



GOING ONCE . . . GOING TWICE . . . SOLD!

by Lisa Hawkins

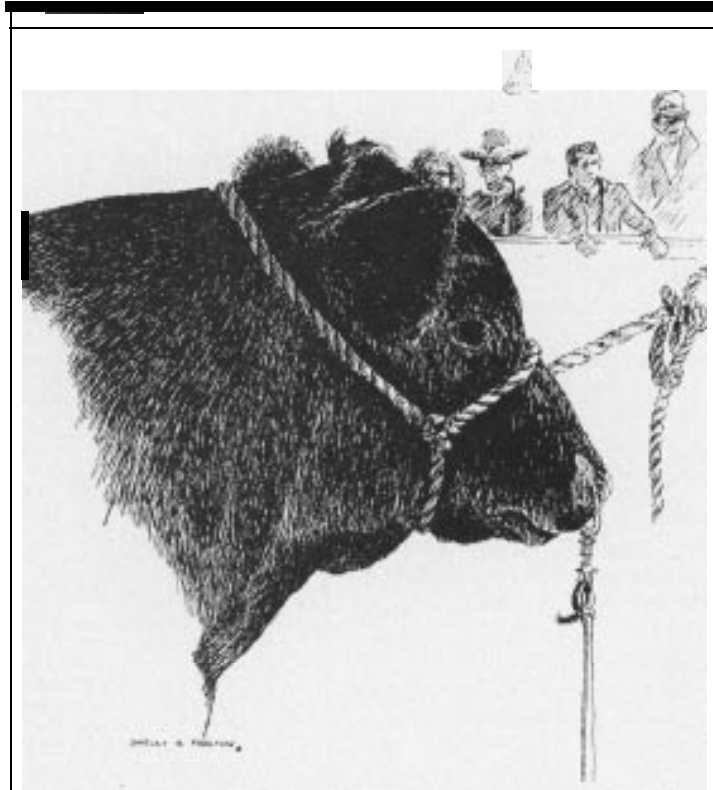
He rises with the roosters. Over a breakfast of bacon and eggs, he reads the futures report. He dresses in starched Wranglers, a white oxford shirt, a striped tie and navy suit coat. The outfit is not complete, however, until he puts on his newly polished ropers and his favorite Stetson hat. On the way out the door, he kisses his wife goodbye and gets into his pickup.

Upon arriving at his destination, he mingles with the people, shakes hands and greets his comrades—almost like a politician. As he walks through the cattle lots, he takes note of what types of qualities the prospective buyers are looking for. Moments before the sale begins he takes his seat on the auction block.

The auctioneer, with the help of the ringmen, has the power to create electricity and stir excitement in the sale crowd. This “buyer” energy is maximized by the auctioneer to get the most amount of money for each animal.

The auctioneer has been a vital part of livestock merchandising since cattle transactions began. The cattle industry’s “Golden Era” of the 1950s and ‘60s was also prosperous for the auctioneering business. One cannot look back on this time period without thinking of men such as Paul Good, A.W. “Ham” Hamilton and Hamilton “Ham” James.

During this era, these men sold most of the Angus cattle from coast to coast. The industry was selecting short, stocky cattle with popular bloodlines. Many well-known people such as General Dwight Eisenhower, Senator Robert Kerr, William G. Mennen and J.C. Penney were involved in the Angus business.



The chill of the autumn air, the auctioneer’s chants, steaming hot coffee, the camaraderie of friends and the anticipation of making the best buy — all make up a cattle sale’s festive atmosphere.

“When I started auctioneering, I set a goal to be the best pedigree auctioneer in the business,” says Paul Good, retired auctioneer. His livestock knowledge, coupled with his aggressiveness and ability to generate enthusiasm, took him to high ranks in the auctioneering world.

“Memories of the past keep me going on,” says Good.

Since the golden era, changes in cattle type and auctioneering itself have occurred. Ham Hamilton notes one of the changes.

“Auctioneers move cattle through the auction ring much faster today than when I began working the ring,” says Hamilton, retired auctioneer. He adds that cattle have gone from tall to short and back to tall again.

