

BUSINESS

Sold American!

George Morse looks like he belongs in an ad that says,
"This man just borrowed 85 million dollars from our bank."



By William Martin

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HIS SIX-FEET-TWO-INCHES and two hundred well-distributed pounds, the perfectly-tailored brown hound's-tooth-check suit in a classically subtle western cut, the \$250 ostrich boots, the Resistol Century hat with its band of pheasant feathers, the custom-made shirts with the tiny GRM monogram, and the gold lion's-head cufflinks, the large rectangular belt buckle with a silver dollar flanked by Morse's brand and initials, the gold glasses, the razor-cut black hair with wisps of grey, even the slightly bent nose that offers the only relief in an otherwise flawless picture—these constitute precisely what God, Frederic Remington, and Hollywood, California, would have come up with if they had been asked to collaborate in the creation of the archetypal urban cattleman. Morse does own a ranch and considers the possibility that he may one day give full time to raising Hereford and Charolais cattle. For the present, however, his primary concern is to help others develop their herds of purebred stock at the highest possible cost. George Morse is an extraordinarily talented and successful cattle auctioneer. Some say he is the best in the business.

Unlike commercial cattle, which are sold by the pound at prices that reflect supply and demand and rise or fall only a few cents at a time, purebred cattle

sold for breeding purposes bring whatever people will pay for them, which may be anywhere from \$250 to over \$100,000. One major factor in the price purebreds bring, of course, is the intrinsic quality of the animals themselves, but the importance of a second factor, the cattle auctioneer, can scarcely be overdrawn. A good bull sold by “private treaty” might bring \$25,000. An average auctioneer might push his price up to \$32,000. A top auctioneer might sell the same bull for, say, \$41,500. In turn, the price the bull brings affects the subsequent worth of his progeny, his full- and half-siblings, the other cattle in the seller’s herd, and perhaps even the price structure for the entire breed.

The price brought by one animal in Houston may thus figure importantly in the price of an animal sold several months later in Florida or Colorado or Canada. Because this is the case, breeders choose auctioneers with great care. They do not want to entrust the work of a lifetime or even a year to a beginner, any more than a heart patient requests an intern to perform his surgery. They want a man who knows their cattle and what they should bring, a man who knows the people who will gather to buy them, and what they might be willing to pay. For a great many people who raise Charolais and Herefords, the man they think of first is George Morse.

Morse has been associated with livestock all his life. As a boy in Missouri during the Thirties, he helped his father break mules to sell to cotton farmers. In 1950, after a hitch in the Navy, he graduated from the University of Missouri with a major in agriculture and a strong minor in business, then went to work for the American Hereford Association. For the next eight years, Morse attended auctions and breeding-association meetings and visited with cattlemen in 40 states. When he decided to enter the auction business in 1958, he had the double advantage of a thorough knowledge of the cattle industry and a vast network of people who knew and trusted him.

Morse explains the lure auctioning held for him: “I have always loved the inward feeling present in anything connected to show business, or in things like the flight of planes in formation, or flag-waving in ceremonies. In the service, I loved drill-team work. I liked the effect these things have on people.

The spirit of it, I guess you might say. I get goose bumps just talking about it right now. Really. Well, at the first purebred cattle auction I ever attended, right after I got out of college, I got that same feeling. I liked the challenge and the speed, and I wondered to myself if I could ever learn to do that. A few years later at a sale in Iowa, Art Thompson, the auctioneer, called me aside and asked me if I had ever thought about this business. I guess that is what I wanted to hear. Driving home that night in an ice storm, I tried my luck with the chant. I decided that if he could learn it, so could I.

“A lot of what an auctioneer says during the chant, of course, is just filler. All you really have to listen for is the price. The rest is mainly for show, to create excitement. The ideal auction chant is clear, rhythmic, and continuous. When it’s done right, it has the same effect on people as pretty music. It helps them feel that this moment is especially for them. For five years I practiced—taking a bath, driving, wherever most folk sing, I practiced the chant. I was driving about 60,000 miles a year for the Hereford Association at the time, and I sold every sign and fencepost I passed. I got constructive criticism from other auctioneers. I never will forget when it first really came to me. I was driving down in Louisiana one night and I got to where it just kind of rolled along. It felt so good I was sorry to get to where I was going.”

