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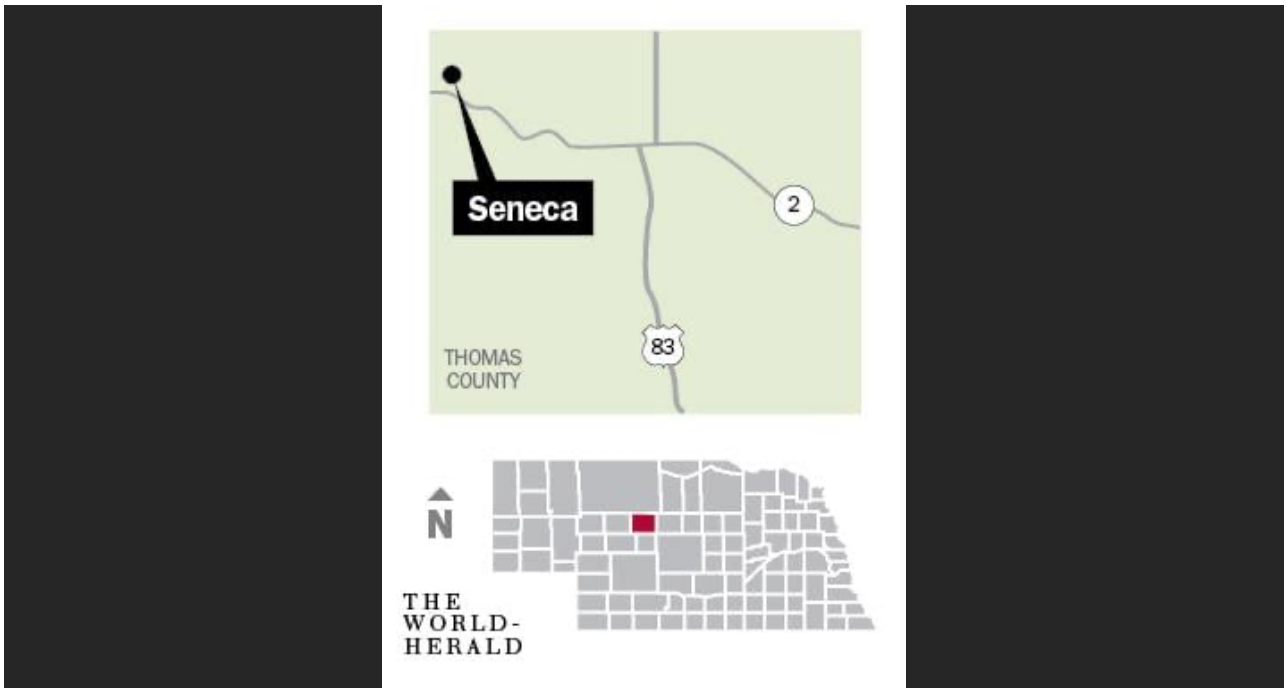
Hansen: How tiny Seneca, Nebraska – torn apart by bitterness – voted itself out of existence



Seneca, Nebraska

Cheyenne Rebello, left, and Dakota Lewis, both 12, horse around as they head over... ▲

By Matthew Hansen / World-Herald columnist

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SENECA, Neb. — It feels so long ago now, but the tiny town of Seneca used to get things done.

A little over a decade ago, the people here sold raffle tickets and organized fundraiser soup suppers. They got grants to fix the cracked ceiling, raised money to replace the wrecked windows, donated their free time to redo the bathrooms and refinish the wood floors.

They worked and worked, and after five years, the shabby old town gymnasium reopened as a shiny new community

center, a place where people from all over this remote western Nebraska county meet to celebrate big events.

Wedding receptions. Family reunions. Funerals. And, lately, a series of increasingly hate-fueled Village Board meetings that have torn Seneca apart.

“We may be a one-horse town, but we can all pull together,” says Sandy Hansen, who moved here in 1964. “At least we used to be able to.”

Seneca can still get things done, but what it does now is the sort of thing that would make Norman Rockwell shake his head, pack up his paints and speed away down Highway 2.

In May, after a bruising campaign marred by allegations of voter intimidation and fraud, the village’s residents voted — by a single vote — to unincorporate their own town.

That’s right: A Nebraska town voted itself out of existence.

Unless two pending court cases change that outcome, the Village Board will be dissolved. The equipment the village uses to plow its streets and mow its ditches will be sold at auction. The streetlights may go dark. The water may be turned off in the city park.

And Seneca’s beloved community center? Barring unforeseen changes, it will be sold to the highest bidder by Thanksgiving.

“It makes me want to cry,” says Hansen, a longtime postal carrier who now operates a small museum and workshop in Seneca. “What I want to say about it is unprintable.”

You may be wondering why a town would choose to become a non-town.

Let’s start with the horses.

A year or so ago, some residents started to complain about six horses corralled in a resident’s backyard.

Horses themselves are nothing new in Seneca: In the summers here, the children ride horses like they ride bikes in suburbia.

But these particular horses were in too small a space, some people said. They were up to their knees in muck. The horses were in danger, they were sad to look at, and they were a bit of a public health nuisance to boot because they were corralled near a town well.

Larry Isom, a retired physician’s assistant who serves on the Seneca Village Board, decided to do something about the horses.

