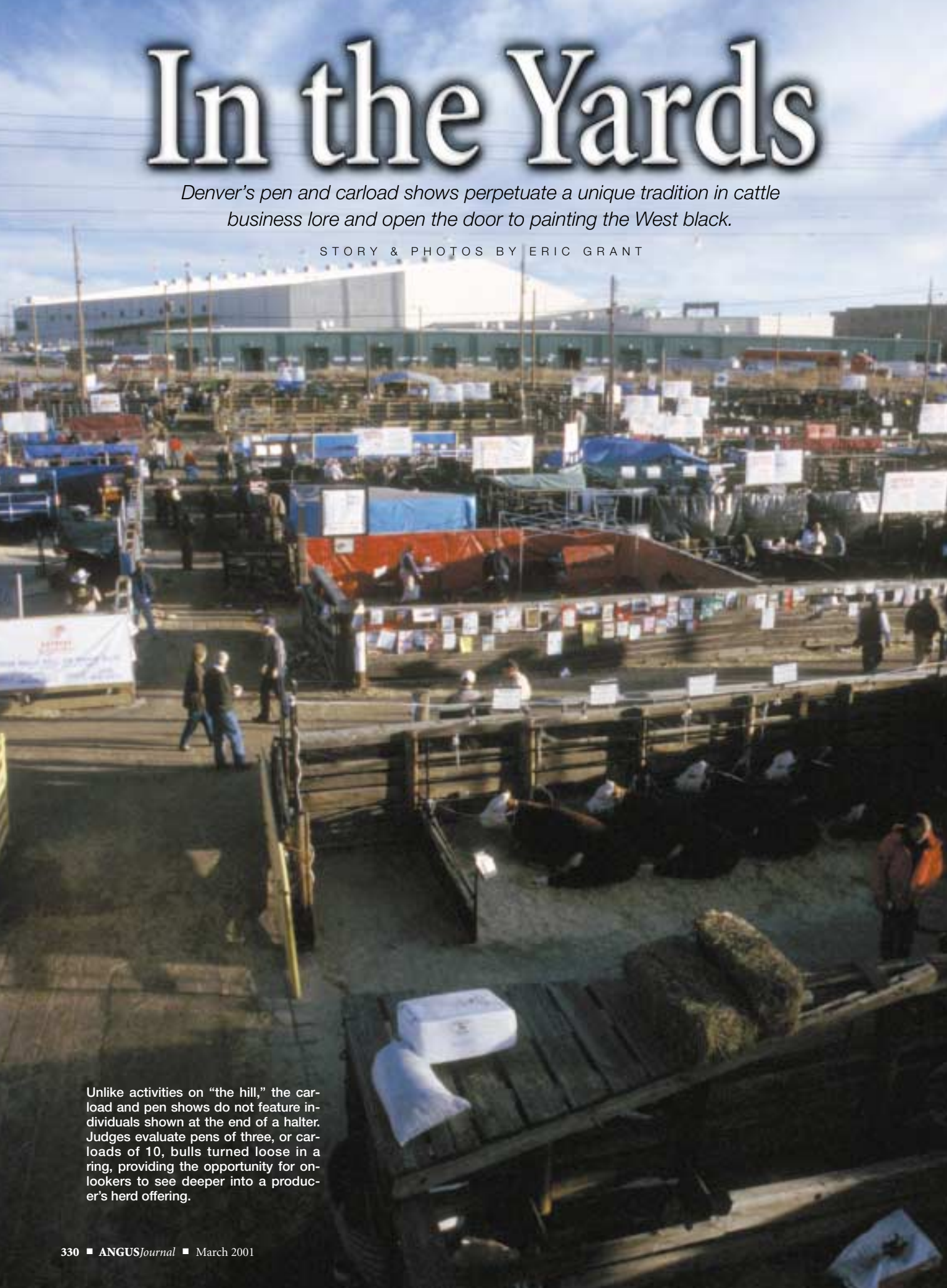


# In the Yards

*Denver's pen and carload shows perpetuate a unique tradition in cattle business lore and open the door to painting the West black.*

STORY & PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT



Unlike activities on "the hill," the carload and pen shows do not feature individuals shown at the end of a halter. Judges evaluate pens of three, or carloads of 10, bulls turned loose in a ring, providing the opportunity for onlookers to see deeper into a producer's herd offering.



