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Life in the Time of COVID-19

Joe Jeffers

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Life in the Time of COVID-19

Joe Jeffers

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**Author's note:** This narrative is a personal account of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on my life in 2020. Three factors come to bear on my reactions. First, I am 75 years old. Second, I have a minor heart condition. Third, I am a scientist. The first two put me in a higher risk category, and my behavior changed accordingly. The third is the window through which I view the world. It affects my reaction to data as the nature of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 are revealed. I follow numerous information sources about the pandemic and share those articles on Facebook. Retirement provides me with the time for extensive reading about the subject, time I would not have if I still worked full time. I plan to chronicle the pandemic from its outbreak in Wuhan, China, to the advent of successful therapies – vaccines and other treatments. That chronicle will be placed in the Ouachita Baptist University (OBU) Archives upon completion, hopefully in 2021.

My interest in pandemics began years ago as I read about the Spanish Flu of 1918. It killed fifty million people worldwide, including 675,000 Americans<sup>1</sup> and seven thousand Arkansans.<sup>2</sup> Further reading about the bubonic plagues and more recent flu epidemics heightened that interest. It was piqued again during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in China 2002-2004. Fortunately, that outbreak was contained before it achieved pandemic status. On a personal note, my son Charlie was scheduled to go to China with a group of his fellow MBA students from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville in 2003. SARS led to the cancellation of that trip.

Ray Granada, Professor of History and Director of Library Services, and I offered a seminar entitled “Pandemics” for the OBU Carl Goodson Honors Program in 2007. We explored many of the world’s pandemics and the microorganisms and viruses that caused them. Reading for that seminar added to the sense that the world was ripe for a pandemic. We dodged a bullet with SARS. Could the next one be far behind?

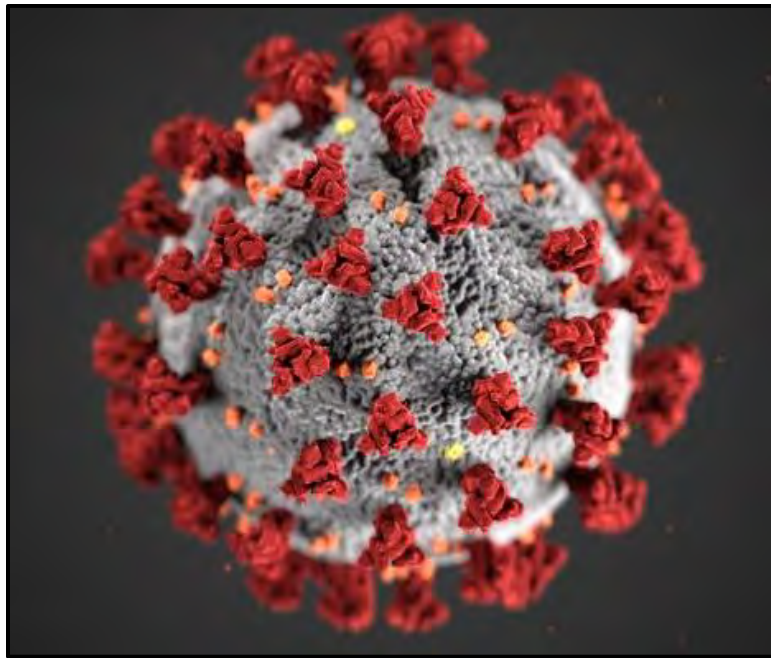
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<sup>1</sup> “History of 1918 Flu Pandemic,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/1918-pandemic-history.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> “Flu Epidemic of 1918.” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed August 10, 2020, [https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/?s=flu+epidemic+of+1918&post\\_type=eo-entry&entry\\_category=&time\\_period=&entry\\_type=&race\\_ethnicity=&gender=&media\\_type=](https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/?s=flu+epidemic+of+1918&post_type=eo-entry&entry_category=&time_period=&entry_type=&race_ethnicity=&gender=&media_type=).

