

Under the Western Sky

Celebrating the iconic origins of the National Western Stock Show.

by *Diane Meyer*

The Super Bowl of livestock shows did not earn its universal moniker by happenstance. Though not unlike other long-standing livestock shows, the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) has a reputation superseding all others.

Identifying the show's distinguishing factor proves difficult, initially. Yes, the event is historic, but so are the other national shows. Is it the superior genetics, the steep competition, the thrilling atmosphere that sets the NWSS apart?

A stroll northeast down the last remaining catwalk over the historic Denver stockyards

garners a view of a maze of wooden pens stretching in all directions. On a cloud-free morning – which, rest assured, the exhibitors in the pens below have prayed for – golden sunrays beam down on the railroad tracks skirting the eastern side of the Platte River. Scanning the skyline due south, the silhouette of the Stadium Arena stands proudly atop the “Hill.” A pathway bearing west under the railroad tracks gives way to the old Livestock Exchange Building, and the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains form the vast western horizon.



It is a spectacle to behold, and one not soon forgotten. This perspective can only be gleaned from one place — the “Yards.”

Laying the tracks

The 113th running of the National Western was designated the “Year of the Yards” — a theme honoring the hallmark of the world-acclaimed stock show. Complete with 25 Yard shows representing 23 breeds, 60 Hill shows, 29 rodeo performances, 24 auctions and hundreds of trade show vendors, the 16-day event racked in a cool 701,656 visitors.

Regardless of all the action throughout the grounds, the mecca for showgoers is undoubtedly in the old stockyards — home to a marvelous display of seemingly endless rows of cattle pens. Those pens carry the history of the once-thriving stockyards, a bustling hub for livestock commerce in the first half of the 20th century.

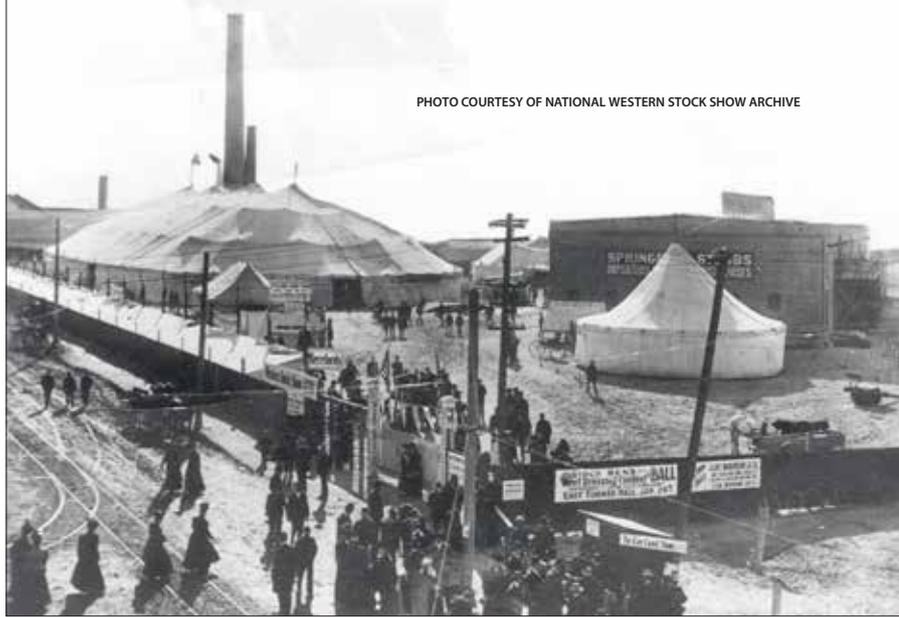
“The stockyards were a focal point for the Mountain West,” says Keith Fessenden, a historian and archivist for the NWSS. “It was an area where people could bring their cattle to sell for slaughter or to be transported further east.”

Where the grounds sit today marks the fifth location of the stockyards. Decades before the inaugural 1906 National Western, the Elephant Corral — a major trading post for teamsters and goldminers — served as Denver’s hot spot for purchasing cattle. Next, the stockyards established themselves at the current location of Denver Union Station. The third move was to a spot at roughly Cherry Street and 7th Avenue, about 6 miles south of the current grounds. However, issues with fragranciness resulted in another northern migration. This fourth move is noteworthy for being the first time railcars unloaded stock at the yards.

