STRATEGIES AND STORIES OF THE OMAHA STOCKYARDS*

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Strategically situated in the path of railroad transport, between western ranges and the incipient corn belt, and beside the muddy Missouri, Omaha became a livestock marketing center in the 1870s. Its first stockyard was constructed on the city's southern outskirts in 1884.[1] Today, through numerous transformations, the Omaha Livestock Market occupies approximately four square city blocks in the same area. It is a place where cattle are bought and sold.

Unlike Wall Street, where trading is in paper, livestock are individually examined prior to purchase on the Omaha Market. Consequently, the yards are comprised of "alleys" through which trucked-in stock are driven after chute unloading, pens in which animals are kept until sale, and "shanties" for the shelter of workers. Located within this maze of fences and gates are weigh stations where purchased animals are weighed before being shipped to feed lots or slaughterhouses. Above the pens and alleys runs a boardwalk from which prospective buyers can advantageously view cattle.[2]

As might be expected of a central market serving a broad geographic area (Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Kansas, Colorado, and the Dakotas), the "sellers" and "buyers" are not primarily producers or processors, but brokers. All transactions on the market are accomplished through "commission salesmen" and "dealers," "traders," or "buyers." Commission salesmen alternately represent western ranchers shipping their grass-fed cattle to feedlots, and feedlot operators who wish to sell their grain-fattened range cattle to packing houses. Meanwhile cattle are bought for feedlots by dealers or traders; local and eastern packing houses are served by "packer buyers" and "order buyers."[3]

The market is open Monday through Friday and work begins in the wee hours of the morning. Employees of the exchange receive cattle shipments and drive them to pens owned by the commission companies to which they've been consigned. Around 5-6 A.M., depending upon the number of cattle they've solicited, commission men arrive to sort their livestock according to size and sex. Cattle are led out into the alleys and--by means of whips, calls, gestures, and the opening and shutting of gates--steers, heifers, cows, and bulls are "cut" from each other into separate pens ("mixed" loads are seldom sold). Counts registered earlier by exchange employees at the loading dock are rechecked by the commission man. Then animals are fed and watered and a few minutes are taken for coffee.

At 8:30 the buyers come around to look at the cattle. The price is not fixed, but rather is a function of the previous day's market, the weight and health of particular cattle, the supply and demand of the present day's market, and the relative bargaining skills of the buyer and seller. So as not to overbuy, and to keep in touch with market fluctuations, buyers carry walkie-talkies to communicate with their offices. Generally, a day's cattle are sold by noon, but the market is officially open until three o'clock.

Once parties have agreed on the price of cattle, the livestock are driven to a station where their weights are recorded; then they are shipped to their destination. On Fridays this routine is broken by an auction sale. The auction saves buyers the trouble of walking the yards for cattle, and the increased number of buyers bidding on individual cattle usually results in slightly higher prices. Thus, despite the addition of an auctioneer's

*Specific fieldwork for this paper was conducted on August 3-5 and 28-29 under the auspices of the Working Americans division of the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife. Beyond that, it is worth noting that my mother's family has been in the cattle business for more than a century and has been connected with the Omaha Stockyards since 1919. I have visited the yards nearly annually for more than twenty years. Nonetheless, this paper would not have been written without valuable assistance from Bob Byington, Bob McCarl, Frank Berigan, Jr., Al Berigan, Dick Moore, and Bill Wittekind.

fee to yardage costs and the salesman's commission, some ranchers and feedlot farmers ship their cattle specifically for auction sale.[4]

At the close of any day's business, workers travel to the adjacent Livestock Exchange building to record transactions. The exchange is a multi-storied structure housing the offices of various packing company buyers, commission salesmen, and federal inspectors. Originally it was owned by commission companies and stockholders.[5] Today the Kay Corporation, and English firm with holdings in jewelry, owns the exchange and rents out offices and yard space. Located on the lower floors are a bank, a restauramt, and locker rooms. In the main lobby a large chalkboard displays the preceding day's sales volume, as well as the market price of livestock for Omaha and other stockyards: St. Paul, Kansas City, Sioux City, Joliet, and others.

The folklorist entering this milieu is immediately struck by a number of factors. All the workers are male and most are over thirty; it is not uncommon for a worker to be a second or third generation cattleman. Despite its location in the midst of an urban scene, the presence of animals, pens, and the odor of hay and manure combine to give the yards a decidedly rural atmosphere. In keeping with this environment, these Omaha businessmen are dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, western or work shirts, and billed "Omaha Market" caps or broad-brimmed cowboy hats. Their hands grip long fiberglass cattle prods tipped with rawhide whips. In keeping with this "ruralness," the pace of work is leisurely and opportunities for talk are frequent.

