

CRITTERS

Preparing the Fatted Calf

By Texas Monthly

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It's something to have the biggest of anything. And when you have the biggest trail ride, the biggest western parade, the biggest livestock exposition, the biggest calf scramble contest, and the biggest rodeo, and it's all part of the biggest show with the biggest heart in the biggest city in Texas—well, neighbor, that's really something. And that's exactly what they have every year at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, an extravaganza that produces a unique story for every pile of manure in the Astrohall.

For a full two weeks in late February and early March, an epidemic of “Go Texan” fever strikes Houston as the Old West makes a modest comeback against the freeways, astronauts, and air pollution that have just about driven it from the city. Not everyone is affected, to be sure, but nobody fails to notice there is a lot of it going around. Accountants appear in western outfits, policemen don string ties, service stations sprout rodeo banners and bales of hay, and motel signs say “Howdy” to visitors who pump over \$15 million into the local economy during the two weeks of the show.

The Livestock Show and the people involved in it have style—a friendly, flamboyant style whose symbols are custom-made boots, hats kept on through meals and cocktail parties, and a colorful disregard for the niceties of diction and grammar that should not be mistaken for lack either of intelligence or formal education. Run largely by hardworking volunteer committees that include executives, entrepreneurs, and salaried workers,

the Livestock Show and Rodeo not only serves important educational, entertainment, and commercial functions, but also provides an opportunity for a great many folk to get in touch with their roots and to reaffirm the traditional values they feel helped make America great.

In the week before the show officially opens, thousands of Texans and out-of-state guests recreate a bit of the old ranching west by saddling their horses, hitching up their wagons, and joining in one of the dozen trail rides that wind their way into Houston over courses that range in length from 40 to just over 200 miles. They ride along major highways and backroads for five to ten days, camping out at night and finally converging, six thousand strong, on sprawling Memorial Park the night before the Big Parade. Folks who have ridden horseback for a week in the sun, wind, and rain of a Southeast Texas February take on a somewhat raw appearance. Dirty clothes, grimy hands, a week's growth of whiskers, and sweaty hats pulled low over scowls practiced for days all help sustain the notion that, as one man put it, "If you crossed one of these old boys a little bit the wrong way, they'd liable to stomp the pure-dee living crap out of you." So, although it is virtually impossible to wander through the crowded park without being invited to sit down for a beer and a bite to eat, when the hatband of a grizzled old saddle tramp warns, "I'M NOBODY TO MESS WITH," you don't hanker to mess with him.

Each trail ride has its own personality. The Flying H outfit takes pride in its family-type atmosphere. "We don't have the type of person that gives trouble. We just get people that want to go out and enjoy themselves in a good clean way." Other groups glory in their image as hell-raisers. Steve Deiss of the Rojos marveled that some of the trail rides do not allow drinking. Rojo girl Sheila Nelson agreed. "When you're riding all day and having a party all night, there ain't no way you can do without drinking. We've come 125 miles, and we've got some sore butts to show for it, but we have more fun than anybody else. If you don't believe it, you come go with us next year."

After a night of visiting and carousing, the trail hands ride through the skyscraper canyons of the city the next morning in a giant western parade, an event of such magnitude that Houston schoolchildren receive a holiday to at-

tend it. Interspersed between the covered wagons and horses of the various trail ride outfits, pick-up trucks bear local dignitaries on bales of hay, and high school bands and drill teams remind one of the painful awkwardness of adolescence. Band uniforms seldom display their wearers to best advantage, and some attempts to alter them to fit the western motif produce striking incongruities, as when the Jebbettes of Strake Jesuit High School twirl by in scanty cowgirl outfits. One can almost hear the whirr as Saint Ignatius of Loyola pinwheels in his grave.