Enter 2020. A novel corona virus outbreak occurred in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. China alerted the world on December 31, 2019.<sup>3</sup> Revelations since then peg the first case in November 2019, probably from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan. China, recorded its first death from the virus January 11, 2020. The virus quickly spread to Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, and South Korea. China shut down Wuhan on January 23. By then, unfortunately, it had spread to the United States and Europe. The first reported case in the USA was in Everett, Washington, on January 21. My former student, Sara McDonald Gering, is an ICU nurse at Providence Regional Medical Center, the hospital where that patient was brought. The magnitude of the problem became obvious to me, and I began to follow reports.

Washington State had been preparing for such an eventuality since SARS, so they did everything right with the first case.<sup>4</sup> Community spread there and in California, however, exacerbated the situation. Soon SARS-CoV-2 spread over Europe, and from there to New York City. On February 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) named the virus SARS-CoV-2 and the disease **CO**rona **VI**rus **D**isease 19 (COVID-19).



**Figure 1.** SARS-CoV-2  
(Courtesy U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command)

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<sup>3</sup> “A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Coronavirus Pandemic: Tale of Two Washingtons,” *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service, April 21, 2020.

## Clark County Historical Journal --- 2020

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It was just a matter of time until it came to Arkansas. And indeed, it did, on March 11, the same date WHO declared it a pandemic.<sup>5</sup> A man who had been to Mardi Gras in New Orleans was hospitalized in Pine Bluff. By March 19, the virus had been reported in all fifty states.

At the time, my morning routine was to go to the gym, work in the yard for a couple of hours, read the paper, and check for articles online about the coronavirus. Some afternoons, I went to the office at OBU to work on a project. Other afternoons, I stayed home and read novels. On Wednesdays, I attended Faculty Colloquium, where faculty present research results or sabbatical adventures, or attended Gutenberg **Conspiracy, OBU's faculty**-staff monthly book club. On Thursdays, I ate at the Ouachita Commons with my friends and colleagues. March 12 was my last time to eat there. As the virus slowly spread through central Arkansas, it was, no doubt, headed to Arkadelphia. In fact, it was already here. We just did not know it.

On March 7, gospel singer Sandi Patty gave a concert at Trinity Assembly of God Church in Arkadelphia. It included a meet-and-greet session. A day or two later, she went home to Oklahoma feeling poorly. She had the virus. Word quickly spread. Several days later cases were detected in Arkadelphia. Nevertheless, once I heard it was local, I began to wear a mask when I went to the store. I quit going to the office except on weekends, when few people were in the Jones Science Center. I no longer went to choir practice or church.

On March 13, many schools in central Arkansas closed. Three days later, Governor Hutchinson ordered all schools closed. Then, he closed casinos and limited crowds to fifty, unfortunately, exempting churches, from which several outbreaks were traced. Many Arkadelphia churches quickly went to online services only. Local courts really got out in front of the virus, closing in-person court on March 6 and moving to Zoom sessions.<sup>6</sup> The first coronavirus case in Clark County was reported March 19.

On March 20, Governor Hutchinson closed gyms, bars, and restaurant dining rooms. Four days later, he closed hair salons, nail salons, massage parlors, and tattoo parlors. He never issued a stay-at-home order, but he did advise older people and those with chronic health issues to self-isolate.

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<sup>5</sup> “6 presumptive positive cases of coronavirus detected in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, 12 March 2020, accessed 27 October 2020, [https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx\\_ver=z39.88-2004&rft\\_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc\\_dat=WORLDNEWS&req\\_dat=095C5CF68DEE42C28AADBAE4C1300CD2&rft\\_val\\_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft\\_dat=document\\_id%3Anews%252F179ACD14A9A7DD38](https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=WORLDNEWS&req_dat=095C5CF68DEE42C28AADBAE4C1300CD2&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F179ACD14A9A7DD38).

<sup>6</sup> Judge Randy Hill, personal communication with the author.

The federal government response was slow. By March 26, the USA had more virus cases than any other country. Congress passed a much-needed stimulus package March 27. Pandemic responses were mostly left up to the states. Some cities went into lockdown. Some states emphasized social distancing and washing hands. Mask wearing was downplayed at first, in part because there were not enough masks for hospital workers. Finally, the CDC recommended masks on April 3. WHO did not recommend them until June 5.