Clusters of animated conversationalists appear in shanties, at the weigh scale, in the shade of a highway bridge that crosses part of the yards, in the exchange cafeteria before work begins, and in offices at the day's close. Even the major business of the yards--buying and selling--is accomplished entirely verbally. Preliminary observations suggest that the knowledge and mastery of oral expressive culture is central to the occupational existence of these men. Their oral traditions can be effectively categorized under the following rubrics: (1) "bullshitting" marked by the joking relationship, (2) specialized jargon based on occupational knowledge, (3) formulaic strategic bargaining, and (4) narrative.

Like lumberjacks,[6] longshoremen,[7] smokejumpers,[8] pipeline workers,[9] and other male groups involved in monosexual, largely outdoor work situations, the cattlemen constantly rely on the "joking relationship" to communicate.[10] In other words, they continuously put on and abuse each other in mock fashion through talk. During my time at the yards, scenes like the following were constantly encountered:

> Mitch and Bill, two commission men, having gotten their cattle ready for the opening of the market, are sitting around in the shanty before the arrival of buyers.
> Bill: (to Mitch) The back of your pants are dirty. The boss sees you, he'll know you been doin' nothin' but sittin' around.
> Mitch: Hell, if they're dirty, it's cause you don't clean off the back of the toilet seat and I just had to use it.[11]

Not only were co-workers foul-mouthed towards each other, but salesmen and buyers too invariably addressed each other through epithets. One veteran worker, with undisguised pride, put it this way:

> Bill: Like I was tellin' you yesterday, and this is true, there's no place in the United States or in the world that you can call a man a so-and-so but in the stockyards--and have him like ya. See, any other place, downtown or any place else you call a man a so-and-so, he'll punch ya in the nose. But, in the stockyards, if he <u>don't</u> like ya, he won't call ya--he won't even talk to ya--he won't tell ya nothin'. It's the people that like ya that call ya names.
> When you [Bill refers to fellow cattlemen Dick and Frank] go in to

> trade with a man--like Dick will come in to Frank and say "Whattaya take for these, you old so-and-so?" And if he didn't say that, he [Frank]'d think he was mad at him.

Bill continued with an illustrative narrative from his own experience:

> So, one time--like I was tellin' ya--I was tradin' with a fella I had traded with every day for twenty years. And he had new help come in--a boy from Iowa. The kid was just off the farm and he was not acquainted with stockyard procedures and language. And I said to my friend, "Say, what'll you take for these, you old so-and-so?" And this kid walks over to me and says, "Don't call him that or I'm going to punch you in the nose." [Laughter] My friend says, "Oh keep quiet. He calls me that every day five or six times."
> Frank: You sure it wasn't s.o.b.?"
> Bill: Well. Yeah. [Laughter][12]

As the above comments and the subsequent narrative account suggest, the application of insulting names served a practical as well as a playful function: they were spoken at a specific time, in a specific place, to a specific person in order succinctly to convey in-group status, intimacy, and trust.[13]

However, mastery of the joking relationship--a phenomenon characterizing the interaction of nearly all tight-knit male groups--is only a small part of the cattleman's job.[14] He must possess a vast knowledge of livestock and what they are worth. The United States Department of Agriculture has established five grades of cattle according to weight and fatness. Carrying a template of these ideal types in his mind, the expert cattleman learns to judge instantly what grade an animal is, how much it weighs, and what it will dress to in the transition from hoof to hook. He also has a good idea of the age of the cattle, where they come from, and how they were shipped or "handled." He knows that grass-fed, western cattle will potentially weigh a great deal more when grain-fed; he knows too that poorly handled cattle may have "shrunk" during transport and, with a little care, will fill out and "yield" well. And then there are more subtle signs he reads:

> Dick: The front end of it, more or less the brisket, whether it's shaped in a tear-drop or comes straight down. . . the color of the hair, the way it shines. Like, when they come out of the west, their grass hair's long and curly. Then when they get protein, when they get that corn, their hair gets nice and shiny.

The Omaha cattleman must also know the market in both economic and human terms: the previous day's prices and volume, the present day's supply and demand, the peculiarities of individual competitors. Occasionally, cattlemen have to contend with deceptions caused by the conniving or careless among them. An animal might be temporarily filled out by water or hay, rather than meat and fat:[15] "The big thing you gotta watch is mostly just a big belly on her. You'll find it's about thirty or forty pounds of water that you don't really need."

As is the case in other occupations, these workers name and communicate their esoteric knowledge through a body of terminology or jargon applicable to recurrent job situations. Poor quality cattle are invariably "diers," "bloaters," "ready for the tank," cattle with too-fat "pants" (hind quarters) are "wastey"; cattle which have ingested exorbitant amounts of feed and water are "hay calves" or "bred to the water tank." Range cattle marketed in the autumn signify the "western season." The rare, unloved cattleman is not an "s.o.b.," but a "human saddle-sore"; while a man confining himself to one facet of the market is "single-gaitered." Many other examples could be cited; colorful occupational jargon on the Omaha Market is both abundant and freely utilized.

