*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Hardies say goodbye to cows**

It was a mixture of relief and regret as I watched the cattle trailer pull out of our driveway — relief that I was able to find a good buyer for some of our last Scottish Highland cows but regret that we were essentially exiting the cow business.

We sold most of our herd in 2018 but still had a couple of cows, who gave birth this past spring. We sold the cows, their calves and a heifer, leaving us with a heifer who was a bottle baby two years ago and a bull we will butcher later this year.

The decision to sell was driven mainly by economics. With the coronavirus putting our winery and inn into a near shutdown, we needed some income. It didn’t make sense to keep only a few cows.

None of those cattle had ever been on a trailer, so it took some coaxing and lots of patience. But finally we had them loaded. The buyer had purchased some of our cows previously and is trying to grow his Highlander herd.

The decisions are more difficult for full-time farmers who have been hit hard by the pandemic. Some dairy farmers are dumping milk as prices plunge. It’s been the nail in the coffin for some dairy farmers who have endured a long stretch of losing money and are now exiting. Meat and grain prices are decreasing because of reduced demand.

Our plan was always to raise grass-fed Scottish Highland beef to direct-market — grow them slowly the way the breed is intended for. For a variety of reasons that plan never fully developed. It’s never easy to admit failure.

Spring is always the time of year to feel a little optimistic about the upcoming growing season. But my mood was tempered by the feeling that selling the cows meant we were giving up. The weather matched my downcast mood as it teetered back and forth between sunshine and snow squalls.

The barnyard looked emptier. I knew that somewhere the sun was shining … we’ll move on.

Woodchuck solutions discovered

My recent column about my war on woodchucks prompted some helpful advice from reader Pete Flats of Kenosha. Flats also has a home in Twin Lakes and says he has been successful in trapping woodchucks with the use of bait.

I reached Flats by phone, and he told me he swears by a bait called Whistle Stop made by Blackie’s Blend. The bait is a paste made from plants, enhanced with oils and herbs.

Flats said he puts some of the paste on a stick and also places a chunk of fresh cabbage in the cage. The combination is too much to resist for the hungry groundhogs.

“Woodchucks are a little more sneaky, but the lure should bring them in,” Flats said. “With the cabbage, that’s what they like the best. I’ve caught many of them over the years.”

I look forward to giving that a try.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at* *chardie1963@gmail.com**.*

***Cutlines****:*

*043020-agrv-life-hardie-1: Scottish Highland cattle are no longer part of Chris Hardie’s farm; they have been sold.*

*043020-agrv-life-hardie-2: Spring flowers bloom on a blustery day.*

*043020-agrv-life-hardie-3: A herd of Hereford beef cattle relax near Melrose, Wisconsin.*

*043020-agrv-life-hardie-4: Budding trees make an early-April scene look similar to late fall.*