# Opinion



### Other **Viewpoints**

### Political action starts at local level

There's a lot of talk around the country these days about the terrible state of our government and the need to get rid of incumbent lawmakers.

That talk, however, doesn't always turn into action. Congressional races have drawn a lot of attention in Kansas this year because there are no incumbents in the U.S. Senate race or three of the four U.S. House races. It's a different story, however, in the Kansas House.

All 125 House seats are up for election this year. When the filing deadline for those seats passed last week, almost a third were being sought by only one person. Thirty-nine candidates, including 37 incumbents, have no opposition for the November election.

The situation isn't particularly unusual. In fact, some recent House elections have had even more unopposed candidates. In 2002, 52 candidates were unopposed. The number dipped to 47 in 2004 and 36 in 2006 before rebounding to 44 in 2008.

The only Douglas County seat that drew enough candidates to require a primary was in the 10th District. Two Republicans - Scott Barnhart of Ottawa and Teri Gregory of Baldwin City – are seeking to unseat Democratic Rep. Tony Brown of Baldwin City.

A couple of factors may be contributing to the lack of candidate filings. First, there is a tendency for people to think that any problems being caused by lawmakers at the state or federal levels are being caused by someone else's elected representative. People tend to like their own representatives or at least are willing to accept them over the alternatives....

Running for office is a big commitment, often undertaken these days with limited support from local party organizations. Candidates shoulder most of the load of raising money and putting together campaign committees. And, if elected, they need to be in a position to take time from their jobs or other activities to devote to the Legislature, both during the session and the rest of the year. Being upset with government is one thing; being willing and able to run for office is another.

Term limits might get rid of incumbents, but they don't guarantee either change or improvement in government. That's up to a well-informed populace that not only votes but helps encourage and support strong candidates.

Although the number of unopposed candidates in this year's House elections isn't unprecedented, it would be nice if voters in all Kansas districts had a meaningful choice on the ballot.

– Lawrence Journal-World, via The Associated Press

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Letters will not be censored, but will be read and edited for form and style, clarity, length and legality. We will not publish attacks on private individuals or businesses not pertaining to a public issue.

Before an election, letters (other than responses by a candidate) will not be published after the Thursday before the polls open.

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## Curiosity pays off at any age

When I was a kid, the newspaper we got had a regular feature called Ask Andy. It was written for kids, featuring thoughtful answers to the kinds of questions kids ask.

I was reminded of this the other day when I thought of something I was curious about, but don't really NEED to know. My question had to do with the printing process, which still strikes me as something involving alchemy and higher mathematics.

I understand linoleum block prints. I understand typewriters. For those too young to have ever actually used an old-fashioned manual typewriter, striking a key moves a lever with a piece of type attached to the end. The type hits a ribbon containing ink, stamping an imprint on the paper behind it.

That, to me, is printing. Anything more complex leaves me scratching my head. When the urge to know gets too strong, I ask questions. Not being a guy, I've managed to overcome my fear of asking questions and looking dumb. I decided years ago that looking dumb and seeking to change the situation was preferable to staying silent and totally clueless.

After I asked my printing question, I thought of Ask Andy, along with another question. That would be, of course, a "whatever happened to..." question. So, I typed it into my handy Internet search engine, and discovered that this neat little column for kids is still going strong.



#### Marian **Ballard**

 Collection Connections

It's on the Internet at www.youaskandy.com, if you want to check it out.

According to the Internet site, it started in a single newspaper in 1955. Popular articles include answers to such burning questions as where a sneeze comes from and when coal was first used. Now, I realize that the future of the world does not turn on providing answers to such questions – or maybe it does.

After all, doctors and teachers and engineers have to start someplace. Even those of us with more mundane callings in life need to know how the world works in ways large and small.

Do you use a remote with two or three batteries? If so, I hope you get the positive and negative ends in the right places. It matters. Knowing why it matters can help you remember to get it right.

Beyond giving facts, though, this resource is one that stimulates curiosity. It says, in effect, "Ask your question. If we don't know tor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas,

out there, we'll be honest about that, too, and maybe someday you'll find it for yourself."

Or, to put it another way, there are no dumb questions. There are simply people who won't ask. My observations of the younger generation seem to indicate that there are many around who simply take what they find for granted, without every asking.

That's not new, by the way. It's a bit troubling, though. Half a century ago, every teenage boy at least pretended to knowledge about the inside workings of a car's engine. It wouldn't be hard today to find one who knows little beyond the need for gas.

A quarter of a century ago, anyone who

used a computer had to know a fair amount about how and why it worked. Today, to use a computer you have to be able to find the "on" button. These changes indicate advances in the re-

liability of machines. I just wonder, do they also indicate a decline in general knowledge among ordinary people? Do us all a favor. Ask questions. Learn

something today, even something little. You'll be doing your part for society. Marian Ballard has collected careers as

counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy edithe answer, we'll find out. If the answer isn't which are more portable than other stuff.

### Silent sentinels guard the Plains

I am on vacation this week, so I have chosen to run a column I wrote in May of '95. It has always been one of my favorites. Hope you en-

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

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

This boot fence can be found on John Smith's Boot Hill Ranch on K-25 about a mile and a half north of Russell Springs. Nearly 500 boots dot the top of a 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 Saddlery & 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

After Smith put the first pair of boots on his fencerow, it seemed only natural to add more.



#### John Schlageck

 Insights Kansas Farm Bureau

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 on the fence. He'd been known to wear a pair that may have 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.

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

"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 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's 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 take any off the posts. I did see a couple pair that 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 of the Kansas Farm Bureau Yep, thanks to Smith, each post has its own 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.

### Where to write, call

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U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback, 303 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. (202) 224-6521

U.S. Rep. Jerry Moran, 2202 Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515. (202) 225-2715

### Mallard **Fillmore**

Bruce Tinsley



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