

from our viewpoint...

Time to get rid of superfluous coins

The U.S. Mint is experimenting with new materials for making coins, hoping to reduce the cost of keeping people in change.

The Mint has tried 29 alloys on fake coins so far, ranging from aluminized steel to new mixtures of copper and nickel. One imperative is to keep the same "magnetic signature" as current coins, since many vending machines use that to validate what they take in.

The Mint says it's tried penny, nickel and quarter-sized coins with various materials, which are then tested for color, finish resistance to wear and corrosion, hardness and magnetic properties.

The test involve "nonsense dies," so no versions of real coins which might enrich collectors are made. Martha Washington appears on many wearing a bonnet, and the words are misspelled.

Why the bother?

Seems the Mint isn't getting its 2 cents worth. With copper and nickel prices soaring to record levels, it costs more than 2 cents to make a penny and about 7 cents to make a nickel today. Dimes and quarters are made with a copper-nickel "sandwich," and the Mint says, just reducing the amount of nickel in the alloy could save millions.

Obviously there's money to be saved here, as well as made, but we think the Mint is on the wrong track.

Instead of finding a cheaper way to make pennies, we should just get rid of them, as Canada is doing. Nickels, too.

A 1950 dollar is worth little more than a dime today, so it follows that our pennies are worth only about a mill today, or one one-thousandth of a cent. Most people won't bend over to pick one up. The calories spent probably cost more than the coin.

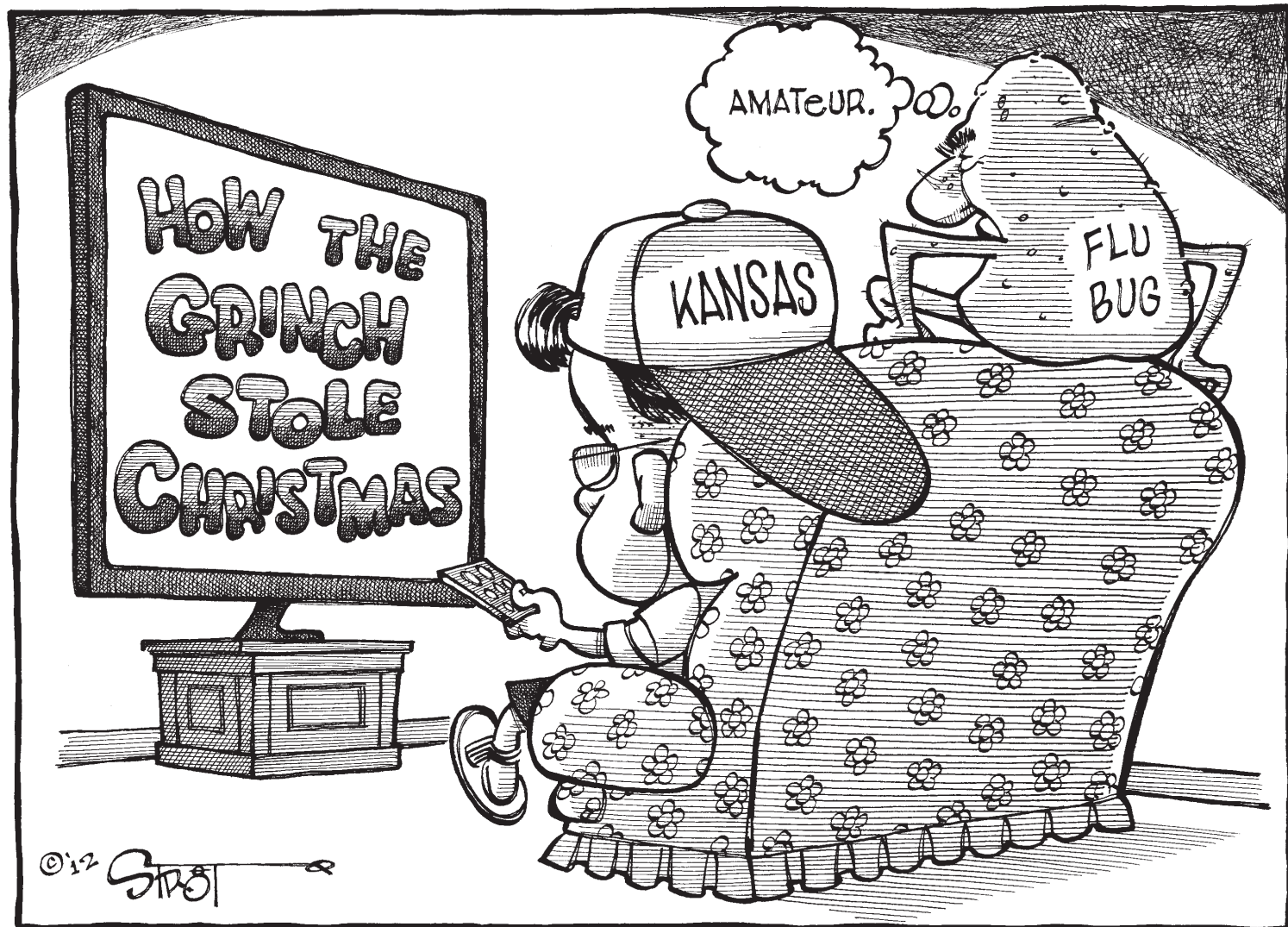
Billions could be saved by not minting pennies and nickels, but there's bigger game. The Treasury estimates that eliminating the \$1 bill could save \$4.4 billion over 30 years. These could be replaced by existing \$1 coins, which have not been popular, mostly because merchants don't have a slot for them in cash-register drawers.