“There are fewer sales today than in 1975. This is indicative of the fact that there is just less cattle numbers,” says Jarvene Shackelford, an auctioneer from Mississippi.

He says catalogs have changed as well. Catalogs used to have just the animal’s pedigree. Today cattle buyers will find all

sorts of pedigree and performance information listed.

The industry is producing cattle that are leaner and more muscular than ever before. These are the cattle qualities that auctioneers are promoting.

The attitudes of the people attending sales have also changed. “In the 1970s there was a more leisurely attitude about sales. Today, buyers are more time conscious and are in and out in one day,” says Shackelford.

“Auctioneering is more than just calling the numbers,” says



Mike Jones, an auctioneer from Georgia. Jones says a successful auctioneer must attend meetings and field days, as well as herd visits. Auctioneers must keep abreast of the industry trends.

Once on the auction block the auctioneer must connect with the ringmen and the audience. The auctioneer has the ability to key-in on certain people by knowing what bloodlines are important to them.

"Auctioneering is a people business as much as it is a cattle business," Jones says.

From the auctioneer's seat the buyers appear to be more intent and focused than other people in the crowd, says Shackelford. Hamilton notices that some buyers seem very nervous.

Hamilton also says some buyers play tricks with the auctioneer. He remembers sales where the buyer would get his neighbor to do the bidding by kneeling him at the appropriate times. At another sale, the buyer said when he took his hat off his head he was through bidding. Regardless of the technique, the goal is to keep the people bidding.

"People get caught up in the action. As an auctioneer it is your job to create and maintain a high level of excitement," says Jones.

The auctioneer cannot maintain this excitement alone. He needs the help of the ringmen. There is constant communication between the auctioneer and the ringman. If a ringman is missing his bids, Hamilton says, he can let the ringman know where the bid is through his auctioneer lingo.

Shackelford says selling cattle is a team effort between him and the ringmen. He believes his job is no more important than the ringman's job.

"If the ringmen isn't doing his job, I will bypass him and take the bids myself. After the sale we will talk about it," Jones says.

Hamilton agrees; but he adds, ringmen missing bids doesn't happen often because they take a lot of pride in their section. He says it is the ringman's job to know the last bid they turned in and where it's at. Hamilton, Jones and Shackelford agree that experience as a ringman is beneficial to an auctioneer.

"Personally, I don't think a person can be a good auctioneer without being a successful ringman first," says Shackelford. One way to get experience as a ringman is to work for a livestock publication.

Jarvene Shackelford says it's easy to motivate people in the Angus industry

Aside from ringman experience, Jones recommends aspiring auctioneers have a college education, auctioneering school training and a purebred cattle background. He also suggests young auctioneers practice their chant daily. Hamilton adds the auctioneer's rhythm for

the purebred buyer must be clear and concise.

"Selling purebred cattle is much different than regular auction markets because the purebred industry is more subjective," says Hamilton.

Shackelford's advice to young auctioneers is to be prepared to work hard. He says you have to have a burning desire to learn and the patience to wait out the tough years. He also encourages young auctioneers to move at a slow pace until they are ready to accept greater responsibilities.

"There is a difference between being a rookie and being in over your head," says Shackelford.

Shackelford and Jones agree that the major drawback of auctioneering is all the time away from their families. The attributes of auctioneering include traveling, working with people and looking at high quality livestock.

Jones has branched out from auctioneering into Simmental sales management. He believes he represents the cattle more as a manager than as an auctioneer.

"As a sales manager, you almost become intimate with the cows," says Jones. Although he has started managing sales, Jones says auctioneering and Angus cattle are still his first loves.

Shackelford says working with the Angus industry has its advantages. "It is easy to motivate people when you are working with cattle and an organization that are in the forefront of everything else," he says.

So with the pounding of the gavel, the auctioneer claims the calf sold. Upon the completion of the sale, he settles up with the producer and says his goodbyes. As he drives his pickup home, he reflects on his performance and the crowd's reaction.

When he pulls into the lane he sees his cattle grazing in the field. He looks toward the house and notices his children and faithful dog anxiously waiting on the porch for his return.

Another work day has ended.

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