

Cattle prices unpredictable

[Continued from Page 1] depressed cattle prices. Two factors involved are that meat in storage is being released to compete with fresh meat and imports from abroad do likewise. McCoy described the present situation as being "extremely volatile." In addition to the above speculations, McCoy is also suspicious that there might be some manipulation of the markets going on. Many of the smaller butchers and packers have been

eliminated from the scene over the last few years, leaving the buying power in the hands of a few. On top of that, he says buyers are not buying large amounts right now because the markets have been so uncertain. Another view expressed by McCoy, now in his sixth term as the Lancaster Stockyard's chief executive, is that "direct marketing is the poorest way to sell." He explained that "Farmers should jealously protect an open, competitive market."

The reason for it is that those buying directly watch the auction prices as a guideline for their own quotations. Danger looms ahead if direct buying predominates because then those firms can set their own prices with little or no regard to the open, competitive market. Dale Marsteller, of Marsteller Brothers, a York County feedlot operation, made the same point when he was interviewed by LANCASTER FARMING this week. He markets about 500 head per year and allows half of them to go to butchers directly. The remainder is sold at auctions to protect the market there and also his contacts with buyers. He stressed the importance of the competitive market.

Although Marsteller tries to follow the markets every day, he commented that "the way they're jumping up and down now, it don't take long to lose track." He'd like to see cattle prices come up to 50 cents per pound again, but offered no predictions as to whether he thought they would or not. Right now Marsteller is still making money on his fat cattle. That's because he purchased the feeders at comparatively low prices. But with incoming feeders being priced higher, that could change. "This is the problem, we're going backwards," he quipped. We'll take a closer look at his operation in next week's issue.

John Marsteller, a cousin of the Marsteller Brothers, takes a somewhat different approach to beef cattle marketing. He and his wife Mary are a little more sensitive to prices and are

active campaigners for a better understanding between producers and consumers. Two years ago, for example, they were telling their side of the story while housewives were boycotting meat. Mrs. Marsteller, who's rather skilled with a camera, puts on slide shows for anyone who's interested in seeing a glimpse of farm life.

For the past several years Marsteller has steadily been increasing the number of sales directly to customers. He's sold carcasses to private individuals as far away as Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. and hopes to establish his own roadside market someday. How quickly that happens will depend on the availability of credit and prices at the auctions. Marsteller does not believe prices are in proper alignment with production costs, and that the retail route will be pursued if things don't adjust and stay that way. Like his cousins, he sees 50-cent cattle as the target to shoot for. LANCASTER FARMING will feature his beef operation in one of its June issues.

Getting back to McCoy's viewpoints, he is a little more cautious about predicting prices than some others in the business. Across the nation, marketing reports continue to point to prices which will come close to and possibly even exceed the 50-cent mark. But McCoy, an experienced and knowledgeable cattle dealer, continues to hesitate. He noted that recent swings in prices have been "too extreme, and depending on what day a farmer brought his cattle to market, he could lose or gain an extra \$40 to \$50 per head. Recent changes in the market have often come without warning,

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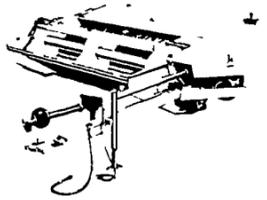
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