

Buyers Only Trying To Ease Ranchers' Marketing Pains

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Mertzon — The most complex members of the Shortgrass community are found within the livestock trading fraternity.

Next to sons-in-law and husbands, these traffickers in cattle and sheep are the least understood of any element in our society. At the peak of his marrying career, it's doubtful if Tommy Mansville ever felt as frustrated as the traders and commission men in our culture.

The biggest barrier against our understanding of traders is our failure to detect their tendency to over-protect ranchers. Long ago, the dealers started shielding their customers from the harsh realities of the marketing game. Whether they succeeded or not is a matter of opinion; but it is a fact that in the course of livestock commerce, the buyers began to feel responsible for sheltering stockmen from the truth.

It all began when the town operators first realized that the livestock market was reacting unfavorably to everything from summer squalls off the coast Newfoundland to the price of a pint of kosher pickles in Brooklyn.

As soon as the buyers became aware that the calf and lamb market could go to pieces overnight just because, say, barnacles were chewing the bottom off a packer executive's favorite yacht, they commenced throwing up a protective wall between the rancher and this horrible new development.

The dealers didn't have the heart to tell their country-based customers that a religious holiday in the jungles of South Africa could wreck the value of their product quicker than a well trained group of government marketing experts.

Once the custom of glossing the facts was entrenched, and this process was completed in less than a full shipping season, there was no turning back. Justifying the price of any category of four-legged animals with a manufactured tale of woe became as much of the trading profession as buggy whips and weight sheets.

Now don't think for a minute the stockyard crowd didn't show real talent in perfecting their new role. They did. Every last one of them, from the hombres with nothing but a telephone booth for an office to the owners of the big yards, developed a narrative style that would make Old Uncle Remus ashamed to open his mouth.

They got so they could hold a crowd of country boys spellbound while they depicted the fierce drouth in the Midwest, or described the awesome sight and sorrow of empty feedyards from the Texas Panhandle to the Canadian Border. The hardest-hearted gambler in all Las Vegas couldn't have remained dry eyed as they dramatized packing plants and other outlets of the rancher's produce being closed by the sheriff's gavel. With a tenderness unknown on this cold earth since the time of St. Thomas, the traders could explain any type of market failure, whether the situation was real or imagined.

From that habit of spinning a protective web around the truth, the break-off between ranch citizens and traders was spawned. A few skeptical old hardheads in the country began blabbing it around that the buying community was stretching the facts for their own benefit. That was all it took to make the traders withdraw into an impenetrable class of their own.

Today the buyers suffer in silence. No one knows what they are thinking or planning. Though they continue to soften market news for their customers, they go through life without anyone knowing their own real feelings.