EDITORIALS

Petting zoo

When words are serious

"Count us among the millions, surely, who never thought of Donald Trump as a serious candidate for president of the U.S. of A. Or a serious almost-anything.

The best description of Mr. Trump (there are so many sardonic ones to choose from) comes from the always serious Charles Krauthammer—columnist, TV commentator and Deep Thinker. It may have come after still another of Mr. Trump's harangues on some subject or another—perhaps his comment en passant about seizing Iraq's oil fields. That's when Columnist Krauthammer said Mr. Trump sounded like the last man at the bar at closing time: Youknowwhutweshoulddo? We shud take the &%$#@ oil from those Iraqi #$%& because we kicked their &^%$#!*

Then, just to underscore Mr. Krauthammer's point, The Donald went before a Las Vegas crowd a few days later and delivered a diatribe that would've got his mouth washed out with soap in Arkansas.

How could a candidate be serious about winning the Republican primary—complete with a Christian Coalition and its fellow travelers, aka social conservatives—if he's on YouTube dropping vulgarities all over the place?"

—Arkansas Democrat-Gazette editorial, May 22, 2011

Like somebody once said, you learn most from your mistakes. If that's so, we should be brilliant by now.

We aren't the only ones who have counted out Donald Trump at some point over the years. (Raise your hand if you were certain his political career was over when he criticized John McCain for being captured in Vietnam. That was in *July 2015!*)



One of his handlers famously said people should take Donald Trump seriously, but not necessarily literally. But how do you spread that message to his own supporters? For most recent example on that, how do you tell his supporters to stop calling in bomb threats in Ohio because they believe Donald Trump's words about migrants eating peoples' pets?

Words are powerful. (Trust us.) Some words, like some guns, should never be taken out of the safe. But for all of those who wink and nod at the craziness coming from the Trump campaign, from the Trump X account, and from Mr. Trump's own mouth at rallies—and believe the whole thing is a lark, simply entertainment, and the guy's a hoot—there is real danger in the air.

The Wall Street Journal—not The New Yorker, mind you—last week detailed how the pet-eating rumor started in Springfield, Ohio. It's been previously reported that somebody saw a rumor on social media—a "neighbor's daughter's friend said," according to dispatches—and the city manager of Springfield was asked about it on the morning of Sept. 9, by the staff of Veep-nominee JD Vance.

The staffer "asked point-blank, 'Are the rumors true of pets being taken and eaten?'" Bryan Heck told The Journal. "I told him no. There was no verifiable evidence or reports to show this was true. I told them these claims were baseless."

It was too late. JD Vance had already put it online.

The next night was the night of the presidential debate. And Donald Trump declared: "In Springfield, they're eating the dogs. The people that came in, they're eating the cats." And 67 million people heard that live. Millions more heard it the next day.

For those who might think this is either just politics circa 2024, or it's kinda funny, or that this is another example of Mr. Trump being taken too seriously by pointy-headed journalists, these comments have caused real problems in Springfield.

The state police were called in to guard children going to and from school. City Hall had to put up more security cameras. According to the press, *36 bomb threats had been logged as of this past week.*

"It induces panic and fear and depletes resources," Mr. Heck said. "We're living the danger that misinformation and created stories leads to."

The mayor of the town, a Republican in good standing, added: "We have told those at the national level that they are speaking these things that are untrue." But, he laments, folks at that level keep doubling down.

As they are wont to do.

There are a number of legal—yes, legal—migrants from Haiti in Springfield, and the business community loves them. The papers are filled with plant managers who brag about the work ethic of the legal migrants, and the place is booming. Which, sure, will cause problems with city services and infrastructure. There will naturally be more traffic in a booming town.

But there are those who will take advantage of even a good situation. Right on cue, Springfield has been harassed of late by anti-immigration hate groups. This summer, neo-Nazis and white supremacists marched there, and at one point even spoke at the Springfield City Commission, warning against more migrants coming to town.

The city has canceled an arts festival. The DMV had to be evacuated once because of a threat. Several schools, too. That is, when parents haven't kept children at home en masse because of one concern or another. (Like the morning after the presidential debate when the pet-eating claim went international.)

The Vance campaign, when prodded, handed over a police report to The Journal's reporters, providing them with documentation about a Springfield citizen who had a cat go missing, and she thought the critter could have been taken by a migrant. The reporters went to the citizen's house Tuesday this last week to inquire further.

It turns out the cat—Miss Sassy—had actually turned up. She had been in the basement.

But how get those facts out?

One way: Start getting the candidates to use them.

Facts, that is.

OTHERS SAY

Robinson should quit race

The Charlotte Observer

North Carolina Republican Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson only has one decent option now: Quit the race for governor.