Not long after his “call” came in Louisiana, Morse decided to turn professional. A two-week stint in auction school, run by speech teachers and veteran auctioneers, taught him to breathe from his diaphragm and to speak for five or six hours at a crack without damaging his throat and vocal cords. With the encouragement of his wife Dixie—”That’s her real name. She’s been a great sidekick”—Morse and a friend, Max Cox, began to manage sales for breeders, employing seasoned auctioneers as well as Morse himself. George quickly proved his mettle. “The first sale I worked was for a sick man who was dispersing his entire herd. He told me he would be happy to get \$250 or \$300 thousand. They brought \$460 thousand. That is still one of the highlights of my career.”

A more recent highlight occurred in 1972 when the American Hereford Association bestowed on Morse and fellow auctioneer Ham Hamilton the

title of “Master Salesman.” Morse acknowledges the honor meant a great deal to him. “I’m pretty emotional. I laugh, I cry, I do it all. I pretty much did it all that day,” The distinction that seems to please him most, however, is the annual invitation from John Wayne to preside over his production sale (the sale of breeding stock produced during a given period, usually a year) at the Duke’s 26 Bar Ranch in Arizona. Morse, who likes Wayne’s political views, likes show business, and likes “being on the inside,” admits he gets a thrill out of the fact that he and the Duke are now good personal friends. Hell, who wouldn’t?

I HAVE WATCHED MORSE AT several auctions over the last couple of years, including the prestigious Sale of Sales at the Houston Livestock Show, but the one that sticks with me best took place deep in the Rio Grande Valley, when Mr. Ralph Hutchins dispersed his relatively small but exceptionally fine herd of Charolais breeding stock. Charolais folk claim, with considerable justification, to be part of “the all-time success story” of the cattle industry. The big, white, long-bodied French cattle have caused a revolution in the industry because of what livestock men call “gainability” and “cutability.” They weigh significantly more at weaning time and reach their full growth from three to seven months faster than the major British breeds—Hereford, Angus, and Shorthorn—and they do it on less feed and with less care. When slaughtered, their carcasses yield more lean meat and more high-priced cuts than other breeds. The combination has proved highly attractive to commercial cattlemen and has enabled Charolais to grow from an exotic novelty breed into the fourth most numerous breed in America, with no signs of slacking off. As the “Silver Cattle” and their crossbred progeny have walked away with top honors in dozens of major livestock shows in the last seven or eight years, and as the greater profit potential of Charolais crossbreeds has become apparent, commercial cattlemen have begun to clamor for Charolais breeding stock.

Strict quarantine regulations have made it extremely difficult for American breeders to obtain animals from France. This, in turn, has enhanced the value of the herds of those breeders who did own full French cattle and who had built up the bloodlines of their herds with care. Few men in the

Charolais industry have made a greater contribution to improvement of American herds than Ralph Hutchins. His decision to retire from the livestock industry for reasons of age and fragile health and to sell his herd at public auction was a major event and drew prospective buyers from all over the nation.

The night before the sale, Hutchins hosted a cocktail party at a hotel in the Mexican border town of Matamoros. This represented a concession, since “Mr. Ralph doesn’t believe in drinking,” but his associates had convinced him it was not the time to strike a blow for abstinence. The hors d’oeuvres were distressingly undistinguished, but an incredible centerpiece structured around an eight-foot alligator sculpted in lard, a combo that featured a young Mexican girl who did not need subtitles to get her message across, and a superfluity of margaritas and Carta Blanca all served to make folk feel relaxed, friendly and expansive. The party had been going for some time when George Morse arrived to supplant the high-cholesterol ‘gator as the center of attention. He spoke to virtually everybody, recalled the last time he had seen them, passed the time of night, then moved on, creating little eddies wherever he went.

