



# The Gentle Art of NEGOTIATING HUNTING ACCESS



*It's a lot like asking someone on a first date,  
except for the part about purchasing livestock*

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# “One time I had to buy a pig before I could get permission to hunt!”



Mac Minard, an acquaintance of mine, shook his head at

the memory. “I drove down this farm lane and stopped beside the barn to ask permission from the farmer. The fellow was polite enough, but he shook his head and told me he saved the hunting privileges for his ‘customers.’ Remembering the sign on the gatepost that advertised butcher hogs for sale, I pointed to a pen of pigs beside the barn and asked him if he’d sell me a hog. ‘Well, sure,’ he replied. So then I looked him in the eye and said, ‘Now, will you give me permission to hunt?’

“That place turned out to be one of my favorite grouse-hunting spots,” continued Minard. Then, with a smile, he added, “And the pork wasn’t half bad either.”

That conversation a few years ago started me thinking about just how creative a hunter can be when it comes to convincing landowners to open their gates to allow some stranger to hunt on their land.

Sometimes, the quest is simple, requiring only a knock on the door and a simple exchange of information. But other times, the actual process may take weeks or months, involving artful negotiating, serious politicking, and sometimes even outright bargaining.

A word about landowners. Often they can be suspicious of hunters, and rightfully so. They may have had gates left open, litter strewn across their land, livestock and windmills shot at, and worse. One bad experience can sour a farming family on the whole hunting fraternity for years.

And it’s worth bearing in mind that landowners have no obligation whatsoever to grant permission, no matter how charming or convincing a hunters’ request, any more than a city-dweller has to allow some group of strangers to camp out in the backyard over the weekend.

The good news is that most landowners don’t mind granting permission. They like hunters. Often they themselves hunt, and they appreciate the long-held tradition between landowners and other hunters.

But they want to be more than just asked. They want to be asked right.

So the point with asking permission is to put your best foot forward, to present yourself in the best light. Consider it like a job interview, but without the tie.

And just as savvy job-seekers will look for other opportunities at the interview if they don’t qualify for the offered position, an adaptable hunter will know when to switch gears and try another approach. For example, many landowners don’t allow hunting for certain species, but they do for others. The key is to look for clues, and then be ready to adjust.

Maybe all the orange posts or No Trespassing signs on a ranch reflect the owner’s lack of enthusiasm for allowing public big game hunting but not necessarily bird hunting. Maybe locked gates on access roads indicate a concern about off-road travel but not other types. A self-confident hunter who notices such clues might open the discussion with a line like, “I saw the signs out front, but I wanted to see if you’d mind if I shot a few mallards on that pond over the hill.”

Or, “I’d originally planned to ask you if I could drive up onto the upper ridge to look for elk, but I wonder if maybe instead I might get permission to walk those lower coulees if I parked at that locked gate below the house?”

As in all negotiations, the most important step is to first establish some initial dialogue. All too often, hunters never get to first base because they haven’t developed a strategy, haven’t sized up the situation and tailored an approach that will improve the odds of success.

Bob Carroll, a hunter from Butte, told me he pays attention to political signs tacked onto buildings and fence posts and is never shy about making oblique references to his own support for a particular candidate whose name might be featured on a landowner’s property.

“Of course,” Bob says, “I only do that if the signs are

from recent campaigns.”