Trail ride and parade ended, the focus shifts to the sprawling Astrodomain complex. Inside the eighteen-acre, air-conditioned Astrohall exhibit building, the distinctive but somehow not really unpleasant smell of hay, urine, manure, disinfectant, and 19,000 animals fills every corner and permeates clothing as if it were smoke. The woman at the Feed Office window, her hair done up on large plastic rollers, takes orders for Beet Pulp, Sho Glo, Pork Pellets, and Calf Manna. In every direction are the green clover signs of the 4-H club and the blue corduroy jackets that identify Future Farmers of America. Large gold letters on the back of the FFA jackets proclaim that these youths have been reared close to the soil in and around small towns like Roscoe, Quail, Bangs, Arp, LaPryor, DeKalb, Thorndale, Tom Bean, and New Caney. They answer to names like Fayette, Billy Bob, Biddy Lou, and Yo Yo (“It’s spelled just like it sounds—‘Wah-O Wah-O.’”). They wear their hair neat and say “Yes, Sir” and “Yes, Ma’am” to grownups. And as they tend their animals, one senses they are trying to embody the FFA motto: *“Learning to Do, Doing to Learn, Earning to Live, Living to Serve.”*

Why are they here? Why does a boy or girl spend hours a day for six months feeding and exercising and grooming an animal to display at a livestock show? Some undoubtedly do so because they love animals, and a calf or a lamb or a pig answers this peculiar need at least as well as a dog, and a good deal better than a cat. For others, raising show animals is just something kids in their towns do between the ages of nine and eighteen, like playing football or twirling a baton. It is a regularly scheduled activity on life’s agenda, and does not require defense or explanation. Most, however, do it for reasons that make more clear-cut economic sense.

Many intend to pursue the livestock business; for them, raising animals for show provides a valuable opportunity to learn about many facets of that business. Skill in selection and feeding are obviously important, but even the time spent in grooming an animal for show can serve them well in later years as they seek prestige for their herds through competition in breeding shows. Raising show animals can also be a good financial investment. Almost any animal that qualifies for exhibition and sale at a major show will turn a fair profit. A moderately successful animal can bring enough to finance the purchase of several more head of young stock, and a champion can enable a boy or girl to become an instant junior cattle baron.

Champions are both born and made. The first step is choosing a young animal that shows high potential—one cannot make silk or purse from a sow's error. Exhibitors do not simply walk into the nearest pasture or feed lot and pick an animal. Usually, they buy show stock from established breeders, often paying several times the market price for prime candidates, and they get all the help they can from county agents, vocational agriculture teachers, fathers, and other knowledgeable livestock men whose trained eyes and hands can spot the bone and muscle development, the head and legs, the posture, and the overall body lines that distinguish prize winners from the rest of the herd.

Just as some coaches produce winning teams year after year, so some of these advisers seem to be responsible for more than their share of show champions. Within a month's time last winter, the young charges of San Saba County Agent Billy Kidd won five Champion-of-Breed awards at a livestock show in San Antonio and added four more champions at Houston. James Esse, whose son Keith exhibited both the Grand and Reserve Champion Steers in 1972—the only time in memory a single exhibitor has taken the top two prizes at a major show—and whose daughter Pam had the Reserve Champion Angus in 1974, lauds the good counsel his children have received from Live Oak County Agent Malcolm Osborne: "He's helped them pick their animals, and taught them how to feed, trim, and show them. He keeps up with what the judges want. He's a Texas A & M boy and he knows what he's doing. You watch the counties with a good agent. They win more shows."

Knowledgeable fathers also help. Theresa and Neil Scott, who won top honors in the Maine-Anjou and Simmental classes in 1974, freely admit they could not have done it without expert guidance from their father, Payton Scott. But the all-time Grand Champion Father of the Houston show is undoubtedly Kenneth Gregg of Plainview. Gregg exhibited the Grand Champion Lamb at the Houston Show in 1947 and has evidently passed his secrets on to his children. In competition with hundreds of other exhibitors, Monte, Lucretia, and Keevin Gregg have shown two Grand Champion Lambs, two Grand Champion Pigs, and a Reserve Champion Pig. After winning Grand Champion in a division, an exhibitor is barred from entering that division again, or they might have won more. That rule kept fifteen-year-old Keevin out of the Lamb and Pig shows last year, but he did pretty well with a Simmental steer that placed second in its breed. And he still has two years of eligibility left. In livestock, as in other spheres, class is not randomly distributed.

