PERSPECTIVES

For Granted

▸ by **Eric Grant,** *Angus Productions Inc. Creative Media manager*

Change

Denver's Union Stockyards once bustled with the energy of American capitalism. Buyers and sellers pushed their way through crowded alleys and along the catwalk, where the network of pens spread beneath them for more than a mile. Locomotives streamed in from mountain and plain, belching pitch-black smoke into the air, their bellies full of cattle, sheep and hogs.

Traveling by train

On the periphery of the stockyards, meatpackers built mighty buildings. It was meat production on a colossal scale, the first time in human history that industrialization brought food to the masses on such a grand scale.

Then Dwight D. Eisenhower, the great organizer of men and material, began pouring asphalt on the western edge of St. Louis, Mo., the first step in the construction of the interstate highway system that eventually would connect the far corners of America — and put an end to farmer dependence on trains.

My grandpa told me repeatedly as I was growing up that the key to success is knowing what to do next.

The net result was a shift from centralized, terminal markets to de-centralized livestock auctions and feeding and packing facilities. Instead of riding the rails, cattle now bumped and jostled down highways in potbelly trailers, pulled with speed and efficiency by semi-tractor trailers.

There and back

If you listen close enough, I often think to myself, you can still hear echoes of the old yards. Apart from the two weeks during the National Western Stock Show (NWSS), the old pens and alleyways are ghostlike. Gates creak in the breeze. Pigeons roost in the upper reaches of the Livestock Exchange Building.

I doubt many of the men who invested their hearts and souls into this place ever expected a network of roads would put them out of business for good. The U.S. cattle industry was changing because of pavement, and the shockwaves are still resonating across the rural landscape.

I recently spent an evening at a cattle sale where there were no cattle. They had their photos, pedigrees and expected progeny differences (EPDs) in a PowerPoint presentation, which they projected across the room and beamed to unseen bidders across the Internet.

I asked myself, "What would those old-timers from Denver think if they could see this now? How would they tell us to prepare for change?"

I remember writing an article in the summer of 1990 about how the U.S. cattle-feeding industry was shifting away from its traditional haunts of Iowa in favor of places like Amarillo, Texas, and Greeley, Colo. Cattle could be fed there more efficiently, on a bigger scale, with fewer environmental effects on neighboring towns.

My sources told me the days of the farmer-feeder were done, that large-scale, commercial feeders would redefine the beef production landscape forever.

Drive across the Texas Panhandle or along the back roads of western Nebraska, and there's no doubt the predictions were partially true. Colorado-based Five Rivers Ranch Cattle Feeding LLC, for instance, has a one-time capacity of 800,000 head — more cattle than there are mother cows in the company's home state.

History, however, often takes unexpected trajectories, and large-scale feeding has become vulnerable in some places. Competition for water makes it difficult to produce corn and sorghum nearby. Urbanization of once isolated reaches bears greater public scrutiny of cattle-feeding practices. And the rising ethanol industry, bolstered by 2007's energy bill, has made cattle feeding more competitive — irony of ironies — in places like Iowa again.

Envision what to do next

My grandpa told me repeatedly as I was growing up that the key to success is knowing what to do next.

"You've got to have a map in your head of where you are and where you need to be," he'd say. I think it was good advice coming from a man who carved out a good ranch from next to nothing.

He, too, once trailed his cows from mountain pastures to the railhead 25 miles to the west. He rode along in a caboose across the Rockies and walked the vast network of pens and alleys in Denver as he waited impatiently for the bidding whistle to blow.

Those were heady, promising years to be a cowman, perhaps the grandest years the industry will ever see.

But when change blew in, it came hard, and its echoes continue to resonate in pastures and farms across America.

E-MAIL: egrant@angusjournal.com

Editor's Note: *"For Granted" is a monthly column written for the* Angus Journal *by Angus Productions Inc. Creative Media Manager Eric Grant. The column focuses on marketing beef, the beef industry and seedstock in particular — aspects of the business that are often taken for granted as day-to-day tasks take center stage.*