In 1880 the stockyards relocated to where they have resided the last 139 years, sprawling over a large stretch of land from 46th Avenue to Race Court. Pens were built east of the Platte River, with railroad tracks flanking both sides. Operating to their west was the once world’s largest sheep barn in a still-standing blue and white concrete building. The Armour & Co. packing plant and water tower sat to the north; Swift & Co., to the south.

Buyers with offices in the Livestock Exchange Building would make daily trips down to the stockyards to procure orders for the packers, whereupon animals were led up a ramp, across the stock bridge and into the packing plants.

The Denver Union Stock Yards Co. became a subsidiary of the Kansas City Stock Yard Co. in 1886. Twenty years later, the company was sold to the National Packing Co. — a consortium of Chicago’s major meat companies including Armour, Swift and Morris & Co. Before its mandated dissolution in 1921, National Packing Co. possessed 23 stockyards and slaughtering plants nationwide, controlling more than 10 percent of the country’s meat production. As a result of the beef trust’s disbandment, the Denver Union Stock Yard Co. passed hands into local control in 1926.



In 1907, the second annual NWSS was held in a circus-sized tent on the Hill.

January was a slow time of year, affording the opportunity to promote the stockyards. With the financial support of the National Packing Co. — along with an influx of businessmen attending the seven association conventions held in Denver that January of 1906 — the stockyards were an obvious choice for hosting the first NWSS.

“It was held in the Yards for people to come see and be impressed with it all and to talk to people,” Keith

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The heart of the stockyards

The cornerstones of commerce, all major stockyards had an exchange building to provide offices for stockyard company employees, commission salesman and cattlemen alike.

The Denver Livestock Exchange Building was no exception. The first portion of the building was erected in 1898 and the eastern section — recognized for its beautiful red brick facade — was built in 1916. The two-story, western-most portion was added in 1918, and is now home to the Denver Stockyard Saloon.

In its heyday, the first floor housed one of the oldest radio stations in Colorado — the KFKA AM radio station based in Greeley — which broadcasted an hourly report on the current market prices. On the second floor, a chalkboard listed the latest prices in Omaha, Chicago and Kansas City.

This famous building will stay through the redevelopment, but the fate of its many offices is still up in the air. **HW**



explains. A large tent, borrowed from a wintering circus, was used to house the show that first year. As intended, approximately 15,000 people from all over the country came to browse through the exhibits.

Likely, in the interest of space, the 1907 exhibition was held in a tent up on the Hill, which was upgraded to a wooden structure with a canvas roof the following year. The National Amphitheater, now Stadium Arena, was completed in 1909 and has hosted the show ever since.

“The packing houses, the stockyards, the railroad and the stock show were all interrelated,” Keith explains. “The stock show has made it so long because of the support of the livestock industry.”

Tracks for trade

The pen and carload show at the NWSS was an annual epicenter for advertising and selling stock. Cattlemen hopped in the railcars with nothing but their stock and a gunny sack of supplies and unloaded in the Yards. “Carlot” sales exploded — selling a pen of 20 bulls was commonplace, and a few sales recorded 50 head sold. In the carload show, producers could show off the breadth of their programs and customers could get a feel for their depth.

“That’s why I like the carloads so much,” says Jerry Delaney of Delaney Herefords, Lake Benton, Minn. “I can bring 10 bulls that are uniform and that represent a broad base of my program.”

The show is “open-air advertising,” as he puts it.

Jerry’s first time in Denver was roughly 40 years ago — when there were only six polled Hereford pens. He says with each passing year, “More people know where you’re at.

“It takes time to let people know what you’re representing is going to be a consistent product year after year,” he says. “People have to make sure you’re the real deal, not a one-hit-wonder.”

After years of hard work and figuring out the ropes, Delaney Herefords finally took home grand champion

carload honors in 2015 — a title and favorite memory shared with business partner, Atkins Herefords, Tea, S.D. The two operations joined forces in 2007 and have shown together in the Yards since 2008.

“The year we had grand champion carload with the Delaney’s was absolutely a highlight — that was a dream come true,” describes American Hereford Association (AHA) President Pete Atkins.

Pete has fond memories of attending Denver as a child with his father and purchasing a Hereford bull in the Yards. “It was like going to a supermarket for cattle,” he recalls.

Now, marketing efforts center around showcasing breeding programs to spur interest in upcoming production sales. Due to advancements in genetics and technology, a fountain of information is available to drive discussion regarding every animal.

