

# Opinion

## Your turn

### Bottled water and branded kids

*Frank Sowers  
Benkelman, Neb.*

They haul water from Goodland to Garden City, bottle it, bring back to sell. I got some plums, I had mold under sticker. I got some peaches, I had mold under sticker. I got 3-pound sack of applies, \$1.68, no sticker, 56 cents a pound. Those with sticker were 78 cents a pound. Bought five pound oranges \$2.49 (no stickers), 50 cents pound. Those with stickers were 69 cents a pound.

I bought canned beef from Uruguay, another from Brazil. Would it be cheaper to bypass the cheat-off crowd, forget the animal I.D.'s (who can prove which hide the hamburger came from?) Export and import beef at less cost?

Those striving for animal I.D.'s and for kids should be told, "and he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell save he hat had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred three-score and six." Rev. 13:16-18.

**About those letters . . .**

The *Free Press* encourages and welcomes letters from readers. Letters should be type-written, if at all possible, and should include a telephone number and an address. Most importantly, all letters must include a signature. Unsigned letters cannot be published. We reserve the right to edit for clarity and length, and, likewise, reserve the right to reject letters deemed to be of no public interest or considered offensive or libelous.

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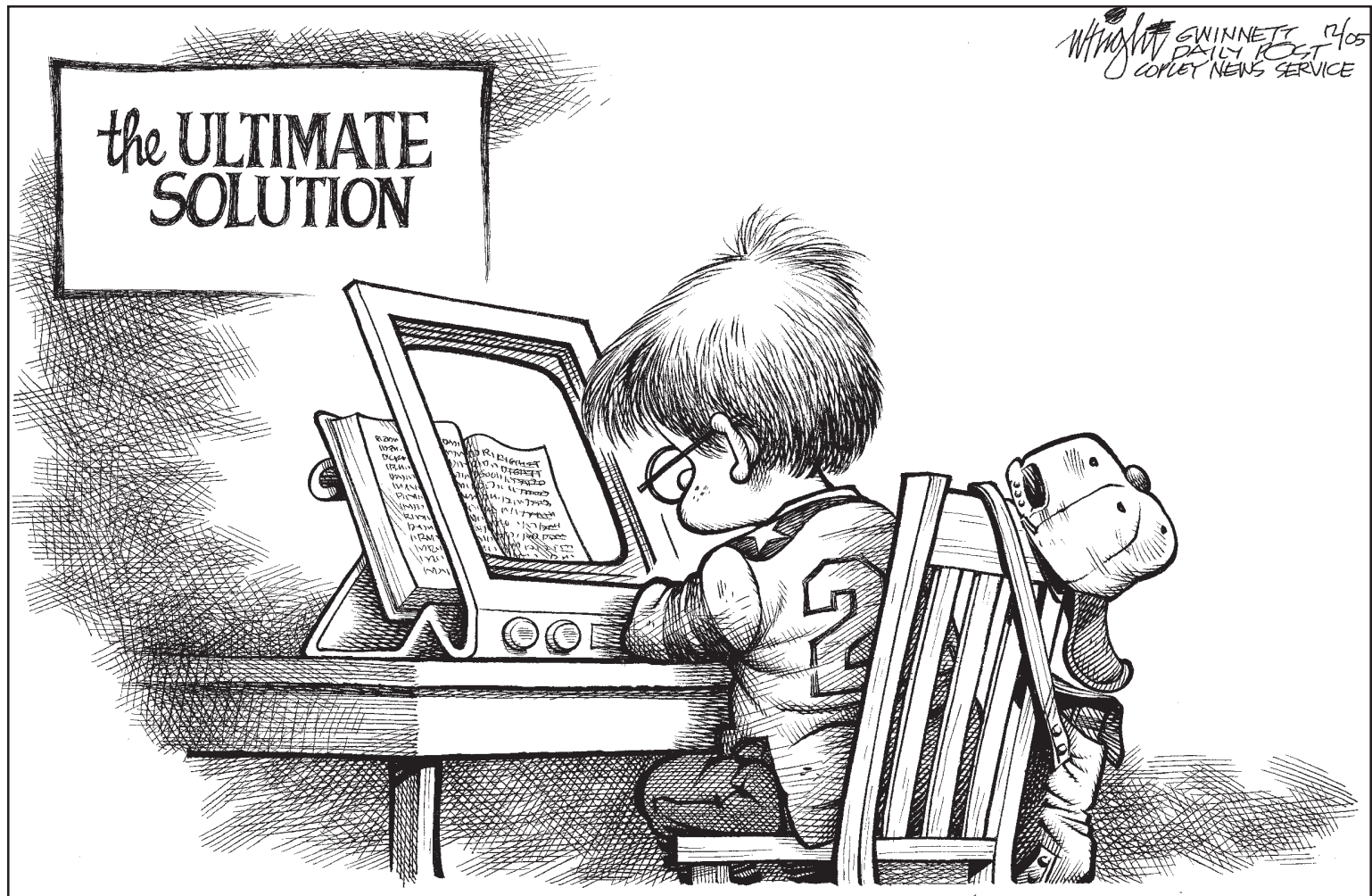
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## What is next for us?

