

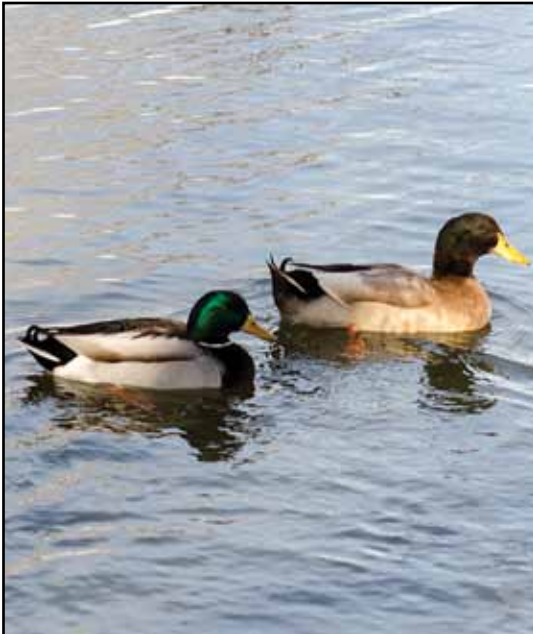
Your *Country* Neighbor

December, 2015

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



Optimist Lake, Auburn, Nov. 25, 2015



What's All The Cheering About? Story Page 2.



The chilly stillness of this farm pond west of Peru, reflects the fading greens of shore plants and leafless trees; warnings of Winter's approach.

Nature's images change with the seasons, and for awhile we will distract ourselves from Winter's more dreary images of nature with holiday meals, Christmas shopping and gift-giving, watching the NFL and the NBA, and partying along with all of the above. 'Tis the season... have a good one!

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Visit Flower Country & Gifts' **Winter Wonderland** for your Christmas Gift or Home Decor shopping in Auburn, 1222 J Street (Hwy-75).

Cover Photo

It appeared that the day was lost with just five seconds left in the game, but the PSC defense played to the last second, and they gave that one second of play back to the field goal team for a PSC win of 19-17.

With the opposing team controlling the ball on fourth down with only five seconds left, in two plays the crowd's reaction went from a depressing 'low' to a sudden gasp of 'hope' to an ecstatic 'high'. That range of emotion made the win that much more satisfying, and resulted in this season's greatest cheer.

You had to be there.

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Enjoy the articles and photos.
Merry Christmas & Happy New Year!

Your Country Neighbor *A Voice and a View From the Valleys of the Nemaha* Publisher & Photographer, Stephen Hassler

Writers This Month

Devon Adams
Carol Carpenter
Sheri Dowding
Stephen Hassler
Merri Johnson
Lee Nyberg
Marilyn Woerth

Merry Christmas!

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Your Country Neighbor

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I LOVE CHRISTMAS

Sheri Dowding

I love Christmas. Not everyone does for various reasons. But I love every aspect of it. The shopping wears out a lot of people because they don't know what to get for people on their list. To me it's a challenge to find the right thing. I learned long ago it's not about the amount you spend. It's all about the memory you leave with the gift.

My Mother always had a "shake, rattle and roll" package under the tree for my brothers and I. We had to guess what was in it. The one package that really stumped us was two pencils with their cardboard wrapper around them. Wrapped only in Christmas paper, the cost, probably a quarter back them, the memory, priceless.

I have tried to find a memory/magical gift for my children thru the years, only they can tell you if I hit the mark or not. They have received mind twister puzzles, their favorite cookies and even fishing lures, to name a few of the weirder presents. Money is another gift they have received in their adult years, sometimes hidden in packages of underwear, in wrapping paper tubes and even folded as bows on the package of a two dollar gift.

Decorations are another aspect of Christmas I hear a lot of griping about. But I love to decorate for Christmas. Every room in my home has decorations in it. From the Nativity in the living room, the real reason for Christmas, to the tree, adorned with years of ornaments, the crystal snowflakes hung in the windows, the snowmen, to the scented candle with greenery on the back of the toilet. Some years my husband has put so many lights on the house we could probably be seen from the space station.

