

from our viewpoint...

## Lifetime of service can end just like that

In politics, the retirement plan isn't always a government pension and a lifetime of free health care.

Sometimes, a devoted public servant can cruise along for years, working for the people for two or three or four decades, then bam, one year the voters just seem to decide "it's time for a change."

It's often nothing the official has done, or failed to do. Nothing wrong. Nothing specific. Just a feeling, often unspoken, that enough is enough. That someone else should have a crack at the job. It's not unheard of.

This can happen to any official in any of our hometowns, and in our estimate, that's what happened to Decatur County Commissioner Ralph Unger in the Republican primary earlier this month. There was no grumbling or complaints before hand. People just walked into the booth and marked the other circle.

A 40-year career was over, just like that.

It's not pretty, nor is it fair. We'd guess if you asked a few voters, they wouldn't say anything bad about the incumbent. It just sort of happens.

Why people get to thinking that way, so many of them, all of the sudden, is hard to say. Maybe some political scientist has studied the phenomenon. We just know it happens, and when it does, it's usually a surprise.

The campaign had not been all that heated, and neither candidate has anything bad to say about his opponent. No drive for "a change," the code words for "he's had his turn."

The county will be well served by Sid Metcalf, a retired farmer and businessman who should make a good commissioner. In time, we hope, Mr. Unger will offer the benefit of his 40 years in office and the things he has learned, not just to Mr. Metcalf, but to all the commissioners.

This we do know: Getting the boot after 40 years of faithful service is no way to retire. This county owes Ralph Unger a deep and extended round of applause for his years of service. Sure, he enjoyed it — most of the time — and he learned a lot, made a lot of friends. But if you think being in the spotlight is great fun, try it sometime.

There are things about public service he won't miss, like late-night phone calls and people stopping him in the grocery or on the street to complain about the roads.

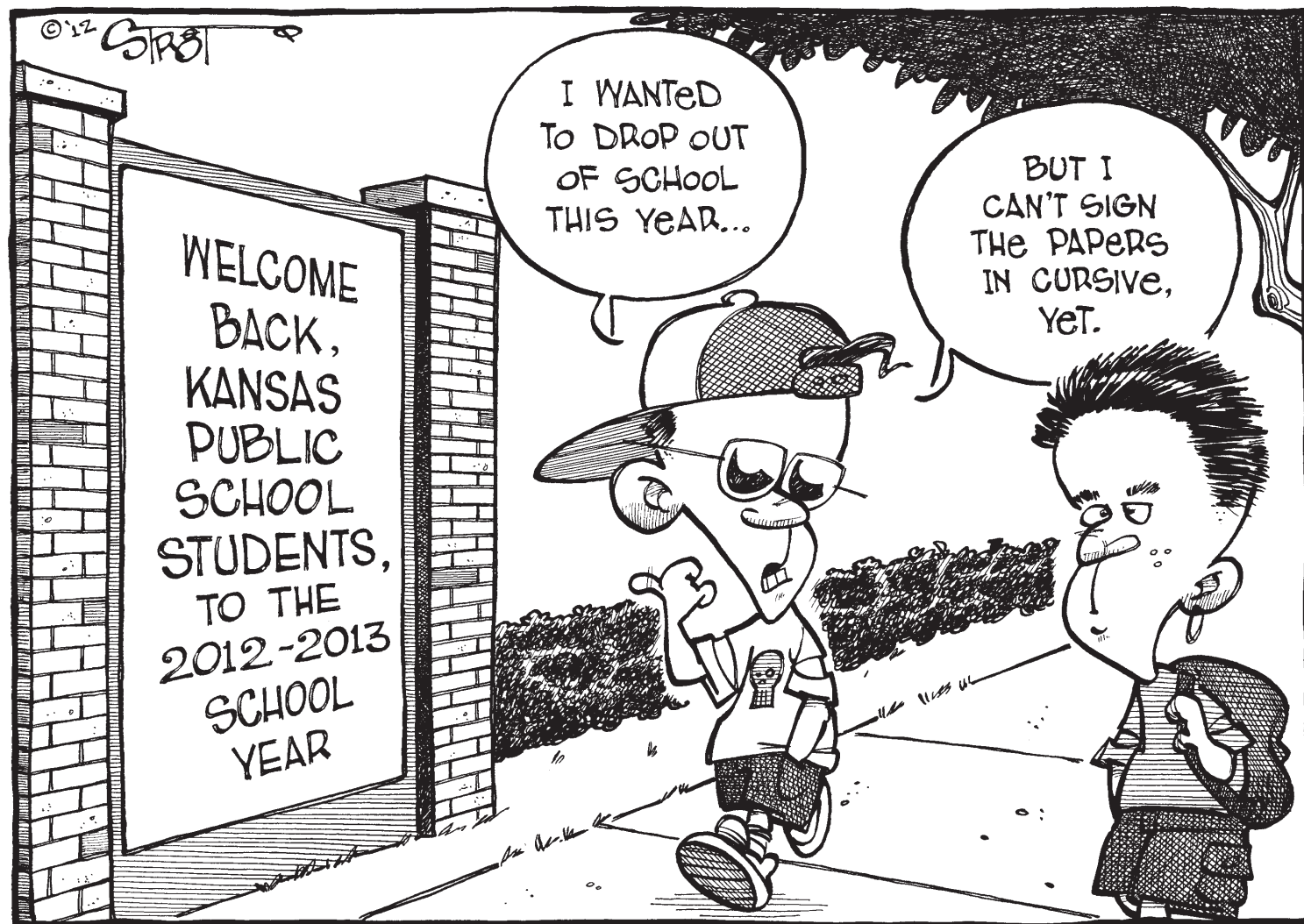
It'd be easy to say, and true, that a good card player knows when to fold 'em. Not so easy when you don't see the train coming, though. And to be fair, Mr. Unger hadn't had much opposition lately. There was no reason to think this year would be any different than the last 10 elections.

