

## State's highways help some places get ahead

Kansas is blessed with a good highway system these days.

It's the work of many people, but a couple of governors deserve special credit: Mike Hayden, who gave us the first comprehensive transportation plan, though it may have cost him his job, and Bill Graves, who kicked off the second, current plan.

Hayden inherited a rapidly declining highway system in the 1980s, and set about saving it. The result was an eight-year plan which put Kansas back on top of the transportation world.

He also brought a professional focus to the new Department of Transportation. No longer run by a politically appointed commission, the department was free to focus on facts.

And that has brought Kansas a very good road system. Spending decisions are based on traffic flows and road condition, and our highways are in as good a shape as they've ever been.

Try driving in any adjacent state if you don't believe this. Visitors, from other states, and from around the world, praise Kansas highways.

There is a tradeoff in this focus on engineering, however. It means that the highway system, outside the major metro areas at least, is pretty much frozen as is.

Money goes to maintenance first, and upgrading primary routes second. There is precious little left over to expand the system or promote the economy of any Kansas town. Competition was fierce for the \$100 million a year or so in "enhancement" projects.

This means the status quo reigns. And many towns are on the outside, looking in.

Kansas blessed a relatively small slice of the state when it chose the routes for the Interstate system back in the 1950s.

Did anyone then appreciate how much the new freeways would concentrate traffic?

In the years since, roadside businesses and industry both have flocked to the Interstate corridors. The areas along other, once-busy east-west routes have withered. Few new motels and restaurants, fewer plants, have been built.

The Bill Bennett era of the 1970s produced a grand plan for a Kansas freeway system serving all parts of the state, especially the hard-to-drive-to regions of the southeast and northwest.

Some of these roads were actually begun. Isolated segments exist on U.S. 75, U.S. 69, U.S. 169 and even U.S. 36, marked by expensive concrete pavement, four-lane rights-of-way and soaring bridges that carry county roads over nothing much.

With the Bennett freeway plan died the idea of building roads to draw business to poor parts of the state. We traded that for good, basic, solid two-lanes.

In most areas, that's what we need.

There are opportunities, though, and there are prospects for economic development. U.S. 81 is an example; it's four lanes to the Nebraska border today because of political influence, not traffic.

It was built to draw business, and improve safety, pushed by powerful interests along the road.

And that may not be a bad idea. There's evidence that if you build it, they will come.

The rest of the state is watching the U.S. 81 experiment, because there are a lot of places which could use better roads, especially southeast Kansas, where Independence, Parsons and Pittsburg struggle with two-lane access while southwest Missouri has a freeway to Kansas City.

The northern tier of counties along U.S. 36 falls into this category, too, underserved and underdeveloped.

The state could change that. — Steve Haynes

## Mountain visit is work, still fun

I spent the weekend in Estes Park, Colo., on the edge of the Rocky Mountain National Park.

It rained. I was stuck indoors. I had to study. Steve had to stay home. It was still fun.

I was taking my semi-annual pharmacy continuing education classes.

In order to practice pharmacy in Kansas, you have to keep your registration current, and to keep it current you have to get 30 hours of continuing education every two years. Kansas offers courses in Lawrence, Topeka and Wichita most years.

You can also get credits through the Internet or from courses in magazines.

Or, you can go to Estes Park, Breckenridge, Denver, Colorado Springs or Beaver Creek and get them from the Colorado Pharmacists Society.

Boy, don't you just hate these tough choices?

While I didn't get into the National Park, and didn't see any deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep or mountain goats, I parked next to a prairie dog town and spotted several marmots and ground squirrels.

I suspect there was other wildlife



### Open Season

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in the bars in town, but I didn't catch any of that, either.

I enjoyed the mountain air and instead of walking from my room to the conference center through the tunnel-like corridors of the hotel, I went outside and went around the building. I got a little wet. I got a little chilly.

But I also got a little exercise and got to enjoy some wonderful scenery and the smell of rain and spruce.

The mountain flowers were wonderful. The lilacs are just blooming up there.

I missed a week of lilacs in Kansas this spring when we went to visit our children in Georgia and South Carolina.

I love lilacs, and I made up for that loss by stopping frequently, jumping out of the car and sticking my head into someone's bushes. Luckily,

I didn't get arrested or even any strange looks. I suspect I wasn't the only lilac lover in the mountains.