Occupational jargon and the specialized knowledge (of cattle, the market, the competitor) underlying it are combined with the joking relationship in the performance of "strategic formulaic bidding." Unlike plumbers who place pipe, loggers who fell trees, iron workers who erect buildings, or truckers who move freight, cattlemen are brokers who work continuously for their clients and against each other in sustained friendly rivalry. Their occupational skills are realized in the haggling over loads of cattle that takes place every day. In other words, their livelihood depends upon an ability to utilize social and occupational knowledge in strategic talk. This is no easy task. As one cattleman put it: "I worked five years before my dad even let me sell one little ole calf worth about twenty-thirty bucks."

Depending upon individual style and situation, strategic formulaic bidding can be either verbose or laconic. In the following example, a bargain is struck in a chatty manner:

> "Lo, Eddie, come look at a load of dandy white faces from some farms near Des Moines, Iowa. Ever see such class? You can't touch 'em this morning in the yards, Eddie."
> "How much?"
> "Well, Eddie, I'll weigh 'em for you for sixteen cents."
> "See you later."
> "Now, Eddie, wait a minute. This is better stuff than I sold you last week at seventeen cents, and you know where the market is today. I know where I can get sixteen-and-a-half cents a pound on this load. Now mind you, Eddie, this stock has been tied up three days near Clinton by a broken bridge. Six days in a car! Of course they look a little drawn. Give me fifteen-and-three-quarters."

An hour later the Swift buyer rides past the same pen and once more examines the load, comparing it with what other commission men are offering. The price may have dropped slightly, but he holds firm, and, after another hour, on his third trip, probably compromises on a satisfactory figure.

After the buyer has decided on a purchase, he utters only "Weigh 'em to Swift," and passes on to drive another bargain.[16]

In my own experience, cattlemen alternately demonstrated the ability to perform their bids in either windy or tight-lipped fashion.

Like Lord's epic singers, they are aware of recurrent situations or topics or "themes" in the market; they name and act upon these "themes" through jargon-spiced phrases or "formulae"; the manipulation of themes and formulae is dependent upon what strategy a cattleman wishes to employ.[17] Thus, the cattleman, like the singer of tales, can adapt his basic "strategic formulaic bid" or "text" in accordance with each situation he encounters.[18] While all this would normally become apparent to even a trained folklorist only after extensive fieldwork, it was revealed to me by a fortuitous happenstance.

During their participation in the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife, I asked Dick Moore and Frank Berigan, two cattlemen who'd been dealing with each other for more than twenty years to simulate a buying and selling situation for the public. Their abnormally extended performance, constant reliance on strategic themes and formulae, and explanatory asides to the audience demonstrate the existence of a refined verbal tradition clearly "oral formulaic" in character.

> Frank: O.K., I've got this load of cattle right here [points to a four-foot by foor-foot blowup of cattle suspended behind him], I'd like to sell 'em to him.

Dick: [Speaking directly to the audience and indirectly to Frank] He thinks these are the best cattle in the world because every time he gets some to sell he says, "Ain't they nice cattle?" I say [slightly sarcastic now], "Ain't they good. Look at them cattle."
Frank: Now there's a pen of cattle that weigh 1,000 pounds [each]. Just what you want.
Dick: How do you know?
Frank: [To audience] I know he buys these kind of cattle. I've been sellin' 'em to him every day for the last two months.
Dick: That's possible.
Frank: All right Dick, what are you gonna give for 'em? How about thirty-eight? [This means thirty-eight cents a pound on the hoof or thirty-eight to the hundredweight.]
Dick: I couldn't possibly do it. [After opening banter, bids have begun.]
Frank: Well, if you're gonna buy cattle today, you've gotta reach down in your hip pocket and pull out some of that green stuff because you aren't gonna walk away from here with anything without paying for it.
Dick: I better call the plant 'cause I'm gonna need for money. I can see that right now.
Frank: You'd better call your banker, too.
Dick: I can do that. [Dick pauses; it is time to move from tangential bickering back to the bid.] Let's get down to business now. What d'ya want for the load of cattle?
Frank: I want thirty-eight bucks.
Dick: All right, we're gonna start you off. I'll give you all of it--thirty-six dollars.
Frank: Lord!
Dick: That'll stop you dead.
Frank: [To audience] He says he's givin' it all to me.
Dick: I'm tryin' to.
Frank: What'd you say--thirty-six dollars?
Dick: Thirty-six dollars.
Frank: Oh, boy, two dollars a hundred weight away from home. What a lousy bid. Oh, you oughta be able to do better than that. What about 37.75?
Dick: Ain't enough. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll put a dime on.
Frank: Aaah. I tell ya, if you're gonna trade dimes and nickels you'd better go to Woolworth's Department Store because you can't get the job done here.
Dick: Betcha I can get it done at your neighbor's.
Frank: Go ahead. If he can sell 'em cheaper 'n me, why there's the chance to get some cattle for your money.
Dick: All right, I'll tell you what I'll do, I'm gonna spread it all out: thirty-six and a quarter.
Frank: Now, now, I'll tell you what. I don't want to top the market, I just want to get what they're worth; I want to get their value. This man here, he's been feedin' cattle and, I'll tell you what, he's got nine kids. By golly, he wants to buy a new tractor...
Dick: ...Grandma broke her leg in the well...
Frank: ...Aw, the fences are down, by golly, he needs new wire. That old 'thirty-six Chevy he's drivin'--he could use a new car, too. And I mean to tell you, he really needs the money. Just between you and me and the gatepost here, why don't you really get down and pay what the cattle are worth--try to buy these cattle. 37.50. I'm gettin' right down to brass tacks.

