

Some Kind Of Year



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Dark brown dirt peeled up and flipped over behind the disk. I glanced ahead of our green tractor at the grass that had sprouted up in our garden during the winter. Our yard and trees had suddenly burst into life. New leaves, grass and flowers popped up all over the place. All the signs around our farm told of a perfectly normal year, but little did I know what was around the corner. A few days later, my dad brought home a bunch of lumber to make a chicken coop.



He said he had woken up in the middle of the night picturing how to build a barn-styled chicken coop with long runs for chickens to roam in all around our garden. That same evening we started digging and putting posts in the ground. The next morning my dad told us about a strange virus that had started in China and had killed many people, called coronavirus. "I hope it won't come here," I thought.

All day, my dad, my brothers and I worked, sawing, hammering and screwing boards together. Late that evening the frame finally looked like a chicken coop.



The next morning I grabbed my yellow torch and walked out to my horse's pen. I'd been cutting down all the small trees and briars out of the two-acre fenced-in area to make a pasture.



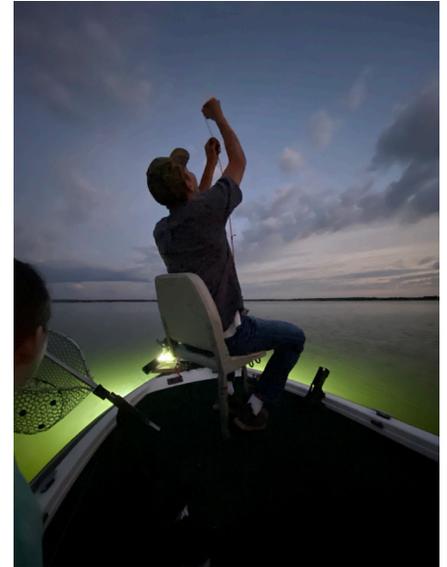
We wanted to have an area to graze a beef calf. Now all I could see of the "forest" was the tops of tons of stumps. In the middle of the field sat a massive burn pile. I walked to one side of it and lit the torch. I held the flame up to a mound of cedar branches. With a crackle, the flames rushed along the branch eating the brown leaves and dropping ashes as it moved up. The flames jumped and roared. I whistled long and sharp then stood and waited. From the far end of the pen I heard two soft whinnies and hooves pounding the ground. From around the field, behind the flaming pile, raced my two horses. Starlight has a white small star shape right above her eyes with a white blaze down her nose. She is a brown horse with a blonde mane and tail. Starlight is the mother of Hazel, a three year old filly. She is

a hazelnut color and has two white stripes on her front feet. Ten feet from me Starlight slowed to a stop, but Hazel, the more bold of the two, walked right up to me and nudged my arm. Starlight slowly walked up and rubbed her nose on my hand. As I left the field I heard her whinny after me.





As we walked in the back door, Uncle Josh bounced into the kitchen,
“Hey Howard, do you want to come fishing with me in the morning?” He asked grinning.
“Sure!” I laughed.
“Be ready at 5:00 a.m.” he nodded. “The fish bite early”.
Uncle Josh had been staying in our camper for a while, because he did not want to risk somehow picking up and bringing the Coronavirus home



to Grandpa and Grandma. It seemed that every day the cases spread and people started actually worrying that it might turn into a pandemic. When we got the news the second week of March that the Governor ordered a complete lock down of all social



gatherings over ten people and then just days later, business closures for health reasons, it seemed hard to believe. All that week we got messages of canceled events. *Due to the virus, we are canceling the banquet this weekend. Due to the virus, we are having to cancel our annual week long symposium— please let all your guests from around the world know. Due to the virus and all the unknowns surrounding it, we will not have any large meetings until further notice...*

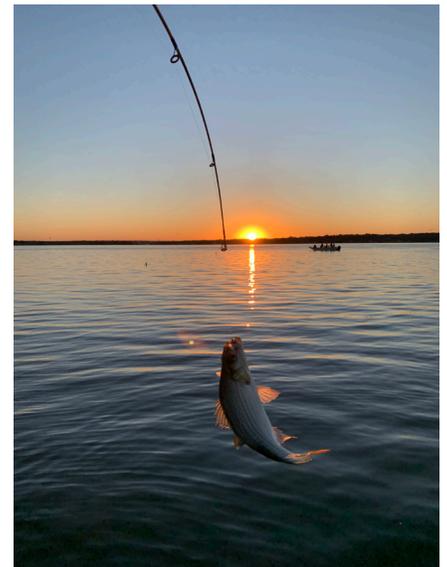
My head hurt thinking about how fast my life had just changed. “What are we going to do if we don’t have anything to do?” I

asked my sisters? They didn’t know.