The party broke up fairly early as a number of guests decided they needed more than the local hors d’oeuvres to help them make it through the night. As we strolled down the street to what was touted as Matamoros’ finest restaurant (a disheartening bit of intelligence, if correct), Ed Christiansen, a crusty cattleman from Florida, entertained us with a chorus or two of Marty Robbins’ “El Paso”—“Nighttime will find me at Rosa’s cantina”—and helped fend off a cab driver who wanted us to meet his mother who, if I understood him correctly, is a virgin. Some of the men elbowed one another and winked and lied about what they were going to do “later on.” Morse listened and laughed, but showed no inclination to join them.

“Cattle people don’t want the man who sells their cattle to do much fooling around,” he had explained earlier. “They expect the same sort of personal behavior from an auctioneer that they expect from a mayor. They expect a sameness in all aspects of your life. Your clothes and your hair have to be

appropriate. Your family life has to be in good shape. You need to look rested, even if you have been on a plane all night.” When he finished a meal of greasy enchiladas and frog legs an hour or so later, Morse decided, despite the protestations of his companions, that it was time to head back to the Holiday Inn in Harlingen.

AT BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING, the motel coffee shop was no place for farmers or sheepherders. Anybody not in town to buy cattle had sense enough to keep quiet. By keeping quiet, he could have a wonderful time. For a great many Southern and Southwestern folk, and perhaps especially those still connected with the livestock and agricultural industries, conversation is something of a social art form. Even serious business discussions are prefaced, ended, and thoroughly permeated with trivial pleasantries, oblique insults neither given nor taken seriously, teasing suggestions and questions, and stylized philosophical comments. For those at home with its meandering rhythms, its shifting directions, and its arresting figures of speech, it can be pure delight.

A couple of tables away, a man noted the similarity between the Holiday Eye Opener and eggs Benny Dick, but what really pleased him were the biscuits — “You know what? These are real homemade biscuits. They’re not the kind you whop on the side of the cabinet.” Unfortunately, the afterglow of tequila and grease, the ordinariness of Breakfast Suggestion Number Three, and the customary brutality of morning had left me feeling like I *had* been whopped on the side of a cabinet. It must have showed. A very large man wearing white ostrich boots walked past my table, grinned, and offered commiseration — “It’s hell to live, ain’t it?”

About 10:30, the crowd headed out to the auction barn at the fairgrounds in nearby Mercedes, where the sale would be held. They wanted to get there early, because Robert and Modena Jernigan had told them this one would start on time. The modern cattle auction is a catered affair. When a breeder decides to sell he employs a sales management firm to secure an auctioneer, arrange for the necessary equipment and personnel, prepare the publicity, contact potential buyers, and perform various clerical tasks at the auction

itself, such as setting the order in which the animals appear and keeping track of who bought what for how much. In return the manager receives 3 per cent of the total amount of the sale. Charolais breeders in Texas, Oklahoma, and surrounding states turn most often to the Jernigans of Tyler.

Robert Jernigan looks rather average and talks slow, even for someone from deep East Texas, but the consensus is that he is “double smart” and a good man to trust with a cattle sale. Robert, however, is by no means the only important Jernigan. In addition to children and other relatives who perform various tasks in the office and at the sales, Robert’s wife Modena carries at least her share of the load. Modena’s pleasant round face is encircled by a bleached-blond hairdo that would probably stand up well in a three-quarter-speed tornado, and she is nothing if not outgoing. By turn earnest and comical, she speaks in a voice that carries, and in sentences that often end with an interrogative inflection that implicitly checks to make sure the listener is still with her. And she works hard. I was told that “You can call the Jernigan offices at two o’clock in the morning and Modena will answer the phone just like it was the middle of the afternoon.”

After registering for the door prize of semen from Charolais bulls Valiant and B-71, prospective buyers picked up handsome Jernigan-prepared sales booklets containing pictures, pedigrees, and other pertinent data on each animal to be sold, then added their own notes in the margins as they wandered through the stalls for a final personal inspection and tried to feel out other buyers.

“Which one of these do you think is the best, Sam?”

“Well, there’s two or three pretty good ones.”

“Reckon we’ve picked out the same ones?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

By the time they settled down at long tables for the lunch Mr. Hutchins had prepared for them, a fine air of anticipation mingled with the warm smells of

hay, prize cattle, fresh manure, barbecue, and coffee. It was just right, and everybody who was supposed to be there had shown up.

