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December 2014

A Magazine for Small Towns & Rural America

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These images of the Christmas Season appeared shortly after the Thanksgiving Holiday. See "Cover" on page 2.

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Cover

Stephen Hassler

These Christmas decorations were photographed shortly after the Thanksgiving Holiday. Small towns in Southeast Nebraska have begun their annual decorating for their most festive holiday. Soon residents will join in, with their family traditions in living rooms and front yards.

Occasionally I hear the bah and humbug complaints about crowds, commercialism, and car traffic. Perhaps they should shop 'local'.

How can anyone enjoy the season with such an attitude? To each his own, but why not allow a joyous spirit? Perhaps it would help to recall a favorite Christmas time, possibly one long ago. Re-create those joyous memories if you can. Or just 'catch' the holiday spirit when out and about.

Some day these will be the good old days. It's up to us just how good we'll remember them.

Have a Merry Christmas!

CONTENTS

Cover Comments	2
Devon's Poetry	4
"Where Life Is Good"	5
The "Nuthatch"	5,6
"Eight Things To Know About Dementia"	8
Merri's Diary	9
Snowy Photos of Winter	10
"Wild, White Wyoming"	11
Coupon for Valentino's!	12

Voices

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

Writers This Month

Devon Adams
Carol Carpenter
Merri Johnson
Lee Nyberg
Marilyn Woerth

Thank You

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Your Country Neighbor

P.O. Box 126
Peru, Nebraska 68421

countryneighbor@windstream.net

www.yourcountryneighbor.com



JAMES H. CAIN

Attorney at Law

Office

1920 "O" Street
Auburn, NE 68305

Correspondence

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A Young Female Cardinal beginning to develop color in her plumage.



Female Cardinal & Snowy Branches



Winter clouds can be unusual, and they contribute to wonderful sunsets.

Poetry by Devon Adams

IN THE FREEZER

WRITE THE DAY

Days will run together,
like paint gone wild when
it collides with water on
white paper. They are long,
as certain numbered hours
can seem to be, when worry
clouds the soul, or work is
hard and unforgiving. They
are short, when the heart is
full, and joy is brighter than
sunshine in the morning.
But when you line them up,
you can't remember exactly
what you did ten days ago.
Time becomes distorted, and
what we think was just last
month was way last spring.
Not to mention how many
years ago was this or that?
So, write the day, day by day,
in a simple journal. It is a way
to catch and hold the memories
that slip away before we miss them.

IN THE DARK OF TIME

On the clearest of nights
in the coldest of winters,
even though the stars
seem unbearably bright,
we see through a clouded
atmosphere, like a cataract
that can't be removed.
Giant telescopes on top of
remote mountains are our
best technologies, trapped
as we are in the pull of our
planet's gravitational pull.
But the floating mirrors that
whirl around and above us
in their own orbit have given
a second sight into the sky.
Hanging as they are, in the
same spatial emptiness as
the rest of the universe, the
fog of air is gone and it is a
straight shot to eternity if you
can craft a combination of
lenses strong enough to
see from here to there.

THE EDGE OF ETERNITY

Even as our photographic eyes
probe with ever stronger lenses
that record a range of visions,
from infrared, to x-ray, to the
red shift of the spectrum, we
are confounded to find that an
edge eludes us, and we must
decipher new information that
seems to contradict what known
theories have said must be law.
It seems logical that there must
be an edge to existence, because
the earth has an edge, as does
the sun, and the solar system.
How can there be something not
contained inside parameters of
time and space and distance?
How could the possibility exist
that time is an elusion, that now
is also yesterday and tomorrow,
and it is only our perception that
clocks don't lie, that all beings die,
and that we can't possibly have
been here before we were who
we are now, or who we think we
are. Maybe eternity really does
last forever, and stardust forms
and reforms our bodies and our
minds way past the edge of time.

EARLY DARK

A veil of dust floats
on the constant wind,
as the late sun crashes
into the edge of the earth.
Long shadow fingers
barely had time to reach
out and touch the trees
before the light ran away
with the colors. Suddenly,
the day melted into dusk
that became dark.