One year, when I was 14, just before Christmas I spent a couple days with Grandma and Grandpa on the farm. While I was there Grandma showed my cousin and I how to make stars out of strips of paper and how to dip them in melted paraffin and sprinkle them with glitter. I was reminiscing in a letter to that cousin many decades later about those stars. A few days later a package came in the mail from New York City where she lived. Inside the package was one of those paper stars. The cost of the stars was close to nothing, but the memory is priceless and brings tears to my eyes even when I just think about it. And they always get hung high on the tree in a place of honor.

Baking all those Christmas cookies is another chore to many. I have learned over the years to bake on one day and decorate them on another. Oh sure, it means I have to clean up the mess on 2 days instead of one but its more relaxing this way. I try to find all my Christmas CD's and sing along using my best tone deaf voice. I've had lots of complains about my singing but none about my cookies. I even get requests from my sons, like leave out the nuts, put in more chips, or can you make those tasteless ones with the yellow frosting in the middle. After a little thought I finally figured out he wanted the red spritz cookies that are shaped like a poinsettia with yellow frosting in the center. And yes I'll be making those again this year. One year the granddaughters came to help decorate. Thinking little girls, I put a cookie on each plate, to help corral the sprinkles, and when I turned around the littlest one was eating her cookie instead of decorating it. Cookie on a plate, eat it. It made sense to her. Memories. Priceless.

Wrapping the gifts is another sing along with Bing or Frank moment. I like to set up the card table, get a cup of coffee or hot chocolate, turn on the music and try to wrap so they won't know what's inside. Over the years I have wrapped a box, in a box, in a box. I have wrapped one or two completely in packaging tape. I have taped batteries to a package containing socks, just to throw off the guessing. Part of the fun of Christmas is the guessing and the anticipation.

One year under the tree at my parent's house was a beautiful package for me from my younger brother. I hated to open it. It was so beautiful. It was shaped like a violin in blue and purple foil paper, with gold strings down the front. You could almost hear the music coming from that package. Finally after much guessing and awing and ageing I had to open it. In side this gorgeously wrapped package was a hammer. It was what I wanted. We lived on a farm at the time and I was always trying to find the hammer. I'm sure the hammer is in the garage someplace but the memory of that beautiful violin lives on in my mind. Another priceless memory.

Christmas cards. Just the mention of it strikes horror in some people. I, on the other hand, like to send cards; I will admit I don't like the postage rates. On the other hand it's pretty cheap to relay my love in a card several states away. Over the years I've seen relatives and friends grow from a couple, to a couple with kids, and now a couple with kids and grandkiddos. I like to hear from classmates, old friends and from those who were friends of my parents. Heck, I like to get cards from the neighbors and friends I see every day. It's another excuse to get a cup of coffee and listen to instrumental music. I have a hard time singing and writing at the same time. I even love Christmas letters. I reread them, in case I missed something the first time. I always read them again after New Years when things slow down. I learned from my mother that I should buy assorted cards because one card does not fit all. So I try really hard to match the card with the person.

One year my Mother assigned the job of the "cards" to my Father. He sent 100 cards, while Mom was telling us that they didn't even know 100 people. I remember how happy my Dad was when he got some cards in return from people he had almost lost touch with. The cards gave my Dad many happy memories. I know this because after he passed away I found that he had saved many of those cards for years. Priceless memories for my Dad and memories of my parents for me.

The weather always seems to have an effect on all the holidays, no matter what time of the year. But for Christmas I am like everyone else, I want three inches of snow on the grass and all streets and highways perfectly dry. Sure, like any other Mom I want my kids home for the holidays but as I have grown older I just want my kids safe, so if the weather is nasty...my motto is...stay home. And if it snows and no one gets to our house, we just have to enjoy the beauty of it and be thankful everyone is safe. I have too many memories of traveling on snow packed, icy roads with blinding snow.

