

**Janzen Family Farms**  
**January 2021 Newsletter**

Dear Friends and Customers,

The double rainbow over Janzen Family Farms earlier this summer provides a hint of sunshine and hope after a year fraught with a global pandemic and a chaotic and poisonous political season. Covid-19 not only disrupted our travel plans, it shaped the way we lived and conducted our daily and weekly affairs. We began limiting our encounters with others and became especially cautious when we went out for grocery shopping and visits to banks and stores. We donned masks and carried bottles of cleanser in each car for hand washing after being with others. Here in Kansas, as in much of the U.S., masking in public was erratic, with some establishments requiring it (grocery chains, banks), others not, or even scorning those who did (auto supply stores, some cafés). Those counties that endorsed the governor's mask mandate saw a decline in cases compared to those that did not. This natural experiment demonstrating the effectiveness of masking did not however convince those who thought masks were repressive, or that the virus was a Democratic hoax.

Fortunately life on the farm was not so much affected by Covid-19. Bovines, unlike mink, do not catch the virus. As for social distancing, one astute farmer remarked that we already do that. Grain crops were planted and harvested in a normal manner, with reasonable results. The grass-fed beef market, however, went crazy as established and new customers went into panic buying, as large packers had to shut down because of Covid infections among their workers. From May through September we direct-marketed 13 beef animals, mostly in bulk sales to nearly 40 customer households. When there

was a bit of extra inventory, or leftover parts of wholes, halves, quarters, or eighths, we attended the West Wichita [Kansas Grown](#) Farmers Market (outdoors; Saturdays, April to October at 21<sup>st</sup> & Ridge).

Grandsons Max and Calvin are shown in the first tent featuring the banner "JFF 100% Grass-Fed Beef." Note that most customers are wearing masks, and yes that is a bottle of hand sanitizer on the counter table. Kansas Grown market leadership is to be congratulated for maintaining vigilance regarding Covid-19 related rules and procedures, throughout the market season from early April through October.

The pandemic-related boom in direct-marketed beef, as well as most locally grown and sold foodstuffs, revealed the cracks and contradictions in the U.S. food system. "Efficient" mass-production packing facilities became petri-dishes for virus infection and spread, leading many to shut down operations. As grocery store shelves emptied, "factory" farms experienced a production glut, necessitating the mass killing of animals ready for market with no place to go. The government's attempt to throw money at this



problem, in the midst of a trade war with China over soybean exports, did not really solve the issues, although farmers readily took the cash payments, and groceries reached urban food lines. But back to our small-scale story.

The demand for grass-fed beef in 2020 also revealed the cracks and contradictions in our direct-marketing system. Although we were able to increase to 13 the number of beefeves slaughtered, we could have sold more had we had the animals. But our pastures and winter grazing fields can only handle about 30-35 head (cows, calves, weaned calves, yearlings, a bull). We have been slaughtering 6-8 two-year-olds per year, selling a few calves at weaning, and returning a few heifers to the cow herd. In our application to the Securing Local Foods program that sought to increase food supply and safety, we suggested that we could double our sales, if we switched from a cow-calf-and-yearling herd to a purchased-feeder-calf-plus-yearling herd (which would mean we did not birth and raise our own calves, as we do now, but would start with calves that were raised elsewhere). This switch in our source of calves would cost us about \$20K up front, which would perhaps equal the cost of owning cows (note “cow” specifically refers to a female in this discussion). Our total number of animals on pasture would remain at about 30-35.

However, it is not clear that we could maintain the quality of our product, since genetics is a primary factor in grass-fed marbling of meat—and we would not be able to determine that if we purchased the calves. In the end, the grant allowed us to install three giant rubber freeze-resistant tire tanks in our pastures (like the one pictured below). Since we received only half (\$5K) of what we requested, we will keep the cows for now.

Another hindrance to increasing our supply of direct-marketed beef is the number of slaughterers our small “boutique” butchers and packers can handle. They were already working at full capacity, as were many others. Indeed, the dearth of small-scale processors that service farms like ours

has been a major issue throughout the country for at least a decade. As the demand for direct-marketed meat exploded in 2020, reservations for processing rapidly extended into all of 2020, into 2021, and even 2022. A butcher shop or small processor cannot increase capacity overnight, as that would require personnel, freezers, equipment, buildings.

The 10 Angus beefeves on triticale pasture shown here will begin to be ready in late spring. We currently have two processing slots in late March, two in July, and several more in November and December. You can see the limits of what we can do, and the constraints within which we operate.

To be as fair to our customers while maintaining a manageable business, we have decided to prioritize bulk orders, limiting them to a maximum of half a beef per customer for the year (see our forthcoming announcement on the JFF website – we wanted to inform our existing customers first). We will take advance orders (with half payment) on a first-come first-served basis, and attend the Kansas Grown market if inventory is available. Note that in addition to our grass-fed beef, we will also market Rockin’ D heritage-breed (Berkshire) pork produced on our farm by our associate Ben Duerksen.

In farming, as in life perhaps, each year is unique. We do hope that 2021 brings less stress, good weather, a favorable market, a more agreeable political climate, and many contented customers. We thank you for your business, and hope to see you again.

We wish you all a great New Year. John, Kristi, Ben and the rest of the crew at JFF.

