

Shipping the Fat Cattle

"We're shipping the steers tomorrow. They have to be loaded before noon", father said one day as mother met him at the gate when he drove up. The family never knew definitely about shipping until father (William Stevenson) got home from Traer with the market reports the day before. The Chicago *Drover's Journal* came weekly; but when the cattle neared the shipping stage, father had to keep in touch with the market reports that came to Traer. "I think I can do better in Chicago", father explained, "than by taking what 'Johnny' Campbell offers." Campbell was a local buyer and shipper in Traer, a Civil War veteran, wiry, impulsive, and good-hearted, known all over the county and popular with everyone.

This was in the nineties — a half century after the first settlers in Tranquillity had begun raising livestock. Having had experience in Scotland, these men saw that selling hay would not pay and that marketing wheat meant too much hauling; so they began breeding hogs and cattle — marketing farm products in a more concentrated form. "Give a steer two acres of grass", said "Uncle" John Wilson, father of "Tama Jim" Wilson, "he'll eat

it and grow fat." Drovers of cattle were driven long distances to market centers — Muscatine, then Iowa City, later Cedar Rapids or Waterloo, and, after the Civil War, Toledo. It took about three hours for the cattle to make the six miles into Traer.

When shipping the steers, certain rules were usually observed. If sold to a local buyer, they were to be given no water at the farm the morning they were shipped but got it later in town after being weighed.

The rule against watering cattle before marketing was sometimes evaded. A Tranquillity farmer once sold two carloads of his fat cattle to "Johnny" Campbell. This farmer had scales and the cattle were to be weighed at the farm — before they drank water. Campbell drove out the night before in order to get an early start. After breakfast, the farmer prevailed upon Mr. Campbell to sit down with the family for worship and the latter reluctantly agreed. The reading in Leviticus was long, the prayer still longer. Gifted in prayer, the farmer pictured our sinful estate, petitioned the Lord with power, to guide not only those present in the paths of righteousness but also the rulers of the nation, the State, and the county; to remember the missionaries and the heathen in foreign lands, the afflicted, and the poor.

As Campbell knelt first on one knee and then on the other, his restlessness grew with every finely-rounded period. Shifting his chair, he saw the hired man pumping water for the steers in the feedyard. With a smothered ejaculation not applicable to the prayer, Campbell hurried out. There was no more water for the steers until after they were weighed.

Shipping the cattle was always a big event at the Stevenson home. Everyone was up early. When all was ready, the steers were let out on the road from the lower end of the feedlot. These forty steers, enough to fill two cars, came racing up the hill past the house, wild with the new freedom after several months of inactivity — even though it meant a contented gorging beside the long feed troughs. Father hurried close behind them. When they were well started, he got into the single buggy waiting at the gate and drove off following the cattle. One hired man walked behind the herd; the other, ahead on horseback, kept the steers from going too fast and getting scattered, turned them at corners, and stopped gaps. They cracked long cattle whips. Snap, the dog, went along.

The arrival of the fat cattle in Traer meant excitement around the stockyards and lots of work between their arrival and loading. They were

weighed, fed with corn and hay, and then watered.

Because of lack of a local switching engine only one car could be loaded at each stockyard ramp before the freight train pulled in, usually before noon in Traer. When the train arrived cars had to be hurriedly "spotted" and moved up to the ramp to be filled with steers. Prodding the cattle up the ramps into the cars while the train waited was grueling work for the cattle owner and his men. Loading hogs was easier. In that case corn mixed with cinders was sprinkled down the middle of the car. One hog would see it, go up, and begin eating; then all would follow up the ramp.

These stock trains had no definite schedule, and the men who went with their cattle had to watch for the starting of the train. One day when a farmer living near Amity Church was shipping several loads from Traer, the train started without him. Used to going barefoot, he took off his shoes and, holding them in his hand, sprinted after the train and caught the caboose just as it crossed Coon Creek at the edge of town.

Shipping was almost always on Monday or Tuesday. This meant a Wednesday and Thursday market in Chicago (time has been cut in half now-a-days). The two-day run made it necessary to feed and water the cattle on the train. Usually

the cars were bedded with straw and the racks were filled with hay before shipping. These hay racks were made by nailing slats diagonally from ceiling to side. They ran along both sides of the car except in front of the big door.

After the racks were filled with hay from trap doors on the tops of cars, tramps often sneaked in on top of the hay and rode there, warm and secure from molestation. It was their favorite way of riding into Chicago. The cattle nibbled at the hay from between the slats and drank from cast iron troughs about half way up on both sides of the car. These troughs were partly outside of the car and could be easily filled.

Sealing the doors of the cars put the cattle in care of the railroad. A higher rate was charged for stock than for most other freight and this type of shipping was valued and well looked after. The farmer got out during waits on sidings to look at his cattle and with pike poles or ordinary canes prodded up the ones that were down. If they were not gotten up, they might be trampled to death.