Friends and family all come together at Christmas. Family is who you're born with and friends are family you choose. They are both the same, all so very important in our lives. The older I get, the more family members are a beloved memory while new family members are like candles lighting up our lives. Enjoy the Reason for the Season, the snow, the gifts, the cards, and your family and friends. But don't forget the memories of Christmas past and try to make new ones. Christmas to me is pure Joy... because of those memories. Oh, don't forget the cookies.

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Rocking Chairs

Stephen Hassler

Two teenagers, walking through an old neighborhood on their way to school, noticed an elderly man rocking on his porch and staring into the distance. "I don't want to waste away like that when I'm old," one said to the other, "I'm going to start a business after I graduate from college and retire when I'm fifty. And then I'm going to live anywhere I want and do anything I want." "Me too," said the other.

The elderly man rocked in the chair on his 'wrap-around' porch. His father built this old house before the great depression, so now and then the son returns to sit and listen to the old neighborhood sounds and to watch the world go by; sport cars and motorcycles in the street, children on bicycles, pretty girls jogging.

He noticed the teens passing on the sidewalk in front of his house; young, good-looking, energetic. "I wouldn't mind being young again," he thought, "if I didn't have to re-live the hard times." He remembered the bullying he had to put up with in school, the anguish when his oldest daughter ran away from home, and the pain of his divorce years later. And he thought of his business success, community awards, the love and admiration of friends.

Sitting in his rocker he felt the breeze and the sun and heard the birds singing in the woodland not far from his property line. Tomorrow he would return to the city, but today he would relax and do nothing, because he could.

The two teenagers passed by on their way to school. The elderly man rocked slowly and watched the clouds drift by and two squirrels chasing each other through the limbs. He smiled and thought to himself, "Rocking chairs are underrated."



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Where Life Is Good

Marilyn Woerth

Where life is good, have you ever wondered what that means to you, to anyone? Yes, it is good to be alive, living in a fairly decent, democratic part of the world. To some this freedom is tied more to who they are than what they have or where they live. To others it is all about status. It is easy to quote "Bloom where you are planted." What if you're not planted in the right spot, with the correct lineage, at the correctly approved time? What then?

The town my maternal great grandmother came from in Poland, after World War II no longer exists. I am so glad she had the nerve and audacity to run away to the United States before that time. I think many of us, in one form or another, except for those forcibly taken or driven from their lands, have similar stories. How fortunate we are that our ancestors made certain choices and were lucky enough to have survived, so that we could be created. While researching our ancestors my husband wondered once what the odds were that everything had to line up just right for us to become us. I wonder too.

There is a season upon us here where life is good, that brings a stirring of peace, goodwill and love for all. It is a season of faith for all those who know and believe in the reason for the season. Do you believe in goodwill towards all men, or do you think you are privileged enough to pick and choose? I feel that everyone would like to bloom where they are planted, if they were given a chance. But sometimes one has to have the nerve and audacity to pull up their roots and find their own correct spot to bloom.

How many of us are blooming where we are planted? This time of the year of cold and gathering snow is the perfect time for all of us to look at our own journey through life, to be grateful for those who have gone before. We need to make decisions on our own about our responsibilities to ourselves and to others so that we can all find our own place to bloom, where life is good. I feel very blessed to be able stay right here where my life is growing and content. Merry Christmas and season greetings to all wherever you have chose to bloom.



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Poetry by Devon Adams

MOVING IN

When the north wind blows all the warm air south, and the shadows of the sun draw long fingers across the yard, there are a few citizens who haven't yet booked their rooms in the warm hotel that is your house. Perhaps they were too busy relaxing in the late autumn warmth, or maybe they had so much to eat that they just got lazy. But now that reality has numbed their toes, they are searching for a way to access the inside of your home. A crack will do, or a loose door, anything that is a space small enough to squeeze a little gray body through. Then they will be set for the long, dark of the coming winter. The buffet that exists in your cupboards, on your floors and in your trash will sustain them in a luxury of ease. They will have fun teasing the family house pets, especially the cat, as they run their routes around and under and into and out of hiding places. Not to mention the wild excitement of stealing chow from the bowl as the cat wakes from her snooze and sees the thief as he escapes one more time. The member of your family who has a soft spot for all living things will say, "But he's so cute, please don't set a trap!" That opinion may change when said mouse makes a cozy bed in the nature lover's winter boots with their warm, fuzzy lining.

