***For Release Week of May 20, 2024***

**All Things Nebraska**

*By Paul Hammel*

Welcome to a new corner of your newspaper.

For years, this column has been called “Capitol View” and for the past several years, it’s been written by J.L. Schmidt, an old buddy and former Associated Press reporter at the Lincoln Bureau who could turn a phrase or two.

Before that, it was written by someone named “Melvin Paul,” who was really a long line of statehouse reporters (including me) who penned a weekly missive using the nom de plume about happenings from the “Hall of Hot Winds,” an old nickname for the State Capitol.

Eventually, the governor and other politicians began to wonder “who is this Melvin Paul guy and why is he writing that stuff?” The griping led to retiring “Melvin,” and bringing in an old pro like J.L. to write a column under his real name.

Well, now it’s my turn, and I gotta say, I’m kinda shaking in my sandals (it is almost summer).

Since 1990, I’ve covered the statehouse and all things state government, from the chronic overcrowding of our state prison system to the yearly battles, often lost, to reduce property taxes. I’ve gotten a few state officials in hot water, which I always figured was major part of the job of a government watchdog.

But I also had the pleasure of traveling the state as a roving reporter for the Omaha World-Herald for several years. I got a wonderful, front-row seat to the trials and triumphs of the state’s communities, from tiny Monowi, population 1, to hamlets like Haigler, Holstein and Hartington.

(As a young kid living on a farm outside Bancroft, I considered any town with more than 1,000 residents to be a “big town.” I’ve never gotten over that.)

Over the years, I’ve also been a reporter/editor for the Omaha Sun, the Papillion Times, The Lincoln Journal Star and, most recently, the nonprofit Nebraska Examiner. I’ve written sports columns (interviewed Bear Bryant once), covered more murder trials than I want to admit, and penned countless stories about floods, tornados and wild fires,

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as well as missives about ground-breaking legislation and both failed and successful state policies.

Covering news is not the easiest job in the world, but stories tend to write themselves -- you gather facts, interview folks, boil it down into a readable dispatch that you’re hoping covers all the bases.

Writing a column, meanwhile, is more of a blank slate, and you fill in the blanks. Yikes.

With a new laptop jockey saddling up comes a new name: “All Things Nebraska.”

I considered “Wondering and Wandering” because there’s a lot of news these days that makes me wonder, and I do like to wander across the state.

But let’s settle on “All Things Nebraska” because that’s the landscape I’m hoping to cover with this column. There’s plenty of statehouse news to chew on, but there’s more out there than just whether we need to tax hemp gummies or wear helmets when riding a motorcycle.

I like history, and there’s plenty of that in our vast state. Newsmakers are fascinating people, and we might have to learn more about what makes them tick. And I’m a sucker for a good “success” story, of all kinds.

Life’s many mysteries confound me. Such as why is gasoline so much cheaper in Omaha than Lincoln? Why do we go outside when the tornado siren sounds? And why don’t those plastic spray bottles that contain spot remover work anymore?

So buckle up. Let’s enjoy the ride.

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*Paul Hammel has covered the Nebraska state government and the state for decades. He retired in April as senior contributor with the Nebraska Examiner. He was previously with the Omaha World-Herald, Lincoln Journal Star and Omaha Sun. A native of Ralston, Nebraska, he loves traveling and writing about the state.*