After selection of the young animal come the months of careful feeding, exercising, grooming, and training for eventual exhibition. Each type of animal calls for distinctive treatment. First, the animals must be “fitted” or tamed and trained for exhibition. A young showman explained the process: “They are pretty wild when you get them, so you have to put them in a close place where they can’t run away, and let them know you are their master. If they won’t lead easy, you drag them ‘til they will. Once they know you have them conquered, they get to be a pet, just like a dog.” There are some differences, of course—not many people have a thousand-pound dog. But one young girl did claim her calf ran to meet her school bus each afternoon and slept in a special room off the kitchen.

Once the beasts have been tamed, they are exercised daily to develop their muscles and work off fat. Calves run from a half mile to as much as four miles a day, depending on the training philosophy and endurance of their owners, who lead them on foot or horseback. Lambs run two to three miles a day, with hurdle-jumping thrown in for variation. Hogs follow a less rigorous regimen, but any youth who has not spent the last month or so before the show getting his pig into good physical condition is courting tragedy in the

judging ring. As Lance Blanchard, whose green and gold football jacket proclaimed him an All-District linebacker from New Deal, earnestly explained, “If your hog is not in shape, he might get excited and die on you right there in the ring. You know, pigs have the highest rate of heart attacks of any animal there is.”

Increasingly, show judges favor the animals that will produce a high proportion of lean meat when slaughtered, as contrasted with the fatter animals that took most of the ribbons as recently as a decade ago. This is not to imply that judges love the winners only for their bodies. Beauty and poise still count for a great deal and draw an impressive amount of attention. Lambs must be carted and blocked and trimmed into symmetrical bricks of meat and wool. To make the coarse hair on a pig lie smooth and close to the body, hog owners rub their animals with wooden blocks covered with sandpaper and brush them for as much as three hours a day for over two months. They also trim the pigs’ nails carefully, to prevent them from toeing in or out when they walk.

A luxurious hair covering is especially important for calves, both for its intrinsic beauty and because, when properly trimmed, it can hide minor weaknesses of an animal’s huge body. The dry heat on the Esse ranch outside the tiny South Texas town of Campbellton inhibits the rich growth of hair required for prize steers, but Keith and Pam Esse have regarded adversity as a challenge rather than a hardship and have managed to conquer the climate. For six months they quarter their calves in a room outfitted with three large industrial fans and super-humidified by a fogging machine that fills the area with a constant cool mist. As the hair on their animals grows, the Esse youngsters spend approximately three hours a day brushing the coats to bring them to show condition.

The hours and weeks and months of preparation come to grand culmination when a girl from Rising Star and a boy from Plainview get a week off from school to match their animals against the best in the state, perhaps the best in the world. For a whole week, when Theresa Scott’s ninth-grade teacher in Rising Star calls the roll, the students will remind her that Theresa is in

Houston for the Livestock Show, and many of them will think to themselves that taking a prize animal to Houston is a lot like going to the Olympics, or maybe even to the Holy Land.

A week at the Livestock Show offers many and varied delights to the young from simpler settings. When they are not sitting around playing cards or dominos on equipment boxes, or offering “Cowboy haircuts 50¢—Hippies free with bath and shave,” or trying to interest passersby in a wallet attached to a string, or engaging in nocturnal hi-jinx in the 500-cot dormitory area (“You know, making animal noises after ‘lights-out’ and stuff like that”), they can wander through the exhibit area and check out the latest in western fashions and Chevrolet pick-ups, ride a Cyclo-massage armchair, have their handwriting analyzed by computer, look over a display extolling the deposits in the Limousin Semen Bank of Waxahachie, and listen to the pretty young cowgirl at the Good News Ranch explain how all her trails have been happy ones since she started riding with Jesus. Outside, the Bill Hames Midway offers them corndogs, bumper cars (“Drive the cars in one direction only. Do not hit the cars head on”), the Tilt-a-Whirl, and special attraction(s) Ronnie and Donnie Galyon, Siamese twins ambiguously advertised as “A Family Show.”