But we found many things to do on our farm. Uncle Josh had been going fishing every year. However, this spring during the lock down, he got a fishing guide’s license so he could take people for pay. He owns Kai Tea, an organic loose-leaf tea business, but the restrictions on restaurants and hotels completely dried up his orders. But his bills still needed to be paid. He temporarily paused mixing and packaging tea and started heading out to Lake Whitney.



At 4:45 am the next morning Uncle Josh and I hooked up my dad’s boat to Uncle Josh’s truck. We then waited for some friends, Clayton and Tirzah, to drive up. Ten minutes later we headed off to Lake Whitney. As Uncle Josh backed the boat down the ramp, the sky began to turn gray. A cold breeze blew off the lake. Uncle Josh started the motor and we were off. The bow of the boat split the water and left it churning in our wake. That morning the fish must have been as sleepy as we were, because we didn’t get a single bite. After we had raced all over the lake, Uncle Josh





stopped the boat in the middle and told us, “I don’t know what to say, there is one other place we can check, and if they are not there, I don’t know if we’ll get any.” He shook his head and started the boat. A few minutes later we pulled up to a cove with red sand. Uncle Josh grabbed his rod and cast out towards the shore. About two seconds after it hit the water, his rod jerked. Uncle Josh yelled “I got one!” Clayton threw out his line too, “I have one!” He smiled. “All right they’re here.” Uncle Josh said as he pulled a big white bass onto the boat. I threw mine out and I caught one too! We



all cast out as fast as we could and every time we caught a fish. Two hours later we all limited out and we headed back with 109



fish! That night Uncle Josh, Clayton and I filleted all the fish.

As the days went by, and more and more cases of COVID popped up, my dad worried that he might lose his job. My sisters already had been laid off from their jobs. He had been a traveling superintendent for eighteen years for a large construction company based out of Ohio, but in the last year he quit traveling and worked from home as a project manager for that company. One day in April, my dad walked into the kitchen in the middle of his work day. He rubbed his hands together and said, “Brad just called and said they have run out of jobs and he has to lay me off.” One of the kids blurted, “What are you going to do? That’s terrible! Why did Brad do that to you?”



Brad, my dad’s boss had always given my



dad good jobs and even flew in to come visit us the year before. “He had nothing else he could do. We’re going to really have to depend on our farm for food this year. Now I know why I knew I needed to build the coop when I did. Building materials are double what they were when I purchased the lumber.”



We rushed to get school work done earlier in the morning, so we could work all day on the chicken coop and garden since we had my dad home all day.

One Saturday we put the last staple in the run. We had finished the chicken coop! Later that same day, my sister drove our van to the Homestead General Store and purchased twelve laying hens to come live in the left side of the chicken barn. Soon after we added 24 chicks for laying eggs and 25 chicks to raise for meat.



Hour after hour, we worked in our gardens, my dad digging the holes, my older sisters Jessica, Nicole and I put the plants in the holes and my younger siblings, Sean and Alicia covered the holes. Our community has worked towards self-sustainability for decades. Our family has always grown big gardens. This



year as we heard about whole sections of grocery stores with rows and rows of bare shelves, we realized that never before had we plant knowing that we might end up depending only on our garden and chickens for food.



The stores ran out of eggs, but we gathered them by the dozens. We were able to share them with our neighbors who told us they had driven from store to store searching for eggs.