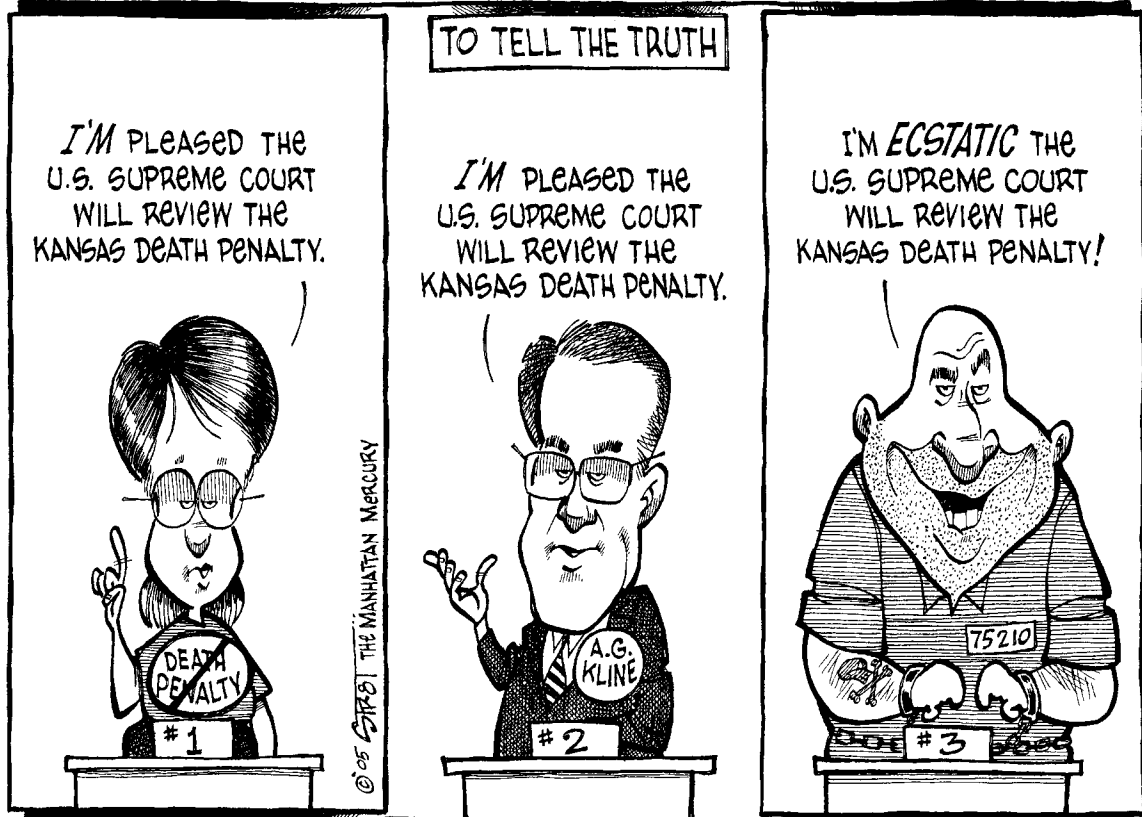
I did get one look at the national park from just outside the boundary.

It looked healthy. There was a mountain stream coming down over rocks and the trees were all leafed out.

There were no large clumps of dead spruce, pine or aspen. The wildflowers were blooming and the bushes were sparkling with the rain that had just fallen.

The mountains are wet and healthy. Hopefully, there won't be any fires up there this year.

I looked a long time at the Front Range. It'll probably be a long time before I get back up there, and I hope when I do, it will all look just the same.



## Youngster returns to Texas

It was a happy homecoming for my 6-year-old granddaughter, Taylor.

She had been with us for the last three weeks and her parents were "itching" to get their hands on her again. When we pulled into the driveway at their home in Texas, her mother couldn't wait to grab Taylor up, and hug and kiss her profusely.

While all that smooching was going on, Taylor looked at me over her mom's shoulder and said, "I knew she'd be like this."

Taylor's independence is a double-edged sword for her parents. They have raised her to be so, but then when she is, it hurts them she gets along so well without them.

They needn't worry. Taylor knows exactly where her foundation is. It's in them. She loves her cousins, her aunts and uncles, Nonni (her other grandmother), Pa-Pa and G'ma, but her parents are her family.

One night during her bath, I asked what she thought of her friend Peyton's brothers. She thought they were OK. So I asked her if she ever wanted a brother or sister.

Thoughtfully, she answered, "I wouldn't mind a baby sister, but I don't want to share my parents."

Taylor is the kind of little kid I would like even if she weren't my granddaughter. Her father and mother (my daughter, Kara) are fairly strict. And except for a propensity to interrupt while others are talking, Taylor is very well-behaved. She talks easily with adults and makes friends instantly with other kids. During her stay, I observed that Taylor is definitely the leader of the pack. More than once I heard her tell playmates, "Okay, this what we're gonna do."

An example of her independence, tempered by her parents' influence, involves her lifejacket. Taylor admits she doesn't know how to swim, but she loves the water. Going to the pool is one of her most favorite things. We were headed to the pool



### Out Back

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one day, and I was reminding her of the rule. "You can't go in the water without your jacket, OK?"

