

from our viewpoint...

Battle raging for party identity

The gridlock that enveloped Topeka at the end of the legislative session is just one outcropping of a battle being fought around the country as emergent conservative forces flex their muscles at the statehouse and within the GOP.

As we've found in Kansas, this process isn't always pretty and it's not always constructive.

Across the country, results have been mixed, the Associated Press reports. In Nebraska, Gov. Dave Heineman called an angry press conference to announce several vetoes after the Legislature gutted his tax plan.

In Missouri, newly dominant Republicans fought over spending and over the definition of a true Republican. In Oklahoma, Gov. Mary Fallin saw her plan to cut income taxes defeated.

Here in Kansas, Gov. Sam Brownback's tax-cut plans stalled in the more liberal Senate. After negotiations ground to a halt, somehow the Senate voted to pass a House-backed plan that even the governor thought was too much. It included most of his cuts, but few of the "adjustments" he proposed to even out revenue.

As a result, the state faces either big budget cuts on top of years of budget cuts, or the House and Senate will have to change the plan next year.

In Wisconsin, meanwhile, Republican Gov. Scott Walker survived a union-backed recall vote which left control of the state Senate in doubt. The bitter fight pitted neighbor against neighbor and friend against friend.

A common thread in all these states is a push by conservatives for lower taxes, lower spending, a more pro-business attitude and more attention to social issues such as abortion.

Beyond that, though, is a nationwide drive to elect even more conservatives, a drive which sometimes has backed more liberal or "moderate" Republicans into a corner. With heavy hitters arrayed to eliminate them, they have little to lose and no choice but to stand and fight.

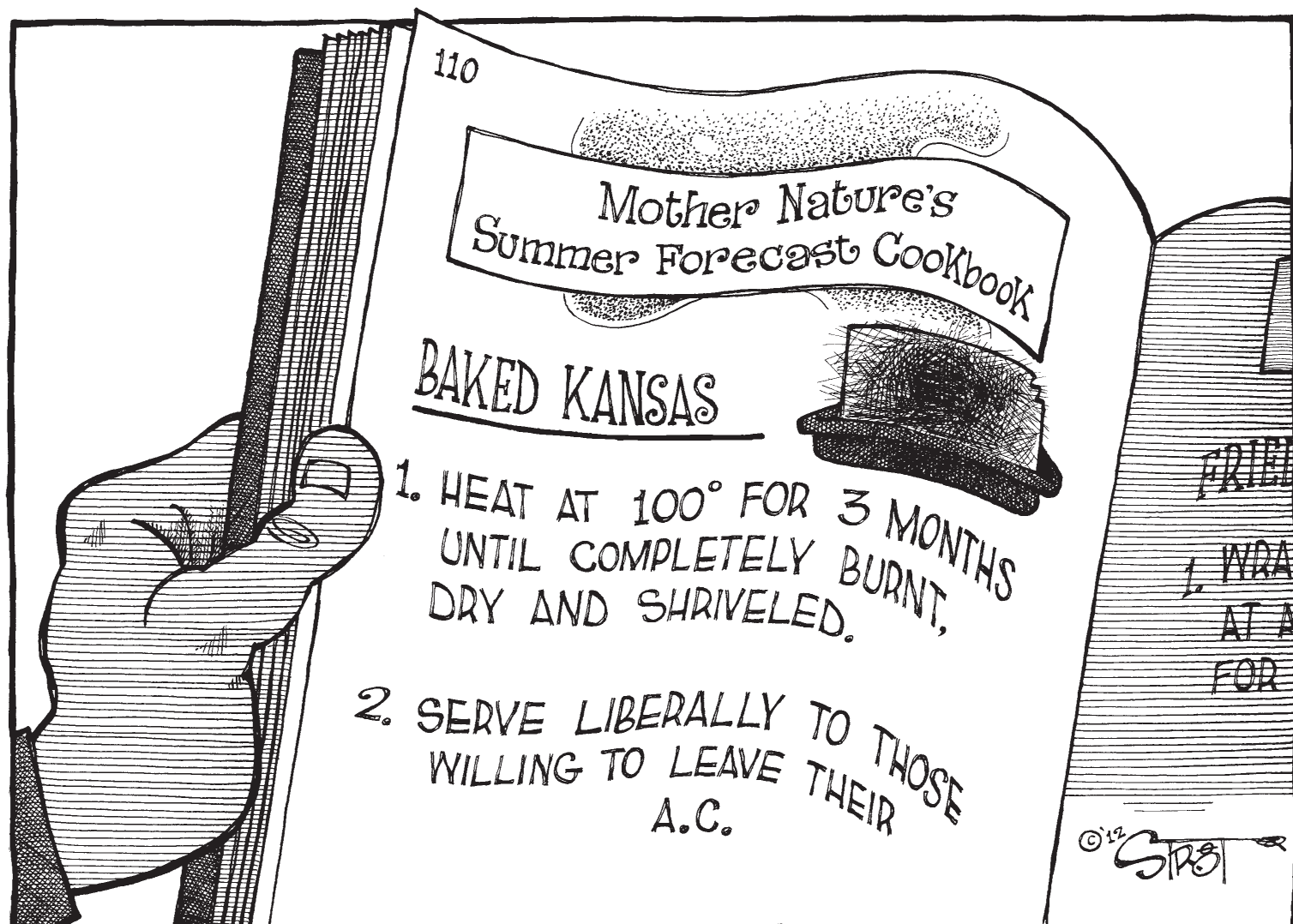
That happened in Kansas, where moderate senators who have controlled the upper chamber suddenly faced primary challenges by popular incumbent House members with promises of financial backing from the state Chamber of Commerce's political arm, among other sources.

