

Stock Show Reflections

For many, the National Western Stock Show represents the best of all that once was — and all that could be.

Story & photos by Eric Grant

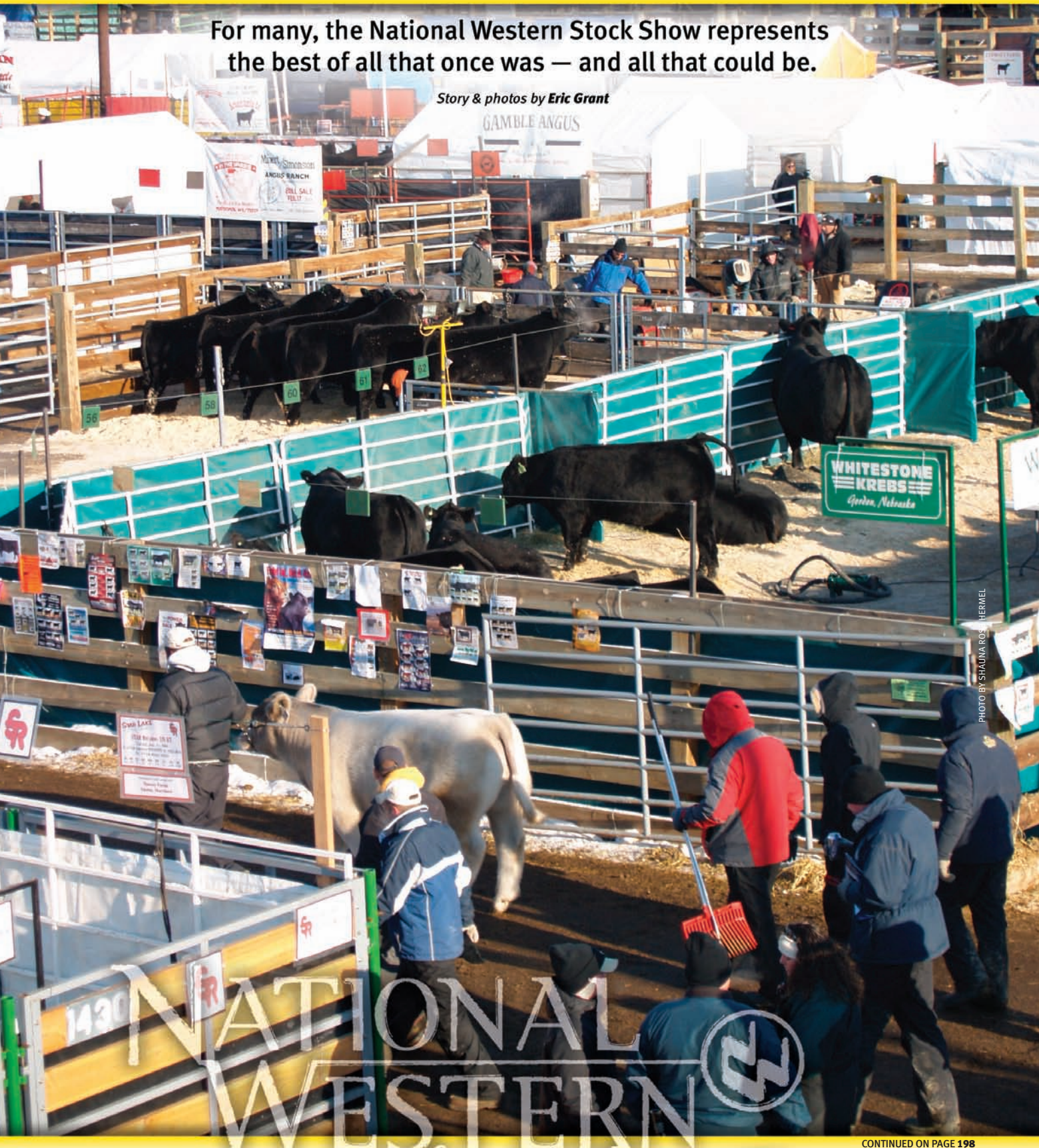


PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

NATIONAL WESTERN



Stock Show

CONTINUED ON PAGE 198

Despite the miseries of cold weather and bad roads, Angus breeders made it a point to show up in strong numbers at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) this year.

After all, it was the continuation of 101 years of tradition, a tradition that was started by Colorado cowboys along the South Platte River a century ago, and continues today as a

worldwide focal point for the international livestock industry.

Back in the 1960s, when Kevin Nickel made his first trip to Denver, Colo., he was awestruck by what he saw. As a kid growing up near Big Timber, Mont., he wasn't accustomed to the feverish activity in the historic stockyards and on the "Hill." There were cattle everywhere. There were people

from every corner of the country. And there was an energy radiating from the "cattle capitalism" that surrounded him.

"I remember arriving in Denver, with all its tall buildings and the traffic, and then topping the hill and seeing the stockyards," says Nickel of G Bar H Cattle Co., a registered Angus ranch near Veteran, Wyo.

"It was an amazing sight. The pens went on forever and ever. The train cars were parked along the tracks, and there were hundreds of people streaming through the alleys."

Of special significance was the old Livestock Exchange Building, which still anchors the yards on its southern side. It represented the magnitude and historical significance of this place.

"That old building has always fascinated me — the history and the people who once worked there," Nickel says. "I never got to see the stockyards during its heyday, but it was always easy to imagine what it must have been like when we were there for the Stock Show."

Later on, Nickel's dad worked for the Wyoming Hereford Ranch (WHR), when WHR brought one of the largest show strings in the country into Denver.