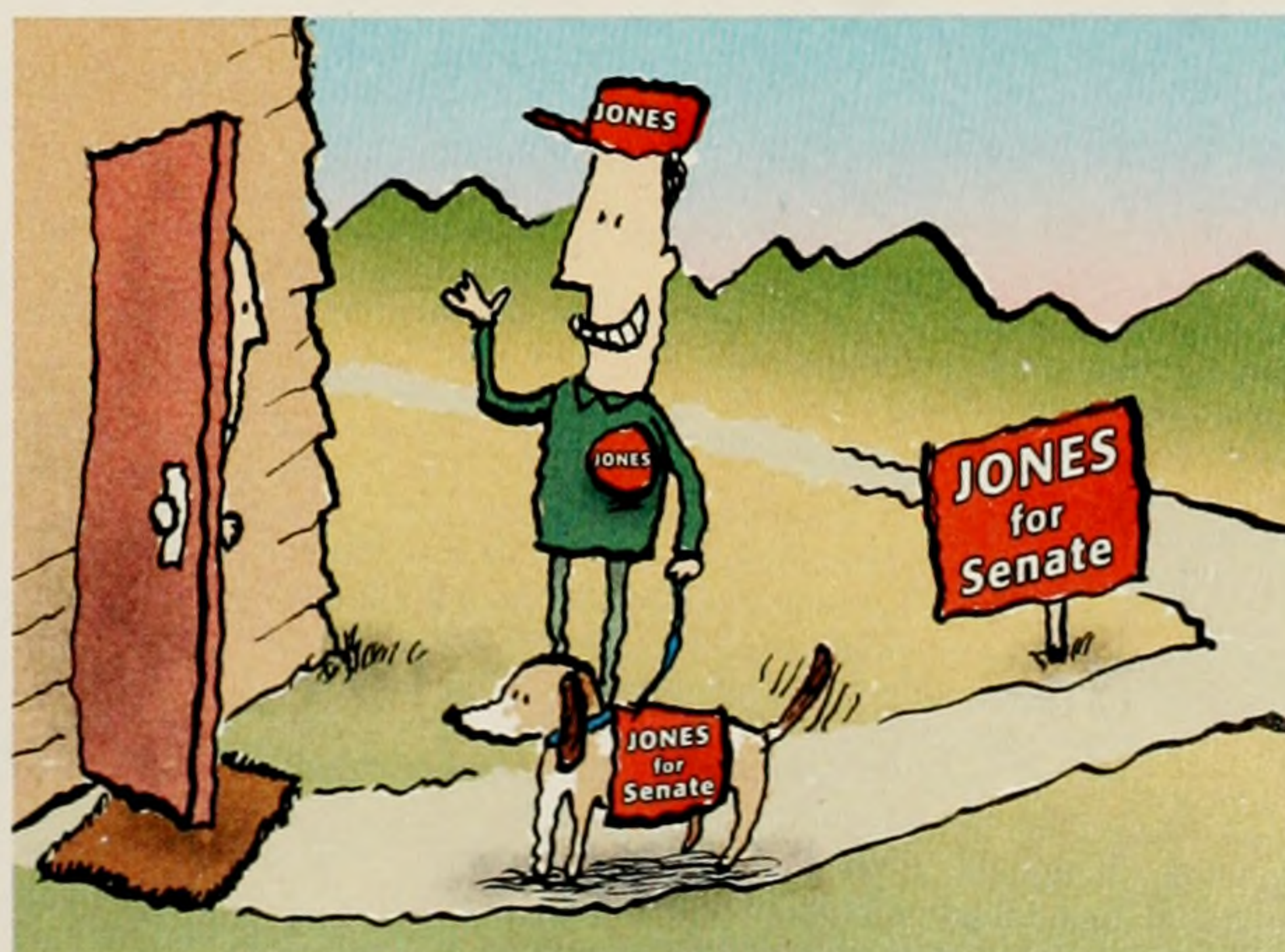
Bob also suggests that if you have a sore leg or hip, don’t hide it; a little limp can work wonders. And if you were in the service—even if you just shuffled papers—maybe wear something that vaguely indicates your military past: “If they ask what you did, and it wasn’t anything particularly heroic, you can always tell them it’s still classified.”