“It’s not uncommon for someone to be pulling up pictures or videos of the dam when they’re here looking at a bull,” Pete remarks.

He and Jerry have learned each customer understands cattle differently, and it is important to find mutual ground when explaining their enterprise to potential clients. Appealing to the variety of breeding needs for seedstock and commercial cattlemen alike is an aspect of the Yards nearly all exhibitors appreciate.

Lowell Fisher, Spencer, Neb., has shown at Denver consecutively since 1995 and enjoys the Yards for their relaxed nature and the fact they are still commercially oriented. He has visited with buyers from Canada to Mexico and everywhere in between.

“The pen and the Yard show are unique,” he says. “It’s located where there is a lot of cattle industry. If you go 10 hours any direction from Denver, a lot of people are making their living with cattle. It’s a great place to congregate cattle.”

Tracks for tradition

In the pen directly opposite the distinct “In the Yards” archway, are Thomas Douthit, 4V Ranch Douthit Herefords, St. Francis, Kan., and his family, who have exhibited at the pen and carload show for 76 years — longer than any other Hereford breeder he knows of.

Back in the day, the Douthits brought 25 to 30 bulls to sell. Albeit successful, it was a lot of work — Thomas has found four head can do the trick just as well. He has one, time-tested tip for good advertising: “Bring good cattle,” he laughs. That, and “Talk to people. It’s really that simple.”

Showing in Denver is a tradition the 23-year-old aspires to continue for as long as he can, especially

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Showing in the Yards is all about teaming up to showcase the best of the best for the Delaney and Atkins families. “We look for quality across all measures,” Pete Atkins says.



Lowell Fisher comes back to Denver year after year because of the uniqueness and family-feel of the Yards show. "There's different cattle for different people," he says.

after his father's, Stephen Douthit's, passing three years ago. "My sister and I had to pick up the reins and keep going," he says. "After 76 years, we can't stop now."

Also on the center aisle, three generations of Kansas Flint Hill cattlemen can be found hard at work in the Mill Creek Ranch pen. Former AHA President David Breiner, Alma, Kan., has been showing in Denver since 1974, a tradition he now shares with his son, Chad, and grandson, Karsten.

"It's part of our family," David says.

As Chad points out, an element of Denver's draw is catching up with friends they see only once a year. "It's an annual tradition," he says. "It's a good time to interact with people you don't get to see all that often."

David describes the magnitude and degree of influence the show has for the breed. "Denver is a very important part of the Hereford business," he contends.

"The sheer numbers and the history really set this show apart," Chad adds.

Karsten has caught the show bug — the good one, not the Denver crud — and is also drawn to the Hill. David smiles, saying, "From that standpoint, that probably means we're going increase the Hill show."

Midway between the 4-V and Mill Creek pens and just west under the catwalk, a canvas sign plastered with "Baumgarten Cattle Co." overlooks a carload of Hereford bulls. Hailing from Belfield, N.D., the Baumgarten family has been in the Hereford business for 104 years. Coming to Denver is engrained in the family's lifestyle.

Rollie Baumgarten first attended as an onlooker 45 years ago and has been showing for the last 25 years. A lot has changed since then, but he notes the unwavering sense of community in the Yards has been a mainstay of the Hereford breed. "The people that show cattle here are so close-knit and want everybody else to succeed without worrying about themselves," he says. "Everybody here is part of your family and will help take care of you."

Tracks for change

At some point in the 1960s, stockyards across the country ceased being stockyards in the traditional sense. One record indicates March of 1973 was



In a pen that has been their home base for nearly a decade, Thomas Douthit and his family carry on the 76-year tradition of bringing their Hereford bulls to the NWSS.

the last time stock came into Denver specifically for the stockyards.

Multiple factors contributed to the change that swept the packing industry. Trucks had surpassed trains as the predominant mode of transportation, rendering central drop-off zones near rail tracks unnecessary. Additionally, railcars had to go through a lot more bells and whistles to haul stock — and many railroad companies gladly abandoned livestock shipping altogether.

The configuration of packing houses also underwent tremendous revisions. Older packing plants featured a vertical layout, where the kill floor was on the uppermost level, and carcasses subsequently made their way down a gravity-fed chain. When the horizontal layout debuted, many plants rebuilt in rural areas closer to their supply source. Other pros for relocating included cheaper labor, less union presence, easy access by truck and no smell complaints from city dwellers.

