

Childhood memories at the vacant lot

Harken back to the days when you were a kid. Being outside was fun. Heck, it was everything and more often than not messy.

But that was fun. Acceptable. It's what we did.

Messy meant jumping in the middle of a mud puddle with your clothes on. Messy meant scaling a giant dirt pile down next to the elevator but most of all being a kid meant messing around in the vacant lot next to the church.

Growing up in a small rural community of 50 hearty souls, this vacant lot was a fertile source of education as important as any classroom. It was our world of make believe, where we played, laughed, cried, cultivated our imaginations and learned to get along with others.

It was here, away from parental oversight our values developed and we morphed from childhood to manhood. We didn't even realize this was happening. We were just living every day in the present and having fun.

This vacant lot is where we played football, pom-pom pull away, rollers, bouncers and flies, constructed forts, dug tunnels and built our first tree house. All the things our parents would let us do in our own yards.

One of our first tree houses was a real challenge. First, my brother, Albert and I had to select the best and tallest Chinese elm in the row north of the church. This tree had to sport a straight, heavy base limb, preferably the thickest one to support our structure.

Living in a small, rural village we had access to plenty of lumber. Dad had several piles blocked up in our big shed. There were also several abandoned barns that we raided to build our tree houses. We also built rafts and planes.

Before we began construction on our tree house, we made a wooden ladder up the side of the trunk. For this we sawed two-foot lengths of lumber and secured them to the tree with two nails. Add any more and the boards would split.

We hoisted lumber for the platform of our tree house with ropes and secured it in a good deep crotch in the elm. On this first tree house, we didn't stop with a simple platform but continued with walls that extended waist high.

Once finished, we proceeded to hoist all the essentials for our fort above ground. This included Red Ryder bb guns, binoculars, a tarp in case of rain, plenty of water and hand-picked fruit from our trees at home.

Every once in a Blue Moon, we'd haul up an old galvanized bucket, fill it with dry twigs, build a fire and roast marshmallows over the flames. There was always a rope on the bucket in case the fire raged out of control and we needed to move it out of our tree house.

From our perch high above the mere mortals who walked some 25 feet below us, we lived our days in another world. One of our favorite activities involved bird watching. We loved seeing the Robins and King birds carefully building their nests. We couldn't wait to see the eggs the momma birds laid and patiently sat on until they hatched into the ugly, naked chicks.

We watched for hours as the parents brought wiggling worms to the chicks who ate everything dropped into their snapping beaks. Seems they never got enough. Ever wonder how many careers of future biologists began in a vacant lot?

And while we tried to be there when the young birds flew for the first time, we didn't always see their inaugural flights. We often wondered how many made the grade and how many were snapped up by marauding neighborhood felines.

One of the absolute best things about our tree house was the advantage it gave us for picking off the pesky sparrows which were the only birds we were allowed to shoot with our bb guns. We didn't like them much anyway because they were such scavengers and ate more than their fair share of bird seed.