Robinson says the comments posted on the message board of the porn website Nude Africa between 2008 and 2012 are not his. But the CNN report does a meticulous job of showing that the person posting under the screen name "minisoldr" is Mark Robinson.

CNN said many of the postings attributed to Robinson were so graphic, it only included a sampling. Thank you, CNN.

Enough is enough. Robinson had already drawn national attention for his outrageous comments and past social media postings about gay people, the Civil Rights Movement, and Jewish people. He's gone from being an embarrassment to Republicans to being a stain on the entire state. Once he was obnoxious and mean. Now he has become creepy.

If Robinson won't go on his own, Republican leaders should explore ways to revoke his nomination. Failing that, they should call for all Republicans to abstain from voting in the gubernatorial race, or, better yet, vote for the Democrat in the race, state Attorney General Josh Stein.

It will only add to the state's embarrassment if, after all this, Robinson receives millions of votes.

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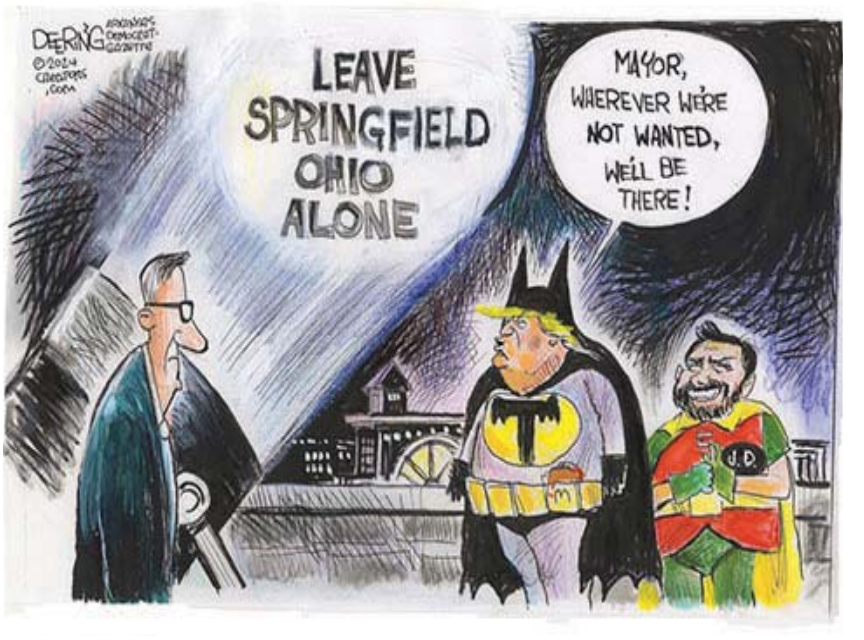
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COLUMNISTS

Ralston means rice

OPINION



Rex Nelson

I'm riding with Tim Ralston through the rice fields at Ralston Family Farms. We're in the Arkansas River bottoms near Atkins on a clear day. Petit Jean Mountain is to my left on the other side of the river. Crow Mountain is to my right. Straight ahead, far in the distance, I can see Mount Nebo. I'm surrounded by rice that's turning gold in the late-summer heat.

If it weren't for the three mountains, I could swear I was in east Arkansas. We generally associate rice with the eastern half of the state. After all, it was William Fuller of Carlisle who became known as the father of the Arkansas rice industry after moving to Arkansas from Nebraska.

Fuller was on a hunting trip with friends in Louisiana in 1896 when he first saw rice being grown commercially. He decided to try growing the crop on the Grand Prairie of Arkansas.

Fuller wasn't pleased with the three acres he planted as an experiment in 1897. He went back to Louisiana for several years and learned the techniques used there. A group of business owners in Hazen offered to pay him $1,000 if he could raise 35 bushels of rice per acre in Arkansas in 1904 or 1905. Fuller planted 70 acres in 1904 and more than doubled the output required to win the $1,000.

Rice production took off on the Grand Prairie. The state's first rice mill opened at Stuttgart in 1906. Cities such as Stuttgart (now known as the Rice Capital of the World), Des Arc and DeWitt began to grow. Through the decades, rice production spread north into northeast Arkansas and became a major sector of that region's economy. Arkansas now raises almost half of the nation's rice.



While we normally associate rice with east Arkansas, there are other pockets of the state where rice is grown. For example, the bottomlands on the other side of the Ouachita River from my hometown of Arkadelphia in southwest Arkansas are filled with rice fields. Here near Atkins, Tim Ralston and his wife Robin have an operation that has received international media attention for the quality of the rice grown and the methods used.

Tim and Robin, whose two daughters and son work on the farm, grew up in the Conway area. Tim's family had a heritage in farming in Kansas. His parents vacationed in Arkansas, fell in love with the state, and later moved here. They raised cattle near Conway.

