

Zimmerman Retires From PDA Bureau of Livestock Marketing

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NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — Every workday for 32 years, John Zimmerman drove east from his 150-acre Perry County farm in Rye Township across the Susquehanna River into Harrisburg to his job at the state Department of Agriculture.

His morning farm chores already done, the trip used to take him an hour, before the I81 bridge was built across the river, and would give him time to think.

He said that many times his thoughts were of the work to be done, the livestock auctions he would travel to that day, the number of hogs, calves, etc., he would group and categorize.

"Lots of times, going to a sale, part of your thoughts were on the sale, what you were going to have that day. Or on the grading operation, usually going to grade hogs, or other livestock, how many I would have, how long it would take.

"And sometimes you'd think about the quality (of the animals). Good quality is a plus from (the perspective of) sales and grading. It always takes long to grade poorer quality. They usually have a bigger assortment of sizes and quality, so it takes longer to get them through."

"And there were a number of times, driving, when you would think about home and things that needed to be done," Zimmerman said.

Those who operate or who have operated livestock auctions around the state should be familiar with John Zimmerman.

On Sept. 19, 1962, Zimmerman joined the state Department of Agriculture as an agricultural marketing specialist. On Jan. 4, 1965, he was promoted to chief of the livestock division, and he held that position until his retirement March 18.

For all those years, Zimmerman's softspoken manner and firm, but friendly face has been associated with the state Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Livestock Marketing.

No more. Zimmerman at 63, is currently living on his farm with his wife Carolyn, with whom he will celebrate a 37th wedding anniversary on Wednesday.

His work now is taking care of all those things he wanted to get down at home ... the small jobs, the painting jobs, the fix-up, the repairing.

But while the state still sponsored it, it was Zimmerman's voice, among others, that was heard on the twice-daily toll-free telephone recordings of the Pennsylvania market reports.

And when the livestock auction in Pennsylvania served a stronger position in the daily marketing of livestock, so did Zimmerman. It was his face, among others, that was seen grading livestock in stables in preparation for an upcoming sale.

With spray-paint can in hand, or some other marking device, Zimmerman has judged the quality and separated into lots hundreds of thousands of animals for auction.

He has traveled across the state many times visiting auction houses, grading animals for sale, marking animals, meeting people, working with people, talking, sharing a cup of coffee, swapping stories.

His job, as an objective livestock grader, was very important in protecting the local producer from receiving inappropriate prices, helping to protect the consumer, and trying to create a level playing field in grassroots commerce.

Those were the days when the community butcher was prominent in the demand portion of the price-driving supply and demand equation.

Now, though there are still a number of local butchers who buy livestock at auction, the majority of animals and the price paid is generally set by several major buyer-processors, or contractors.



John F. Zimmerman has retired as chief of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture Bureau of Livestock Marketing. He is known for his support of the industry, and his personal disposition.



In this photo taken in 1990, John Zimmerman, left, looks over a Holstein calf at Vintage Livestock Auction, while Richard McDonald marks the calves according to grade. Zimmerman recently retired as chief of the Livestock Division of the PDA Bureau of Market Development. McDonald is the new chief.

While nothing stays the same, it is still worth noting when things change as significantly as they have with the grass roots agricultural community and its ways of doing business.

Zimmerman was a part of the change.

When he was just starting out with the state Department of Agriculture in 1962, Zimmerman, then 31-years-old was back from a two-year stint as an officer in the U.S. Air Force, having served as a radar controller with the rank first lieutenant.

Previously, he had attended Penn State University at the Harrisburg Center in 1949 and 1950, through the ROTC program and went on to earn a degree in agricultural economics.

He grew up on a mountain subsistence farm behind Summerdale with a herd of milking goats, and other livestock and laying hens, and when he was 15, his family moved to a Cumberland County farm, about 14 miles away from where he lives now, on the other side of Stewart's Gap.

With hogs, some cattle, and a half dozen or so riding horses, he said he grew up wanting to be a cowboy, and then with World War II coming, he wanted to be a fighter pilot, "Until I found out I was color blind," he said, laughing.

"But until I was 15, I didn't have a definite goal of what I was going to do," he said. His father, raised and born on a farm, had been looking for a farm and had finally found one in Enola. Zimmerman said that was when he decided that whatever he was going to do, it would be agriculturally related.

They were, as is said, the good old days.

For a youth in Cumberland County on a 50-acre farm loaded

with pheasants, and having a couple of dogs that would hunt the birds and rabbits, life was good.

"That was one of the joys of life, was hunting pheasants. I had the idea when I got out on my own I would all kind of time to hunt," he said, again laughing at his youthfull outlook.

Although the pheasants are pretty well history, Zimmerman has more or less always kept the first week of deer season as an annual observation, sometimes taking two weeks in the late fall to hunt. And more recently he has been fishing with a son-in-law.

But those are avocations and times for being an individual, separate from the demands of society.

His work as auction grader and reporter for the state was his work.

"(Work has) meant a great deal to me, and still does," he said recently. "It was an area where my so-called expertise laid and it was a service provided to the agricultural community and consumer as well, and you had that feeling that you were of help to people," he said.

He routine was never exactly routine, but he would drive 20,000 to 25,000 miles per year to travel across the state to get to auctions, stay overnight, do another auction somewhere else the next day, and maybe get home later the next night.

On the road, before the roads became so big and straight and level and made all the remote places accessible.

Even as recently as last year, Zimmerman tallied 2,500 to 3,000 miles on the road in Pennsylvania just during October. And that is with severe reductions in the amount of traveling that has been allowed by the state with the

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