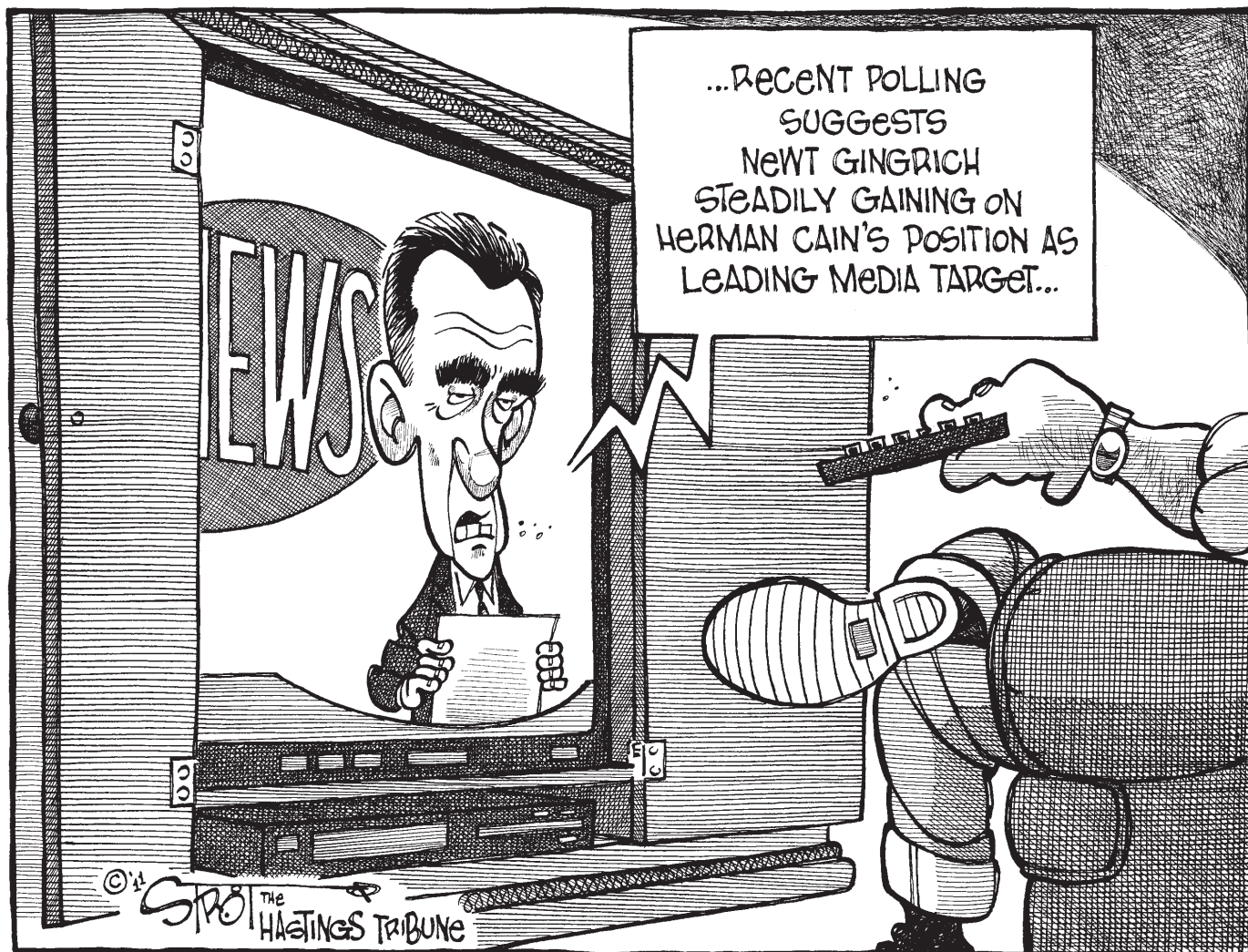
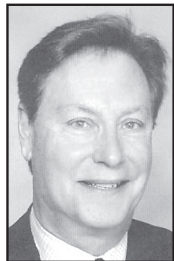
The vacant lot in our little village was our ticket to an abundance of far-away adventures. We went on safari with Smilin' Jack, tracked down Indians with Jim Bridger and battled at the Alamo with Davey Crockett. Just about anything we could think of we did as youngsters using our imaginations and the vacant lots.

Some days we did nothing at all but lay on our backs while looking up at the big sky of Western Kansas. Thoughts rolled through our minds like the passing clouds overhead.

We didn't want for much as youngsters in those days gone by. Everything we desired was right there in the vacant lot.

Insight

John Schlageck



The EPA'S Christmas gift to America

By: Congressman Tim Huelskamp

While most Americans are preparing for holiday celebrations this month, the Obama Administration and its EPA are rolling out and enacting rules to make sure next year's festivities are certainly more expensive and much less bright. In its zeal to kill coal-fired power plants - as the President hinted he would do when he ran for office - the Administration will finalize one energy-crushing rule this month and fully implement another as we ring in the new year.

Among the new rules facing America are the Utility Maximum Available Control Technology Rule (Utility MACT) and the Cross-State Air Pollution Rule (CSAPR). A real mouthful, to be sure, but these words mean less - much less electricity being produced in the U.S. According to the Administration's own research, these job-killing regulations can force many existing power plants to "retire" or delay and prevent much-needed new power plants from going online.

The basic rule of economics is that when there is a reduced supply, a product will cost more. In this case, these two regulations combined are expected

to cost consumers an additional \$184 billion from 2011 to 2030. In fact, one group estimates that these expensive regulations could eliminate up to 4 percent of power supply and could cost upwards of \$120 billion by 2015 alone!