Some claim national conservative groups, backed by the billionaire Koch brothers of Wichita, are out to take over state Legislatures for the conservative cause.

The impact of that initiative remains to be seen. By forcing the federal courts to draw district maps for the Legislature and Congress, however, the conservatives may have shot themselves in the foot. Some observers say they, not the moderates, will come out as the big losers.

This fight is not just in Kansas, and it's not going away. Everyone, conservative, moderate or liberal, has the right to state their case and run for office, of course. Voters may find some of the tactics offensive, though.

In the end, they'll decide who they want running the states, not the money guys or the national groups. And that may surprise a few people. — Steve Haynes



Fire threatens old stomping grounds

As a Colorado native I often keep up with the news coming out of our neighborhood, and I've been following, as have many, the story of the High Park Fire.

As I write this, the fire is somewhere around 50 percent contained, which of course is only an estimate, and still means that around half of the fire is still burning out of control. It has burned some 65,000 acres.

I grew up in Loveland, about 25-30 miles from the fire, and went to college in Fort Collins, which is about 15 miles away, so I know the area pretty well.

As a Boy Scout I often went to the Ben Delatour Scout Ranch in Rocky Mountain National Park, about 40 miles northwest of Fort Collins, which is right in the path of the fire. A photography instructor at the camp sent in pictures to CNN that show the fire crawling along the wooded mountainsides toward the camp. It's an eerie feeling seeing something like that in a view that I've seen in person many times. The note on the photograph said about 180 campers and 40 staff were cleared out late last week.

It's sad to think that if it can't be controlled, the fire could consume that camp. I have a lot of good memories of that place. Camping with my friends, shooting .22 rifles, canoeing, learning about wildlife and more. That said, I almost envy the Scouts that were there this year, can you imagine a more interesting campout?

One of the troops that was evacuated was Boy Scout Troop 1, from Edmond, Okla. I actually encountered that troop taking a break at the truck stop in Colby several weekends ago. I didn't know it at the time, but they were on their way to Ben Delatour. I almost went over and talked to the leaders, after all how often is it that you encounter Troop No. 1 (mine was 182).



kevin bottrell

- simple tricks and nonsense

I'm sure I've been hiking more than once in the burn area. As a resident assistant at Colorado State University, I once took a group of students hiking up the hill that sits behind the college's football stadium. Once you get to the top you can look down and see Horsetooth Reservoir. If I understand correctly where the fire is located, we would have had an incredible view of the smoke plumes from the top of that hill.

My parents, who still live in Loveland, said they can often smell the smoke depending on which way the wind is blowing.