Dick: You're comin' along. I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'll give you 36.50 and [on] those two off-color cattle, I want a dollar a hundred off.
Frank: Oh, Dick, I'll tell you. I want to sell these cattle straight. Them off-color cattle, they weight just as much. And they done just as good as the rest of the cattle. There's no need to cut anything back on me, by golly. You know when the man bought these cattle, he bought them straight; he didn't buy them with any out.
Dick: Looks like they're out to me, boy.
Frank: I'm out for you [Pause] I'm out to get you, but I want you to pay what they're worth.
Dick: Well, I'll tell you what. I'll let it all out for you, I'm gonna give you 36.50. Straight. No outs.
Frank: I'll tell you what, we got to figure this old boy's got these nine children, needs that new car, and wire, and the kids need new shoes.
Dick: Yeah, the car's an antique. The kid next door bid him thirty-six hundred dollars on it last week.
Frank: I know you got a lot of money.
Dick: Yeah?
Frank: You haven't, but your company has.
Dick: Company's got money.
Frank: Doesn't mean a thing to you.
Dick: I just spend it like it was my own.
Frank: Yeah? I always knew you was a tight-ass. [A long pause is followed by the cattlemen's explanation of the foregoing.]
Dick: This could go on any length of time. We'd probably end up somewhere around the thirty-seven dollar mark.
Frank: Anyway, he tells me how crazy I am and I tell him how crazy he is. We finally end it up. I've got cattle to sell, he's got cattle to buy. I get paid for sellin' 'em, he gets paid for buyin' 'em. So we usually end up--we get together. And, just like I started at $38, he started at $36. We usually end up some place in between--thirty-seven, thirty-seven and a quarter. Maybe I take off seventy-five cents or a dollar, maybe he puts on a buck. We finally end up and we sell the cattle.

As a careful reading of the above demonstrates, a number of topics or themes were touched upon: the business habits of buyer and seller, the quality of the cattle and their economic worth, the adequacy of both bids, where a better price might be had, the needs of the farmer, the wealth of the packing company.

Verbal interchanges concerning these themes were rapid and marked by formulaic catchphrases (all lines in the above text reflect this). Meanwhile, the entire interchange was sustained by the practical desire to settle on a price. Whenever tangential repartee on a particular theme stalemated, one of the cattlemen invariably said, "I'll tell you what," or "I'll lay it all out"; they then modified slightly their previous bid and trading commenced along new thematic lines. Cattlemen probably do not have to go through such stylized folderol in order to agree on a price; each has a good idea of the market, the cattle, the other buyer, and what price the cattle will eventually bring. But there is a certain pleasure in going through the motions; even if you're always trading with the same people, as one man puts told me, "It's different every day." Clearly the major work of the Omaha stockyards--buying and selling livestock--is accomplished through an oral formulaic method which, in terms of business, is more artistic than pragmatic.[19]

Appropriately sealing this spoken transaction is a traditional verbal contract. Cattlemen are quite proud of this feature and discuss it readily:

> Dick: All of this is done by word of mouth. And there's no written contract of any kind; there's nothin' signed--I tell him what, he writes it on a little bitty piece of paper to bring to the scale...And by verbal contract, I'll probably buy 100-200 thousand dollars worth of cattle a day. And, sometimes over the weekend, have half a million to a million dollars worth of cattle out--just on verbal contract, by word of mouth between me and my customer...And the price is established, and this is an ironclad rule, once you establish the price at $37 on the cattle, that's it. I mean, it's just a kind of code of honor that you don't do anything--you don't mark the cattle up or down. It's just a very unusual thing, that it's all done verbally.

