



Other Viewpoints

Historic sites join byway’s sights

A slice of historic terrain in western Kansas is about to make history in another way. A 105-mile strip of highway from Scott City to Oakley to Sharon Springs is in line to become the state’s first historic byway. Nearly two years ago, community leaders from Logan, Scott and Wallace counties agreed to seek scenic byway designation for the route. Others saw the route’s attributes in another light, and urged the western Kansas group to consider historic byway designation instead.

The Western Plains Historic Byway was born, and with approval from the Kansas Department of Transportation’s byway committee will become the first such road in Kansas. For those not familiar with the geography, the byway heads north out of Scott City on U.S. 83, taking a short diversion along K-95 about 10 miles to the north. From there, it’s on to Oakley on U.S. 83 and west to Wallace and Sharon Springs on U.S. 40.

Motorists today cover territory traveled by settlers heading west, and encounter such notable sights on K-95 as Battle Canyon, site of the last Indian battle in Kansas, and picturesque Scott State Lake. Monument Rocks and Keystone Gallery on U.S. 83 at the Scott-Logan county line and a larger-than-life Buffalo Bill on Oakley’s west side are among sights along the way. The route has plenty of features that should be known to and understood by travelers. Historic byway designation would do just that, with the state providing at least one information kiosk. Supporters of the byway designation also envision making details available in such ways as brochures, signs and even a computer disc that serves as an electronic tour guide.

Having a route on its way to becoming the state’s first historic byway is positive recognition in a part of the state that’s often overlooked, and on the receiving end of jokes by outsiders who perceive the area as dull and uninviting. This attention proves something many western Kansans already know, although some take for granted: This region does indeed have its share of interesting sights that are worth a look due to their natural beauty and historical significance. Soon, with official byway designation, more will know the same.

— The Garden City Telegram, via The Associated Press

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Bad roads, dead ends, and health care

I’m going to break a promise to myself, and all because of a little snowstorm – I’m going to talk about health care.

I celebrated my midlife crisis by buying a pickup, not a sports car. It gets me where I’m going and is easy to pack. It’s a two-wheel drive, which is just fine most of the time. I don’t drive across pastures much these days, and Kansas weather is not really a challenge. Remember last winter? I didn’t even need boots it was so nice.

Then came Tuesday. I found myself driving to work with school cancelled and only the hardest folks around. Creeping along, knowing if I stopped I’d have trouble starting. I’ve driven a front-wheel drive car for years. An empty rear-wheel-drive pickup is different, though to handle because traction and steering are not really well-connected. I have vague plans to add weight, but by the time I get around to it, the streets will probably be dry again. Heck, there may be kids playing in the new swimming pool by then.

Meanwhile, I’m cautious. I start slowly, stop gradually and avoid putting myself where I could slide into another vehicle in an unfriendly manner. This means a route with low traffic, few stop signs, and few turns.

This presents a problem. Living south of the grade school, every route between home and work involves lots of turns and stop signs, due to the school between me and my destination.

In fact, it’s downright aggravating to have to choose between zigzagging over half the town, hitting a yield sign at every corner, or going west to Range in order to find a through street that goes east.

I don’t blame anybody, at least no one still living. It’s obvious the geography of Colby is



Marian Ballard

• Collection Connections

a result of decisions made over the years by railroads, city planners, school boards, etc.

While distracting myself from ice and dead ends the other day, my mind jumped to the health-care battles. Like the streets, it’s a case of “you can’t get there from here.” The health-care system, after all, did not suddenly materialize in its present form. It grew over a period of years, like a town.

How does a town grow? Somebody arrives first. They set up homes and shops, connected by trails that eventually become streets.

A railroad track further shapes the town. Neighborhoods, schools, business districts are a response to needs, patterns of traffic, and other factors. As needs change, buildings and infrastructure change, are abandoned or are co-opted. That’s probably how a railroad track became a school playground in Colby.

A few communities are planned out before any building. These, at least for a few years, probably do not have orphan dead-end streets or unoccupied commercial buildings in odd places. Their emergency routes, school zones, and industrial parks are all neatly placed on a developer’s planning board.

What does this have to do with health care? Our health care system also grew a little at a time. A Civil War battlefield surgeon became a country doctor, a midwife set up shop, a nurse

moved to town and staffed the two hospital rooms connected to the doctor’s office.

