

Thoughts on Democracy for the 4th of July

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Forty years ago this summer, I had the great privilege of living and working in Washington, D.C. I was at the National 4-H Center, actually in Chevy Chase, MD, working with a program that now goes by the name of Citizenship Washington Focus. This is a week long program focused on high school age 4-Hers that shows them much of their national heritage in an effort to help them understand the importance of citizenship. I had attended this program as a high school student in 1972 and when I had the opportunity to work on the staff in the summer of 1976, it was a dream come true.

Yup, 1976; the year this country celebrated its 200th birthday. It was an incredible summer to be in D.C. The Smithsonian Air and Space Museum opened that year. There were many special bicentennial displays all around the District. We took bus loads of 4-Hers to the monuments in D.C., we took them to the Capital. We took them to Mt. Vernon, a personal favorite of mine, and many other historic places. In six short days we tried to give these high schoolers enough of a taste of their history to peak their interest in why they should be good citizens of this country and what that entails. That summer was an incredible experience for me and cemented within me some deeply held beliefs about citizenship and an awesome appreciation for our national history.

One of the things that I have noticed in recent years is that we have a lot of US citizens that have either forgotten, or never learned that critical history or what real citizenship entails. If they had learned it, they would not be trying to draw comparisons between today and then. We have incredible freedoms today because of the brave steps those statesmen took. As we head into an exciting 4th of July holiday weekend, we need to take time to humbly remember what those 56 men, that potentially signed their own death order when they signed the Declaration of Independence, provided for us 240 years later.

They gave us one of the most interesting experiments in democracy that this world had ever seen. If you look up a definition for “democracy” you are liable to come up with something like, “a system of government by the whole population, or all eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives.” This concept is accepted by states, other countries around the world, even by many organizations. We elect people to represent us on city and county commissions, state government, even our federal government. Like any democratic system it really only works when the “whole population” is involved in the process, and to me, that is where the process is breaking down in the US.

In the last presidential election, 2012, voter turnout was less than 60%. In the last Kansas statewide election voter turnout was 51%. These rates are sad and a mockery of the brave men who signed the Declaration of Independence. As a society I’ve noticed that we are prone to gripe about the way things are. Yet when I ask many of these folks if they voted in the last election, the answer is often, “No. It really doesn’t make any difference.” Time and space won’t allow me to tell you all the way’s that that is wrong. The most important thing that each of us in a democracy can do is participate. We’ve got a primary election coming up in a month and a national election in four months. Please, become an active participant in citizenship and democracy and go vote!