

America's Historic Stockyards



LIVESTOCK HOTELS

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Preface

Americans have used meat as a large part of their diet from colonial times to the present. While hunting wild game may have been the earliest source of meat, especially on the frontier, domesticated animals quickly provided the most readily available food. The story of how various types of livestock have reached America's dinner tables for the past four centuries forms a vital part of this country's heritage.

The historic marketing picture reveals various scenarios: driving animals to "cow pens" during colonial days, slaughtering hogs on the Ohio frontier, herding Texas longhorns northward to Kansas cow towns, transporting livestock by rail to big city stockyards, or, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, selling animals from feedlots or by video, computer, or closed-circuit television. From the 1860s to the 1960s and beyond, large stockyards dominated livestock marketing in America. Two dozen of the largest are featured in this book.

Phrases from a unique language—that of stockyards and meat-packing workers, especially of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—need to be preserved. Livestock workers used their own colorful terms to describe the animals and their surroundings at the yards. A glossary includes terms commonly used during the heyday of the big stockyards.

Much of this country retained an agricultural existence until the fourth decade of the twentieth century, which meant that parents or grandparents of many present Americans either handled livestock at stockyards, worked in the packing plants, or loaded animals on railroad cars headed to market from their own farms or ranches. I hope readers can learn what earlier generations of Americans readily accepted as the only way to sell their domestic animals: through stockyards. Western historians will recognize the familiar themes of livestock, railroading, and meat-packing entrepreneurship in the

rise and fall of the nation's big stockyards in the century when they proudly called themselves "livestock hotels."

One comment about style: the industry spelled "stock yards" and "live stock" as two words for decades and then at mid-twentieth century combined these to one word. Consistent with the time frame, this manuscript follows the historical spelling.

Introduction

Symbolically and literally, the era of big stockyards in the United States began with the opening of the Chicago Union Stock Yards on Christmas Day 1865. The innovative livestock marketing strategies that would dominate the business for the next century represented a welcome new beginning to a nation torn by civil war and ready for healing. Indeed, cattle drives heading north from Texas soon reached railroads that were building westward, allowing cattle to travel to slaughtering plants near the Chicago yards. In 1869, the first transcontinental railroad united the nation east-west at Promontory Point, Utah Territory, and a network of feeder lines made possible several cow towns in Kansas and Nebraska with rail connections to the large Chicago market and to other similar markets that soon developed. In addition to new markets, the revolutionary idea of shipping slaughtered meat by iced-down, insulated railroad cars (and later refrigerated ones) set in place elements that, for well over a century, made the big stockyards the major means of marketing livestock.

After a long drive, cattle pens had to be available at railroad junctions and pens readied for hogs that were shipped from midwestern farms. Meat-packing companies (as the slaughtering plants were called) needed a ready supply of all types of livestock to keep their plants operating; consequently, the slaughtering companies invested both in stockyards and railroads. This triumvirate of rail lines, stock pens, and slaughtering facilities dominated livestock marketing in America.

Most nineteenth- and twentieth-century markets operated in big cities at locations collectively called “the stockyards.” They actually consisted of a stockyards company, meat-packing facilities, offices for commission agents and dealers, market newspapers, cattle loan companies, market news services, officials hired solely to run the operation, and harness shops,

veterinarians, and restaurants. Thus, the term “stockyards” became an umbrella designation for a variety of services. Also among these were public utilities officials, livestock traders, meat inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, officials from the Packers and Stockyards Administration, buyers from the meat-packing plants nearby, and railroad officials. All of these people and their customers made the livestock market a place teeming with activity.¹

Therefore, “stockyards,” in its broadest definition, became a place to bring all kinds and classes of animals and people together. A relationship of mutual benefit existed among the railroads, the stockyards companies, and the slaughterhouses, making the three entities quite interdependent; probably none could have prospered without the other two.² Along with other related businesses, the three major players constituted the “market.” In many instances ownership of the three business operations combined and overlapped. The packers constructed refrigerator railroad cars in order to protect their perishable product, and they also often built stockyards facilities in order to guarantee a ready supply of animals for slaughter in their packing plants.³ Louise Carroll Wade has called the livestock trade and the meat-packing industry “Siamese twins.”⁴ “Triplets” better describes the relationship between stockyards, meat packers, and the railroads, for the latter first carried the live animal to the market and then transported the slaughtered, refrigerated product away from the packing plant. The stockyards generally referred to the entire area in a city where all participants in the process came together to do business.

Market participants used both broad and narrow definitions of “stockyards” as does this historical account. In a narrower sense, stockyards can be defined as only the company that provided the pens and facilities where livestock trading took place. A single company in each market, for example, often furnished food and water in the holding pens, veterinary services, loading and unloading facilities, weighing scales, and office spaces. A

stockyards company did not buy livestock; rather, it provided a convenient place where buying and selling could occur. This unique system for marketing livestock in America found its greatest success from approximately the mid-1860s to the mid-1960s.

Compared to railroads and the largest meat packers, little attention has been given to the stockyards companies, the firms that established this unified system. Clearly the holding area for livestock called “stockyards companies” played a vital role in the entire process. A president of the Wichita Union Stock Yards once used an analogy long accepted in the livestock industry when he described the narrower definition of a stockyards as a “hotel for livestock.” “For instance,” he said, “we rent ’em a room—a pen; if they want to eat, we feed them. We furnish branding service as a hotel furnishes a manicure; we have a veterinarian on duty, offering a complete service, just like a hotel employs a house physician.”⁵ He further explained that this livestock hotel charged the same rent, called yardage, whether the “guest” remained one day or a week. The “desk clerks,” employees of the stockyards, fed and watered the animal and weighed it as it “checked out.”

Principal sources of revenue for stockyards company owners included the charges for market services and use of facilities. Normal charges were: (1) yardage at a fixed price per head; (2) weighing at a fixed price per draft (several animals); and (3) feed, if required, at a fixed margin above the cost of the feed.

Quite properly, most businessmen chose sites for stockyards on the south side of towns so that prevailing north winds would blow the accompanying aroma away from residential areas—as in Omaha, South St. Paul, St. Joseph, and South San Francisco. As it happened, the men who organized the stockyards near Fort Worth owned fourteen hundred acres of land north of town, so they built there; stockyards promoters at Wichita located their pens to the north as well. Practicality and perhaps cheaper land overrode the public’s sensibilities in the nineteenth century.

Eventually an association of livestock dealers or commission agents, who sold livestock on commission for others in a central market, banded together in a voluntary association called a “livestock exchange” or a “traders exchange.” The association provided a gathering place where members could meet and share views about the market. The major purpose of an exchange was to assure every patron of the market fair and impartial treatment in the sale or purchase of livestock and to bring about a uniform code of ethics among members. An exchange admitted new members upon the recommendation of an investigating committee. Various markets handled such organizations differently.⁶

Interconnected and well organized, this livestock marketing network involving big stockyards served the nation superbly for over a century. It faltered in the last third of the twentieth century, when many of the large stockyards began closing.