

Jim Hoy: Ranch Life during the Pandemic

Video Transcript

I live south of Emporia, a few miles on forty acres. The house is just almost smack in the middle of that forty acres. So, it's very easy to isolate yourself here. I walk down to the mailbox every day, get the mail or take something the mail if I have something to mail. I walk a mile or a mile and a quarter about every day, walk to the road, down the bar and back the road two or three times that figures out to about a mile. So, I get good exercise out in the fresh air. It's a very good place to be isolated and it's easy to isolate here.

I don't have that much contact with neighbors, but I got a family who lives just across the road over here, up the road, just a little bit, the guy that makes my hay for me. I called him the other day, he has a job in town, and he apparently has been going to that. So, I think many of them are just continuing. I live out in the country so, a lot of my neighbors are farmers, and they're out planting crops now, soybeans, things like that. So, yeah, they're getting out doing things. Socially, I don't know what they're doing.

When I go in town to buy groceries, I wear a mask. I was at the store today, and I would guess that half the people in the store had masks, half of them didn't. And I don't know about the neighbors, whether they wear I'm not there wouldn't be wearing them when they're working outside here in the open air. But when they get together with other people from the town, I don't know.

This COVID-19 pandemic is something I've never experienced before in my life. I'm eighty years old. I've never experienced anything quite like this. But I do know my father, my mother lived through the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. My mother was eight when that hit, my father would have been fourteen when that hit. They never talked about it. If it created a big impact on their lives, there's nothing that they necessarily talked about later on, possibly because living in a rural area, it didn't affect that many. I don't think it was nearly as bad in the rural areas as it was in cities, just like this COVID-19 isn't as bad in the rural areas as it is in the cities.

You know, I have, I'm trying to think. Been through some pretty hard times. My father of course, grandparents lived through the drought of the 1930s, "the Dirty Thirties." The 1950s were almost as bad, and I remember those very clearly. That was a tough time on the ranch to get through that, but we did. But that was you know, something outside of our lives that not affecting people, their health personally affecting their economics, perhaps in their way of life, but not their health.

My son and his wife had weaned their calves, they were getting ready to take them to market. Another two weeks, and they would have been in good shape, but that damn thing hit, and the

market just fell to pieces, and they still have the calves. They're gonna raise them now. They got enough pasture they can handle them, but it really caused a drop in the market. One of the problems—not with, there are plenty of animals where the shortage of beef, I guess a lot of the shelves around the country, it's not that we don't have the animals. We do. It's the processing of them in order to process beef and get it on the shelves in the supermarkets, you have to go through slaughterhouses and packing plants, and their people are working close together, and there is no social isolation, no six feet apart there. You got to get in there and do the work, and it's easy if someone comes in infected. It's easy to get other people infected. And that has caused a major disruption in the supply chain from the beef on the hoof that we have out at the ranch to the beef on the shelf. And that in the middle of that, the packing houses, the butchers, the people are getting it to the markets, and that's just raised havoc with them. It's very difficult.

With restaurants closed, and they're beginning to open here and there, but they're still pretty much, it's gonna be a long time for things in the restaurant business to back to normal and of course, it's those elite restaurants. It's those high-class restaurants or those expensive cuts of beef find a home.

The corner grocery store, that housewife was looking for stew meat and hamburger and cheap cuts. But you know, the beef especially. I have heard that in the feedlots that they don't know what to do with those cattle because they're ready for butchering, but there's no market for them. What do you do with them? Do you continue spending a lot of money getting them even bigger and fatter, or do you just say bite the bullet, shoot them, you're done with it, write it off? I don't know. It's not an easy choice in there.

One problem is—I think one change that may come out of this, in the past twenty years, twenty-five years, there's been a kind of a movement toward grass-fed beef. When I was growing up, it was all grass-fed. Feedlots, well, they had a few and you know, in Iowa, Eastern Nebraska, Illinois. But for the most part grain-fed beef was very unusual. If we could, if this epidemic will get us back to eating grass-fed beef instead of grain-fed beef, it'd be healthier and maybe be a salvation to the ranchers. I don't know.