But enough of the instant analysis. When you see Mr. Unger in a store or downtown, do talk to him. Take time to say how much you appreciate what he's done for this county and for the state. He'll shuffle and say something like, "Aw, shucks. It was nothing."

It wasn't. It was hard work, coupled with a few tears, some sweat and some good judgement, and always the thought of what was best for the county, whether everyone agreed or not.

This is not the way anyone should go out after so many years, but the voters have spoken. Now we get the last word.

"Thanks, Ralph." — *Steve Haynes*



## Class reunion brings up retirement issues

Recently my Lamar High School class (1967) held a 45th reunion in Lamar, Colo.

Most of my classmates are either retired or getting close as we were born in 1949 near the beginning of the post-World War II Baby Boomer generation and most have reached 63 years old.

About one-third of the class attended the weekend events where we said hello after many years of being apart, and for some it was the first reunion they had attended. The reception on Friday evening was held at Big Timbers Museum on the hill north of Lamar with the city in the background. Saturday evening the class spent the evening at Lamar Lanes the bowling alley where we learned to bowl and was a familiar hang out more than 45 years ago.

The same weekend was the Prowers County Sand and Sage Roundup with a parade along Main Street Saturday morning for more than one mile from the south end of Main through the main business district and across the Santa Fe (now Burlington Northern and Santa Fe) mainline and for at least two blocks north before the parade ended. The class decided not to have a float in the parade, but many of the class did go downtown to watch the parade and wave at people we have known over the many years.

Some of the class continue to live in the Lamar area, and some have moved back for family reasons to help care for their parents.

Over the years members of the class have held other reunions in Lamar. With a large number of classmates living in the Denver area a summer party has been held almost annually. Many of my class gathered three years ago at a classmate's house in the Denver area to celebrate our turning 60.

When we greet each other one of the first questions is what are you doing, and for more than three-quarters the answer is they have



**tom betz**

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retired or are planning to retire in the next year or two. Some of the classmates have found themselves having to retire for medical reasons and moved from high mountain homes near Colorado Springs to the flat areas of Arizona. In fact three of the classmates live on the same block in a Phoenix suburb. Two of the classmates married each other and the third moved down in the past six months with his wife.

At least one classmate came back for his first reunion in 45 years. He retired from the U.S. Army after 20 years and works for the U.S. Postal Service in the northwest. He was a good friend from high school and we had fun remembering many of the things we did and people we remembered from the class. His mother continues to live in Lamar and he spent part of the weekend with her before he had to fly back to his home.

Many of my classmates have reconnected over the past several years thanks to the social media. The first was through a contact list set up about Lamar High School classes, and more recently through Facebook. It has been a great way to catch up on each other's lives. Many more of my class are Facebook friends who did not attend the reunion, but we do keep in touch. As with most high school class reunions those who live the closest did not attend.

Most of the class are either collecting Social Security by taking early retirement or are planning to stay until they turn 65. Talking to my classmates I found those who have retired — as I have — at age 62 found themselves in the conundrum about health insurance and the three-year gap before we qualify for Medicare.

We have been paying into Medicare since the program began in 1968, and now for the three year gap from 62 to 65 large insurance companies continue to make it hard to get reasonable health coverage. Hopefully that will change when the Affordable Care Act is fully implemented.

When I decided to take early retirement I began searching for health insurance and had lots of companies willing to give me a quote until I said I have Type II diabetes. What I found was the health insurance plan we had under the company was reasonable, but as a single person the premium rate went up by more than 100 percent with plans beginning at \$800 a month and going up from there. Even the program approved by Congress to allow a person to keep their health insurance (COBRA) for up to 18 months went from reasonable to the \$800 level.

