

# That Very First Cattle Auction

by Cheryl Johnson

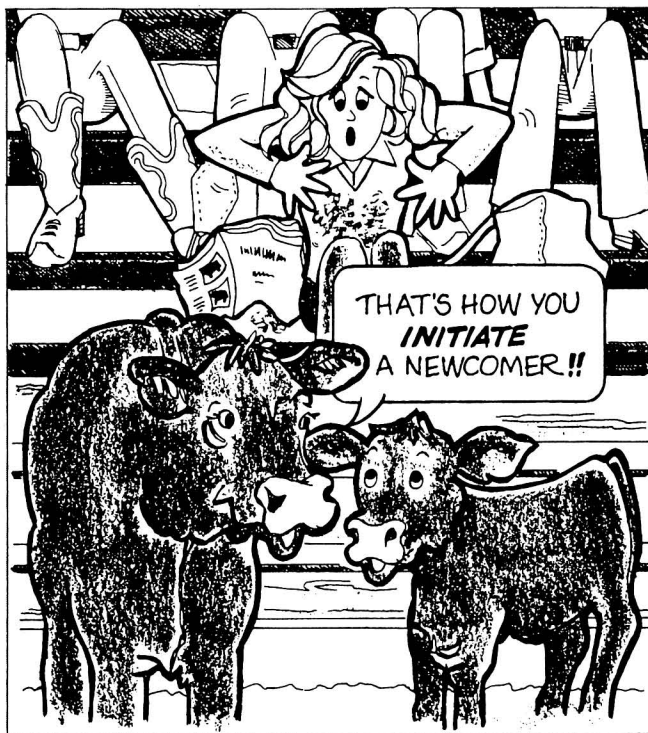
If it had been some kind of gala event, it would have made sense to me. But the noisy din, the pungent woodchip smell, the loudspeaker voices and the brightly lit stanchioned stage created an atmosphere entirely new to me, the novice in this cattle world. Eagerly wanting to understand and "get with it," I searched out what I thought would be a strategic seat low on the south bleachers. There an observer could surely hear, see and totally experience an Angus cattle sale.

Wondering what my next move should be, I spied a stack of catalogs nearby. Security came behind its pages. Black Angus profiles filled every page, and all that ponderous pedigree info made for heavy reading. How can one bull be so many things? Endorsed by breeders, bull calf champion in '76, '77 and '78, a tad bit of western Canadian, a touch of Wye, overall sprinkling of style, correctness, a pleasing rate of development and excitement. And his progeny (that's a good word for "kids") will compile volumes of breed history in the years ahead. Busy bull.

## Initiation

"Terms and Conditions" was getting rather tedious. I was ready for this sale to get going. Initiation came immediately. The loudspeaker blared forth local radio rock 'n roll voices. Straight through the ears to pierce my brain. Where was Willie Nelson when I needed him? Waiting expectantly, believing all the while this was where I really wanted to be, I felt a 5-inch crease begin forming across my posterior end. Those narrow bleachers had to have been designed for midget cattle buyers. Diversion was needed.

In the barn, people milled around comfortably. Surprising to see so many women; it was like old home week. A woman across in the middle section was casting on the beginning stitches with her knitting needles. Her husband, chewing tobacco, released the juices cautiously from his lips down between the boards from time to time. That was a new one for me. The ladies in flowered aprons stood protectively behind their steaming chili and roast beef. No ham sandwich could be had. The young cowhand in sweaty hat and faded flannel had a secret place behind his leather chaps where he stored a green bottled friend, Annie Green Springs. The labors of sale day weren't going to interfere with his fun. Cattlemen grouped themselves in clusters. No doubt negotiating big bucks in beef deals. I was in awe. I wondered what those kind of people ate for breakfast. Did they sit on their shaded morning patios like Jock and Miss Ellie and their kids in "Dallas"?



*Production manager Cheryl Johnson's name has appeared on the ANGUS JOURNAL masthead since July, 1979, when she dropped in the office, taught herself to set type and took over the magazine's typographic responsibilities. Her only exposure to the Angus business had been through typesetting the JOURNAL until a few months later when (after typesetting about 100 sale reports) she decided to see an auction first hand.*

*Those of you who are old hands in the cattle business may have a difficult time seeing humor in an auction, but try to put yourself in a newcomer's position. And since there are a lot of newcomers in the business (Angus association membership renews itself every six to seven years) and those new people come from all walks of life, we are dedicating Cheryl's story to them, appreciating the confusion and questions a first cattle auction might create.*

*Before coming to the JOURNAL, Cheryl spent seven years teaching high school English, drama and a smattering of journalism. She and daughter Nancy live in St. Joseph.*

## Proper Attire

Proper cattle sale attire had been a dilemma for me. It shouldn't have been; denim was the fashion of the day. A cowboy boot appeared on the board beside me. The denim leg connected to one of those super suede fringed jackets like Dale Evans always wore. Introducing myself to the lady wearing it, I managed some chatter that led us into my favorite tactic. Ask the appropriate cattle questions of a devoted Angus person, and conversation is assured. It's somewhat akin to a loving mother expounding on her newborn babe. Cattle people *love* to talk about their business. I was beginning to be at ease.