WHITE SHEETS

It's time to change the sheets. Spring and Summer were light and delicate, with pastel colors tinting the big room under the prairie sky. Life was warm and days were full of light that lasted into night. But now the clock is stuck on dark, with times that go too slow. Someone stole the lazy days and threw white sheets into the wind of Winter. They shook and shivered and rippled down, and now they all lie on the ground.

TALKING FIRE

Wood is cut and split, and kindling is waiting to be the first to feel the match. Then the finger of fire reaches up and wraps around the dried sweet wood. The pull of the draft sends smoke up the chimney in a blue signal that summer is an old memory. The cackle and crackle and spit and crack as the flames eat trees, are words from a language that we can't speak, but the heat from the conversation is quite enough to keep us warm.

PINK SNOW

The first soft snowy night is almost warm without a wind to whirl it into drifts. Flakes are big, and take their time coming down. But there are lots of them to count, so many that the inches are adding into feet. The roads have disappeared and trees are drooping with the weight. Street lights glow and throw their blush around the town, which has become a perfect pink snow globe.

HAWK ON THE LINE

He waits for life to run across the snowy fields, so he can jump into the icy river of air and dive like a bullet fired from a feather gun.

GOING HOME

The road is longer when we leave. Childhood is walking with us, and will never be real again. The pictures in our mind won't ever be as vivid as the single moments of each day that led to growing up. We look back at our parents as they wave us on, but then the future pulls, and we are part of it and not the past. That is, until Christmas comes and we are looking back once more. And whether we can be there in reality, or in the soft edges of our memory, we find that home is only as far away as our heart.



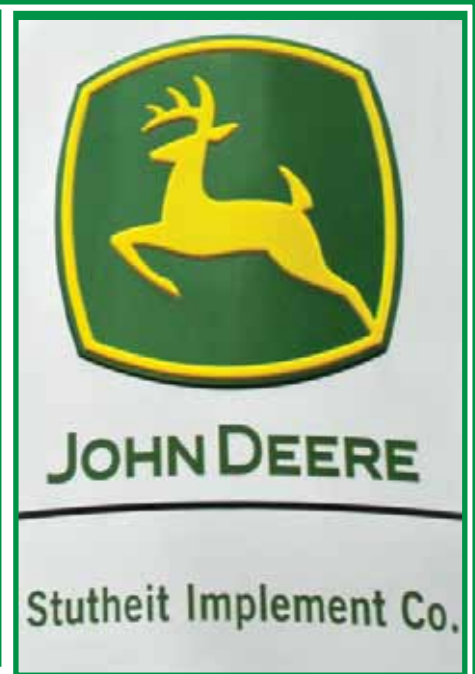
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December, 2015 *Your Country Neighbor*

Diary of a Part-time Housewife

Merri Johnson

This article was written originally for the December 2005 Nemaha Valley Voice

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Winter solstice: the longest night, the shortest day. The term "solstice" comes to us from the Latin word "solstitium," which in turn comes from two words: sol (sun) and sistere (to stand). On solstices, which occur in June and December, the sun has no apparent north or southward movement: it appears to be standing still.

Winter solstice coincides with the first day of winter, on December 21 or 22, depending on your source of information. On December 21, the sun will rise at 7:22 a.m. and will set at 4:49 p.m., shining for a scant 9 hours, 27 minutes. The solstice itself will occur at 10:48 p.m. At that precise time, the sun will sit at its southernmost point in the sky. Take a look out a southern window when you eat lunch that day and note the angle of the sun to the horizon. It will be well under 45 degrees, not what you would call "high noon" that day. The scientific reason for this is that because of the earth's tilt, the northern hemisphere is leaning farthest from the sun on this date, giving the sun its lowest arc in the sky.