Corruption is also a contender for the packers' demise. Although the passage of the 1921 anti-trust Packers and Stockyards Act disbanded corporate monopolies, commission firms remained notorious for price setting. In response, local auction markets rose in popularity during the '60s as business began to wane for the major packers.

In spite of it all, the NWSS prospered, transforming into the world's premier pen and carload show.

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Generations of Hereford breeders showing in the Yards is a tradition not soon to be forgotten. Pictured (l to r) are: Chad, David and Karsten Breiner.

“I think the show itself has thrived because it fills a need and a niche, and we still have the Yards show,” Keith says.

The Yards show is not immune to change, and many exhibitors note it mirrors the Hill in the sense that fitting and prepping are a more rigorous process. Still, it refuses to shed its ruggedness and its appeal to the commercial cattleman.

History repeating, the NWSS Yards will strike a tad north once more, still within the Denver stockyard boundaries as they existed in the 1960s. In response to concerns about losing “the feel” of the stockyards, Keith assures it is a “definite” the Yards will be preserved as best as possible. The National Western Center Authority, tasked with managing the 250-acre property year-round, has carefully planned a billion dollars’ worth of renovations over the next four years. Preservation is a top priority, so those “100-year-old boards” on the outside of Lowell’s pen will remain part of the framework of the new Yards.

“Things will change, they never stay the same, but the feel of the Yards will be there,” Keith says.

Tracks for culture

Decades of traditions have solidified a timeless culture sustained by generations of Yards exhibitors. As one of the four cattle breeds exhibited the first year, Herefords are a rich part of the show’s landscape. “There’s people who come show their Herefords and they’re only down in the Yards,” Keith observes. “They don’t come up on the Hill, and the same is true of other breeds.”

Case in point is Lowell, who has not set foot on the Hill for three years. “It’s nice to come after all these years and know where your cattle are going to be and know who your neighbors are going to be,” he says.

“The show holds the romance of the old West.”

— Rollie Baumgarten

Forthcoming years will yield a new pen setup, but the core dynamics of the pen and carload show are sure to hold steady: “Always bring good bulls,” Jerry counsels. “Nobody wants to see an average bull. The cream of the crop is always here.”

“This is like the Olympics,” Rollie echoes. “Everybody brings the best they have.”

This commitment to excellence sets the Hereford show apart from all others, whether that be in the Yards, on the Hill or in the sale ring. Yet, more importantly, Hereford breeders prioritize people over business.

Few people understand this better than Jerry. While “favorite memory” is perhaps not the right term, a story always top-of-mind is the time his truck and trailer were stolen as he was loading up to go home. “We were tying up a bull in the front [of the trailer], and someone jumped in the truck and took off with it while we were in the chutes.” Jerry and his crew tumbled out the back, while the thief made way across the railroad tracks with most of their equipment and, according to the press, a “million-dollar bull” — which was ironically crippled.

Halfway home, the sheriff’s department notified Jerry his truck was found in a semi reefer parking lot five blocks away, stripped of everything except the million-dollar bull and anything around him — luckily this included the generators.

Jerry was never short a helping hand through the whole ordeal. “The guys and the crew down in the Yards took really good care of us,” he says.

Likewise, Lowell appreciates the helpful nature of Hereford breeders. “I’ve learned there are a lot of good, honest people in the Hereford business,” he says. “There’s a lot of quality cattle people here, people that are great friends after a long period of time, people that care about each other and who understand it’s not all about winning — it’s all about participating.”

Participating in the Yards also means taking time to appreciate the surrounding history. “I like to go where they haven’t been replaced and look at the old things,” Rollie says. “The show holds the romance of the old West.”

Perched on the concrete catwalk, watching the last glimpse of sunlight crawl over the top of the Armour water tank as the sun sinks behind the Rockies, it is impossible not to relish in the saga of the old stockyards.

“There’s something about the Yards,” Pete reflects. “It still has that cattleman feel to it — that western feel.”

Weathering change is what the Denver stockyards do best. And, as sure as the city itself, the NWSS will always emanate as a landmark of the Mountain West, a testament to the pioneering cattleman of the past.

“There’s nothing like the Yards anywhere,” Jerry reflects. “You’re out in the open, under the sky, immersed in the climate, trying to sell your stock no matter what the conditions. There is no other show like the National Western.” **HW**



With 25 years of experience, Rollie Baumgarten has learned to take every day in stride at the NWSS. “You’re a long way from home with your livestock,” he says. “Just go with the flow and be glad for the day.”