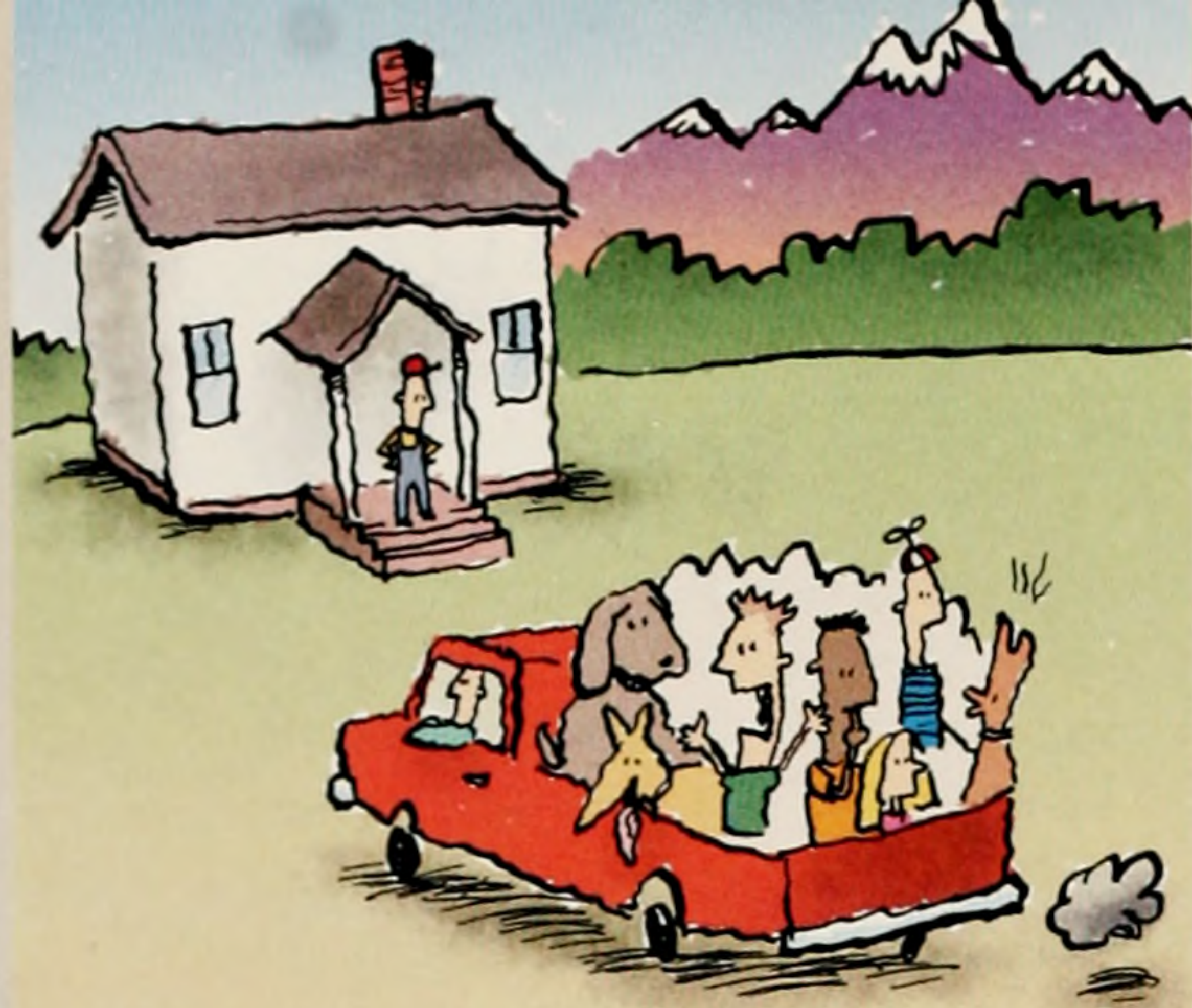
Several hunters have mentioned to me that they seem to do well gaining permission when they bring along a young hunter. It’s good training for the youngster, who needs to learn the art of asking permission sooner or later. And it’s tough for any landowner to turn down a freckle-faced girl with pigtailed sticking out from under her orange cap, or a wide-eyed young boy eager to embark on his first hunt.

Puppies and old dogs can have a similar effect. Many landowners may have a soft spot for requests “to push the brush just to give this young pup a chance to learn a thing or two,” or “to let this ol’ gimpy fellow make another circle through the cover—maybe his last one.”

Ensuring that the puppy gets a chance to wag his tail and nuzzle the rancher’s boot adds a nice touch, as does teaching the old dog the proper time to peer out from the truck window and give a lonesome whimper.