Journalistic accounts reveal that the verbal contract has been part of the livestock market since its inception:

> All sales are made verbally and with an apparent looseness that is a matter of wonderment to the casual visitor. As a rule the salesman and the buyer ride into a pen together. The salesman sets his price, and after riding among the bunch for a moment or two the buyer either refuses or accepts the offer. A sale made by a nod of the head is as binding as if it were put in writing, independent of the amount involved in the transaction.[20]

Another late 19th century newspaper emphasizes that the verbal contract is made powerful by the personal integrity of the cattleman. John Berigan is described:

> He is a hustler from way back, a hard-working man, and he treats everyone right...he always pays top market price and always does as he agrees. The word of John Berigan is as good as an iron-ed bond.[21]

This archaic form of sealing a bargain, the verbal repartee preceding it, and the rural atmosphere and western dress of the cattlemen, combine to give an impression that nostalgia and pride in the past are important components of expressive culture on the Omaha Market.

Indeed, cattlemen may often be heard remarking wistfully that nowadays things are somehow "different," that "times have changed." Bill Wittekind laments over the trend from central marketing to the "direct buying" of cattle:

> It's changed considerable. I was always one for "buying on the market." My boss at times would get kinda peeved with me. He said, "Other guys are going out to the country to buy their stuff." I said, "Well, I would rather do business--it's like a ball team playin' on the home diamond. You've got an even chance there. And you're dealing with men that know the value of livestock. Even though we have our tussles with them, it's much easier to deal with a man who knows the animal, what it's worth on the market, because he has sold every day and he's much closer to the thing; instead of traveling 100 or 200 miles and getting some farmer that thinks he's got better cattle than he has and doesn't know how the cattle are selling.

But even within the market, on the "home diamond," changes are taking place. New men, "College Agriculture Students," are entering the field. Intelligent and able, "they work on trends--how the business trends are going; and kinda go by graphs and charts, kinda dope it out." What they are perhaps lacking is the verbal facility and sense of history which the "old timers" have.

Nowhere does a sense of kinship with the past come through more strongly than in the exchange of narratives. Work has always been long and hard at the yards, and stories of early job experiences are common. One Omaha veteran, transplanted from Chicago, describes breaking

into the business as a young boy:

> I was chasing sheep in the Chicago Stockyards, driving sheep, and taking weights. In 1919 I started. Worked anywhere from twelve to fifteen hours a day. Them days there was no lunch hours, you ate at five o'clock in the morning. Then, if you were awfully lucky, you got to eat again at three o'clock. I worked for a strawboss named Fred Monaghan and, uh, one day he says--I was about faintin' from hunger, it was about three o'clock in the afternoon--he told me to do something that would take an hour. And I said, "Fred, you son-of-a-bitch, I don't want to do that." And he cussed me up and down. It was either get the sheep or go out the front door. And that's the way you had it in those days. It was twelve bucks a week and you were glad to get it. But when that guy finally died, I went and pissed on his grave.

Cattlemen also tell of early learning experiences. Frank Berigan, Jr. describes some fanciful advice given him concerning the solicitation of business for the market:

> Well, when I was going up to Wyoming the first time to get some of these ranchers to ship down to Omaha and bring their cattle down there, I asked my dad what's the best way to go about soliciting cattle? He says, "Well, I'll tell you son, the first thing you want to do is get their attention." He says, "Best way I know is pick up a brick, find yourself a saloon there in town, throw it through the plateglass window, walk in, and say, "Hell, I'll pay for your window and buy everybody a beer." Well, it didn't work that way too good. [Laughter]

Just as knowledge, for good or ill, is gained from old-timers, there are stories aplenty concerning their exploits.

This example concerns a resilient buyer who made the best of an unfortunate situation through wit:

> Frank: We got an Irishman down there. His name's Jack Finn, a real nice guy. He went in to look at a load of cattle. One of 'em kicked him in the knee. He was laid up for about two weeks; y'know when he came back we asked him how he felt. He said, "Y'know, I feel pretty good. But what makes me so damn mad--I bought *that whole load* of cattle that that one was in that kicked hell out of me." And, he says, "Y'know, I bought 'em all." But he says he sure didn't have any regrets. At least the one that kicked him was dead. [Laughter]

Occasionally, as in the following example, narratives shade into the realm of the humorous folktale:

> Dick: Let me tell one story. We got a fella down there named Jake Mosley. He comes from Mexico, Missouri. He asked his dad for five dollars--this was *a long time ago--he wanted to go on a date.* His dad wouldn't give it to him. So he went out in the back pasture and got one of his dad's mules, and went out through the back and brought it up through the front yard. And he says, "Dad, I just stole this mule down the road," he says. "Would you give me five bucks for it?" And the old man reached in his back pocket and give him a five-dollar bill--bought his own mule back. And Jake went out on a date. So--that's some of the guys we got down there.[22]

A good many narratives are essentially brags by cattlemen over their clever achievements on the market.