It rained every few days and the baby plants quickly sprouted and grew extra well. One morning I walked out to

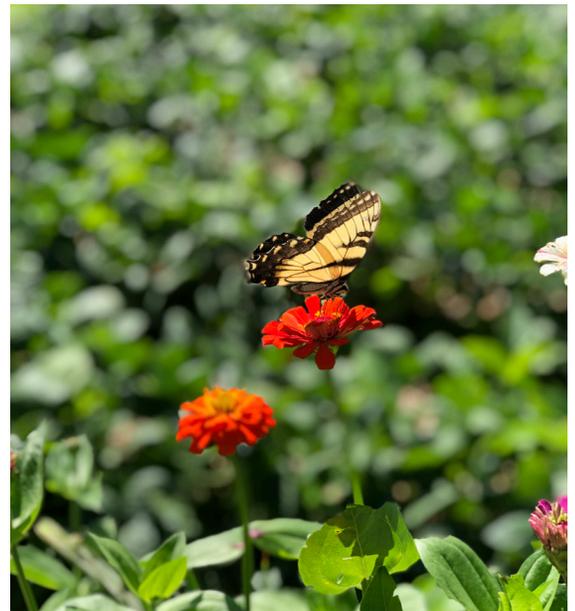


spray our bean patch with fish emulsion.

I saw that the green beans pods had filled out and were ready to pick. Later that afternoon Jessica, Nicole, and I picked about 50 quarts of beans. So that night my family snapped and put them in quarts jars, filled

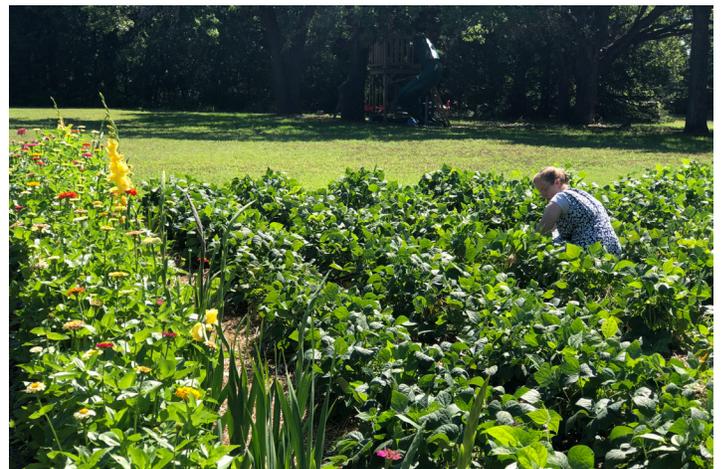


them with boiling water and put them in the canner. After that first picking, all our gardens decided that they needed to produce as fast as they could.



One night while we sat at the dinner table, Uncle Josh told us that some of my cousins were coming over to help him bag some free tea samples. He wondered if he sent out samples all over the country, people might decide to place orders. After dinner that night we walked out to my Uncle Josh's tea shop. A big long table sat down the middle of the room. He gave my cousin Renée and myself a big stack of labeled bags to open. Uncle Josh then set up others filling, closing or sealing the bags. We talked and visited until late as we bagged the tea.

All during the season when we would have been up late into the night cooking and helping serve at our church's annual symposium with all our friends, we stayed home, landscaping our yard, cut down trees, planting flowers, processing fish, weeding and weeding the gardens, doing school work and hoping and praying for a let up in the lock down. Every few days we heard of new restrictions and more deaths. Also the stores were running out of food and necessities, like toilet paper. People in the cities with all their kids staying home from school, could not leave their houses, and I wondered how they could stand sitting around and doing nothing. We heard reports of people running





a marathon in a five foot circle in their house. We read a mailer listing five tips on how to curb anxieties due to the lack of things to do.

Meanwhile, Penny, one of our dogs had a batch of ten puppies! Then a



few days later, Pearl had a litter of six. We all stayed busy checking on the sixteen puppies.



In May, Mom had a baby girl. Brooke Olivia joined our family as my seventh

sibling. The week she was born, we harvested, snapped and canned 200 quarts of beans. Our friends who came to help Mom after she had the baby, pitched in to help with the beans.



Our neighbor came and my brothers and I helped him put in a seven-strand barbwire fence around my newly cleared field.