A word of caution, however, about kids and dogs: Pulling into a farmyard with a truckload of barking, ill-behaved curs is not the best tactic. And having your son ask





permission while wearing his nose ring and black “Megadeth 2003 World Tour” t-shirt probably won’t close the deal, either.

The initial step can decide the outcome, no doubt about it. One hunting colleague said a farmer once told him, “I hate it when city folks try to ‘talk farming’ in an effort to break the ice. They don’t know a thing about farming, but they try anyway and throw in words like ‘silage’ and ‘summer fallow’ when they don’t have a clue what the words mean.”

On the other hand, if you do know something about working the land or livestock, you could use that insight to get a foot in the door. One time I stopped to ask a farmer, who was fueling his tractor in the field, how his crop of flax was harvested and how flax was processed, since I’d never been around that particular crop before. My curiosity and interest in his work gained me a five-minute lesson about local farming practices, and I was rewarded further when he invited me to hunt birds on his farm after asking me what I was doing in the area.

Perhaps that simply reinforces the value of approaching something obliquely, instead of head-on. Asking about a certain type of crop or grass, inquiring about a harvesting technique or livestock management system, citing an interest in the history of a place—these are all ways to begin a conversation and can often lead to a discovery of shared interests and knowledge.

Sometimes, an entirely unrelated action results in hunting access privileges.

“One day when I was returning from a deer hunting trip,” says Dave Pavlicek, a

hunter from central Montana, “I encountered a rancher having problems moving cattle down the county road, and I helped him get them to the new pasture. I still hunt deer and pheasants on his place these many years later.”

Another time, Pavlicek was returning from work in Broadview and came across a farm truck near Buffalo with the hood up. “It was a rancher from Hilger returning to the ranch with a load of fence posts,” Pavlicek says. “He had blown a radiator hose and lost all his coolant. I drove to Eddie’s Corner, picked up a hose and some antifreeze, and helped him get the truck going again. He invited me to hunt on his ranch in the North Moccasins, and I’ve since had many good hunts there.”

Sometimes, the relationship between hunter and landowner results from complete coincidence. One time, an acquaintance told me, a rancher was walking down Main Street in Miles City and noticed a truck with a bumper sticker from a national accordion players’ group. The rancher, interested in the polka-related instruments, stopped and visited with the man in the vehicle. That conversation led to an invitation for the accordionist to come out to the ranch that fall to hunt deer

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and antelope. Twenty years later, the musician’s grandson is hunting that same ranch, which is now run by the rancher’s grandson. And it all came about because a bumper sticker identified a common interest.

