

"IN THE YARDS"

A Trip in Time

Stockyards remain the heart of the National Western Stock Show.

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Just mentioning the Denver Union Stockyards can cause cattlemen to daydream of a time long ago, when Denver, Colo., was a cow town and thousands of head of cattle streamed in and out of the yards daily.

That was a different era. People traveled by rail, and central livestock markets ruled the industry. Denver was a livestock market on the rise, with the potential to be a formidable player in the United States cattle industry; but, at the time, most of the major markets were in the Midwest.

In an effort to build the reputation of the western cattle industry, the Denver Union Stockyards joined forces with a few rugged cattlemen and livestock commission merchants to form the National Western Stock Show (NWSS).

Several previous attempts at creating a national livestock show in Denver had failed, but this time would be different.

A century ago, ranchers from around the country convened in front of the Livestock Exchange Building in Denver to found one of the most successful and prolific stock shows in the country.

As the age of central markets passed, the Denver Union Stockyards closed its doors. By then, the NWSS was well on its way. Now the

stockyards remain at the heart of the National Western, and their preservation is a top priority of the 100-year-old show.

The legend

The idea of an outdoor January show in Colorado might leave you scratching your head, but NWSS founders designed the event to bring cattlemen together. And, as cold as it might be, that's the only time of year the ranching industry slows down enough to take a few days off.

The show's first years took place in the open stockyards or under a canvas tent, creating a rich atmosphere and solid foundation for stories to share for generations. And, anyone spending a little time in the yards would quickly learn the definition of "stock show weather."

"My basic memory of [my first day in the yards] is that it was one of the coldest days I've ever experienced in my life," said Jim Heird, chairman of the National Western's stockyards long-range planning committee.

"I can remember times when it was colder than the devil down there," agreed longtime Hereford exhibitor Jim Milligan of Illinois.

Beyond the weather, ranchers in the stockyards tell stories of the legends of the cattle industry and their time in the yards.

"Once I got over the shock of the cold, I began to look around," Heird said. "I realized all of the major cattle operations in the country were there, and they were so accessible to me.

"The owners and herdsmen were there," he continued. "It was so easy to get connected, and it was a real, live piece of agriculture."

Milligan, who relates hundreds of stories of his family's time in the stockyards, adds, "The same operators came year after year. You made a lot of friends, and [returning to the yards each year] was like a reunion."

With hundreds of chief cattlemen in attendance and an exhibition of thousands of head of top-quality cattle, the National Western earned the moniker, "the Super Bowl of Livestock Shows."

"The National Western has such a huge yards show," Milligan said. "It's the big one. Denver has done a good job of supporting the yards and, in turn, the yards show has helped support the entire show."

The golden days

As Denver's market grew, so did its stock show. Cattle came by the carload, and by the 1950s, business was booming at the stock show.

From that very first year to the 1960s, the

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western cattle market bloomed. Denver, and its stockyards, became one of the premier livestock markets in the country, outlasting even some of the older river markets that were developed in Chicago, Ill., and Saint Joseph, Mo.

“I still remember riding the train to [my first National Western],” Milligan said. “I can remember the huge overheads and packing plants they had there. And, they probably had 3,500 to 4,000 bulls to sell there.”

At that point, carloads of bulls held 20 animals, and it was not uncommon for individual ranchers to bring 100 head of cattle to the stock show. Cattlemen who brought their feeders to market in Denver purchased seedstock at the stock show with the money they earned from the feeder sale.

“This is where business took place, and

that was the purpose of coming — to conduct business,” said Gene Wiese in a story in the National Western’s souvenir program. His family has exhibited and sold bulls in the stockyards for more than 50 years.

In the yards

The stockyards are steeped in tradition, but they have still endured their share of change.

In the yards’ heyday, all the activity happened in the pens and the allies between them. Cowhands slept in their cattle pens, and the cattle were paraded down an alley in front of crowds to be judged.

Following the close of the Denver Union Stockyards, the National Western put together a plan to purchase the empty yards to maintain its commercial cattle show there.