Senator Kimball from Louisiana was there, and so was Dr. Billy Newton. Walker Wilson, who looks like Fred Flintstone would look if he looked like Wallace Beery, was there with his wife Potty, who is about a quarter of his size and losing ground. Wilson is president of the American International Charolais Association, a canny cattle raiser, a flamboyant gambler, and a wearer of marvelous hats. His new brown plantation hat drew a lot of attention.

“Walker, that’s the best-looking hat you’ve had on all year.”

“Thanks. Potty don’t like it much.” Richard Hass was there to represent Nelson Bunker Hunt—“He’s H. L.’s boy”—who owns the largest herd of Charolais cattle in the world. Last fall, Modena told me, Bunker sold 1250 female animals in an auction that lasted four days and totaled over four million dollars. Potty spent the four millionth dollar.

Senator Kimball and Dr. Newton and Walker Wilson and Richard Rass were there to buy cattle, and so were a good many others. But some, including some who had traveled hundreds of miles, had no intention of bidding. They had come to pay their respects to Mr. Rutchins. More than one expressed the sentiment that “It’s kind of like going to a funeral, if you want to look at it that way.” Among those who seemed to look at it that way was Ralph Rutchins himself, who admitted it felt a bit strange to see his whole life’s work come into the barn in three trucks, to be sold in three hours.

As is true at a lot of country funerals, the sadness at this one was tempered considerably by good food and good talk.

“How you doin’, Johnny?”

“I’m kicking, but not too high.”

“What’s the matter? Did you get a lot of partying done last night?”

“I got enough done to last me awhile. How’re you feeling?”

“If I felt any better, I’d be dangerous.”

“Chris, I believe you’re supposed to eat the seeds on those peppers.”

“Let me tell you something. My momma killed all her idiot children at birth.”

“Seriously, you oughta try ’em. They say these Jalapeños are the main reason Mexicans never have any grass back of their houses.”

“I saw that good-looking daughter of yours at the party last night. Help me remember her name.”

“It’s Judy, but I can see why you forgot it. She’s not a Judy. I never did think so. She’s an Amanda.”

“I don’t know. I think she’s a Martha.”

“Yes, she could be at that, now that you mention it.”

“If everybody was like Ralph Hutchins, the lawyers in this country would starve to death, wouldn’t they?”

“That sure is right, isn’t it? You know, I think that’s about the nicest thing I ever heard said about anybody.”

TRUE TO HIS PRINCIPLES, GEORGE Morse looked rested, but he did not look relaxed. Morse admits he seldom relaxes until several animals into the sale. While others visited over coffee, he climbed onto his perch above the auction ring and began testing the sound system. He turned the bass up and the treble down. He unplugged a speaker that didn’t sound quite right, then plugged it in again because it was better than nothing. He suggested to one of the Jernigan’s staff that they arrange for a complete back-up system in the future, in case something went wrong with the main system. He fretted about the acoustics and worried that the noise the cattle were making would interfere with the sale. It was not the petulant bitching of a prima donna, but the concerned attention to details that marks the truly professional

performer. Gerald Bowie, a rookie auctioneer from West Point, Georgia, who would spell Morse in the latter part of the afternoon, watched and commented on his own good fortune: “You know, to be asked to sell behind George Morse, one of the best in the business, on one of the best herds in the country, could be a lifetime honor.” To commemorate the occasion Bowie had presented Morse the night before with a gavel (actually a rounded and polished stick about six inches long, two inches wide, and a half an inch thick) that he had carved from a hundred-year-old barn door on his Georgia ranch.