The farmer rode in the caboose going into Chicago. It was bleak, drafty, and dusty, with berths to be pulled down for the trainmen but only long, hard seats along the sides with black oilcloth cushions for the farmers. Sometimes there were so

many cattlemen the railroad had to put on a passenger car. With two carloads of cattle, a farmer got a pass home on a passenger train.

Chicago drinking water was, conveniently, considered unwholesome by North Tama cattlemen. One church elder arranged for his future son-in-law, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, to meet him at the stockyards. "Come and have a glass of beer", said the elder, "I never drink water in Chicago." It seemed eminently respectable for the shippers to drink beer and even good Scotch whisky at the bar in the stock exchange with the other stockmen.

Finally, father's cattle were in a pen in the Chicago stockyards. There were acres of pens with stout plank fences, the top board wide enough for men to walk along as they inspected, bargained, bought, and sold. Horsemen in the narrow roadways between the pens, galloped from place to place, ready to drive the steers into the maws of the great packing houses that flanked the yards.

The W. W. Wilson Commission Company of Chicago was founded in the nineties by West Wilson, brother of "Tama Jim" and father of Margaret Wilson, author of *The Able McLaughlins*. West Wilson managed the business for thirty years and sold most of the cattle shipped by the "lairds" of Tama, estimating that approxi-

mately \$30,000,000 worth of livestock from Tama County and vicinity passed through his hands.

There were many questions for the Chicago livestock salesman to decide, for he had the entire responsibility for the stock sale. Whether to sell in the morning or hold, hoping for a strong finish in the late afternoon? What particular kind of livestock did each buyer like? Was he playing the eastern buyers on the market against local Chicago packers and getting the highest price for his client?

When father got back from Chicago, we shared mother's interest as to the market he had struck. It was a good one this time. Then we wondered what he had brought. Unless he had special business and stayed over, father had little time in Chicago and his presents were usually confined to fruit, candy, or something from "Jack-knife Ben's" little joint near the stockyards. Being a showman, Jack-knife Ben liked to stand out in front and bark his wares as he did when he started with \$8 worth of jack knives on a barrel top. For many years he did a thriving business in cutlery with the visiting farmers. One neighbor even got from Jack-knife Ben the glasses he wore for years. They "just suited" his eyes. We were not interested in the butcher knives, razors, and scissors that father brought but gave attention to the pearl-handled penknife to sharpen our pencils at school.

Many of the cattle shipped to the Chicago markets were originally "feeders" — animals bought in other places and fattened in North Tama. Hugh Stevenson rode horseback or in a single buggy all through this part of Iowa in early days, visiting farms, and picking up yearling and two-year-old steers. These he and a helper on horseback drove away, gathering a large herd as they went along. He carried money enough to pay for the cattle he bought — say \$3,000 for a trip down into Poweshiek County. There was no checking system then and carrying large sums of cash was considered dangerous for it caused many of the mysterious disappearances in those days.

Hugh Stevenson formed a partnership with John Young, mother's brother. Uncle John took care of the distribution of feeders in Traer, while Hugh traveled, by train in later years, buying western feeders in carload lots in Kansas City, Omaha, and Minneapolis. Stevenson, a natural-born judge of beef cattle, was a typical livestock buyer, a "hail fellow well met", with a keen eye and a quick wit — the "life of the party". John Young, a quiet, reserved man of affairs, was later a county supervisor, bank president, owner of farms and town property. These men made an ideal business combination.

Although "Stevenson and Young" dealt mostly

in feeders, Stevenson once, against Young's advice, bought Peter Whannel's fat cattle for shipping to Chicago. "I know there is money in the cattle", he said. They made \$300 and gave Peter half of it.

I once asked my father how much a buyer usually made shipping a car of fat cattle to Chicago — they nearly all went there in those days. He said W. W. Wilson, later in Chicago, estimated that when in the livestock business in Traer, he made about \$20 a carload — \$1 a head. A fat steer weighed from 1100 to 1400 pounds then and sold at from five to seven dollars a hundred in Chicago.

Dean C. F. Curtis of the Iowa College of Agriculture marketed eighteen steers of various breeds in January, 1893. Their average gain, he reported, had been 2.4 pounds per day. On a diet of fine cut new corn or ground corn and oil meal in the month of October the average daily gain was 4.1 pounds.

Cattle feeding was a major industry in Tama County. There were sometimes 500 steers at one time in the William Fleming feedyards near Dinsdale. "Jimmy" Mutch, when 72 years of age, placed 800 hogs and 140 head of cattle on the Chicago market at one shipment. Later on, twenty carloads were shipped at one time from the siding on the W. H. Sprole farm east of Traer.

When Editor Elmer E. Taylor of the Traer *Star-Clipper* said in 1942: "Looking back fifty years I am convinced that the average farmer lost as much money in feeding cattle as he made", he was not referring to the Tranquillity men, for they were not "average" farmers but the sons of Scotch farmers with a background of cattle-breeding and shrewd business methods.

JANETTE STEVENSON MURRAY