"I know, G'ma."

"Now, promise me Taylor," I went on. "You won't go into the water without your lifejacket."

"Grandma," she exhaled with attitude, "I won't make a bad decision."

Well, OK then. I guess there was nothing more to say.

I realized how busy we had kept her when this morning, in her own home, she said, "Guess what, G'ma. I don't have to go a-a-n-n-y-y-place today. I can just stay home and play."

It's true we kept her on our life's fast-paced treadmill and threw in a few extras for her benefit. She attended three different vacation Bible schools, took piano lessons from Miss Sonya, and for the grand finale, went to a wedding Saturday evening.

The wedding was a wonderful celebration with many details planned for their guests' enjoyment, especially the children. The theme was a fairy-tale wedding with castles, a prince and a princess. Not only were there Cinderella gummy candies and cheese hearts for snacks, there was a real, kid-sized castle and a table full of color crayons and princess-themed coloring books.

When we first walked into the hall where the party was being held, Taylor looked at the table loaded with kid-friendly items. She tugged on my sleeve and whispered, "G'ma, I think we're going to do

crafts."

She had a ball. I let her take some pictures and she did an excellent job. That earned her a lot of prestige with the other kids, because she also figured out how to play the pictures back on the digital camera. The food was even kid-friendly. What child (or grown-up for that matter) wouldn't like spaghetti for a meal? She cleaned her plate and was still eager for the cake.

She especially liked the toasts made by the best man and the maid of honor. Everyone in the hall received a champagne glass of non-alcoholic sparkling apple juice. "I drank seven juices," she announced.

Then she and a new friend, named Dallas, discovered the art of stacking champagne glasses. It's a good thing the "glasses" were made of plastic because they came tumbling down, several times.

After doing "The Chicken Dance" and "The Hokey Pokey," the evening finally came to an end and we headed for home. Skipping to the car Taylor said, "That was the BEST party I ever went to, in my whole life."

It was a great party, but the best are yet to come.

### From the Bible

Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare.

Psalm 75: 1

## Big boys take over Internet

Down the road, we may ask ourselves if the country missed a good opportunity when we let the big telephone companies take over Internet service.

Internet is big business today, with phone companies offering high-speed access for less than we used to pay for dial-up connections.

Nearly everyone can get high-speed service from a cable company or phone provider. Even farm areas will be served by wireless systems now being built.

And the role of the phone companies in all that is critical. Still, you have to wonder.

In the beginning, the Internet grew out of academia and the military. When colleges made e-mail available to students, not just researchers, it really started to take off.

But the big phone companies didn't have a clue. A couple of the more nimble ones, including MCI and Sprint, provided the cross-country "backbone" of the system.

But the local-service "wireline" companies, especially the "Baby Bells" created out of the AT&T breakup, really didn't catch on.

All they knew was there was a sudden surge of demand for telephone lines as thousands of "mom-and-pop" Internet services sprang up across the country.

People were putting Internet "POP" systems in their basements. Businesses stuck them in closets. We had one in a furnace room, another in a long-disused storeroom.

The Internet was hot. People wanted e-mail and bulletin boards and something called the World Wide Web. Nobody knew what it all meant, but it looked like fun.

What sprang up was a crazy-quilt patchwork of services that served



### Along the Sappa

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some areas and not others. But as the Internet caught on, service moved into smaller and smaller towns.

Our company had systems in Norcatur, McDonald and Bird City, as well as places where we had newspapers. If something didn't work, the phone would ring at home — sometimes in the middle of the night. We still give that kind of service, but the phone companies have shoved us aside.

In Herndon, the school district put in a line and opened its system to the community. Some places, the city had a role, others the county, still others a college.

When we got into the business, though, I remember saying that we'd probably be successful only as long as the phone companies didn't understand what was happening.

And for a while, everyone made money: providers, phone companies, equipment dealers, the lot. For a while, we were the phone company's favorite customers.

Then the phone companies started to figure it out. And when they did, the big guys started to muscle in on the market. Southwestern Bell was offering high-speed lines with Internet service for the same price it offered bulk lines to independent providers. Most small businesses knew, in the long run, they'd never be able to compete.

At that point, the government

could have used its antitrust power to separate provision of Internet lines from Internet service itself. That might have created a more interesting mix of competition, and allowed some of the small guys to make a living.

Things were moving too fast, though. And if anything, government is way slower than big business.

The result is not all bad for consumers. Today, we have high-speed access at what used to be dial-up prices. It will only get less expensive.

What we're missing is that crazy quilt of variety that made dot.com millionaires in the blink of an eye and kept Internet connections popping in basements and closets across the country. Someone to answer the phone in your own town. And the fascinating variety of a growing, thriving, living animal.

And that's too bad.



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