Every night and twice a day on Saturday and Sunday, they can drop over to the stately pleasure dome for a championship rodeo that plays to more people and offers a larger total purse than any other rodeo in the world. It’s a grand show if you like rodeos, and a fascinating one even if you don’t. The counter culture has never managed to make much of a dent in the rodeo. The Color Ride, in which two western-clad flag bearers on magnificent horses race around an arena darkened except for spotlights on Old Glory and the Lone Star; the singing of the National Anthem, during which the Astros’ giant scoreboard contributes a generous helping of rockets’ red glare and bombs bursting in air; the Grand Entry, featuring the Houston Mounted Police and an astronaut or two; Wilbur Plaughner and his trained dogs; chuckwagon races; a Brahman bull that has been ridden only three times in eight years; a concert by a Big Star from New York, Nashville, or Hollywood, California; and world-champion cowboys who walk as if every bone and

muscle in their bodies hurt real bad from competition in which winners receive rich rewards and losers get nothing—these make it quite impossible to shake the conviction that one has come upon a ritual enactment of the American Standard Version of Reality.

With all the diversion, however, the show is hardly a vacation for the young exhibitors. Stalls have to be kept clean and animals have to be tended and readied for their big moment. On the days when judging is to occur, the Astrohall resembles a mammoth beauty parlor. Sheep await final trimming atop grooming platforms lined up like barber chairs. Teams of parents and children and friends wash, dry, vacuum, trim, comb, and brush calves, then tease their tails into puffballs and set them with *Dippity Do*, *Cinderella*, and *Aqua Net*. Black and red hogs are rubbed with oil and alcohol to give their skin and hair a lustrous sheen; the white breeds are covered with a paste of talcum and water that when carefully brushed a few minutes before show time will hide scratches and blemishes and leave them with an even white coat.

Finally, the judging begins. In each division—lambs, pigs, steers, or whatever—a champion and runner-up from each breed or group of crossbreeds are named, and the Grand Champion and Reserve Champion of the entire show are selected from these. Champions bring big prices at the Houston show and every youngster in the ring knows it. They take their work seriously. In the lamb and steer shows, the judge moves up and down a line of sheep standing side by side, rearranging them again and again until he is satisfied he has ranked them correctly. An animal has to be good to win, but an experienced showman can make a good animal look better. Last year, as lamb judge Jim Sachse, professor of Animal Science at New Mexico State University, bent over and probed each lamb with fingers so sensitive they could discern differences in fat covering of less than 5/100ths of an inch, the ringwise exhibitors pressed their knees into their lamb's chest, pushed its head down to produce maximum firmness, and tried to follow instructions whispered to them, from ringside—"All right, Sis. This is it. Set him up. Rub him on the tummy. Pay attention." After almost thirteen hours in the ring, Judge Sachse looked over the day's champions, made a little speech about

how all these lambs were really championship calibre, as were their owners, then walked over and laid his hand on a near-perfect Hampshire that belonged to thirteen-year-old Alan Miller of Ropesville. Alan took the victory pretty well, but his younger brother Chris erupted in a sobbing release of the day's tension. Ten minutes later, as photographers took a family victory picture, Chris' glasses were still fogged with happiness, and Alan's mother said it was something you dream about but you never really think it will happen to you.

Whether docile or frisky, lambs have a certain charm about them that the average pig lacks. Two-hundred-pound pigs are not cute. Neither are they magnificent in the way that a prize steer can be magnificent. Add to that the bad press pigs have suffered in recent years, and you have a situation calculated to make hog men defensive. The point they most often make on behalf of pigs is that they are smart. This may surprise most folks, but that, according to Leslie Murray of Fred, is because "most folks don't know about pigs." Leslie does. "They are the smartest animal there is. I know. We got over a hundred head of cattle, eleven horses, more chickens than you can count, a herd of lambs, thirty- six chinchillas, and a few pigs. The pigs got it all over the rest for brains. They just know what they want and how to get it. I heard some fella wrote a famous book awhile back about how the animals took over a farm one day, took it away from the people that run it. The pigs took charge, givin' orders to all the rest. That fella knew the truth.