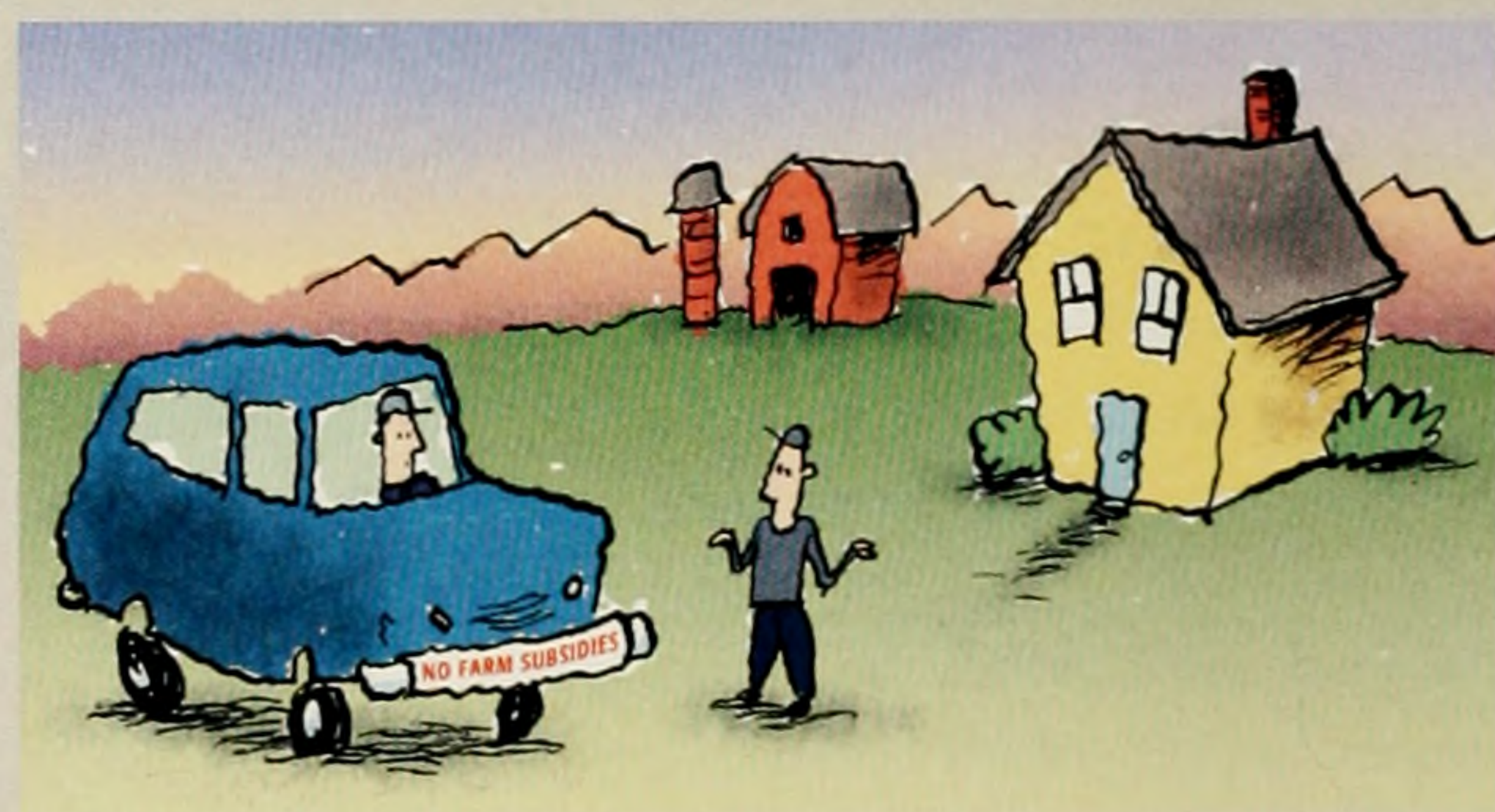
That is something hunters need to think about before they stick decals and bumper stickers all over their vehicle. If the first impression a landowner gets about a person is an unfamiliar truck pulling into the

farmyard festooned with slogans proclaiming support for organizations and philosophies at odds with the landowner’s own ideology, then the chances of gaining access privileges are greatly diminished.

“Stop Farm Subsidies,” for example, isn’t a bumper sticker that will open many gates. And a “Go Grizzlies!” decal probably won’t grease the rails in a yard festooned with Bobcats memorabilia.

On the other hand, an “I Bought the Grand Champion 4H Steer at the Fergus County Fair” sticker might tilt the odds in a hunter’s favor. It sure couldn’t hurt. And a John Deere cap blocks the sun just as well as a visor bearing a vegetarian message.

Asking permission isn’t everyone’s cup of



tea. I know hunters who would rather get a root canal than have to walk up those front steps, hat in hand, and knock on the door.

But other hunters consider the quest for private land access simply part of the hunting experience itself. Obtaining permission is an element of the scouting process, as important to success as the search for animals and their sign. It’s also a chance to make some new friends.

The quest for permission involves maps and phone calls, networking with other hunters, talking with wildlife biologists and game wardens, and then doing more networking—with school bus and mail drivers, taxidermists, and others who might lead you toward a receptive landowner.

The opportunities to develop innovative approaches and strategies are limited only by the hunter’s imagination. For most situations, simply projecting a positive, confident, responsible, and respectful attitude while making a reasonable request is usually enough. For others...well, you might just have to buy yourself a pig.

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