But dropping the mostly worthless small change would solve that problem, and eliminating \$1 notes would thin out our billfolds. Sure, it might be a sacrifice to change our habits. With the government deep in debt, though, we've got to start somewhere.

Coins and currency make as much sense as anything.

Even though there'd be complaints, we think people would adjust pretty quickly. Unless something changes, coins are not going to get any cheaper.

So break out those dollars and let's get with it. — Steve Haynes



Holiday traditions endure

Everyone has their particular peculiar holiday traditions. Some families I know open all their presents on Christmas eve, while some churches prefer not to even make a big deal out of Christmas.

In my family, the most important tradition is to be together, even if only for a few days. For the past six Christmases I have lived in another state from my parents, and my brother moved away well before that. Still, even though sometimes we have had to fly or curtail our holiday visit because of blizzards, there has only been one time in the past 13 years when both of us haven't managed to make it home.

We have other things we like to do as well, like sit down for a Christmas dinner (though not necessarily on the day itself) and see the



kevin bottrell

• simple tricks and nonsense

others of our family that are scattered around Colorado and Wyoming. We also have a tradition of going to a Barnes and Noble and buying gifts for each other. We all go together, then when we're done we go to a Starbucks and exchange the gifts.

Since I've been living on my own I've developed a holiday tradition or two which

are unique to me. The chief among these is watching my favorite Christmas movie: "Santa Claus Conquers the Martians." It isn't my favorite because it's a good movie; rather it's my favorite because it's an utterly terrible abomination of a movie.

Back in the 1990s there was a show on cable called Mystery Science Theater 3000. In the show, a man and two robot puppets would sit in front of terrible movies and make fun of them. Santa Claus Conquers the Martians was one such movie, and it is one of the show's best episodes. That's the version I watch.

So keep your holiday traditions alive, no matter how strange others might think them. Merry Christmas.

Gift of the Magi

I'm calling it "The Gift of the Magi."

No, I'm not talking about the wise men from the east. I'm talking about the O'Henry short story about a young couple with no money and a desire to give each other a wonderful Christmas present.

Each gets rid of their most prized possession to buy a gift. She cuts and sells her long hair to purchase a watch fob for him and he pawns his watch to purchase fancy combs for her hair.

Well, I wanted to get something special for Christmas for our oldest daughter and her husband. We had already gotten presents for the youngest daughter and our son, but the oldest was a problem.

I finally hit on the idea of giving them money. But, not just any money — this would be something that would say "we love you and want you to have a great time."

For several years, they have talked of visiting Ireland, and when his sister married and moved to England a year ago, they said they were going to go visit her — and maybe see a bit more of the British Isles while they were there.



cynthia haynes

• open season

This fall, they said, they were definitely going to England next spring or summer. So, I decided to get them their foreign currency. England is part of the European Common Market, so I went to the bank and ordered \$200 in euros.

It would have been cheaper to just give them the check, but I thought this would be more fun. We would be blessing their trip and encouraging them to have a good time. I also viewed it as shopping at home, since the bank here gets a small commission on this type of transaction.