"You don't believe me, the proof used to be on TV every day. On *Green Acres*. Arnold the Pig. He'd go in and put his toast in the toaster and toast his toast. He could write. Counted his allowance every week. He'd go up and turn on his TV and sit up in a chair to watch it. A real pig. He smoked cigars. He used to tell the weather with his tail. If he pointed up it meant rain, curled down, it was gonna snow. One time it was in March and that tail curled on down, and nobody believed him and they put him outa the hotel. Next day it was snowin'. Arnold's not your average pig. That's not what I'm sayin'. But you can train 'em any way you want. They just naturally know the easiest way to do things."

Perhaps as a by-product of their intelligence, pigs tend to be more willful creatures than lambs or steers and thus offer both judge and exhibitors something of a challenge. Because they stoutly resist any effort to line them up in an orderly fashion, the judge stands in the middle of the ring and tries to sort out his impressions as the animals move around him. An experienced exhibitor knows he has a better chance if he can keep the judge's attention on his pig—"If he looks up at the ceiling, you'd try to lift him up in the air if you could." Most use a quirt or a piece of plywood about a yard square to try to keep their pig about six feet in front of the judge at all times. The sight of 25 kids trying to move 25 recalcitrant pigs into the same spot six feet in front of a judge is one not soon to be forgotten. Efforts to control the animals' movements often dissolve into desperate attempts just to keep up with them. If trapped in a corner a pig will often squeal wildly and run straight at his pursuers, adding new understanding to the scripture concerning the risks of casting one's pearls before swine. When the white breeds are in the ring, the frequent quirting stirs up so much talcum that the arena smells and sounds like a barbershop set up in the latrine at Bedlam.

Eventually, the judge narrows the field to the top ten, which he assigns to pens around the ring. He then lets them out in small groups, assigns the lower positions first, and finally chooses the first and second place animals from the last three or four in the ring. Last year the top prize went to a white crossbreed belonging to seventeen-year-old Robert Pope of Hereford. Robert had no little brother who would cry for him, but his Ag teacher Marcus Phillips filled in admirably. Robert allowed he didn't know a better Ag teacher anywhere than Mr. Phillips, who is just like a second father to him. And, truth to tell, as Marcus Phillips stood there with tears, in his eyes and a little old rumpled blue cap that kept his brownish-blond hair out of his sun-reddened farmer's face, he did look for all the world like a man you could trust to help raise your hogs. Or your children.

Because it apparently is easier to identify with cattle than with sheep and hogs, and because the Grand Champion Steer always commands a top price, the steer show is the glamor event. For two days, hundreds of steers parade through the large cattle arena in quest of the purple and gold banner that

goes to the Grand Champion. Then, after the winners of each breed are chosen, the final judging takes place in the Astrodome as a kind of half-time show for the rodeo. Judge Gary Minish of Virginia Polytechnic Institute inspected the champions carefully for the fine differences that would distinguish one as better than all the others. After five minutes, he walked over to the big black Maine-Anjou and slapped it on the rump, and pretty little Theresa Scott looked like she just might have been the happiest girl in the world at that precise moment. Maybe she was; I suppose somebody had to be.

Satisfaction and prestige come with raising a Grand Champion, but Alan Miller and Robert Pope and Theresa Scott knew their victories would also bring a financial windfall dropped on them by the show's generous backers. Virtually all who are connected with the show in any capacity, from paid staff to wealthy patrons to volunteers in the most menial of tasks, insist that the main thing they are interested in is "helping the young people." It begins to sound like cant, and part of it doubtless is. Some support the show for reasons of self-interest, whether measured in public relations, or the business the show brings into the city, or tax deductions, or assertion of social position, or attempt at social climbing. But after watching these folk operate for a few weeks, both behind and at the forefront of the scene, one has to be impressed with their determination to see that "no kid who has spent half a year getting ready for this show is going home feeling like he threw sand down a rat hole." To a person, they seem to share in the classic American tendency to romanticize the life of the noble farmer and rancher. Leroy Gloger, a vice president of the show who has made much of his fortune in radio stations and Japanese automobiles, explained it this way: "I love the young people. If we don't support them and keep them on the farm, and try to interest them in livestock and agriculture, this country is going to be in pretty bad shape. We've been real fortunate in America, and supporting this show is one way that I can do my little bit so that when I pass away the people will be taken care of and the land will be more productive."