A few minutes before one o’clock, folks found their seats in the three small grandstand sections semi-circling the ring and Robert Jernigan and his daughter Judy, who looked like she could have been an Amanda or maybe a Martha, took their places in the auction box on either side of Morse, Judy to keep track of the sales and Robert to laud the qualities of the animals in the ring. Jernigan paid brief tribute to Ralph Hutchins while several men and women about Mr. Ralph’s age brushed tears from their sun-parched cheeks, and Morse introduced the “ring men” who would help him during the sale. Ring men scatter themselves throughout the crowd to relay bids to the auctioneer and are a vital and colorful part of the auction. Most work for livestock magazines and serve as ring men in return for ad space purchased by the rancher giving the sale. With the vigilance of wagon-train scouts they lean forward and search expectantly for the gestures that signal a bid. When a bidder loses the lead and seems about to drop out, they get right down in his face and quietly cajole him into bidding just one more time. When the bid comes they translate it instantaneously from a discreet nod or wink into a raucous, ear-splitting yell. Every ring man has his own yell—Bruce Brooks of *The Drover’s Journal* favors EEEOOOWWW, Fred Ferrell of *The Charolais Banner* leans to HEY-AHHHHHHHH, and Johnny Brandon of *The Cattleman* emits a wild YEEE-AAAHHH—so that an auctioneer has little trouble discerning which of his helpers has sent the message.

The preliminaries done, Morse declared this sale was one of the great moments of his life and sounded like he meant it. Then, with the air of a man willing to seize a great moment, he dramatically pronounced the ritual

phrase: “Ladies and Gentlemen...the auction is on.” And it was. Head bobbing and weaving, eyes darting about the crowd, hands snapping out and in as if catching bids on his fingertips, gavel tapping a brisk *rattattat* to maintain the flow for the microsecond he needed to take a breath, Morse rolled along at a dazzling clip, pausing only when he felt it his duty to let the crowd know the bidding was unconscionably low. The effect was something like a cross between a gatling gun and a frontier evangelist pleading with sinners to repent before it is “everlastingly too late.”

Early in the sale, Morse displayed his artistry on a magnificent half-French cow and her twin calves—”This is an own daughter of Uranium, rebred back to B-71 and safe in calf; a great cow from a great cowman. Tell me, boys, how many dollars for them? Give me twenty thousand to go. Give me seventyfive hundredTHIRTYFIVE-Igotthirtyfivehundred-bidthirtyfive-givemefourthirtyfivefour-*rattattat*-willyougivemefour-YEEEEAAAHHHHH-allrightfourmakeitnowfiver-*attattat*-thinkingnowfiveEEEEOOOWWWfiveHEY AHHHHHsix...seven...eight...now we’re going. You’reoutintheback-Igotanewmanoverhere-bettergivemenineEEEEOOOWWWEEEEOOOWWW he did Igotninetousanddollars-willyougivemeten-*rattattat*-Igotninegivemetennine-thinkingnowten...Now boys, take a hold, take a new look. We can sell them this high at any crossroads. If we got them all as good as this one, we wouldn’t have any competition in this business. I have nine thousand on my right, I want tenYEEEEAAAHHHHHHH-allrighttennowfivehundreddollars-onhertenfivegivemefive...she’s a young cow, she’s got two young calves, she may be carrying two more. This may be a five-in-one package. AreyouabletobuyemIgot-tenthousandmakeitfivetenfivegiveme-tenfiveopenthatgatewe’re gonna-sellhertenfiveSOLD for ten thousand to N. B. Hunt Ranches. Thank you, Richard.”

“Ol’ Bunker likes those French cattle, don’t he?”

“Yeah, he does. And he can sure as hell afford ’em, too.”

Another early highlight was the sale of a quarter interest in B-71. Under the terms of the sale, the buyer would get 800 vials of semen immediately and one-fourth of all the semen B-71 produced each year. And, as Robert Jernigan explained, “You can do whatever you want to with it. If you want to sell it or give some of it away, you can do it. It’s your semen.” With that kind of enticement, the bidding started at \$10,000 and went up so fast that Morse’s chant amounted to little more than counting by fives