"I always liked farming," Tim says. "We got married at age 18 and bought a farm at Naylor in Faulkner County. I also sold farm equipment for a time. We bought 1,800 acres here in 1999 from the family of a farmer who had died. We later began leasing other land."

The Ralston family now oversees 6,000 acres of row crops. Of those 6,000 acres, between 3,000 and 4,000 are planted in rice. The family also grows soybeans, milo, corn and wheat. Tim still keeps a small herd (usually about 35) of registered Angus cattle. Through the years, family members began using what are known as regenerative practices to protect the soil.

There's no-till planting and the use of tracks instead of tires on farm equipment to prevent ruts. They filter water through the fields before returning it to the Arkansas River. They've created abundant wildlife habitat. Precision leveling is used to prevent the loss of irrigation water. In 2018, the family began milling rice on the farm rather than shipping it elsewhere. Even the packaging they use is 100 percent recyclable.

Robin says that when their children—Matthew, Jennifer and Ashley—began showing interest in the farm in 2016, it was natural to launch their own line of rice. They spent the next two years building the mill.

"The grocery world moves at a fast pace," Robin recently told an interviewer. "Consumers have countless options on the shelves. We knew we had to go to market with unique rice varieties, ones that are hard to find and rarely grown domestically. Our customers value traceability, knowing where their food comes from and how it's grown. Their tremendous support and encouragement reminds us of that every day. Still, as a new brand, it can be challenging to build awareness."

Robin is a master marketer. She built a large kitchen on the farm for recipe development and has invited top chefs from across the state to visit. I sit down at a table in the kitchen for a meal of rice grits grown on the farm. They're the same grits served for breakfast at the Capital Hotel in Little Rock.

After lunch, Tim shows me the lab where crops and products are tested. We then visit the state-of-the-art mill. Storage bins are just outside the mill, which turns out 10 products from six varieties of rice. There are three carts outside that are used to haul rice from the fields to the bins. They hold 1,500 bushels each.

Basmati rice is being packaged on this day. Ralston Family Farms' largest customer is Blue Apron, a producer of meal kits that was founded in August 2012 and is based in New York City. The second-largest customer is Ben E. Keith, a distributor of food service products with a huge facility in North Little Rock.

Nothing on the farm is wasted. Rice flour, for instance, is used for pet food. With about 20 employees, Ralston Family Farms isn't a big operation. But online sales are growing quickly as more Americans buy products from farms that use regenerative practices. The Ralstons call it "seed to spoon."

"You're constantly selling whether you want to or not," Tim says. "People want to know what makes you different. That's why we got into specialty rices."

I'm looking at a field of purple rice that's almost ready to harvest. Tim explains to me why cover crops are planted on all fields after the harvest. Extensive leveling efforts began in 2007. Then no-till farming was added in an attempt to reduce chemical use.

Even with these efforts to save money, Tim says his input costs were $2.3 million in a year when crop prices are low. He also points out three new Case IH combines that cost him almost $1 million each.

Ralston Farms is served by the Point Remove Wetlands Reclamation and Irrigation District, which sells water to numerous other farmers in the area near where Point Remove Creek runs into the Arkansas River. Tim shows me the three pumps that can move 105,000 gallons of water a minute and irrigate 20,000 acres of area farmland.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has also purchased water from the irrigation district for its nearby Ed Gordon Point Remove Wildlife Management Area. AGFC acquired land in the late 1980s that previously had been used to grow soybeans. At the time, the ground was depleted of important nutrients for plant growth.

The Ralston Family Farms mission statement reads: "Our focus is to provide the best-tasting, highest-quality rice available using sustainable, regenerative farming practices. Our work gives back—to the land, to future generations and to our communities, helping to end food insecurity."

One of the family's publications defines regenerative agriculture as a method that "focuses on farming in sync with nature to restore ecosystem function. It rewards farmers with resilience, profitability and economic viability. By prioritizing soil health, biodiversity, water retention and ecosystem vitality, regenerative practices heal the earth and nourish people."

Sales of regenerative products have grown more than 20 percent during the past year. Surveys show that 75 percent of consumers look for some type of certification when buying products.

An onsite solar farm satisfies all of the electrical needs for the farm and the rice mill. Ralston Family Farms' patented paper package provides a 93 percent plastic reduction over traditional plastic pouches. That's estimated to save 150 tons of plastic from landfills annually.

Products include jasmine rice, basmati rice, nature's blend rice, purple rice, golden rice, red rice, white rice, brown rice, nature's blend rice grits and golden rice grits. Ralston Family Farms products are available in more than 7,000 stores nationwide.

Rex Nelson is a senior editor at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.