He and several others called state agencies. They called Thomas County officials. They called the Nebraska Humane Society. People at each of those places told Isom and his allies the same thing: This is an issue for the Village Board.

And so Isom began to mull introducing a town ordinance to ban keeping horses and other livestock within the city limits. The board discovered that an old town ordinance on the books did exactly that — it just hadn't been enforced in decades. They chewed over the issue at several board meetings, in which Isom says the majority of residents in attendance — though certainly not all — supported a change.

And then the board voted unanimously to ban livestock in Seneca.

That's when all hell broke loose.

You would think that the opponents of the new ordinance would respond by trying to get the ordinance changed, maybe by narrowing the wording so that it affected only endangered horses or livestock kept in a tiny area. Or you would think they would respond by waiting until the next election and then throwing the Village Board members out on their keisters.

You'd be dead wrong.

Instead, they circulated a petition in town that called for the unincorporation of that town. They got 13 people to sign it, enough to get it on the ballot.

Instead, they portrayed the Village Board as autocratic and rule-happy, though when questioned, many couldn't name a single other bothersome ordinance that the Village Board had passed.

"We just don't want people telling us what to do," says Terri Hartman, a Seneca resident who grew up here, graduated from high school here and now lives with her mother in town. "It was bound to be this and that (from the Village Board). ... We just want to be left alone."

The petition stoked red-hot anger on both sides. Conversations became yelling matches. Lines were drawn in permanent marker.

People who signed the petition think the Village Board and its allies condescended to them after those signatures became public and retaliated when they could. Hartman says she lost her job as a waitress at Cattleman's, Seneca's restaurant — a job she held for five years — in part because she signed the petition.

"There has been quite a bit of bullying," says Hartman. "I love this town as much as anyone. It's my home, too."

Bring these bullying complaints to residents who want to keep the town a town, and watch their eyes bulge wide and their cheeks redden. They are trying to preserve a town that is cut into a picturesque valley in the Sand Hills, wedged

between the beautiful, winding Middle Loup River and the train tracks that once provided Seneca its jobs.

They are trying to save a town that has existed since the covered wagon.

And they are the bad guys?

“On some level, it’s like, ‘What do you want?’ ” Isom says. “Look, there are speed limits in our world. There are stop signs. There are county laws, state laws, federal laws. Without a shared set of community rules, these rules that we have as a society, what you have is anarchy.

“And that’s just silly. It’s silly.”

On election night, the residents of Seneca drove their pickups and SUVs to nearby Thedford to cast their ballots. They watched the county and state election websites late into the evening.

And when it was over, 17 people had voted Seneca out of existence, while 16 people had voted to keep it a town.

Two court cases now challenge that vote.

One is a felony charge against Jacqueline Licking, the 80-year-old who circulated the petition, alleging that she didn't witness all the signatures being signed on the petition, as is required by state law.

The other is a request for a delay on the dissolution of Seneca, as county officials investigate whether everyone who voted in the May 13 election was a legal resident of Seneca at that time. Even one incorrectly counted vote could swing the result of the election and keep Seneca a town.

As Seneca waits, many residents on either side of this civil war have simply stopped speaking to each other, which isn't easy in a town that covers only one-eighth of a mile. When

they pass each other in pickup trucks, they do not wave. And when they are among like-minded friends and neighbors, they throw around accusations that would make the most hard-edged D.C. operative squirm.

While in Seneca, I heard people on both sides say the following things about their neighbors: drug addict, drug dealer, welfare queen, verbally abusive, physically abusive, sexually abusive, creep, jerk and much, much worse.

The acrimony fogs everything, making it hard to see what Seneca once had and now what it stands to lose. It makes it hard to see that, even if the community center is sold to someone who gives it back to the local historical society — that's a potential Plan B if the election isn't overturned in the courts — and even if Seneca residents figure out how to pay for their own streetlights and plow their own roads, they will still lose something. Maybe they already have.

This town used to be the place that banded together and built something. Now this town is in danger of being the place that butchered off its collective nose to spite its collective face.

It reminds me of a miniaturized version of Congress. It reminds me of the worst of modern-day America, a place fueled by fury, where winning an empty argument always trumps the harder labor of searching for common ground. It reminds me that when we do this, we do lose something less tangible, yet still every bit as important as any streetlight or park or community center.

Watch Sandy Hansen on a recent weekday as she walks through her makeshift local history museum on the outskirts of town and talks excitedly to two visitors about the exhibits. Many of these things came from people in town, who before they died gave them to her to make sure

they would be remembered.

Here are saddles used by area pioneers in the 19th century. Gray flannel baseball uniforms from the 1930s. Photos of two area brothers, both wounded in the same World War II battle.

And many of these things came from all across the U.S., mailed to her by relatives of onetime residents who figured the town would love these artifacts more than California or New Jersey or Texas could.

Here are old hats and old mugs and yellowed newspaper clippings, all sharing a common history and a common name.

Seneca.

“Some part of me has to believe they did not understand,

that they don't understand," she says of the people who voted to end Seneca as she walks through this tiny Nebraska town's history. "Because I cannot possibly believe that they understood exactly what they were doing and still voted.

"I wouldn't want to think anyone in this town could be that ... wrong."

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