—”TENnowtenfivenowelevengivemefive-

Igotfivemakeittwelvetwelvefivethirteen”—and Fred Ferrell quit yelling and just started laughing. At \$17,500, several bidders obviously reached the point they had decided was their limit and the bid stopped rising. A big price on B-71 could set a standard for the rest of the sale, so George and Robert pulled out all the stops. George noted that “B-71 has as much bone and substance as any bull we’ve seen in a long while. And he puts it on his calves. He’s a 100 per cent certified meat sire. Why, at \$17,500, we’re doing little more than selling the 800 vials of semen. It’d be worth that much just to say you owned part of this bull.” Then, to assure folks that what the 800 vials contained was not your everyday, run-of-the-bull semen, Jernigan asked Dr. Cardwell, the vet who has cared for the Hutchins herd, to comment on B-71’s generative powers. Dr. Cardwell laid it out straight: “Fertility has to be the name of the game,” he said, “and B-71 ranks as one of the top bulls fertility-wise that we’ve ever had in stud. When we have hard-to-breed cows, he’s the one we like to go to for the best results.”

The quality of his work certified by a doctor, B-71 quickly found some cattlemen who wanted to be identified with him and drew bids of eighteen thousand, then eighteen-five. As the action slowed again, George admonished the faint-hearted: “Boys, you’ll join the old Wish-I-Had club if you pass this up. I believe, as sure as we’re sitting in this barn, that if you ask anybody to name the top five or ten bulls in the U.S.A. today, he’ll put B-71 in there with them. I sell B-71 cattle every day of the year, so I guess I should have some idea of what they’re worth. Honestly and truly. And I think B-71 is worth a whole lot more than what you’re offering.”

By now, the contest was down to two men, Glen Roney of nearby McAllen and Jack Canata of Houston. Roney raised the bid to eighteen-six and Canata decided to think about it awhile. Two ring men worked on him feverishly, expectantly, but he would not budge. Then, as if no one else were listening, Morse looked straight at him and said, real low and smooth, like a close friend offering carefully weighed and secret advice, “I’ll tell you what to do. You give me \$20,000 and I think we’ll shoot him clear out of the barn. Think what it would be worth on your advertising to own an \$80,000 bull. The Great B-71. Just get on that even money and buy the bull. You won’t have the chance to do this again in your lifetime.” Canata cracked, but not wide open. He went up to eighteen-seven and Roney, probably already a hundred over what he had figured the bull was worth, ducked his head to signal he was through. Jack Canata had bought himself one-fourth of a lot of bull.

THE BEST ANIMALS CUSTOMARILY GO early in a sale, and the tension runs fairly high as breeders compete with each other for cattle that could become mainstays of a topflight herd. Further down the line, things relax a bit and folk start to take themselves and their competition a bit less seriously. They know that if they lose one \$4000 cow, another just about as good will be along in a moment. The sales team likes the audience loose, of course, but works to make sure they don’t let things go flat and “lose the auction.” At this point the value of an experienced ring man like Fred Ferrell becomes clear. Folks like to have Freddy work their section not only because he knows his business, but also because, just standing or walking, he makes them laugh. His uncomplicated face sits atop a thick body that has absolutely no extra height for its weight, and when he walks he moves as if the strings connecting the various parts are a little too tight so that the joints don’t flex just right. He teases the buyers and they feel free to poke fun at him:

“Freddy, the way you passed me coming out here, you must have taken an offensive driving course.”

“Why don’t you get a haircut, boy? You’re starting to look like a damn sheep.”

“Freddy, you’ve missed about three bids now. I don’t think it’s good for you to go to Mexico.”

Morse also loosens up and amuses the crowd and himself by raising the pitch and speed of his chant to sound like a record being speeded up, or switching into a minor key for a few seconds, then switching back with a grin about the time somebody notices what he has done.

As the afternoon wore on, both the sales staff and the buyers were clearly feeling satisfaction over the way things had gone. They had set no records, but between them they had done right by Mr. Ralph. The 72¹/₄ lots brought a total of \$275,600, safely within the \$250-300 thousand range they had hoped for. Several people came by to shake Morse's hand and tell him, "You done a wonderful job, George, but then you always do." George allowed that was awful kind of them and said he'd be looking forward to seeing them up at Bunker's ranch in Terrell in a few weeks.

"I'll be there. And, say, if you ever get down to Florida, you be sure and come by to see us, will you?"

"You know, I might just do that. Where is it you live, exactly?"

"You can't miss it. It's right on the way."