The day the money was to come in, Steve said he woke up in the middle of the night and remembered that they don't use euros in England. While they joined the Common Market, he explained, they kept their own currency.

Well great, now it was too late to get English money, and I had a whole fistful of money good

in places my children weren't planning to visit. Except, I discovered, Ireland. They use euros in Ireland.

I told my story to some friends and one offered me a couple of pound coins. They were very pretty, he said. He and his wife had brought them back from Egypt as small presents for friends.

OK, I got the coins. They are pretty. They are also worthless unless you are shopping in Egypt, but they ARE pound coins. I added them to my collection and mailed the whole mess off to Georgia.

I'm not sure what the kids are going to do with an envelope of "funny money," especially since daughter called the other day to say she wasn't sure if they would get to go to England this year.

Her sister-in-law and husband are coming to the U.S. in the spring, our younger daughter is having a baby then and the upstairs bathroom leak turned into a huge, expensive project.

I wonder if their plumber would take euros?

Giving away Christmas

I was working on a humorous Christmas story when the news came about the massacre of 20 children in Connecticut, along with the deaths of many adults that gave their lives to protect the children in their care.

My two youngest daughters are about the same ages as some of the children that were killed, and I was too stunned to continue writing. Later in the afternoon, I went to my daughters' concert. When it ended I hugged them tightly, grateful for their safety, while, at the same time, my heart ached for those who had lost people they loved.

When I finally sat back down to work on my story, my emotions were such that I knew I could never finish it this year. Instead, my thoughts turned to the real meaning of Christmas and a different story.

We had been out of graduate school a couple of years, and had paid down our student loans. We decided we could finally afford some of the gifts that our little girls really wanted. We told them they could make a list and let them look through some catalogs. But soon they were overcome by the commercialism of the season.

Through the years of school, when we had very little money, our Christmases were simple, but family centered, and the strength we drew from the season, and from each other, couldn't be purchased at any price. I found myself longing for those same feelings as our little girls fretted more and more about what they wanted.

Finally, as the "I want" attitudes seemed to reach a crescendo, I decided it was time for a change. I called a family council. "This year," I



from other pens

• Daris Howard

said, "we are going to give Christmas away." "Give Christmas away?" my oldest daughter asked.

"Yes. You will still get to choose some things, but they won't be for you. They will be for a child your age that has greater needs than you have."

My wife, Donna, and I had contacted the university for the address of a struggling young family who had children that were the same ages as our girls. What we purchased would go to them. I was surprised at the eagerness my daughters showed for this. They spent even more time happily trying to pick out the perfect presents. They each purchased a set of clothes, a nice coat and two toys that they would have loved for themselves. Donna and I purchased warm clothes for the parents. We also bought a full Christmas dinner with a turkey and everything to go with it. We added a large box of oranges and baskets of fruits and cookies.

It seemed to our little girls that Christmas Eve would never arrive, and they marked the days off on the calendar. When it finally came, we loaded everything into our old car and drove to the rundown apartment complex where the family lived. Donna insisted on playing Santa to deliver everything, even though the apartment was on the third floor.

It took her three trips, hauling the heavy

boxes and stacking them next to the apartment door. We had our car windows open, and our little girls were listening intently. When they heard their mother's loud knocking on the door, and heard her feet pounding down the stairs, they squealed with excitement. Donna had just arrived out of breath at our car when we heard the squeaking of a door opening and heard the joyous delight of children's voices. Then, through the night, we heard a young mother's voice, full of emotion and in a strong southern accent, call out, "Thank you."

Donna and our girls almost simultaneously yelled back, "You're welcome."

The next day we opened our few presents, played card games, built a snowman, and went sledding. In the evening we settled down with hot chocolate and I read stories to my daughters. We talked about how the Christmas season is really about love, friends, and family, just as it was two millennia ago when a wonderful baby became the newest member of a special family.

As we finished the stories, my daughters snuggled up in my arms as we watched the lights on the tree. Eventually, my oldest daughter broke the silence. "Daddy, I want to give away Christmas again next year."

"Me too," I said. "Me too."

As I think of the people in Connecticut, and know we have little to offer compared to what was taken away, I realize we can still give our love and prayers, and that we will do.

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