Cultural anthropologists tell us that ancient peoples all over the globe recognized that the solstice was a turning point in the sun's annual north-south circuit. They built great stone structures designed to align perfectly with a shaft of sunlight on the days of solstices and equinoxes. These structures, such as Stonehenge in England, likely had religious significance as well as serving as giant calendars to mark the four seasons. If you'd like to read more about solstice traditions, you might check out www.candlegrove.com.

The "science" of nature is fascinating, but it is a sterile discipline, in my mind, if it excludes the contemplation of our spiritual communion with nature. Throughout history, winter solstice observances have been part of the cultural heritage of diverse and geographically scattered peoples. (I wonder if our earliest Nemaha County inhabitants had their own version of Stonehenge.) Over time, new traditions become entwined with older ones. It should come as no surprise that festivals of lights were, and still are, popular in the dark of winter. Sparkling lights cheer us up as well as helping us to see. And light is a common metaphor for knowledge or revelation (think of the Biblical star over Bethlehem).

But the short days and lack of natural light in winter are more than an inconvenience or minor irritation to some. Many people supplement natural light in the winter with special bulbs to combat seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a condition linked to short daylight hours, which can lead to depression. SAD sufferers can probably relate to the words of the poet Emily Dickinson, who described the winter sunlight in the mid-1800s.

THERE'S a certain slant of light,
On winter afternoons,
That oppresses, like the weight
Of cathedral tunes.

Heavenly hurt it gives us;
We can find no scar,
But internal difference
Where the meanings are.

None may teach it anything,
'T is the seal, despair,—
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the air.

When it comes, the landscape listens,
Shadows hold their breath;
When it goes, 't is like the distance
On the look of death.

Not being a Dickinson scholar, I won't try to explain the meaning of every line, but the mood is certainly dreary. If you find yourself despairing of the short winter days, take heart. Although winter solstice is the shortest day, it also marks the beginning of the return of the sun and longer days.

Whatever the season, I encourage you to take a moment each day to note the natural wonders in your Nemaha County backyard.

Alzheimer's Affects Us All



Playing Cards with Friends Alzheimer's Prevention in Practice

By Lee Nyberg

"We do relish our friendships of 58 years," quipped Ric Herbert in "Still Dealing after 58 Years," Lincoln Journal Star, 11/14/15. Deep friendships bring us more than meets the eye.

Social connection is a key element in healthy longevity and its benefits are believed to be factors in preventing Alzheimer's disease, the most common form of dementia. In their book, "The Longevity Project," Drs. Friedman and Martin present findings from Dr. Lewis Terman's eight-decade-long study of factors contributing to longevity. Friedman and Martin concluded the most important contributor to healthy longevity may be participating in social networks which allow a person to help others.

Stress reduction is the elemental, core benefit of friendship. Dr. Gary Small, in his book, "The Alzheimer's Prevention Program," says stress reduction is a key part of prevention, along with other practices such as exercise, stimulating mental activity, and a heart-healthy diet. Researchers at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago found people who are prone to stress are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's disease, as compared with those better at coping with stress, (p. 139-140). Stanford University researchers showed inflammation of the brain, which happens during chronic stress, actually causes the area of the brain where memories are stored (hippocampus), to shrink, (p. 140).

Laughter, relaxation and talk therapy are significant stress reducers, according to Dr. Small. Happily, most of us get these in great supply from our friends. The 7 ladies in "Still Dealing after 58 Years," reveled until 2 a.m. one night, in "side-splitting, tear-inducing hilarity." University of Maryland psychologist, Robert Provine, said laughter reduces the physical symptoms and damage of stress because it:

- Increases antibodies and immune cells
- Reduces tension by increasing circulation and relaxation
- Escalates feelings of happiness, which lessens anxiety and depression

The ability to laugh at yourself and the difficult times life delivers makes a tremendous difference in how you age, and how well connected you stay to your spouse and other important people. Laughing actually reinforces relationships, which in turn, helps us be resilient and handle life's big problems more successfully, as found by Drs. Rowe and Kahn, in "Successful Aging."