Add in more science, more training, rules about treatment, laws about drugs. Mix with an insurance cooperative to help pay the bills. Factor in medical breakthroughs, and a federal government wanting to spread the benefits.

The huge medical establishment we have today is not a planned system. It grew by fits and starts. It isn’t neat and tidy.

But it does work – sometimes better than we have a right to expect. Sometimes, though, it runs into dead ends. At present, the most obvious dead end is financial, that is, ability to treat medical problems frequently outstrips the ability to pay for that treatment.

The health care system – hardware, pharmaceuticals, trained personnel, real estate – could be more efficiently organized. All we’d have to do is scrap everything we have and start over with a unified plan – like a planned community. Set aside insurance companies, power wheelchair companies, heart hospitals and baby hospitals and all the rest, and start over.

More realistically, though, we can’t – and won’t – take such a drastic step. What we can do is locate dead ends that got cut off on the way to big business. We can connect dead ends back into the mainstream. It’s tedious, and not particularly tidy, but little in life is.

Meanwhile, there’s those zigzag routes on icy streets, where I began this saga. All things considered, I’d rather drive down Webster and Range in ice and snow than tackle I-35 during morning rush hour.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

Prepare for winter driving

While it’s not “officially” winter, many of you may have already experienced the wrath of this season.

More than a foot of snow blanketed parts of the state last week. Other sections of Kansas reported blizzard conditions, or freezing rain and ice, which make winter driving dangerous and nothing to fool around with.

When I think about the perils associated with winter travel, I think about my dad’s simple, but sound advice: “Stay off the roads.”

My dad lived by this creed for more than 80 years in northwestern Kansas. He’d seen his share of blowing and drifting snow. When he talked about western Kansas blizzards, the years of ’31 and ’57 stood out.

The ’31 blizzard hit on April Fool’s Day and killed hundreds of cattle. One of Dad’s neighbors lost 80 head in a pasture less than a quarter mile west of the small town of Seguin in northwestern Kansas.

I was just a youngster, but I remember the blizzard of ’57. Snow drifted as high as the roof on my friend Vernon Rietcheck’s two-story home. We sledged down the drifts and played in the snow all day.

Our parents weren’t as lucky. There were roads to open and cattle to feed and water. Our homes were without electricity for five days.

My father and those hearty souls who lived on the High Plains learned from these storms. He learned to travel only when necessary – to feed, water and care for his livestock. He never went anywhere in his pickup without several pairs of gloves, a scoop shovel, a log chain and



John Schlageck

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chains for the rear tires.

Dad always wore a cap with ear flaps and carried a couple of extras on the front seat of his pickup in the winter. The trunk of our car also had extras. He knew a person couldn’t last long outside in freezing weather with all of your body heat escaping through the top of a bare head.

If we traveled during the winter, the trunk of the family car was always packed with extra warm clothes, blankets, overalls, gloves, a flashlight, fresh batteries, chains and a shovel to clear the snow from in front of the tires.

Dad had been stuck in snow before. He’d heard of, and known of, people who were stranded and froze to death in some of the fierce northwestern Kansas blizzards. Before every winter season began, and often throughout, he’d remind us of these stories.

My father always topped off his fuel tanks for winter travel. He believed a full tank provided extra weight on the rear wheels.

“It runs better on the top half (of the tank),” he always said.

Although Dad never carried sand bags in the back of his car or trucks, he did carry extra

weight during the winter. He always lugged around tractor tire weights. Some of his neighbors preferred sand and sprinkled the gritty stuff in front of their tires for extra traction in snow and ice.

If someone absolutely had to go out during a winter storm, Dad preached extra time and patience. If you’re frightened or overly concerned about weather conditions – don’t drive. Wait the storm out.

Remember, it takes a while to find your “driving legs” each winter season, he’d say.

Relax. Sit back in the seat. From time to time take deep breaths. Don’t grip the wheel until your knuckles turn white.

Try to anticipate what other drivers intend to do. Let them speed, spin, slip and slide. Allow at least twice the time to reach your destination. Concentrate on the road ahead, behind and on your right and left.

While driving during hazardous weather brings out the worst in some drivers, it can bring out the best in others. Some welcome the chance to brave the elements. To drive safely under such conditions can provide a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Drive safely and know your limitations. Remember, if you have to take a chance that could result in an accident or worse, “Stay off the road.”

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