THE SEA OF NIGHT

A night of high silver,
with the moon sailing
in a black sea, and the
wind dragging poems
through the grass.
Moving through space
in the pewter glow, with
time suspended until
forever, or tomorrow.
Walking in a place
more strange than a
dream, and more real
than death. Being both
here and there, we touch
the edge of infinity.

Would someone please
pop open the lid on the
freezer? It's dark down
here in the frost and ice,
and the sun only laughs
as she races across the
sky in an arc that has less
bend than the curve of a
rainbow. We are stiff from
walking like penguins to
keep from falling on the ice,
and our skin has faded to
the sickly sheen of raw fish.
How many more calendar
days must be checked off
before shamrocks dance in
the clover, and mornings
lose their chilly drafts?

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Where Life Is Good

Marilyn Woerth

Is Christmas still relevant? Is the true meaning and purpose of Christmas still relevant? It is getting close to that time of the year when Christians celebrate Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which in turn is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*. Both words can be translated as "a coming." In a religious context it is a time for the preparation for the Christ Child otherwise known as Jesus or often referred to this time of the year as baby Jesus. To prepare correctly for Advent one must humble themselves while thinking of the very humble beginnings of this child. Not many babies are born in a barn and placed in a feed container for animals, at least not in the United States.

Are children still grasping the full purpose of the celebration, are adults? I guess that Christmas can only be as relevant to you and your family as you want to be. My husband will go crazy this week (Thanksgiving week), putting up Christmas lights. Drive by some time if you get a chance. Christmas music will be playing from the tea house by the pond. A gazillion lights will be swaying in the breeze, but the most important decoration will be center front under the flag pole. This plywood cut-out carefully cut by my father-in-law, lovingly painted by mother-in-law will be relevantly placed under the flag pole by my husband. The most meaningful picture in this day and age; Santa Claus kneeling, hands wrapped in prayer next to a manger with a haloed Christ child snug in his make-shift bed.

Keeping Christmas relevant is important in our home, where life is good, by the grace of another family we know and eagerly love. Have a beautiful Advent and Merry Christmas as you contemplate the reason for the season.



After the little Nuthatch gets a black oil sunflower seed from the feeder, it finds a notch in the tree bark to hold it in place while it opens the shell with its beak. See page 6.

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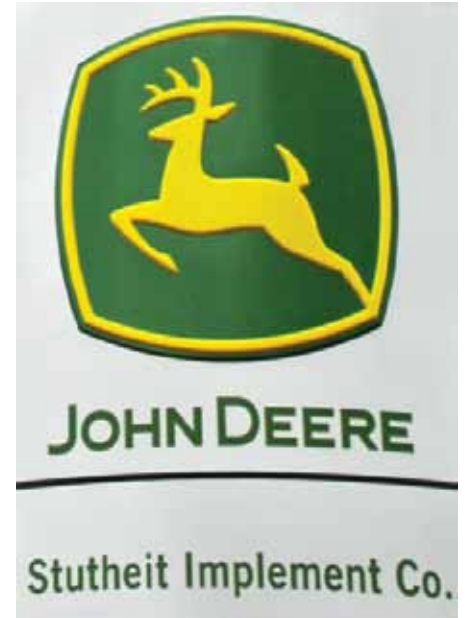
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The little Nuthatch is an interesting bird to watch. It seems to me that it spends half its time upside down. See page 5.

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Alzheimer's Affects Us All



Eight Things You Need To Know About Dementia

By Lee Nyberg

You're wondering... here are some answers.

1. Dementia is more than memory loss. It is a group of symptoms that include poor judgment, memory loss, inability to complete simple tasks, and difficulty orienting yourself in your environment.

For a diagnosis of dementia, doctors evaluate whether at least two of the following mental functions are considerably impaired.

