

COVID-19 and the Texas Summer

I grew up in the mountains of Pennsylvania and my wife, Joice, in the lake areas of Michigan. We knew what harsh winters were like, but our summers were usually mild—a time when the young men played baseball and the young women (sometimes) watched them. It was a time for mowing the hay and harvesting crops. We wanted the sun to shine upon us, burning as necessary, to foster our tans. Once the sunburn settled, there were great patches of skin to remove—like a snake shedding its skin. We had contests to see who could remove the largest (intact) piece of skin, and the boy who won might get a Boy Scout badge.

There were summer thunder showers, so my and I brother would often stand by our upstairs windows and watch the continuous flashes of lightning and hear the peals of thunder. The lightning would occasionally strike one of our old oak trees or even the lightning rods on the house. It was a wonderful and frightening experience for young boys.

Some experts thought the Texas summer might give us some relief from COVID-19. There was debate (of course) on whether the hot weather would wipe out, or at least suppress, the virus. I thought a Texas summer could kill the virus, and here is why.

Texas summers are scalding hot. I remember an old farmer in Pennsylvania once saying, “It must be hot as hell in Texas.” (A note to the reader: “hell” was not considered a swear word in the farm area where I grew up.) I was just a young boy and knew very little about Texas or hell, but now that I am advanced in age, I don’t think Texas summers compare very well with hell. Here in Texas, most of us have refrigerators and air-conditioning, and I haven’t read, even in modern translations of the Bible, that either are available in hell. Hell is indeed a very hot place and, unfortunately for many, much hotter than a Texas summer.

A Texas summer happens very quickly. Yesterday may have been a perfectly calm and moderately sunny day, with the temperature about 75° Fahrenheit and the smell of BBQ smoke in the air. There wasn’t a siren that sounded all day, and no one had been shot in Killeen. It stayed in this wonderful state of affairs for about 24 hours.

Then all hell broke loose: the temperature shot up to 105°, there were two murders near Fort Hood and three 18 wheelers crashed on I-35. The evening newscasters were delighted—camera crews rushed to the scene, where helpful on-lookers (some without masks) were passing our free beer to the survivors and reviewing for the press all that they thought they had seen or heard. Sweat was pouring from the masks of the reporters and reaching their microphones.

Back on the home front and away from the carnage, I noticed an imprint on my stomach. I realized it was not the virus, but the mark was where the seat belt of my car had branded me—I was now a true Texan. Some of the big fellas wear metal belt buckles with the insignia of the

Alamo or their alma mater for branding, which is much less expensive than a tattoo. In the Texas summer sun, it takes about an hour for a fellow to be branded.

Texas men who don't wear face masks are nevertheless smart enough to wear their cowboy hats in the hot summer. The hats are big and broad and even in the hottest Texas sun provide shade for one half of the body. We Northerners wore baseball caps and consequently need to have parts of our ears sliced off occasionally by a dermatologist.

The most burdensome effort in the Texas summer is walking from our air-conditioned car to our air-conditioned house with a face mask on. It takes a minute or two, and we often break out in a sweat. However, I've heard that a F-150 Ford pickup truck has a powerful air-conditioner and pointing the vent toward the sidewalk will lay down a layer of ice in about a minute, so that the walk to the house can be made in comfort.

Everything in Texas is air-conditioned, and the open meat counters at HEB grocery store are so cold that I would be glad to wear my face mask, as well as my sweater, when I buy hamburger or hotdogs.

True Texans are a hardy lot. With their face masks on, they swim in lakes that approach 95° They picnic comfortably in the sizzling sun with flies, wasps, and the occasional crow. Texans are also generous and will offer you blistering baked beans, sun singed biscuits, and searing hot coffee, regardless of the temperature. But the food is hard to eat with your face mask on.

However, you should keep your face mask on because a cold front may blow through and the temperature will drop from 105° to 75° in a matter of minutes. The warm wind will blow away your left-over picnic beans and brisket, paper plates and cups. Unfortunately, you will then have "messed with Texas."

Karl Franklin
A Covid-19 summer
in Waco, Texas