Bill Wittekind's vivid account of buying nearly all the sheep on a competitive market is a classic:

> When I first started in Omaha in the forties, we used to get an awful big run every day. And we'd buy anywhere from--in 1945-46 Armour alone, and we were just one of the big packers, bought three-quarters of a million sheep. And every year we'd buy a half million or 600 thousand head. And we'd, of course, ship alot of 'em around the country, some dead and some live. And it was like that all the time. And one day I bought ten thousand head. It was when the meat deal went off. Some of the older people remember when the government had the clamp on the price of meat. And, uh, it went off one morning. And my boss must've had a good friend there to tell him that the meat deal was going off. And so he generally called about 8:30 in the morning to give me my orders for the day. I took all my orders outa Chicago. They wouldn't give me no live price, they'd give me a dress cost. And you had to figure the live price from the dress cost and come out with the deal. He called me and said, "How many sheep's on the market?" And I says, "Ten thousand." And he said, "Buy them all, call me back, and I'll give you distribution on them." And I said, "Gee whiz, is the guy drunk? He never told me that before." And he didn't tell me anything else; he didn't tell me the meat deal was going off. In them days there were so many buyers, they generally tossed a coin to see who was first in each alley--there were eight or nine big alleys that always had a lot of sheep in 'em. And I went out and, lucky as the devil, I happened to hit on a man with just one load, a smaller commission man. And I come in, and we talked it over and I decided the only thing we could do is bid so low that it shakes the man. And he'll be talkin' around; they all talk around: "For God's sake, don't mess with Armour, they'll kill ya." So we did that, we went out and bid a dollar lower. And pretty quick them guys come round to me sayin', "Are you that dead today?" They were used to us buyin' a lot of sheep and they couldn't imagine that we was that dead. And I said, "Well, if you're not satisfied with the buyer you got, come on in and see me. I'll call the boss back, maybe he'll change his mind on the price he give me." I said, "I can always change, we've changed before." So the other people must've got wind of what we were doin'--"Armour's dead"--so they were biddin' lower too. And, uh, these fellows I had talked to started comin' back to me. Finally I was on 'em all. The only fella that sold lower that day was the guy I bid first, and he was mad at me. And I believe he was mad at me 'til the day he died. But I bought all the rest of the sheep, ninety-seven hundred head. Steady to twenty-five higher or fifty higher. It didn't make any difference what the price was to me, I was gonna own the sheep. And when I called the boss back and told him, he said, "What the devil happened to the other load?"

Berigan's briefer narrative also displays quick, calculated thinking, as well as sly humor:

> These cattle were a buncha ropin' steers or calves. And they numbered them from about one to forty. The cowboys--they'd draw a number and that's the calf they roped during the performance. Well, anyway, the rodeo was over and the calves--they wanted to sell 'em to me. So, they shipped 'em in. This one farmer from over in Ioway--he wanted to know how come they had so many numbers on 'em. I told him they was "Indian

> Cattle." They didn't really give 'em brands up there, they just give 'em a number. Each number was a certain Indian. So, anyway, I guess that satisfied him. I sold the calves to him. But--we've gotta make up alot of stories like this. We don't really go in for prevaricatin', but we will stretch a point from time to time to get the cattle sold.

It is partly through narratives, both "made up" and "true"--like those above--that cattlemen educate, entertain, and sustain each other in their common desire to "get the cattle sold."

Occupational narratives combine with "joking" social skills, specialized knowledge and terminology, and formulaic bidding in creating for the cattleman both a system of social action and a mental picture or role image of himself. While their expressive culture is primarily verbal, Omaha cattlemen have so valued this role image that they have put it into print and circulated it among themselves:

REQUIREMENTS OF A CATTLE DEALER [23]