- Ability to focus and pay attention
- Communication and language
- Memory
- Reasoning and judgment
- Visual perception

2. Dementia both affects our senses and can be affected by them. Two items from the above list, communication and language, and visual perception, depend on our ability to use our senses of hearing and seeing. Hearing loss might be mistaken for dementia, since it can lead to many of the same symptoms: social withdrawal, inability to follow conversations, and answering questions inappropriately. People with dementia often have trouble with depth perception and hallucinations. Recent research indicated an increased likelihood of developing dementia among seniors with hearing loss. The greater the hearing loss, the higher the likelihood is. Similarly, people with untreated vision problems, such as glaucoma, are more likely to develop dementia. Having vision treatment reduces the risk.

3. Some dementias are reversible. See your doctor if you're concerned. If you have a treatable condition, you can only receive medical treatment from a doctor. Here are the top conditions which might produce reversible dementia.

- Infections and immune disorders
- Metabolic and/or endocrine abnormalities (i.e., thyroid condition)
- Nutritional deficiencies (vitamins B-1, -6, and -12) and dehydration
- Medication issues
- Heart and lung problems that deprive the brain of oxygen

4. Prevention measures are especially important for women. Two-thirds of Americans with Alzheimer's are women. Women in their 60's have a lifetime risk for developing Alzheimer's of 1 in 6, versus a lifetime risk for developing breast cancer of 1 in 11. (Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia.)

5. If a relative has dementia, your risk is not necessarily higher. Only 5% of Alzheimer's cases are caused by inherited genes. Neuropsychologists advise exercise, a heart-healthy diet, enough sleep, and to stay connected to friends and family. Worrying won't help.

6. There is hope for drugs currently in trials. Researcher, Dr. Dale Schenk said "biology and technology are finally coming together and enabling great leaps in understanding of how the brain works and how to treat Alzheimer's." Researcher, Dr. William Thies says, "By improving early detection and risk evaluation, we will... test potential therapies and eventually prescribe them. Ultimately, this approach envisions for Alzheimer's what is now common practice in cardiovascular disease, where early signs of risk -- such as blood pressure levels -- can be treated to reduce the likelihood of heart attack or stroke later on."

7. What you eat really does matter. Research has shown that a heart-healthy diet may help protect the brain and even rejuvenate its functionality. Limit consumption of sugar and saturated fats and eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. (See DASH and Mediterranean diets.)



8. Exercise is job one. Exercise may help delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease because it increases a protein which supports new neuron growth, improved brain and vascular function, and improved brain health and learning. No drug can do all this. (paraphrased from Dr. Carl Cotman)

Sources: Alzheimer's Association and The Mayo Clinic

Lee Nyberg seeks to help families and those living with Alzheimer's through education and her company, Home Care Assistance.

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Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

I broke with tradition this year and actually began Christmas shopping before Thanksgiving. I have to say it does take the pressure off a bit.

I had success knocking things off my list at the local "Christmas opening" sales in Auburn on November 20. Then hubby and I went to Lincoln on November 22 – the first day of normal temperatures in two weeks – which went a long way toward making the experience reasonably pleasant. It also happened to be a Husker home-game day, which would normally ratchet up the shopping frenzy level. But we lucked out in that regard, too. We arrived in town well after the game had started, missing that first crush of traffic. And we actually got a parking space within two blocks of the Haymarket store we wanted to visit later in the afternoon. And, because it was so early, we didn't have to wait for a table at the restaurant in the next block, either. Despite the Husker's loss, the crowds were festive, making up for the fact that there weren't a whole lot of Christmas decorations in sight yet and no Christmas music playing anywhere.

We may set a record and be pretty much done shopping by the time you read this. The master plan is to detour off I-29 at Council Bluffs on our way to a Thanksgiving gathering. We dash into the computer store for a couple of gift cards, and then hit the toy store. With only two grandchildren to shop for, we should be back on our way in an hour. Ninety minutes, tops. I'm almost giddy at the thought. And I'll still have time for on-line ordering if I've forgotten something. This may be too good to be true.