After months of searching we did find a "short-term" insurance program that gives us limited coverage for the next year, and hopefully can be extended by another six months to a year to cover the hole before we are eligible for Medicare insurance we have paid for over the past 45 years.

Plans to change Medicare may not affect me or my wife - who went on Medicare last year, but the proposals for the future to make this into a voucher system will give the insurance companies even more of a monopoly on controlling health care for our children and grandchildren.

Medicare needs reform, but the system works and can be saved rather than hand it over to the insurance companies who do not have our health in their best interest.

I enjoyed seeing my classmates, and hope to see them and possibly more when we celebrate the 50th reunion. — *Tom Betz*

## Blackbirds a scary bunch



**steve haynes**

• along the sappa

They line up on the roof across the street, a dozen or more at a time, ready for the attack.

Soon, they'll swoop in for the, er, kill, if you can call it that. They'll pounce four, five, even six at a time, hanging on every perch, reaching around the tube, even hanging upside down like bats.

They probably spill as much as they eat, but nevermind. Their siblings will clean that up, them and the squirrels.

Not a scene out of some obscure Alfred Hitchcock movie. Just our neighborhood blackbirds.

I should explain that two or three pair of redwings nested in our area this summer. At first, it was just the parents at the feeder, trying to balance on perches meant for sparrows.

A full-grown blackbird is at least twice the size of a sparrow, maybe larger. Too big for a one-inch perch, or so you'd think. But they find ways. Blackbirds are very resourceful, we've found.

They'll perch on one side of a feeding tube, reach around and peck food from the other side. Or they'll perch on one level and peck below. A couple today tried to perch upside down and feed. I'm not saying that worked, but I watched them try.

Early on, nearly all our visitors were males, with their fancy black, gold and red plumage. They must feed mama and the babies the way they work at it. Seldom if ever did the dun-colored females show up at the feeders.

All that changed in July, though. All the sudden, perches were full up with brown birds about the size of an adult male redwing. Eventually, I realized these were juvenile blackbirds, fledglings now foraging on their own, competing or perch space with their fathers.

Now, They're getting their adult plumage, and you can see where their red wing patches will be. These are sort of mottle right now, mixed brown and red, but they are becoming more distinct. Or not, in which case, you're dealing with a budding girl redwing.

Whole families of them will line up along the peak of the neighbors' roof, waiting a turn at the feeders. Then they swoop in. Their antics are entertaining, but they're not the biggest birds we get at the sparrow feeders.

That would be the Stellar's jays, huge blue-and-black monsters that seem to love milo and millet as much as anyone. Some try to hover, like a hummingbird. Others try to grab a perch. The tubes are 18 inches apart, but I've seen

jays perch on one and try to eat from the other. Hunger seems to be quite a motivator.

Then there are the mourning doves, almost as big as a jay, if a little more sedate. They'll come in, perch on the top of the mounting pole and survey the feeders, trying to figure out how to tap the goodies.

If all else fails, they can clean up the leftovers on the ground. That's what the ground squirrel is doing this week.

Cynthia had some tubes out there with little trays attached to catch the spills until he showed up. He could shimmy up the half-inch bar holding the feeders and then jump out to a tray, fill his cheeks, then go home with a load. She fixed that.

Now, he's cleaning up the ground with the less dexterous redwings and the jays, when they show. The free lunch is over, at least for squirrels.

Gotta go now. Cynthia is going to fill her feeders, and I may have to run interference for her.

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## The Goodland Star-News

(USPS No. 222-460. ISSN 0893-0562)

Member: Kansas Press Association

Inland Press Association Colorado Press Association

National Newspaper Association

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Published every Tuesday and Friday except the days observed for New Year's Day, Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, at 1205 Main Ave., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

Periodicals postage paid at Goodland, Kan. 67735; entered at the Goodland, Kan., Post Office under the Act of Congress of March 8, 1878.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Goodland Star-News, 1205 Main Ave., Goodland, Kan. 67735.

TELEPHONE: (785) 899-2338. Editorial e-mail: [star-news@nwkansas.com](mailto:star-news@nwkansas.com).

The Goodland Star-News assumes no liability for mistakes or omissions in advertising or failure to publish beyond the actual cost of the ad.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: In Sherman County and adjacent counties: three months, \$29; six months, \$46; 12 months, \$81. Out of area, weekly mailing of two issues: three months, \$39; six months, \$54; 12 months, \$89 (All tax included). Mailed individually each day; (call for a price).

**Incorporating:**

## The Goodland Daily News

1932-2003

### The Sherman County Herald

Founded by Thomas McCants  
1935-1989

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Founded by Eric and Roxie Yonkey  
1994-2001

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Haynes Publishing Company