



Branding Iron

► by **Eric Grant**, general manager

Lessons of Chicago

Two Chicago landmarks speak volumes about the lasting impacts of economic, technological and cultural change — and how the struggle for marketplace relevance is unpredictable and ever-changing.

Silent icons

The first is the gateway that marked the entrance to the Chicago Union Stock Yards. Constructed in the mid-1870s, it witnessed the growth of the nation's livestock industry and the sweeping, evolutionary changes in the meatpacking and processing business that continue to shape food production.

Today, the archway stands alone. It's all that remains of the 475-acre stockyards, where pens and alleys once comprised a vast, bustling patchwork across Chicago's south side. Modern offices and distribution centers now reside where the transactions of millions of head of cattle, sheep and hogs took place.

The second is the Sears Tower, now called the "Willis Tower," which rises from the city's floor to a height of more than 1,730 feet. On a clear day, visitors on its sky deck can see four states — Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana and Michigan — and travelers on the Plains know they are nearing the "Windy City" when the building's black shape first becomes visible on the horizon.

At one time, more than 12,000 people worked inside the building. Nearly 25,000 people — about the equivalent of the membership of the American Angus Association today — passed through its doors each day.

Struggle for relevance

It was not so long ago that the Sears catalog was a primary driver of the U.S. economy. In its pages, customers could find just about anything they wanted — clothing, appliances, jewelry and even complete kit houses. The catalog was launched in 1888 near the time of the stockyards' heyday and remained a centerpiece of the American family until 1993, when the company discontinued its distribution. Sears still struggles for relevance in today's ever-changing, worldwide economy now dominated by disruptive companies like Amazon and Apple.

Urban stockyards, on the other hand, lost most of their relevance in the 1960s when construction of the interstate highway system ended the use of trains for transporting cattle, and the packing and marketing sectors moved into the countryside where they were closer to

livestock and farther away from hustle and bustle of cities like Chicago.

The rise of the American middle class would not have been possible without the stockyards or Sears. The stockyards made food inexpensive and accessible to the masses for the first time in human history. This resulted in a migration of people who left behind subsistence farms and ranches for opportunities in cities. The Sears catalog helped furnish their homes with the consumer goods they needed.

On the surface

Time marches in lockstep with change. There's no doubt the livestock industry will continue to change in the coming years, in the same way that Chicago has transformed itself during the last century and a half. We're just now scratching the surface with genomics technology, which will forever influence the way we breed cattle. Plus, we're just now building the platforms that will reshape the way we advertise and market the cattle we raise.

Today, the two structures stand as icons to the past, bookends to a century of progress and economic change. Tourists still clamber onto the tower's elevators to ascend the 110 stories, where they visit the sky deck to scan the distant horizons. A handful of people who remember the history of Chicago's south side still seek out the gateway, and recall the city's big-shouldered, gilded age.

Both remain poignant reminders that the struggle for marketplace relevance is unpredictable, ongoing and ever-changing.

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