*"In the year 3535 Ain't gonna need to tell the truth, tell no lies. Everything you think, do, and say is in the pill you took today."*  
— from the 1969 song Zager and Evans "In The Year 2525"

I've heard stories about the science-fiction novels written in the 1950s set in the future. Of all the technology and imagination in those books, about the only thing that came true was having just a handful of corporations run the world.

Considering the hoopla this decade received even before it started, I'm not terribly thrilled with the future we are supposedly living in.

You remember Y2K, the computer bug that supposedly would wreak havoc throughout the universe when the clock struck 12 a.m. Jan. 1, 2000? It turned out to be the biggest, over-hyped event in world history. I still think it was a subtle conspiracy to benefit the bank accounts of computer companies.

We are far from living what is portrayed in the classic cartoon "The Jetsons." For starters, we are not living in space. We are talking about a trip to Mars, but that probably won't happen for at least another 10 years. Our space exploration program has been troubled the past few years and critics are wondering why we are still using the initial shuttle program technology from 1980.

Our world has been influenced, and even decided, by what we do with the computer industry, hence the Y2K fear. An excellent book about the consequences of advancement in technology, "Why things bite back: Technology and the revenge of unintended consequences" explains



**John Van Nostrand**

- Line in the Dust

what happened to us because of computers and other things. We are using more printer paper and have been brainwashed by the companies that say a computer six months old is worthless and we need to purchase the newest models.

I admit, e-mail and the Internet are handy and convenient. Both computer programs have impacted traditional mail, but there is still a sentimental feel reading a handwritten letter just out of the mailbox. That feeling can't be created on a computer.

Cars are slowly getting more futuristic. Today's front page story about the Toyota Prius implies traditional gasoline is on the way out. While at his own drawing board, Ford car founder Henry Ford had plans for having every Ford run on what we call ethanol. We are not driving, or flying, nuclear-powered cars like what was in the 1980s series of movies that began with "Back to the Future," but there is hope of newer cars.

Would comic strip icon Dick Tracy understand Dec. 28, 2005? All he had to do was use his wristwatch as a way to communicate to others. We are almost to that point. Cell phones have nearly eliminated pay telephones. (They are few

and far between.) A few weeks ago we replaced the office's bag phone with a modern cell phone model. Bag phones, if you have forgot, were about the size of a shoe and, yes, looked like they were in a bag.

When we exchanged phones with our provider, I told the woman she could donate it to a museum, because I don't know of anyone who would use it. Although during the summer I read of people in extremely rural parts of the Dakota states still love their bag phone because the technology in the area still makes them work well.

I don't know what 2006 will bring. Discussions and debates over cloning have subsided, but probably won't be forgotten. It's scary to think a Xerox of you and I could be created. So much for the individuality God put in each one of us.