Rowe and Kahn's successful agers said they thrive because they have friendships which keep them "active and emotionally secure, even in advanced age," (p. 154). These seniors reported protecting and caring for each other, both emotionally and physically, and sharing joys and concerns.

Healing emotional pain helps keep your brain healthy. Dr. Small explains you feel relieved and soothed when you air worries to a friend who listens empathetically. Michael James, artist and Chair of UNL's Textiles, Merchandising, and Fashion Design, spoke to this personally as he shared his experience of caring for his wife, Judy, through her Alzheimer's journey. He said the opportunity to discuss his feelings and experience with others who deeply understood his situation made a tremendous difference in his ability to cope with his wife's illness.

So—how 'bout one more hand?

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

For more info, visit:

<http://www.homecareassistanceomaha.com/hourly-home-care>

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Merry Christmas!

JAMES H. CAIN



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This Chic-a-dee is a frequent visitor to area birdfeeders; this one coated in ice the day after Thanksgiving.



Optimist Lake, Auburn, November 25, 2015

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Christmas at Disney World

Kevin and I sang Christmas songs
on the shuttle bus to Disney World,
the people around us oblivious
to our voices kept low, harmonizing
Silent Night
Joy to the World
The First Noel
On Christmas Day in Orlando,
it was 75 degrees.
My brother, with his young daughters,
along with pulsating throngs of people
at the place he called "The Manic Kingdom"
for Mickey's Christmas parade.
We, thankful for our older boys,
let them ride the Rock 'n Roller Coaster
at Disney MGM over and over
and over again.
Later in the afternoon,
while we did laundry,
the boys swam in the pool,
the lifeguard in a heavy sweater
and stocking cap while back home
in Nebraska, the temperature
hovered at 14 degrees
below zero.

Sharyl Ann McDonough
12-3-1956 8-11-2015
in memoriam

My dear cousin Shari,
so near my sister twin.
I think of your passing suddenly and
I feel your Irish McDonough soul
across the bridge of blood and bone,
beautiful dark haired daughter of
my father's only brother.

You are gone too soon from this earth
and the reminders of you are everywhere,
in the hummingbird's dance
the first soft snowflakes
the dark space between the fireflies
and the song of the rainbow.

Angels do not weep for you; instead,
they rejoice in you becoming one of
them.

The sky holds you now and
I'll watch the night sky
for your light
to fall
between
the stars.

PS -- Save a spot for me by the pool.

Photography & Poetry by Carol Carpenter

Tauquamenon Falls

It might be too much to ask
but I want my ashes scattered
over Tahquamenon Falls
in the eastern part of Michigan's
Upper Peninsula.

Not the large impressive Upper Falls
that look like a smaller version of Niagara,
the Upper Falls we walked under as children,
on the slippery rock ledge,
with the spray in our faces,
where we had to be very careful
and we didn't die.

Just scatter them in the root beer foam
of the Lower Falls around the rocks and ledges,
the ones I walked across one summer
while camping with Kathy Crabtree.
Throw me into the cold rusty water
and let me flow downstream
beneath the cedars and larch,
maples and oaks of the eastern U.P.

Give this former Michigan "downstater,"
this troll from under the Mackinaw bridge
a "yooper" resting place.
Let me lie in the dark berry waters
of Longfellow's Hiawatha poem,
smell the fresh piney breeze
and let the river
warble in my ears.

I know it might be
too much to ask.
Do it anyway.



Family Portrait

There is a beautiful woman
in my childhood photographs
tall, slender, raven hair
drop dead gorgeous
like a movie star
Betty Grable or young
Barbara Stanwyck
before Big Valley.

She smiles at the photographer
while holding my brothers or me
on her lap or propped up
on the arm of a Naugahyde chair
she is in love with the man
behind the camera who will
die much too soon and
break her heart.

The talented photographer
who leaves behind
a tortured
blue eyed daughter
two freckled faced and angry sons
and a pig tailed girl
with sad green eyes
on the tip
of adolescence
who looks
absolutely nothing
like her mother.

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