The stockyards are silent now. Once a thriving marketplace for the West's livestock industry, they are now little more than a collection of empty pens and creaky gates that swing in the wind.

Apart from 10 days in January, when stockmen and cattle once again fill the place, the yards remain a skeleton of a past self. Where millions of cattle once passed, now only memories linger.

Yet, the story of the Denver stockyards — and more specifically, the one-of-a-kind pen and carload bull shows that continue to perpetuate the memories of old days — is unique in the annals of cattle industry history.

At one time, the yards provided a vital marketplace for Western cattlemen. They bustled with activity, with cattle from everywhere imaginable being loaded onto and off trains, commission agents dashing to and from the Livestock Exchange Building, buyers sweeping through pens to analyze the week's offering. The free-market system lived and breathed like in few other places.

So it was when cattle producers sought to organize the first-ever stock show on these grounds in the late 1890s. They knew it was the right place, and they felt it was the right time. But the problem was providing incentives for producers to come and to compete. So a railroad announced it would offer a special half rate for cattle shipped to the show, then sweetened the pot by transporting the cattle back to their point of origin at no additional cost.

The organizing committee next promoted the opportunity for producers to view top-notch seedstock, arranging for "a large number of thoroughbred bulls and heifers to be sent and, after being exhibited, to be sold to ranchers who bring in their cattle."

The committee financed much of the first show through the sale of alcoholic apple cider. "While there is considerably more alcohol in it than there is in beer,

it is smoother," wrote the apple grower who donated the five barrels of cider.

### Challenging start

Entertainment plans included a bullfight, but it was canceled following pressure from Denver newspapers, which criticized the idea and described it as inhumane. Even Denver ministers chimed in, denouncing the cruelty of bullfighting from their pulpits.

Despite these challenges, the show went on. Organizers limited it to pens and carloads of steers and calves "to be judged from a beef-making standpoint." This disappointed many producers who anticipated prizes for breeding stock.

But that was the least of their troubles.

In 1897, the National Livestock Association sponsored a barbecue in the yards, which the organization hoped would become an annual event at the show. It backfired.

Big portions of beef, buffalo, antelope and venison were served with beans. There also was free beer — and lots of it. All went well until a group of hoodlums arrived, tanked up on liquor, and started a brawl.

The mob rolled over streetcars, scattered pots, plates and pans, and left the stock show grounds resembling a war zone more than a marketplace.

The *Daily Record Stockman*, astonished by the violent outbreak, reported why there would be no barbecue the following year: "This barbecue caused the Queen City to gain an enviable reputation as a wild and wooly city."

Needless to say, support for the show wavered. So the stock show didn't become a permanent, annual event until 1905, when a group of cattlemen, packers and stockyard executives began the official organization of the event. They wanted it to be "second only to the great International at Chicago ... the biggest and best show in the West."

### A makeover

It was conducted in conjunction with the annual



Vance Uden of TC Ranch, Franklin, Neb., started competing in the yards in the mid-1970s. He's won the event once and taken reserve champion twice, but it's the weather he remembers most.



The pen and carload shows allow producers to display the depth and uniformity of their breeding programs, says Eldon Krebs of Whitestone-Krebs, Gordon, Neb., shown above with his wife, Louisa. It also draws more commercial producers than other shows and serves as a marketing vehicle.

convention of the Colorado Cattle and Horse Growers associations, as well as the national cattle and livestock associations, which had their merger meetings in January 1906.

Special Pullman cars carried stockyard executives, commission men and packers from association meetings in downtown Denver to the stock show grounds a few miles to the northeast. Hundreds of members of the Colorado and national associations took time

from their meetings to attend the crowded shows.

On a specially designated "Denver Day," banks, department stores and other businesses closed at noon, and much of the city loaded up in streetcars or horse-drawn buggies and headed for the stock show grounds. The Burlington railroad had special trains running twice daily from the Denver Union Depot. A round-trip cost 25¢.

Of the crowd, the *Daily Record*

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*Stockman* reported: "Broad white sombreros and the heads of the men from the staked plains of Texas, and the natty derby on the craniums of Omaha, Chicago and Kansas City commission men, while one or two of the Eastern beef barons appeared in a silk hat."

These spectators came to see the carloads of feeder cattle, which included aged steers, 2-year-old steers, yearlings and calves.

**First carloads shown**

In anyone's estimation, the 1906 show was a success. So organizers went about making the 1907 event that much bigger and better.