And there's more. It isn't often you see a bull moose wandering around I-25 up by Loveland, but apparently one was found wandering by all the shops and dealerships that have sprung up by the interstate (which at that point is many miles from the mountains). The pictures on the Loveland Reporter-Herald's website show it wandering around next to the Harley Davidson dealership, which is right by the BMW dealership where my cousin works.

State Fish and Wildlife personnel suspect it may have been driven down from the foothills by the fire. It is just one of many large animals that people have reported fleeing the fire.

My mom always joked about how she has lived in Colorado for nearly 40 years and, despite many trips to the mountains, she had never seen a moose until she went on vacation to Alaska. Apparently all you have to do to see

one these days is go to your local motorcycle dealership.

It's sad to see so many people lose their homes. However, there should be some good coming out of this and similar fires. For one thing, part of why the fire spread so quickly was because there were a lot of dead or dying trees in the area, trees killed by parasitic beetles. It's not a bad thing to get rid of that.

For another, fires like this one can be beneficial to the environment. Lodgepole Pine trees, a predominant species in the area, are dependent on forest fires to grow new trees. Their pinecones need high temperatures to open and drop their seeds.

By all accounts, the fire was a natural fire. It was started by a lightning strike, rather than by any human actions. This fire would have started whether there were people living in the area or not.

Out here on the plains we face just as much danger from wildfires, especially this year with how hot, dry and windy it's been. There was a small one Wednesday and at least two others in various areas of the county over the past month. The Sherman County Rural Fire Department has done a good job getting them out quickly, with the assistance of Goodland, Brewster, Kadorado and our neighbors, but under these conditions a small field fire could quickly develop into a huge wildfire, such as the 38,000-acre fire by Johnson City last year.

The county commissioners put in place a burn ban earlier this week along with a ban on shooting off fireworks outside of Goodland. I urge everyone to follow those bans. If we limit the fires we cause, then our firefighters can focus all their energy on ones caused by nature.

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Friday the 13th came early

As the old comic strip Pogo would have said, "Friday the 13th done come on Wednesday."

My mother died on June 13, 2011. I will always remember the date, not because I'm especially good at that sort of thing, but because it was the day before her 65th wedding anniversary.

So last Wednesday started out sadly and then things really started to go wrong.

When I got to my office in Oberlin, my writing program wouldn't work and I started getting calls from our Colby and Goodland offices that they couldn't use their fax machines.

A simple restart and update fixed my problems. The fax problems were more complicated. The machines would receive faxes and could fax documents in town but couldn't send things out of town. A quick check showed that St. Francis was also suffering from the out-of-town fax bug.

I made a few phone calls and basically shoved the problem onto Evan's shoulders. And he got it fixed. God bless him.

That was before lunch. After lunch, I saw friends coming out of the courthouse. They had just been to hear our U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp speak.

We had completely missed the e-mails, which go to three of us, that he was even going to be in Oberlin. We didn't have his visit in the paper nor did we attend the meeting.

We all felt like fools and, worse, we hadn't alerted other people who might have been interested in going to his visit.

Then I called my sister.

My sister had visited our mother every day for the eight years she was in the nursing home. In the last year before Mom's death, she went two and three times a day.

I was the daughter who showed up every month to six weeks. It took me a full day to



cynthia haynes

- open season

drive to Concordia to see Mom for a couple of hours.

Sis was her rock. The one who was always there making sure she had the best care possible, fixing her fingernails, bringing her treats, running her errands.

Wednesday was tough for her.

Then I got the news of another death.

April Alice had been hit by a car. She was dead in the alley behind the house. We called her a sand cat, because her fur was the color of sand. Apparently, she'd been a little too well camouflaged that day.

Her death came just a couple of months after her son died of unknown causes on our bathroom floor.

She came to us in April of 2002, when we were looking for a cat for our son.

She was living in a shed and jumped in my arms and started to purr the minute she saw me. Steve noted that she was pregnant, but our son said he'd take one of the kittens.

April Alice loved to sleep with us in bed. When the kitten our son took came back to live with us, she wasn't any more pleased than any other mother whose adult offspring has come home to live. Especially because Frank liked that same spot on the bed.

For the last few months, however, she's ruled the bed. Now it feels sort of empty even when we're in it.

Do cats go to heaven? I don't know, but Mom always had a soft spot in her heart for April Alice.

where to write

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