

# Your *Country* Neighbor

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August, 2015

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**A Magazine for  
Small Towns and  
Rural America**



**A Late Summer Afternoon, Highway 136, July, 2015. See Cover Story, Page 2**



Thanks, Herb

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## COVER PHOTOS

I couldn't help noticing this Summertime sunset from Highway 136 on my way to Brownville one late afternoon in July.

The fireworks photo was taken at the end of Brownville's July 4th festivities.

I like to photograph wildlife and other scenes in nature. See pages 6, 7, and 9 for more of my photos, (Carol's are on 10 and 11.)

Please support the advertisers who support *Your Country Neighbor*. And enjoy the articles; just note that your favorite writer might be taking a break this month.

Have a great August!

Stephen

## Voices

*From the Valleys of the Nemaha*  
Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

### Writers This Month

Devon Adams  
Carol Carpenter  
Stephen Hassler  
Merri Johnson  
Thank You

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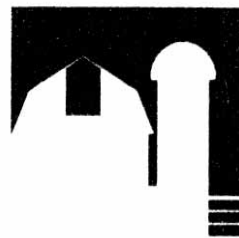
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## The Good ol' Days

Stephen Hassler

After college, in my first office job in the big city, the small talk my co-workers and I would exchange were topics of where we were born, where we went to school, and where we were 'brought up', among other things. I was then, and am now, proud of my rural upbringing on a farm. So at times I would relate the often difficult chores of feeding pigs, chickens, cows, calves, in cold Winters and in hot Summers.

I remember trying to chop through the Winter's ice in the cows' water-tank (we didn't have heated tanks), and trying to re-light the small kerosene lamps beneath the pigs' drinking trough. It was difficult striking a match while wearing two pairs of gloves (I wore my father's clothes over my own), and one time I noticed that I had allowed my glove to catch on fire.

It seemed as if every morning in January and February was 20 degrees below zero. But that was in northeast Nebraska, not the temperate southeastern part of the state where I live now. Back then my world was without running water or telephone, and with a one-room schoolhouse half a mile from home with outhouses and an outdoor well for pumping water, plus occasional water in the basement from the overflow of the nearby 'crick'.

My dad and I moved irrigation pipe from one row of corn to over 18 or more rows to a dry row for several additional hours of watering. We didn't have the large, mechanically-propelled, metal monsters seen in fields these days. Late in the season when the corn was tall, even taller than my junior high height, I had to push and balance the 20 foot aluminum, 4 inch pipe (with my finger-tips), over the corn tassels and 'catch' it in the next row. And the corn leaves almost cut my arms, leaving scratch marks when I didn't wear a long-sleeved shirt. Of course, the hotter it was, the more we had to irrigate, moving the pipe early in the morning and again late in the afternoon so that the water could run all day and all night.

But I enjoyed relating stories that sounded unbelievable; if the chickens didn't get enough calcium supplements (powdered oyster shells), we would occasionally find an egg without a shell, enclosed only by a delicate membrane. No one would believe there could be eggs without shells.

My favorite story was how you could hear the corn grow. No one believed that either. I wonder how many farm kids experience that today? Sometimes when a field close to the house was in corn, on a quiet night when the wind wasn't blowing, you could hear the 'click', 'click' of the corn stalks pushing upward, growing. The sound was like chewing on a stalk of celery. Maybe that story would be easier to believe if one knew that a corn plant can grow several inches in a day, and standing within a few hundred feet of thousands of plants, the multiple growth spurts sound like the wind bending the stalks... when there is no wind!

Real life experiences are often unbelievable. YouTube is full of them. (YouTube even has a video describing corn growing!) Someone ought to upload an audio. Anyway, there are many stories remembered of my growing up on a farm. And some of them would be hard for me to believe as well, if I hadn't lived them myself.



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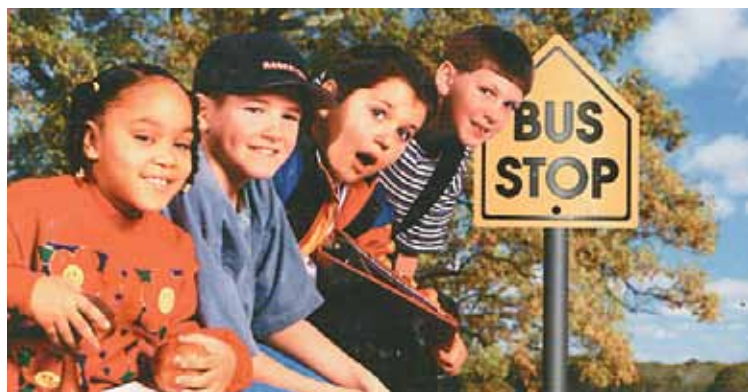
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August, 2015