The actual entertainment eventually got underway. The family reunion part presented all the ranch family members, connected in-laws, manager, veterinarian, herdsman and his dog. Yes, we were glad they were all here, even gave them a round of applause. Then the round of pep talks. First-generation father, then son, then sale manager. He sounded like a recent Baptist seminary graduate with his reverence for the "wonderful bunch of animals here today." Amen.

## The Action

Nice. Real nice. When does the action start? He talked on. Abruptly I came to. With a loud smack of the gavel, our auctioneer started rattling off his peculiar musical lingo. I'd been looking forward to this part. A real auctioneer with gavel. Not Leroy Van Dyke on a record.

A very large, very black Angus bull paraded himself around the sale ring with the unnecessary assistance of two guys with show sticks. He didn't need help to show himself off. It was obvious he knew who he was and was in full control of his own display. Listening sharply, I could actually make a logical pattern out of the sounds coming from the auctioneer. Somewhere in there, he took time out to remind us that one-third interest and one-half possession were being sold. Not being a mathematician, I sought out my fringed friend. She explained it in hushed tones. It made good sense. At least they wouldn't have to cut him into thirds or halves.

The colonel rattled onward. It was fantastic! Gradually, the price rose to a \$19,500 bid. Skeptical about the sum I was hearing, I held my breath while the babbling man pleaded. No use. That was tops. "Walk him out, boys. Sold!" I exhaled. The bull sauntered out of the ring. "Big deal," he thinks to himself, "new owner, new home. Same old job."

## The Ringmen

A second animal entered the ring. The

process began again. This time I concentrated on those nice-looking gentlemen in sweater vests, ties, sports jackets and tasteful Stetsons who stood on the ground around the outside of the ring. Miss Information told me they were the ringmen whose duty it was to relay bids from the crowd to the people on the block. Close study of them in action made me smile. It was unbelievable what they went through. No two were the same. The best one had a bleating noise produced with the tongue fully extended from his mouth, with vocal cords straining along an extremely red neck up to his red face. A long, loud series of "yips" emitted from the one at the northwest corner while he jabbed an accusing finger at the faces. The shortish fellow was given to flapping his catalog

strenuously as he whirled and danced about from crowd to ring. His signal was a high-pitched unintelligible squall. The one directly in front of my vantage point had an added touch. He actually coaxed and bargained with timid bidders. Then spun around, coat-tails flying, to relay the message extracted.

All this screaming and yelling, on top of the yodeling auctioneer over the speakers, made for bedlam supreme. It was wonderful. Somehow, by magic, the racket was correlated and cows were sold.

As each lot came through for viewing and selling, attributes and conquests were sounded. The ones that weren't "super" were "truly great animals." That auctioneer went non-stop, breathing only when necessary to change animals. Constantly slamming his


gavel down on the countertop to accent his rhythm. It was a cruel blow for me when I noticed that it wasn't an authentic gavel at all, but a simple block of wood.

### The Cattle

Bull followed bull as cow followed calf or calf followed cow across the auction ring. One particularly audacious young mother signaled her dismay at being separated from the "calf at side" by bawling piteously and making several wild-eyed 90 mph turns around the miniature race track. Initiation was complete. I was the recipient of a lap full of gravel, woodchips and a smattering of loose, ah, "cow smatter." Now I knew why so few sat in the first two rows. Nobody paid much attention, though. "Happens every once in a while," I heard, as someone passed me a handful of tissues. Gack. Where was the powder room?

Powder room? Through the crowd, out the door, past the mud-choked corral, down around the corner of the sale barn, quietly stood the "sanitary conveniences." First problem—which was for the women and which was for the men? No signs. I took a chance and peeked in the first one; logical to have ladies first. Well, it sure wasn't Grandpa's old outhouse. More like a huge tin can that wobbled, with all the poshness of a Greyhound bus bathroom, swaying included. It would have to do. It was adequate and the companionship of the mooing Angus right over the fence out back made it more "farmy." I was nearly one of them now.

By the time I had negotiated that new adventureland and returned to the sale barn, 10 lots had "passed under the gavel," as they say in the sale reports. Fine with me. It had been a long day. I stood through the few left. Total sales and averages were announced for bulls and females. We were thanked for our coming and our strong interest in their cattle. More than \$250,000 had been circulated through the economy that day right there in that one barn.

Besides that, this new kid sure had learned a lot about organized cattle selling. It was exciting, high rolling and entertaining, even though I didn't have 2¢ to spend, just a thousand dollars worth of curiosity. 

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## ANGUS JOURNAL Flashbacks

1965—The ANGUS JOURNAL field staff as introduced in that year's Herdbook: Jim Orton, Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Kansas; Dale F. Runnion, general manager and advertising director; Lanny DeMott, Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and western Canada; Chris Clark, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, New Jersey, the Carolinas; Veryl Jones, Iowa, Missouri and Arkansas; Jim Rentz, Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana; John Kendall, the far west and Pacific Coast area; Perry Lane, the southeastern states; and Ray G. Roth, Ohio, Michigan and the northeast, including Ontario.