The possibility of Kansans losing power as a result of these regulations is more than speculation. It is an inevitable reality. Regulations like these establish unattainable targets for emissions levels that Sunflower Electric may not be able to achieve with its Holcomb Expansion Project, an overdue endeavor that will supply much-needed electricity to our part of the country. Regulations like these also set unreasonable deadlines for compliance that entities like Westar may not be able to meet, and as a result, could impose blackouts on Kansans as early as this summer. While Washington thinks it may be doing America a favor by imposing these regulations, all it has done is cause a tremendous amount of uncertainty, unachievable goals, and undue costs to you.

Supporters of these regulations argue that they are necessary for environmental reasons. But without these job-killing regulations, progress has already been

made. In fact, between 1980 and 2008, there have been substantial reductions in nitrogen dioxide (40 percent decline), sulfur dioxide (56 percent) and lead (96 percent)! The EPA wants you to believe that there have been no gains whatsoever, which is why there needs to be expedited new regulations - no matter what the practical and economic costs are. The EPA is trying to make America buy into a "solution" in search of a problem.

Simply stated, America needs more energy - not less. America needs less regulation - not more. And, it needs it from a variety of sources. But, until the time comes when it is economically viable and non-disruptive to expand and transition to nontraditional sources, we cannot abandon the sources of energy we do have and on which our economy relies. The Obama Administration may hope that the announcement of one rule and official "start date" for another go unnoticed, but consumers will certainly recognize these regulations when their electric bills skyrocket and rolling blackouts could force a 2012 holiday celebration to take place in the dark.

Cheap entertainment with pets and imagination

This is weird. We finally moved the computer from the desk in our bedroom to the desk in the new office. And now, I'm sitting here, fingers on the keyboard, staring at my lime green walls, my mind totally blank. You see, I'm used to having a TV in the room, perhaps just for noise, but I was used to flipping channels while I worked on this column. The office does not have a television. It just has quiet. And the silence is deafening. I don't know if I can work like this or not.

At least the cats are entertaining. I'm watching one play with a rubber band. She throws it in the air, then pounces on it. It must feel strange in her mouth because as soon as she picks it up, she spits it right back out. Somehow, she got it under the corner of the new zebra print area rug I put down on the floor of the office and she kept digging at the edge of the carpet. Finally, I couldn't take the sound anymore and retrieved her rubber band for her. It's not television, but it'll have to do.

-ob-

All my big predictions about putting our Christmas lights up early were for naught. Since outside lights fall under the "Jim's Job" category, I don't mess with them until he's ready. I kept asking

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



(he says nagging) when he was going to put up lights. His answer, "I'm just not feeling it."

Well, we mustn't rush the artist. When he's ready, he's ready.

Until then, I will work inside, but I don't think I'll use the traditional tree. You see, I found the perfect shaped tumbleweed. Usually, tumbleweeds are squat and round. I, however, found one shaped just like a Christmas tree. I'm going to set it in a can of plaster of Paris, spray paint it silver, put some tinsel on it and call it good.

I remember the year my mom cut a large triangle shape out of chicken wire and hung it on the wall above the divan. (That's the sofa or couch to my younger readers). She sent me, clippers in hand, to the evergreen trees where I cut short branches which we stuck in the chicken wire. Presto! Change-o! We had a Christmas tree, complete with ornaments, lights and presents lined up

on the back of the divan.

-ob-

Jim was talking with our daughter, Jennifer, in San Antonio, telling her of our recent snowfall. She said it was raining there. He said, "That's great. You don't have to shovel rain."

Indeed you don't. But my co-worker, Tim, at the radio station where I still work one Sunday morning a month, had to shovel a bunch of the white stuff. The drive had drifted full and even his honkin' big pick-up truck got high centered. He warned me not to pull in the drive so I had to park my van on the edge of the highway and walk through the snow up to the station. Trying to walk in the tire tracks is harder than it looks. How do cows do it? Their trails aren't any wider than the tire track and they don't seem to wobble and step outside the track like I did.

-ob-

Christmas is less than three weeks away. I don't stress too much about shopping. I get Jim a new pair of overalls and that's about it. I don't need a thing, but if you want to "put a bug" in his ear, my bottle of perfume is about gone. Don't worry. He knows what brand.

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