Your Country Neighbor

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# Poetry by Devon Adams

## DEAD HEAT

Deep in the well of summer  
a breeze is only a memory,  
and the limp, humid heat beats  
down from a skillet hot sky. Sweat  
flows over skin in tickles of rivers,  
and breathing is like drowning.  
The dark of night brings no relief,  
with the menacing hum of skeeters  
singing blood prayers to the moon.  
Corn stalks unfurl at a furious pace,  
as their busy leaves whisper. A faint  
hope sizzles on the horizon, as flashes  
light up the inside of a thunderhead,  
and thunder rolls in mighty concussions  
of crashes. Like a midnight train, the  
storm passes, dropping brief torrents  
of rain blown sideways with gusts  
of cool air. But when the sun comes  
back in the morning, it is with a vicious  
fury of renewed oppression. The new  
moisture boils up, and we are trapped  
under the lid of a furiously boiling pot.

## KOOLER

In the distant past of some people,  
summer was a time to be outside,  
to play in the dirt with miniature  
cars and trucks, to ride bikes to  
our friends' houses, to haul all of  
our treasures to the covered porch,  
or into the vast open space of the  
back yard. Tents made from sheets  
and blankets that hung from clotheslines  
were our own special places, and we  
filled them with the cherished dolls  
and stuffed animals that were living  
creatures to our untamed hearts.  
We had crayons and coloring books  
and blank paper to make the world  
the way we wanted it to be, without  
edges or limits. Time was an abstract  
concept that had no restraints on our  
imaginings. We became the stars  
we saw on television and in the movies,  
writing our own scripts and acting out plots.  
But we always knew that Mom wasn't far  
away, and that she would save us from  
thirst and hunger with homemade cookies  
served with outrageous colors of a packaged  
drink. The pitcher would sweat, as ice cubes  
floated in the sugary substance that seemed  
to have flavors that adults couldn't taste.  
Life was KOOL, and shorter than we knew.

## LINE OF LIFE

We all are part of  
a line that stretches  
far behind us and  
into the future.  
It is unbreakable  
and no one is ever  
lost. We are links  
made from each  
other, and though  
death comes, we  
reassemble in cells  
that come after us.  
And so it is that we  
continue to be alive.

## PORK CHOPS AND POEMS

Shopping for groceries and ideas,  
placing items in the cart, check out  
and carry out, then home again  
in time to watch the evening deer  
and the bedtime wrens. Sleeping  
on the pillows and the thoughts,  
waiting for the sun, doing chores  
and listening to so many different  
songs that fly from tree to tree.  
Getting hungry for the food and  
the words, and frying chops as  
key strokes sizzle. Then eating  
the pork on the plate and reading  
the rhymes on the paper, feeling  
full and satisfied.

## FLUTTERS

At the edge of your eye  
is a nervous waver that  
steals your attention in a  
silent signal. It is a soft  
reminder that all wild things  
exist on their own terms,  
independent of opinions or  
judgements. They have a  
place to be and a purpose  
for being. Beauty isn't required,  
but often it is there, bringing  
colors and shapes that  
enhance our lives, if only  
we will notice. Butterflies  
know this just by being alive.

## WREN TRIBE

They found the brush pile that  
evening, after tree trimmings  
were discarded. At dawn, it  
was undergoing inspection.  
By noon, the pair had sat on  
every stick and branch, turning  
their inquisitive glances in all  
directions, memorizing angles  
of approach, landing and ascent,  
evaluating depth of cover and  
quality of camouflage, reporting  
to each other on this and that,  
until they decided to build a nest  
there, in that random detritus near  
a house, where humans would  
have the privilege to share their  
existence.



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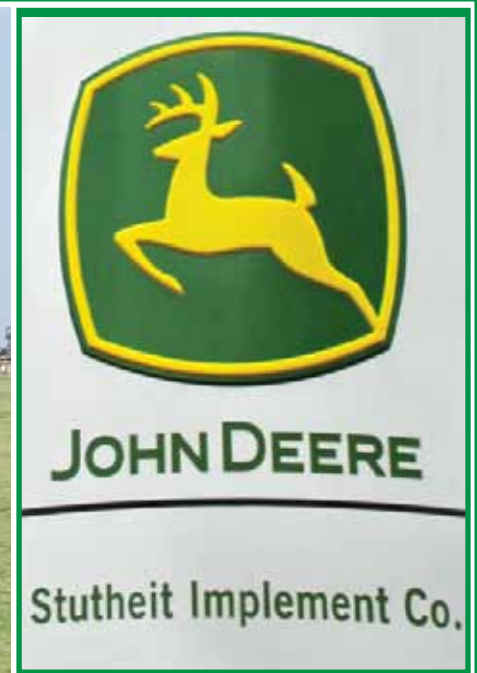
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We'll be seeing more of this wildflower along 136, 75, & 67 in August.