> MUST BE A MAN OF VISION AND AMBITION. AN AFTER DINNER SPEAKER, BEFORE AND AFTER DINNER GUZZLER. NIGHT OWL. WORK ALL DAY AND DRIVE ALL NIGHT AND APPEAR FRESH THE NEXT DAY. LEARN TO SLEEP IN AN AUTOMOBILE AND EAT TWO MEALS A DAY TO ECONOMIZE ON EXPENSES SO YOU CAN ENTERTAIN YOUR FRIENDS IN THE NEXT TOWN. INHALE DUST AND DRIVE THROUGH SNOW TEN FEET DEEP AND DRIVE ALL SUMMER WITHOUT PERSPIRING OR ACQUIRING B.O.
>
> MUST BE A MAN, A LADIES' MAN, A MODEL HUSBAND, A FATHERLY FATHER. A GOOD PROVIDER. A PLUTOCRAT, A DEMOCRAT, A REPUBLICAN, A NEW DEALER, AND OLD DEALER, A FAST DEALER. TECHNICIAN, MATHEMATICIAN, MECHANIC, AND VETERINARIAN.
>
> MUST BE A SALES PROMOTION EXPERT. CREATE A DEMAND FOR INFERIOR CATTLE. BE A GOOD CREDIT MANAGER, CORRESPONDENT. ATTEND ALL LIVESTOCK CONVENTIONS, RODEOS, FUNERALS. VISIT CUSTOMERS IN HOSPITALS, AND CUSTOMERS IN JAILS. CONTACT ALL ACCOUNTS EVERY 30 DAYS. IN SPARE TIME LOOK FOR NEW BUSINESS. DO MISSIONARY WORK AND SERVE ON ALL CIVIC COMMITTEES.
>
> MUST HAVE UNLIMITED ENDURANCE AND FREQUENT OVER-INDULGENCE IN WINE, WOMEN, WIND, AND CAB. A WIDE RANGE OF TELEPHONE NUMBERS IN ALL PRINCIPAL CITIES. MUST HAVE ANEXPENSIVE CAR, ATTRACTIVE HOME, BELONG TO ALL THE CLUBS, PAY ALL EXPENSES AT HOME AND ON THE ROAD ON 5% COMMISSION AND STILL MAINTAIN UNLIMITED CREDIT. PRICE CHISELING AND BAD DEBTS WILL BE DEDUCTED FROM THE DEALER'S WORKING COMMISSION. MUST GUARANTEE QUALITY OF ALL LIVESTOCK--ALL COWS TO BE WITH CALF AND ALL BULLS TO BE FERTILE. TO BE CRAZY IS NOT ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY, BUT IT SURE HELPS.
>
> MUST BE AN EXPERT DRIVER, TALKER, LIAR, DANCER, TRAVELER, POKER PLAYER, DIPLOMAT, FINANCIER, CAPITALIST, MARKET FORECASTER, WEATHER MAN, FEED EXPERT. AN AUTHORITY ON ALL TYPES OF CATTLE, INCLUDING BLOOD LINES, PEDIGREES, QUALITY AND DISPOSITION.
>
> ALSO MUST WEAR A WIDE BRIM HAT, CARRY A WHIP, A LONG CHECK BOOK AND HAVE A READY SUPPLY OF ALIBIS.

This statement is a consummate one; it can and should be viewed as a written version of the cattleman's otherwise oral mythic charter.[24] It is both a descriptive code and a proscriptive challenge to action. In a world which is modernizing and simultaneously dehumanizing at a rapid rate, the successful cattleman seeks to maintain an honored tradition; he "MUST BE" and is many things to many people.

In closing, it is worthwhile to offer a few speculations on the degree to which the commodity these men deal in has kept them as they are. First of all, the Omaha market trades not in

inanimate merchandise or certificates, but in animals. Unlike Barbie dolls, door knobs, automobiles, and coffee pots, livestock cannot be spit mechanically from a mold. They are delicate, individually distinct creatures who demand feeding and care. Second, the animals in question are not chickens or pigs, but cattle. At the risk of being branded a mystic, I would suggest that man's relationship with cattle has long been peculiarly satisfying.[25] As Curtis K. Stadtfeld points out in his eloquent agrarian reminiscences:

> Part of this feeling comes from the fact that chickens and hogs are ultimately hostile to man. A hen seated on her nest is perfectly prepared to peck the hand that feeds her if it tries to reach in and take the eggs she wants to hatch. If a man bursts suddenly into a hen coop, the flock cries out and runs. Cattle, like horses, will come to you, but a hog cares nothing for you. Now and again one hears a grisly tale about a farmer's having a heart attack and falling unconscious into the hog pen; the hogs simply devour him. A cow might lick his face...The cattle were always psychologically more important than the pigs and chickens.[26]

In an oft-repeated story, Frank Berigan, Jr. tells of how his father, Frank, Sr. (son of John Berigan whose word was like "an iron-ed bond") climbed out of the hog pen and into happiness in both the world and the cattle business by employing a briar patch Br'er Rabbit strategem:

> My Dad, I wish he wrote a book of some of the things that happened. Because, y' know, there are things that people would like to read about. His grandchildren have all heard stories about Grandpa. He was born on a ranch in the middle of Nebraska. And he came to the yards in 1919. He started workin' in the hog yards and he really didn't like the hogs 'cause he was a cattleman. His dad was a rancher and everything. So he got in a fight down there. We got water plugs that we put in our water troughs to hold the water in. He finally threw a water plug and hit a guy in the head with it. And they told him they was either gonna throw him outa the yards or put him in the cattle yards. Anyway, he got back into the place he liked, where he belonged. And he's been dead several years, but he was one of the long-time commission men in the Omaha yards. And there's a lot like him. And they're just good people. You can't find any better any place around. They like human nature and they enjoy people and appreciate the things they do. And I think that's what life is all about.