For weeks ahead of time, committeemen canvass the business community to find donors who will guarantee that any animal sold at auction during the

show will garner a price well above the going market rate. Dozens of backers donate \$200 to be given to winners of the numerous Calf Scramble contests held during the show. In the Scramble events, some of which are a special feature of the rodeo, twelve calves are turned loose in the arena and twenty-four boys scramble after them. Every boy who manages to halter an animal and lead him into a square in the center of the arena receives a \$200 certificate to be applied toward the purchase of a calf that may be entered in the show the following year. To date, the Calf Scramble program has given away over a million dollars' worth of calves to 7000 boys.

Other gifts and proceeds from the show go toward maintaining approximately one hundred college scholarships granted to promising young people who plan to follow a career in some phase of the livestock or agriculture industries and to support research programs in various colleges throughout the state. As an example of the kinds of innovative research being fostered by the show, agricultural scientists at Sam Houston State University at Huntsville have experimented with substituting plastic particles for organic roughage in the diet of beef cattle and have installed portholes in the sides of several steers to enable them to observe digestive processes directly. Such undramatic, often unseen contributions of time and money undergird the Houston show at every point. Without them, it could not exist. But the glory and the glamor derive from the extravagant sums paid for the champion animals and the flamboyant way in which this is done.

Many rich Texans, of course, are sensitive about the vulgar "whiskey and trombones" image they project in the minds of effete Easterners and others of stunted expressive capacity. But as the livestock show gathers momentum, the boots and hats and western suits and horses and cattle and manure and cowboys and beer and bourbon begin to take effect. Sedate affluence gives way to bombastic extravagance, and by the time the auctions roll around, the fact that they are Texans and right proud of it sticks out like a silver spur. They intend to start the bidding high and run it higher, well past the world record if they can. If they wind up buying a champion, most donate it to a charity or some other organization that will raffle it off or resell it at market price. Some buyers, however, find other uses for their purchase. Houston

restaurateur Bill Williams has bought more champions through the years than any other patron of the show. In 1937, he paid seventy dollars for the Grand Champion Chicken. Twenty men subsequently offered him five dollars apiece for a chicken dinner. Williams accepted their offer, but insisted the money go to charity; this was the beginning of the annual Bill Williams' Charity Capon Dinner which contributes over \$100,000 a year to charitable causes. In 1964, Williams paid \$20,500 for the top steer, which he mounted and displayed in his Main Street restaurant until it was torn down last year.

Each auction is arranged by a volunteer committee, and each committee tries to outdo all the others. In 1974 all of them felt a special obligation because the entire show was dedicated to Mr. Edgar Brown, Jr., an old and respected Texas industrialist who has helped make many an auction a success by paying an estimated half-million dollars for prize animals over the last 30 years.

The poultry auction came first and set a high standard for the others. The theme was Mexican and a mariachi band played as lovely señoritas and gay Caballeros passed out milkshake-sized cocktails to the sombreroed Pancho Villas in the Rancheros Grande's section. Show President Tommie Vaughn introduced Mr. and Mrs. Brown—"the old rooster and his young pullet"—and told the folks that if they had forgotten their billfold they could use their credit card "just like at the Chicken Farm in La Grange." The hoopla and cocktails apparently worked. Colonel Walter Britain, the auctioneer who has handled the Houston sale for 36 years, knew all the major bidders and played them against each other with casual good humor. Folks chuckled and agreed that "Old Walter is pretty sharp, isn't he?" It was corny, but it got spectacular results. Mrs. Brown paid \$7500 for the Champion Pen of five broilers and Dick Freeman of Tenneco bought the Grand Champion Turkey for \$4100. It looked like a good year for champions.

At the lamb auction later in the day, the Super Sale Salon had been decorated in African and the sombreros and serapes had been replaced by pith helmets and bush jackets. Two quasi-tribe dudes in dashikis beat drums, and girls in

costumes fashioned from the skins of leopard cubs helped the bwanas and bwanettes achieve their second drunk of the day. And, of course, the obligatory ape added a note of authenticity, even though one could spot two-tone cow person boots sticking out from underneath his gorilloid toes.