Stem-cell research is also a hot-button topic, but too much of the discussion has been based on using deceased fetuses. Some scientists claim the same benefits could be achieved using umbilical cord fluid from healthy babies from problem-free deliveries. But when death is involved, that will always get more attention than anything else.

But there is no guarantee those attempts in science or plans for the future will make us better people.

Remember, we still struggle and we have flip-phones with cameras, SUVs with DVDs and computers that sit in our laps, all from just a handful of corporations.

*John Van Nostrand is publisher of the Colby Free Press*

## Gas prices hit ruralia hardest

**By Thomas D. Rowley**

A few months ago, my family and I left the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and headed for the hills of Texas. (Yes, Texas has hills.) As a result of the move, we're now enjoying the many benefits of small-town living: a saner pace of life, a deeper connection to nature, and folks that say "please", "thank you" and "have a great day"—and actually mean it—to name but a few.

We knew of course, there would be trade-offs: saying goodbye to family and friends and leaving behind big-city amenities like world-class museums, zoos, concerts and such. (Okay, in truth, I went to the Kennedy Center maybe three times in 17 years of living there, but it was there if I had ever developed a sudden operative urge.)

What we didn't expect was such severe gas pains.

No, not that kind. (Though I have significantly upped my intake of barbecue and Mexican food.) I'm talking about the pain that hits every time I see the tank heading toward empty while the price at the pump remains stratospheric. And I see that inverse phenomenon quite a lot these days.

Living in the city all those years-taking the subway, walking, and biking-I'd forgotten just how much time one spends in the car in rural America. Moving back home has reconnected me not only to my roots but also to the steering wheel.

And the miles add up in a hurry. Our son's school, which has no bus, is 22 miles away. The

grandparents who we came back to see more often are 95 miles away. Big-city shopping is 60 miles away. (Yes, I'm a big proponent of buying locally, but some things just aren't available in our little town; other things cost a whole lot more and sometimes my city-girl wife just needs an urban fix-and to get away from me and the boys.)

And, well, you get the idea.

And we're among the fortunate ones. Unlike so many rural people, neither my wife nor I have to commute for work. Most of our miles are optional.

For the many who must drive long distances to jobs, health care, child care or college, the rising price of gas isn't merely a pain; it's a serious malady.

A recent report by the Consumer Federation of America put some numbers on it.

According to the study, rural households will spend on average some \$2,100 on gas this year.

By comparison, urban households will spend only \$1,700. And because rural income is about 25 percent lower than urban, that difference is magnified in terms of its bite out of the family budget: Rural households will spend nearly 5 percent of their income on gasoline, compared to about 3 percent for urban households. More if the price starts to climb again.

Not surprisingly, rural folks surveyed for the report were more likely than urban folks to see gas prices as a great concern, by a margin of 82 percent to 71 percent.

The question is: What will any of us-rural or

urban-do about it?

And the answer, sadly, is: Not much.

For many rural folks, there's little they can do. The poor can't afford to go out and buy a new, energy-efficient car. Those who drive long distances out of necessity can't cut back much on their miles.

For many others, urban and rural, too, it isn't a matter of "can't;" it is one of "won't." In a nation of auto worship, we won't sacrifice our ride for the sake of the environment, national security or our own wallets.

We'll stick to our oversized gas guzzlers come hell or high prices.

As historical evidence of that, Princeton economics professor Alan Krueger pointed out in *The New York Times* that when inflation-adjusted gasoline prices rose 53 percent from 1998 to 2004, consumption didn't fall as one might logically expect: It actually rose 10 percent!

Summing up our nation's shortsighted, hard-headed denial about energy, he wrote, "In the short run, some people drive less when gas prices rise or they buy a more fuel-efficient car, but most do not change their lifestyle and just complain about prices."

Will someone please pass the Tums?

— — —

Thomas D. Rowley is a Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) Fellow. The Rural Policy Research Institute provides objective analysis and facilitates public dialogue concerning the impacts of public policy on rural people and places. [www.rupri.org](http://www.rupri.org).

## Doonesbury

• Gary Trudeau