Notes

1. Rudolf A. Clemen, The American Livestock and Meat Industry (New York: The Ronald Press, 1923), p. 456.

2. In the interests of compression, I'm painting here with a broad brush. More precise descriptions of the yards may be found in Charles S. Plumb, Marketing Farm Animals (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1927), pp. 133-35.

3. A detailed description of channels of livestock marketing may be found in Edward A. Duddy and David A. Revzan, The Changing Relative Importance of the Central Livestock Market (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

4. General discussions of cattle auctions may be found in James Brough, Auction! (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), and Ralph Cassady, Auctions and Auctioneering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). For a good Goffmanesque study, see Edna L. Koenig, "The Cattle Auction in Central Texas: Analysis of Social Interaction," Folklore Annual of the University Folklore Association, 4-5 (1972-73) (Austin, Texas):60-77.

5. Federal Writers' Project, Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), p. 250.

6. Richard M. Dorson, Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 186-90.

7. William W. Pilcher, The Portland Longshoreman (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), pp. 102-13.

8. Robert S. McCarl, Jr., "Smokejumper Initiation: Ritualized Communication in a Modern Occupation," Journal of American Folklore 89 (January-March 1976):49-66.

9. Gary Traylor, "Joking in a Bush Camp," Human Relations 26 (1973): 479-86; the private, unpublished Thomas J. DiFebbo collection of satirical xerox lore from the Alaska pipeline.

10. The term was coined by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "On Joking Relationships," Africa 13 (1940):195-210.

11. Field notes from the Omaha Stockyards, 3 August 1976.

12. This text, and all subsequent uncited texts, was recorded in Washington, D. C. during the Festival of American Folklife, 29-30 August.

13. "Friendship. . .can in part be characterized or measured by the license to take advantage of another. This bond of intimacy permits incursions into the territories of the self (mental and material) which are denied to others." John McDowell, private communication to the author.

14. In addition to occupational groups cited above, I have found the joking relationship to exist in working class and collegiate male groups. See my "White Guys' Stories of the Night Street," Journal of the Folklore Institute, in press; and "Folklore and Photography in a Male Group," in Saying Cheese: Studies in Folklore and Visual Communication, ed. Steven Ohrn and Michael E. Bell. Folklore Forum, Bibliographic and Special Series, No. 13, 1975:45-50.

15. Plumb, p. 132.

16. Clemen, p. 547.

17. Although bids are prose forms, lacking the music and meter of epic songs, the analogy remains apt. Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (New York: Atheneum, 1973).

18. A recent investigation of oral-formulaic adaptation to context is Ilhan Basgoz, "The Tale-Singer and His Audience," in Folklore, Performance and Communication, ed. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

19. I realize that here I may be disappointing those fans of the oral-formulaic theory who might desire a more in-depth treatment. However, in the interests of providing a panorama of folklore on the Omaha Market, I prefer to put off such analysis.

20. "Chicago's Great Stockyards and Packing Houses," Breeder's Gazette (1 December 1897):409.

21. "Souvenir Supplement," Friday World (Imogene, Iowa) 8, no. 100 (25 August 1899):37.

22. While I have not found an exact analogue for this trickster tale, it comes under Motif K258, "Stolen Property Sold to Its Owner"; it is very close to a New Jersey tale, Motif K 258.2(e), "Thief Sells Chickens to Owner." Ernest W. Baughman, Type and Motif Index of Folktales of England and North America (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 347.

23. Typed one-page ms. given to me by Frank Berigan, Jr. "I swear every bit of this is true, because this was written by a bunch of commission men. We got it up and tried to have it published." Following the original, I have left the entire description in capital letters. A statement similar to this one is Arthur C. Davenport, "The Characteristics That Make a Salesman in the Stockyards," The American Live Stock Market (1922):50.

24. "Myth as it exists in a savage community. . .is not merely a story told, but a reality lived." Bronislaw Malinowski, Magic, Science and Religion (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 100.

25. This is especially true in the case of Irishmen and there are good many of them in the yards. For commentaries on the importance of man-cattle relationships in rural Ireland, see Conrad Arensburg, The Irish Countryman (New York: Macmillan, 1937), and E. Estyn Evans, Irish Folk Ways (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957). On a more high-flown, expressive level it should be noted that the Irish epic, The Tain, concerns a cattle raid.

26. Curtis K. Stadtfeld, From the Land and Back, What Life Was Like on a Family Farm and How Technology Changed It (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1972), pp. 19-20.