

News Column

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TRACTOR SAFETY

I have told this story far too many times – some of you will know the story and a few will even know the family – but some events in life have a lasting impact.

This is one of those life events,...and I'm sure the impact on me was extremely small compared to the impact on Rodney's family.

Rodney was a sophomore in high school when he was killed in a tractor accident. His brother Kerry was one of my best friends at the time. I was 13 years old and a freshman in high school when Rodney died.

Rodney's family still milked a couple of cows at that time and he died while rounding up the cows from the pasture. He had driven a small Ford tractor out to the pasture to get the cows. Nobody knows all of the details, but he was crushed when the tractor turned over backwards while going up a hill.

Unfortunately, Rodney's death isn't so unusual in the farming world. Without trying very hard I could count at least a dozen people I knew, or family members of people I know, who have either died or been severely injured in farming accidents. Farming can be a dangerous business.

One of the things we do annually is to teach a tractor safety class. We don't actually teach our students to drive, but instead try to instill in them a safety attitude – to get them to think about safety and to recognize hazards when working with tractors and machinery.

There is a driving portion of the class curriculum, but our group chooses not to attempt

that with a group of mostly 14 and 15 year old students. Instead, we try to teach safety, then send them home to their parent or employer for instructions about operating their own tractor.

You might wonder why we don't teach them to drive and the answer is simple – I did that once! The course curriculum calls for us to set up a driving course and have each student drive through the course pulling a two-wheel trailer, then back the trailer into a space outlined by four cones.

It sounds simple, and the course seemed reasonable to a couple of farm boys teaching the course, who had been driving tractors for years. Ninety-five percent of our students raised their hands when we asked if they had ever driven a tractor before,....but it was soon obvious they hadn't!

Let's just say that trying to put those kids through that driving course, with 24 other students standing and watching, was more dangerous than turning them loose in a field with no instruction. We don't want turn them loose with no instruction either, but we will never try to put a group through a driving course again. It was scary.

We teach a tractor safety course each spring because we believe in safety, but the course also satisfies a provision on the law that allows 14 and 15 year old youth to operate a tractor for someone other than their parent. Without the safety course, it is illegal to employ 14 and 15 year olds to operate a tractor over 20 horsepower.

Most newer riding lawnmowers are over 20 horsepower.

This year's tractor safety course will be held June 7 and 8, starting at 9:00 a.m. each day. Class will continue until 4:00 p.m. on day one, and will conclude before 3:00 p.m. on day 2. We accept students as young as 12, but we won't certify them until they are 14. Older students are also welcome. We routinely have students 17 and 18 years old, and the oldest I have has was 65.

The tractor safety course will be held at KanEquip in Wamego and there is a \$30 charge to cover meals and course materials. Register online at www.pottawatomie.ksu.edu by May 29.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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