The *Milkweed* blossom is very fragrant.



The *Red-Spotted Purple* butterfly is not common everywhere, but is occasionally seen sipping moisture from stony paths.

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## Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

For three hours now I've been sitting in my screened porch keeping vigil over the wren house fifteen feet away. The wren parents have been frenetically catching and delivering moths and other delicacies to the little ones inside. This past week, we've been hearing the nestlings' faint cheeping from deep inside the house. Today it is noticeably louder, owing to the fact that the babies have moved to the "top bunk," as it were, and are perched atop the pile of nesting sticks just inside the opening.

Their tiny, pointy beaks pop out and in like the tip of a ballpoint pen. Occasionally one will poke its entire head out of the hole and look around with a few quick jerks before retreating inside to safety.

Meanwhile, the parents alternate between two exhausting extremes: attempting to coax their offspring to leave the house, and furiously warning them to stay put whenever a blue jay appears.

A few days ago, I witnessed first-hand the carnivorous behavior of a blue jay. It had nabbed a young house finch and was stabbing it with its beak in the grass just beneath the wren house. I intervened, but it was too late: the little finch was done for. As soon as I turned my back, the jay returned, plucked up its prey, and flew off with it, no doubt to feed its own young. Such is the reality of survival of the fittest. If one desires to observe wildlife, it is best not to be overly sentimental about the fate of individual critters.

As I write this, one adult wren is delivering a morsel to the young while the other is chattering insistently. A cardinal joins the alarm; it has a nest of its own nearby that I am also monitoring. The female is incubating four eggs in a nest in the Viburnum shrub, right at my eye level. Together, the cardinals and wrens have mounted numerous defensive maneuvers against the blue jays. It seems the rest of the birds are content to let the cardinals and wrens do all the work. (I guess birds and humans are alike in that respect.)

It's a great luxury to be able to sit here in my porch all afternoon, hoping to witness the young wrens' exit from their house. I paid my dues this morning, mowing for two hours, so I feel no guilt about indulging in a few hours of birding. As I've been sitting here, a young oriole has visited the plants on my patio seeking lunch, and a (luckier) little finch – still fluffy with downy feathers – has come to bathe and drink. It's 100 degrees by my thermometer. I can only imagine the temperature inside the wren house.

The heat has brought down a hush and stillness over the neighborhood, yet the wrens' dedication to their duty has not diminished. I wonder if they marvel at the miracle of their own existence. Most people would pooh-pooh the very suggestion. But in their way, perhaps these tiny dynamos of the bird world have some grasp of their part in the vast scheme of things.





Swallows migrating, late July, 2015.



*Queen Anne's Lace* is a common wildflower in July.



This year the *Red Admiral* butterfly is much more common than usual.



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by Carol Carpenter

## Open sky

I've visited wonderful cities  
from east to west  
north from Detroit and Chicago  
south from New Orleans to Miami  
with concrete and steel canyons  
blaring horns and sirens  
the never truly dark streets.

I've been to the mountains of the west  
watched sunrises kiss snow packed glaciers  
rafted on froth and frosty rivers  
stared in wonder at the deep canyons  
and red rock monoliths.

I've walked the northern pine forests  
along the root beer rivers  
heard the wind rustling in the treetops but  
something always brings me back  
here to the rolling hills of  
southeast Nebraska, southwest Iowa,  
northeast Kansas and  
northwest Missouri.

I need to feel the freedom of the open sky  
of a roostertail of dust on a gravel road  
or flying down a two-lane blacktop  
with fenceposts peppered with  
meadowlarks and red winged blackbirds  
between fields of emerald corn  
tawny wheat bending in the breeze  
alfalfa speckled with big round bales  
dark sunflower faces dancing in the sun.

Let me smell the wild plums blooming  
or feel the prairie wind against my skin;  
then throw a fistful of popcorn clouds  
across the bright cornflower bowl  
speckle it with red tail hawks  
and whirling turkey vultures  
for here beneath  
this wide open sky  
I am once again  
Home.



## Hummingbird conversations

Around the feeder ruby throated  
hummingbirds swoop flit hover  
dance and fight and I wish  
I could hear their  
wingbeat conversations.  
What would they tell me?

Do they discuss the weather  
the local nest situation  
compare the quality of spider silk  
swap migration route stories  
or point out their favorite flowers?  
Do they have a pecking order  
who goes first and why?

Maybe they talk about politics  
or health insurance  
immigration or crop prices  
probably not though.  
How would it feel to be  
in the tiny jeweled body  
buzzing around  
unable to be still  
always moving  
a heart beating  
six hundred times a minute.

If I could feel that I'd know  
what it feels like to fly across  
the Gulf of Mexico  
hover swoop dive and  
taste the nectar of a  
hundred thousand  
flowers.



Roadside Nature Scene, Rural Auburn

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