“The yards are what separates the National Western Stock Show from other stock shows in the world,” Heird said.

The National Western bought the first three acres in 1969. By the end of the decade, the NWSS owned most of the vacated yards.

About this same time, the National Western erected a building to house the many auctions going on in the yards. The National Western Livestock Center opened for business during the 1967 show.

“The purpose of [the Livestock Center] was to compete with the auction barns in the respective communities surrounding Denver,” said retired NWSS general manager Chuck Sylvestre. “Even after the close of the Denver Union Stockyards, the National Western saw the need for a place where people could bring their feeder cattle and animals to sell.”

The National Western owed its uniqueness to the yards, and it was always its goal to maintain a livestock market in Denver. In the mid-1970s, the aging yards were renovated, which included repainting the pens red, white and blue, and renaming Packing House Road to National Western Drive.

But, the National Western’s plans for a continuing viable market didn’t come to fruition, and the final livestock market agency moved out in 1978.

The next 100 years

“When we think about the future [of the yards], we have to ask how we preserve its heritage,” Heird said. “We want to be able to preserve it as a piece of living history.”

Heird believes that process starts with increasing the yards’ accessibility to the attending public. Speaking of preparations for this year’s NWSS, Heird said, “We’re going to brighten the entrance with a new paint job,



and signs will make it easier to find the Yards.” The National Western also maintains an annual budget for repairing the pens.

“We’re trying to keep the yards’ [original] pen pattern, but we’re redesigning the pens themselves so it’s a more flexible-use area than what we’ve had in the past,” Heird said. This includes using removable posts and partitions so the area can serve as a parking lot in the stock show’s off-season.

This enabled the stock show to focus on the yards during its centennial celebration in 2006.

“So much of what people remember of [the stock show] has to do with the yards, whether it’s riding the train with the cattle or the cattle being unloaded off the cattle cars, the sales or the blocks,” Heird said. “We’re going to try to duplicate some of the things that have taken place in the last 100 years.

“We’re trying to find some of those areas [that people remember] to let visitors see how cattle used to travel and where people stayed,” he noted.

In addition to the updated appearance, the National Western added activities to increase the amount of traffic in the stockyards. Along with hosting the first-ever video sales in the yards in 2005, the stock show featured parts

of the versatility ranch horse competition and stock dog trials among the pens of cattle.

Steeped in tradition

A place of big business, family traditions and tall tales, the National Western stockyards hold a special place in the hearts of stock show fans and cattlemen alike. Be it a reunion site or a history lesson, the area holds the key to the roots of the National Western and the heritage of the western United States.

“More business is conducted at the stock show in the yards than anywhere else during the year,” said Becky Tiedeman of Nebraska, a longtime Angus exhibitor. “It’s the culmination of everyone in the cattle business, and it’s been that way for the 27 years my family has been coming.”

Involvement at the stock show runs three generations deep in Tiedeman’s family.

“Our son is the third generation of our family to exhibit in the yards,” Tiedeman said, adding that her son received a National Western scholarship in the past and that her father, Jim Baldridge, has served as the auctioneer for the National Western’s Auction of Junior Livestock Champions.

“The people, the activity, the potential for great things happen in the yards every year,” Tiedeman said. “It’s just too important to miss.”

In a salute to its beginnings, the National Western still hosts its carload and pen show, and it remains the only stock show in the world that continues to hold such an event. The stock show also is the only exposition that maintains a carload judging contest for collegiate contestants.

“The yards make Denver different than the other big livestock shows in the country,” Milligan said. “Once their yards shut down, shows like Chicago and Saint Joseph really started to dwindle. Denver’s yards have really carried the entire show on.”

“So many people have stories to tell about the yards, whether they’re so cold, they saw a certain bull or they met somebody,” Heird said. “It’s an experience. The yards are what makes Denver Denver.”



Editor’s Note: This article was provided upon request by the National Western Stock Show, Rodeo and Horse Show.

