4, Washington, D.C. 20002. moran.senate.gov/public/ (202) 224-6521

★ **State Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer**, State Capitol Building, Room 300 SW 10th St., Topeka, Kan. 66612 ward.cassidy@house.ks.gov (785) 296-7696

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