For the second show, they established the first-ever showing of "carloads of 20 range bulls, any breed, to be shown by breeders who must certify that said animals are the produce of purebred and registered animals." They offered \$50 in premiums for first place, \$25 for second and \$15 for third.

This humble beginning for the pen and carload bull shows was perhaps the most significant and long-lasting event that organizers ever put in place. It

made the Denver show a unique livestock exhibition in the country. Unlike most exhibitions, where individual animals were judged, the carload show enabled producers to view more than one animal at a time.

The pen show today allows three head per exhibitor, while the carloads have 10 head. The cattle are judged without halters, set free in a viewing ring.

**A stockyard history**

While the stock show lasted just 10 days every January, the stockyards remained viable through the 1950s.

Located on the cusp between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains, near the banks of the South Platte River, there was connectivity to the place. The train tracks that skirted the yard's southeastern edge traced to markets in Omaha and Chicago. At one time, there were more than a dozen packinghouses within a few miles of the yards, and there were plentiful family feeders downriver with abundant corn for finishing calves.

Every week, the stockyards bustled with activity, especially in the fall, when cowboys gathered

cattle off the mountains and hauled their calves to Denver.

For John Hill, a cattle producer from Collbran, Colo., the Denver stockyards represented his primary market in the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

It wasn't easy getting cattle there, however. From his mountain ranch, Hill would trail his cattle for three or four days to get them to the depot: down the valley, through Little Horse Thief Canyon and into the town of De Beque, Colo., where he'd meet the train.

Trouble was, the train didn't always have cars available for cattle.

So Hill would wait with his herd south of town, across the Colorado River, until the next train came. When it did, the work really began. Most cattle in those days, and from that part of the country, hadn't spent much time around fast-moving cars, trucks or trains. Nor had they crossed or passed under many bridges.

A local policeman had to hold up traffic as Hill's cattle passed. If a train would pass, the cattle would spook and sometimes would stampede, tearing down fences and scattering in all

directions. A time or two, Hill had to force a few stragglers to swim the river because they wouldn't cross the bridge. "It was tough going in those days," he recalls.

Once loaded, Hill would ride in the caboose for the trek over the mountains to Denver. A coal stove kept him warm, but it belched out black smoke, making it difficult to breathe, especially when the train passed through tunnels.

The arrival date usually was set for Saturday, which gave ranchers a day to rest, feed and water their cattle before the sale on Monday. Representatives of commission companies would scour the yards, evaluating calves and cattle as they unloaded from trains and listing as many as they could.

Back then, there was no formal auction arena, so the cattle were bought and sold right in the pens. When the whistle blew at 9 a.m. on Monday, the bidding began.

"A salesman would take the prospective buyer down the alleys, give them information on whatever they wanted. The salesman would write down the buyer's bid, then go and get a second buyer," Hill recalls.

Many of the calves that Hill sold wound up in small, family feedlots near Greeley. Most of the fed cattle that passed through the yards went straight to one of nearly a dozen packinghouses located within a few miles of there. Since that time, all of those packers have gone out of business, falling victim to corporate concentration and other economic and cultural forces in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hill attended his first stock show in 1950. He spent most of his time watching the pen and carload judging, which included mostly Herefords.

"I remember there were several people from back East looking at the champion steer, which was a Hereford," Hill remembers. "One of the women said, 'the blacks don't stand a chance out here.' It's sure changed since then."

Hill found most of the cattle on exhibit to be overfed and extremely fat, not the kind that



Carloads await their chance to go through the ring.



would work back on the mountain. Many of the bulls, in such ripe condition, would “just lay on their sides and puff,” he recalls.

There also was the practice of keeping milk cows in pens to supplement the diets of still-suckling, yearling bulls. “Those bull calves were just sloppy fat, and they were as big as the cows,” Hill says.

Oftentimes, when a rancher would buy one of those spoiled calves, he’d buy the cow, too, enabling him to wean the calf off his milk diet. “You couldn’t tell anything about a calf like that,” Hill quips, “other than he could utilize a lot of milk.”

Like Hill, Francis Rogers, who owns the Wagon Wheel Ranch of Yuma, Colo., attended the stockyards show 50 years ago. He hasn’t missed one since, showing and selling cattle in the yards every single year.

He, too, remembers how Hereford cattle dominated the pen and carload shows and how Hereford breeders occupied all the best pen locations.