My morning routine adjusted to the new reality. While I still worked in the yard, read the paper, and followed coronavirus articles in the media, I limited my travels to occasional forays **to Brookshire's, Walmart, and Atwood's. I wore a mask, of course, but** I was in the minority. I stopped going to the gym. I did walk or aqua jog in the pool, until cold weather limited the aqua jog. I began to read extensively about virus-related issues, especially ones with a science tilt, and posted links to them on Facebook. Since late February, I have posted more than 850 such articles.<sup>7</sup> Word of mouth spread, and my Facebook friend requests more than doubled my number of friends. To reach the widest possible audience with coronavirus information, I shied away from political postings, except when science was at odds with public pronouncements. I followed developing information on the virus and urged the wearing of facemasks. Sadly, facemasks became a political issue, so there were many who resisted wearing them.

Fortunately, both Walmart and Brookshire's **required employees to wear masks**, beginning late April. Also, the public became more conscious of the need. By going to the stores early, I found few people were there and about half wore masks. Like many others, I wrote to the Governor imploring him to mandate facemasks. He would not take that step.

A bit of joy happened in April. My daughter gave birth to her second child, a daughter, at UAMS in Little Rock. My wife Charlotte and I went to Little Rock to keep our grandson, Dylan, while Teri and Toby were at UAMS. Toby could not come and go due to hospital restrictions, so he stayed the entire time. We have seen them several times since.

We have also visited with our son Charlie and his family, but otherwise, we have severely limited our in-person visits. Glenn Good and I still pick up litter on 26<sup>th</sup> Street every Saturday morning, but we work opposite sides of the street. I talk to my neighbors

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<sup>7</sup> Among the sources I follow are CDC, WHO, FDA, Arkansas Department of Health, MedPage, Medscape, ClinicalOMICS, STAT, Science News, Scientific American, Smithsonian, Politico, The Economist, National Geographic, Christian Science Monitor, The Week, Associated Press, New York Times, Washington Post, London Guardian, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Time, Newsweek, The New Yorker, Atlantic, Vanity Fair, AXIOS, Morning Brew, Good Faith Media, The Flip Side, NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and BBC.

from a safe distance outside. When I encounter colleagues in the office at OBU, we limit our conversations, keep our distance, and wear masks. Except for the cardiologist, I postponed all other medical/dental appointments. I am rather shaggy. Charlotte cut my hair once, but mostly, I trim it myself.



**Figure 2.** Teri Jeffers Vancil with daughter Sloan

The Governor begin a gradual reopening in May – restaurants at limited capacity, hair salons, casinos, etc. Still no mask mandate. Finally, after Walmart issued a requirement for all customers to wear masks, Governor Hutchinson followed suit, with an effective date of July 19. While a few people still did not wear masks, the **overwhelming majority at Walmart and Brookshire’s did**. Even restaurant/fast food take-out establishments that did not have their employees wear masks earlier do so now.

Clark County schools did re-open, with restrictions. Both Ouachita and Henderson have students on campus. Just before schools reopened, Clark County had its first COVID-19 death from 177 cases. At the time of this mid-September writing, Clark County has 286 cases and four deaths. We are not out of the woods yet.

Prior to the pandemic, Charlotte and I had traveled a bit. In addition to two more extensive trips in 2019, Charlotte and I began an odyssey in July 2019 to visit all fifty-two Arkansas State Parks. While we are at it, we plan to visit all eighty-five county courthouses. Yes, Arkansas has seventy-five counties, but ten of them have dual county

seats. The pandemic halted us at twenty-four parks and thirty-seven courthouses by late February. Our travel plans are on hold. A scheduled September trip to Ecuador was cancelled. We did manage one daytrip in July 2020 to visit three more parks and two more courthouses, but the remainder require overnight stays, and those visits will await a vaccine or preventative treatment for coronavirus infection. For now, our traveling must be by nature programs on television. In the meantime, we will take care to remain coronavirus free.



**Joe Jeffers**, Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at Ouachita Baptist University, holds a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology from Purdue University. He retired from his role as the Charles S. and Elma Grey Goodwin Holt Professor of Chemistry and Pre-Medical Studies in 2017. He began his career at Ouachita in 1972. He was thrice named Professor of the Year by the Central Arkansas Section of The American Chemical Society.