A friend in our community offered my dad a job in a much smaller construction business. My dad told us that we could no longer afford horses. We needed the pasture for a beef cow and we couldn't afford to keep buying hay. Starlight had been a present for my eighth birthday. I had her for nine years. My dad and I talked over all the possibilities of keeping them. "Can't they share the pasture

with a cow? What if we sell Hazel and keep Starlight?" I wondered. But I knew he was right. The new pasture would be just enough for one beef cow. To help provide our family's food, we needed beef. Maybe after we cleared more pasture, we'd get a horse again. A lady from Austin came one day and fell in love with the horses. She promised to send us pictures and let us come down and visit them whenever we wanted. She came with a big trailer and took them away. I stood and watched as she drove down the driveway. I caught a last glimpse of their blond tails through the slats of the trailer gate. I missed them already, but I tried not to think about it too much.





Uncle Josh still took groups of people fishing every morning. Sometimes I woke up in the dark early morning to see the bright lights in front of our shop on, and then Uncle Josh's truck with the boat pulling out of our driveway.

Uncle Josh didn't just go fishing-- as he liked to say, "We go catching!" One morning my cousins went with Uncle Josh and caught 150 fish in about two hours. About once a week, Uncle Josh would walk up with a big grin on his face and ask, "If I take you fishing in the morning will you help me on my shop?"

"Yes!" I always replied. Sometimes Uncle Josh hired Sean and I to fillet the fish that he and his group caught. Day after day we filleted more and more fish. Some we sent home with the fishermen and some we kept.

Our deep freezer filled up with fillets stacked among all the garden produce.



In the mornings my whole family picked and weeded and in the afternoons, canned and blanched corn and tomatoes.

Every two days we picked the tomatoes. One Saturday, My dad and I took one row and Jessica and Nicole took another. Sean, Alicia and Jonny emptied our buckets into the wheelbarrow. The sun shone hotter and hotter, green plants and red and green tomatoes hung onto the cages and draped into the aisles. Again and again we filled our buckets and had them emptied.



Finally my dad and I finished the last half row and carried them to the big crate and dumped them into it. I looked around and saw that the wheelbarrow had been filled so full that some of the tomatoes had fallen off and five big crates sat around it full as well. That night we cut and ran most of the tomatoes through a juicer for sauce, the others we blanched and peeled and put in jars for whole





enough produce canned to last until next summer's garden. Mom called her friends and asked if anyone needed tomatoes, since a



into the soil and make compost.



tomatoes. Soon after that we picked an even bigger batch of tomatoes. My dad estimated we had picked a couple thousand pounds of tomatoes already. We also had cucumbers, squash, watermelon and cantaloupe growing faster than we could pick and process them. We still had tons of green beans ripening and more tomatoes to pick. Finally, after counting all the jars, we realized we had more than

a major hail storm had damaged many of our friends' gardens. For some reason, the hail had only dented a few plants on our farm. People came in the mornings and harvested five-gallon bucket loads of juicy tomatoes for themselves. Finally after everybody got as many tomatoes as they wanted, we stopped picking the fruit, and let the last few fall



Several evenings a week, Sean and I filleted fish for hours outside under the big L.E.D lights, then we washed the fillets and put them in the freezer. By the end of the “catching season” we had all caught well over 2200 fish. As the garden season came to a close, we had canned over 300 quarts of green beans, gathered a gallon and a half of pinto beans, put up 3000 pounds of tomatoes, tons of pickles, and harvested lots of squash and okra. We also had bags and bags of corn and fish in the freezer.



After that I had more time to work in my field. My dad got a backhoe and we pulled up the stumps and smoothed out the holes and dragged the little sticks to a big burn pile. A few weeks later we disked the whole back field, and planted a special mix of grasses in it.

It had been some kind of year! We heard many people say this has been a wasted year, that this year was a total loss. But looking back over it, we made good use of the unusual circumstances and accomplished more than ever before on our farm. During the COVID lock down my family and I learned how to work together. When a task looked too hard for us, we worked together and together we finished it. Together we planted and harvested two big gardens, built a chicken coop, picked, canned and put up thousands of pounds of produce, caught and filleted a couple thousand fish. Together we worked to



overcome the hardships we faced. We worked to become more self -sustainable and we sure learned a lot! It was some kind of year!



Howard Wheeler
2020