The Browns apparently felt that having the show dedicated to them carried an obligation to try to buy all the champions, because Mr. Brown bid Alan Miller's lamb up to \$7400, a new record, before letting it go for \$7500 to Jesse Sharman, who promptly announced he had bought it to honor the Browns. Another record fell at the pig auction when oilman W. M. "Billy" Mitchell and oilman-rancher Jimmy Johnston teamed up to pay \$9800 for Robert Pope's barrow. Robert said he would miss his pig, who was just like a pet, but admitted the \$9800 would help him bear up under the loss.

With prices like these being paid for chickens and lambs and pigs, rumors circulated that a new record would also be set in the steer auction. Not only would this round out the sales nicely, but it might also relieve longtime friends of the show of a source of some embarrassment. The record price for a champion steer at the Houston show was paid by Candace Mossier in 1969, the year after Percy Foreman won her acquittal on a charge of murdering her husband. In 1973, she garnered more unsavory publicity when her next husband was critically injured in a fall from the upper reaches of their River Oaks mansion, under circumstances explained with a vagueness likely to augur a poor market in prospective suitors. Not that Ms. Mossier is without points in her favor. From time to time, she rents billboards and buys TV commercials urging people to vote or give money to orphans, and last February she took out half-page newspaper ads boosting the Livestock Show and featuring a color photograph of herself that speaks well for the rejuvenating effects of civic-mindedness.

There are those who regard Candace Mossler's interest in the show as a blatant attempt to purchase respectability and who would prefer she stayed home on auction day. But, as they say, it's a free country. Fortunately, one of the freedoms rich Americans have always enjoyed is the freedom to gang up against competitors. Last year, perhaps spurred by her ad campaign, a group

of show supporters banded together and determined they were not going to let Candace or anyone else steal the limelight from Edgar Brown. Thirty-one men secretly pledged as much as \$2000 apiece toward setting a new record and purchasing the Grand Champion Steer as a tribute and gift to “Mr. Edgar.” Word has it Candace heard about the syndicate. In any case, she surprised everyone by not showing up. They decided to go on without her.

These folk are willing to mess around with nonsense and mummery when they are dealing with mere chickens and sheep and pigs. But selling cattle is a dignified business, and the costume of the day was formal—boots, hats, and one’s best western suit. The men looked like I thought all men were supposed to look until I was about seventeen, and the women, though not fixed exactly the way I would fix them if I had free rein, were nevertheless fixed, and they didn’t look bad. Tommie Vaughn talked about billfolds and credit cards again and said the look on Theresa Scott’s face that night in the Astrodome was the best pay he had ever received in his life. As soon as Vaughn cleared the ring, Walter Britain set out to make Theresa Scott rich as well as happy, a combination not half so rare as poor people like to imagine.

Mrs. Brown started the bidding at \$20,000 and it took off from there with Tommie Vaughn, bidding for the syndicate, raising it every time anybody else got the lead. Theresa’s father watched the bidding from behind a six-foot pipe fence at the edge of the auction ring. As the bid rose, so did Payton Scott. About every five thousand dollars, he climbed up another pipe. By the time it reached \$35,000, Scott was on top of the fence and pounding the corner post in avaricious glee. If the competition hadn’t finally bailed out and let Vaughn buy the calf at \$40,000, I’m afraid Payton Scott might have hurt himself real bad.

At the end of the 1974 show, Alan Miller, Robert Pope, and Theresa Scott took home \$57,300 and a clear conviction they had invested their last six months wisely. Two thousand exhausted volunteers took home a good feeling of “helping the young people” and getting to play “cowboys and farmers” in the bargain. I took home, in addition to a pair of shoes I regretted having to throw away, a strange sense that God, country, love for the soil, respect for

hard work, generosity of spirit and pocketbook, faith in the power of competition to produce a just distribution of resources, trust in one's fellows as long as they are enough like oneself to merit trust, and even a fair amount of optimism about the future are alive and flourishing at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. If you don't believe it, you come go with me this year.