I'm normally not the superstitious type, but could I be tempting fate by upsetting my typical holiday routine? I'm generally working on addressing Christmas card envelopes and composing my letter about now. But, I haven't bought cards yet and my letter isn't even in the incubation stage.

Then there's baking for the church Christmas bazaar. And putting the finishing touches on the Sunday School Christmas program. And, my gosh, I almost forgot about cutting a tree and decorating at home. At least my outdoor lights are up and ready for the start of Advent. I took the forecast to heart right after Halloween and hung the lights before Veterans' Day – another aberration that may contribute to a disturbance in the holiday preparation time-space continuum.

Since it's too late to go back and undue the shopping I've already done, I'll just have to take my chances that everything else will fall into line as the season progresses. I'll make a list and check it twice to be sure everything gets done.

Here's wishing you all the best of the season, both the preparations and the celebrations. Merry Christmas!

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Above a trace of snow in the foreground, some remnants of Autumn still hang on to obscure the view of the Nemaha County Courthouse.



Auburn's little lake is cold and frozen with a thin cover of the season's first snowfall.

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Carol Carpenter



On September 10, Tom and I left northwest Missouri for the wilds of Montana and Glacier National Park. The first day was fairly uneventful and long with short stops at both the Mitchell Corn Palace in Mitchell, SD and Wall Drug in Wall, SD (do not eat at the Cactus Café—you will thank me for this!) before our overnight stay in Rapid City SD. Since Tom and I have seen the monuments and the Black Hills a couple of times, we skipped that part of the tour. We probably wouldn't have been able to see them anyway as it was snowing heavily the next morning. All we saw of Wyoming was the blacktop and the yellow lines on the road because it snowed all the way across Wyoming.

Somewhere near the halfway point, the driver's side wiper started to fail. Why is it always the driver's side wiper? When I say fail, I mean that the wiper went out past the windshield on the left with each swipe and we thought that it would fly off at any second. Tom drove like a tank driver using the wipers only when he had to and ducking down to see through a semi-clear portion of the windshield. We prayed for a rest area, and lo and behold, one popped up. We pulled in and figured we'd have to call AAA and wait for them to come and help us. Did I mention this in pretty close to the middle of nowhere in Wyoming? No cellphone signal—swell. Tom went to the bathroom and I sat in the lobby (?). At least it wasn't snowing in there!

The rest area looked like an AARP commercial—all retired folks (we call them "coots") like us taking vacation or on the road after the fall semesters began. Tom came out and asked some of the guys if they could help us. He offered cash. I love my guy dearly, but even he admits to having no mechanical aptitude. I'm not much better. Anyway, he finally found a couple of men that said they'd look at the wiper and see if they could fix it. Great, go to it, fellas. My turn to pee, so I headed to the bathroom, expecting that by the time I returned, everything would be both hunky and dory. Next thing I know is Tom is yelling my name at the bathroom door. I hurry out. There are two men waiting outside in the snow with no hats on their head to fix our car. Tom's car keys are dangling from the ignition and my keys are in my pocket. And the doors are locked.

I gave the keys to Tom, he pulled his Tilley hat down tight, and looking down at the ground, took off full tilt before our help decided that it's not worth standing in the snow for a couple of idiots that haven't a mechanical clue how to fix their own wipers. Between the car and the rest area is a Russian olive tree with one straight branch at the same level of Tom's forehead. Running full tilt, the branch connected with Tom's forehead and down he went, like Wiley Coyote smacking into the tunnel while chasing the Roadrunner (Meep! Meep!). Flat on his back on the gravel and snow, he managed to throw the keys to the guys and old folks come from everywhere to make sure he's all right. With his forehead bashed and bloody, and his pride a little battered as well, Tom headed back to the bathroom to assess the damage.

I stayed outside with the guys and they fixed the wiper, showing me what to do should it happen again. Tom returned, bleeding staunch, pride bandaged as best he could. The only thing I have to add is that it's a good thing I went to the bathroom before he connected with the tree. I laughed so hard that I probably would have wet myself.





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