Angus breeders took a backseat, exhibiting their cattle in the stockyard’s far-back pens. “We were so far away from the activity that you couldn’t see the Livestock Exchange Building,” Rogers recalls. “There were 10 times as many pens as there are now. The stockyards was a huge place. We were so far away, you had to take the trolley or ride a bike to get to the front part of the stockyards.”

In those days, Rogers came to Denver to sell — not just show — cattle. Unlike today, cattle had to be consigned with a commission agent in the same way all other cattle brought through the yards were bought and sold.

“You didn’t sell the cattle; the commission agents did,” Rogers says. “There were a lot more ranchers buying cattle back then at the stock show. If you didn’t get your cattle sold, there were always a lot of buyers from Mexico who would come in and clean up what was left in the pens. They’d buy semi-loads of cattle. Nowadays, it’s more like show-and-tell. You show ’em

your cattle, and tell ’em to come to your production sale.”

Vance Uden, who owns and operates TC Ranches, a registered Angus operation based near Franklin, Neb., attended his first pen and carload shows in the early 1960s. He remembers the extreme weather conditions. “It was unbelievably cold,” Uden says. “It was 33 degrees below zero, then it climbed to 50 degrees later that week.”

To keep warm, many carload exhibitors constructed huts from straw bales and placed heaters inside. “I don’t think they were supposed to do that,” Uden says.

“I’ve seen a lot of snow in Denver,” he recalls. “We used to show outside, and prior to the show, there’d be snow all over the bulls. Once they entered the outdoor ring, the bulls would get to playing in the sand — and really go bananas.”

### Westward expansion

For Angus breeders in the late 1970s, who’d taken a backseat at the pen and carload shows for a half-century, the National Western came to represent an opportunity to expand the breed’s influence into a region historically dominated by Herefords.

Today, it’s hard to find a herd of cattle west of Denver that doesn’t have some Angus influence. That wasn’t the case 15, or even 10, years ago.

“We used Denver to push Angus cattle to Western commercial producers,” Uden recalls. “It was a frontier we wanted. We wanted to paint the West black.”

“I agree,” says Eldon Krebs, who owns and operates Whitestone-Krebs, a registered Angus operation based near Gordon, Neb. He’s attended or participated in the yard show since 1959, and he believes it’s the unique nature of the pen and carload shows that really gave the breed a leg up.

“The great thing about the pen and carload show is that it’s not an individual show, and it’s not a halter show,” says Krebs, whose cattle won grand and reserve grand champion pens and grand champion carload this year. “It



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allows you to display the depth and uniformity of your breeding program. It also draws more commercial producers than other shows do. It’s allowed us to pick up new customers every year we’ve been there.”

With the advent of widespread use of artificial insemination (AI), the pen and carload shows have come to play an even greater role in determining which AI sires get used and which don’t.

“Unlike other shows, you can see more big numbers of cattle quicker in the Denver yards than you ever could by traveling the country,” Krebs says. “You can see the progeny of a lot of different sires at one time and in one place and determine which bloodlines you’d like to use in the future.”

For these reasons, and because of the unique showring niche that Denver has carved out with its carload and pen shows, Krebs predicts the Denver event will continue to thrive as it enters the 21st century. “I can see nothing but bigger growth for Denver,” he says. “It’ll just keep getting better — and stronger.”

Looking across the stockyard and seeing its pens filled with cattle again each January, one cannot help but wonder if the event’s original organizers could have imagined that their vision

would have stretched so far into the future. Had it not been for their foresight, most likely the old yards would have been dismantled, and their memories would have been left to scatter in the breeze.

For Hill, Rogers, Uden and Krebs, who’ve made a few days in the yard an important part of their life, the old stockyards have an undeniable presence, a place in history that each January takes on new life.

“There’s a great allure being part of an old tradition,” Uden reflects. “While the cattle have changed [and] the buildings have changed or been improved, there’s a real sense of history in the yards. There’s a great tradition in going each year to Denver, not just to display cattle, but to meet up with old friends. We may compete against each other, but we’re still good friends. Hopefully, my son can continue this tradition after I call it quits because it’s become a big part of my life over the years. And I think it’ll be the same for him.”



**Author’s note:** Some of the information for this article came from *Ten Days in January* by Willard Simms, the most comprehensive work of its kind on the history of the National Western Stock Show.