There was a lot of work to be



►Above: "I never got to see the stockyards during its heyday, but it was always easy to imagine what it must have been like when we were there for the Stock Show," says Kevin Nickel of Veteran, Wyo. He and his wife, Jackie, make it a point to return every year.

►Right: Pen bull success was punctuated by having their trailer impounded and getting lost in the yards the first day for Bud Koupal (left) and his son, Joey. Despite it all, they'll be back next year.





►**Left:** Jessica and Chance Simpson huddle beneath a makeshift tent in the yards. Despite the frigid temperatures, the kids returned home more inspired than ever before to be in the cattle business.

►**Below:** Ultimately, the National Western Stock Show is about the future, says Bill Simpson, pictured with his daughter Jessica, 3.

done, but Nickel found time to break away with his friends to explore the old yards. On more than one occasion, they snuck onto the walkway that connected the old yards with the Swift & Co. packing plant. And high above the ground, he could see the broad expanse of pens that stretched toward the eastern horizon.

“We weren’t supposed to crawl up there, but we’d walk the length of it and make our way into the old plant,” Nickel recalls. “The yards gave us a lot of opportunity to be kids, to explore things. We probably looked at things that we shouldn’t have.”

Kevin’s wife, Jackie, grew up in the Angus business on the eastern Wyoming plains. Her family, who founded G Bar H, exhibited pens of 20 feeder calves in the early 1970s.

“I can remember how they had the cattle stalled from one end of the stockyards to the other,” she says. “We bedded our cattle on straw instead of chips, and sold our calves before we went home.”

For the Nickels, who took first in their class in the pen bull show this year, the NWSS has come to represent two things:

First, it’s a good chance to promote their upcoming Angus sale.

“The commercial producer doesn’t come and buy bulls in the yards like he used to,” Jackie says. “Most of the people who exhibit there have their own sales now, and we take



our best bulls there to promote our sale, not sell them.”

Second, and most importantly, the NWSS is a great place to see old friends.

“One of the main reasons we go back every year is to just see old friends,” Kevin adds. “There are so many friends we’ve made there over the years, and the only time we get to see them is at Denver. We get to look at their cattle, and see how they’re progressing.”

First-time success

A few years back, Bud Koupal made his

first trip to Denver. It was a fast and furious expedition. Driving all night, he arrived just in time the next morning to take in the Angus show. When it was over, he hopped in his vehicle and drove home the next night. It was a 1,300-mile round trip, and he covered it in little less than 48 hours.

This year, the Koupals, who own Koupal Angus of Dante, S.D., planned to exhibit their own cattle at the pen and carload shows, so Koupal sent his son, Joey, and a good friend to Denver a few days ahead of

CONTINUED ON PAGE 200

time, so they could make the necessary preparations and ensure the cattle would be ready.

“People told us we’d better go down and take a look around before we showed. But we thought we’d try it out and meet some people,” Koupal says. “This business is more and more about public relations all the time, and we thought we could attract some customers to our sale.”

Bud underestimated the size of the yards, however, and spent much of his first day wandering around trying to find his cattle.

“I got my directions mixed up,” he quips. “I had no idea there were so many cattle in there.”

His trailer also didn’t fare very well. They parked it next to a bank in the hotel parking lot, only to find out later that it had been towed off and impounded. It took \$160 to get it back.

“The hotel was right in the middle of Denver,” Koupal says. “Our kids are right out of high school. You can guarantee they got their education that week.”

Despite the problems, everything worked out well. The Koupals took first in their class, despite the fact they were Denver rookies. They plan to come back next year.

“It was quite a show,” Koupal adds. “It was a great experience for the kids.”

It’s about the future

Bill Simpson made it a point to take his three kids — Cody, Chance and Jessica — for a walk on the catwalk, high above the Denver stockyards.

As the broad expanse unfolded beneath their feet — the hundreds of pens of cattle, the buzz of preparation, and the low rumble of coal trains passing down the tracks — he knew his kids had caught the bug.

Awestruck, Cody turned to his dad and gasped, “Dad, this is awesome.”

The Simpsons, who run a small herd of Angus cows and operate a meat business, had traveled from their home near Bend, Ore., to help their friends in Denver as they prepared for the Angus pen shows.

Simpson hoped the kids would be inspired enough by what they saw to bring their own cattle back in 2008.

“I made it to my first stock show about 17 years ago, when I was on the Chico State University livestock judging team,” Simpson says. “The show was impressive. Like the Cheyenne Rodeo, it’s the granddaddy of them all.”

The family spent nearly a week in the frigid yards, battling not only snow but also sub-zero temperatures. The kids made it through every day but one (a day they chose to visit the Denver aquarium instead) and stayed bundled up in three and four layers of clothes. They even constructed a makeshift tent in their pen where they could stay a little warmer.

“When the kids got home, they immediately went to the barn, grabbed their halters and put them on their heifers,” Simpson says. “They’re jacked up.”

For Simpson, the Stock Show isn’t just a celebration of the past; what matters most is the good things it does for kids.

“Stock shows are where kids build the foundation of their life — the hard work, the dedication, the preparation it takes to excel,” Simpson says. “If they can learn to do those things, they can do anything they set out to do later in life.”

“It’s amazing when you think about all of the hard work that comes with showing cattle at Denver, even before you get there,” he continues. “Then you hang out in 12-below temperatures, and not whine or cry because you’re cold. That takes a lot of dedication from kids these days. I think that the kids understood that it was a big deal, that it’s about a way of life, that it’s really bigger than you can ever imagine.”

►The NWSS offers breeders a chance to promote upcoming Angus sales.



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