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GAYE LeBARON'S NOTEBOOK

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Penny-wise, pound-foolish

If you are one who gets exercised over government waste and questions where your tax dollars are being spent, stop right here. You don't want to know this.

Yesterday's mail brought to the Santa Rosa office of the non-profit Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization a four-page form from the Social Security Administration's Maryland office with a cover letter indicating that there was a discrepancy in the figures provided by Big Brothers/Big Sisters in 1982 IRS tax information and the office's Social Security report for the same year.

The form was complicated and the government agency wanted copies of W-4s and a full financial report addressing the discrepancy which was in the amount of — one cent!

Lucinda Stone, a volunteer and board member for BB/BS, telephoned the Maryland office where the letter originated, her opening gambit being: "What is this garbage?" The woman who answered the telephone was "dumbfounded" and told her to return the four-page form immediately. Lucinda did. With a penny taped to it for good measure.

You are way ahead of me, I'm sure, in your computations. There was the 25 cents postage both ways, the cost of the form itself, the staff time spent on the letter and the mailing, the cost of the transcontinental telephone call, the staff time spent on the telephone, the staff time that will be spent determining what to do with the penny when it arrives — "It's your tax dollars at work," sighs Lucinda.

THE VIEW from the window of Suzanne Nelson's home said it all. The rain had not yet begun when the press gathered at the Nelson home Monday, called by Friends of the Laguna to a press conference announcing plans to have the waterway declared a National Wildlife Refuge. Reporter John Adams was there to note that the vista was lush and spring green, a sweeping view over the laguna toward "that monster Santa Rosa" to the east.

As Adams and his colleagues listened to the plans, blackbirds rose and fell over the marshland and a flock of barnstorming swallows performed intricate acrobatics. A Great Blue Heron, standing like a statue, took wing, flapping deliberately — majestically — out of the picture.

As he watched all this, Adams said, "I heard a pheasant calling in the distance." It was the perfect background music for the scene and for the discourse on reasons to preserve the laguna. The pheasant called again. And then again. "After the bird's third call, I heard two shots," said Adams. The pheasant didn't call again.