

Gavel Bang Marks End Of Era

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— The final banging of the gavel at the 1995 Cambria County Fair 4-H Livestock Auction marked the end of an era in Cambria County.

Chester Davis, 79-year-old veteran auctioneer, received a standing ovation from fair-goers when it was announced that he had called his last 4-H auction.

Davis had been a fixture at the fair for the past 53 years. During this time, he had managed and called the auction, on a volunteer basis, selling thousands of dollars worth of livestock raised by 4-H'ers of the area. Davis, a former 4-H member himself, showed steers at the fair as a youth. In 1932, at the age of 16, he was the top individual livestock judge. That same year Davis, along with two other judges, represented Pennsylvania in national competition in Chicago.

Besides performing the auctioneering duties at the fair, Davis has made a career of his salesmanship ability. He has spent more than 60 years in the auction business. At the beginning of his career he primarily dealt with auto auctions, travelling each week to Buffalo, N.Y. Other places to

which he travelled on a fairly regular basis were Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Lancaster, Maryland, and occasionally to Louisville, Kentucky.

Davis estimates that he travelled as many as 60,000 miles per year. He was a licensed pilot and when the weather permitted, flying was his transportation of choice. Many times he took off and landed in farmers' fields. Other times he would take the train, but if his family went with him, they travelled by motorhome.

Chester was born and raised on a farm between Ebensburg and Colver in Cambria County. Orphaned at age 5, he was raised by an uncle and helped out on the uncle's farm. It was here that Davis practiced his auctioneering "singing" skills. In the early 1930s, Davis learned his trade from John Bloom, area auctioneer, at the horse sales. Davis would then go home and practice his famous "singing" inside of a silo — because of the "echo" effect that it had. He also practiced "yelling" while riding his pony on the farm so that he could tell what his voice sounded like "on the move."

As a young man, Chester performed the auctioneering honors at area grange socials — with customers bidding on cakes, pies, and



Granddaughter Tammy Ebert (left) and her children, Jackle, Jessle (front), and Jeff, or Hawley, (Poconos area) with Minnie and Chester. The family is quite proud of Chester and his accomplishments. Tammy affectionately told her grandfather that she passed an auction last week and she just had to go in to check out the auctioneer. She told Chester that the auctioneer "sang," but added "not as good as you pappy!"

box lunches made by the young women members. It was at the Grange that Chester met his wife Minnie. During 58 years of marriage, Chester and Minnie reared two children: Nancy, of Lancaster, and Benny, of Ebensburg, who is also an auctioneer. They are also blessed with five grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

In 1948, Davis built a small auction barn along Route 22, outside of Ebensburg. Over the years he constructed additions to the original structure as needed, and conducted a thriving business there for approximately 40 years. When asked how he became so well known in this part of the country, Davis explained that because Route 22 is a major artery across the state, thousands of cars passed by his auction barn each day. His sales were frequented by travelers who heard his auctioneering "song" on the highway over the loudspeakers. Travelers would stop at the auction for an hour or two, if for nothing else, a place to stretch their legs and get a quick bite to eat. Minnie operated a concession stand there and would sell quite a bit of food and homemade pastries each week.

The auction barn was primarily a place for merchandise sales. Each sale was well attended — approximately 500 persons came each week. These numbers attested to Davis' notoriety as a premier auctioneer in the state. He sold anything from dressed chickens and crates of local produce, to new furniture direct from a factory in Tennessee, clothing, antiques, and items from estates.

Thanksgiving Day was his "biggest" day of the year because of the upcoming Christmas season. This was the time of year that toys and candy were in great demand. He wistfully remembers that in the beginning and for a number of years afterward, the

items brought to auction were good quality American-made items.

Over the years he has sold tons of candy and feels that translated into dollars it would be close to \$1,000,000 worth. Buyers were individuals as well as those from large and small "mom and pop" grocery stores.

The auction barn also served another purpose. It provided an outlet for people to bring unwanted or unneeded items and make a few dollars. Reflecting on his 60 years in the business, Davis says that prices at auctions today are typically higher than they have been at any time in history.

Immediately after the war, Davis remembers that the grand champion steer at the fair brought a price of \$0.50 per pound. In more recent years he has auctioned grand champions for anywhere from \$3.50 to \$8.00 per pound. This pricing is somewhat dependent on current trends and also the Chicago livestock market.

Reminiscing a bit, Davis mentioned that he handled the estate auction for Grace Kelly's father's house in the Philadelphia area many years ago. This was probably his most "famous" consignor. He and Minnie don't recall too much about that sale except that Minnie remembers that she was impressed because the house itself had white carpeting throughout.

Speaking of local farm and equipment sales, Chester can't recall how many of these he handled but knows that there were quite a few. It is estimated that at one time or another, Davis handled the sales of machinery, livestock, or land at approximately 50 percent of the farms in Cambria County.

At the beginning of the tractor era in farming, he recalls auctioning quite a bit of equipment which

was dependent on horses. Because Cambria County is a potato farming area, Davis has more recently handled a lot of potato equipment.

His advice to farmers who are readying equipment for sale is "don't paint your farm equipment unless it is done professionally." His reasoning for this is that when not done properly, it looks as though the farmer is trying to hide cracks or flaws in the machinery. This may make potential buyers shy away from it and not bring as good a price as the farmer hoped for.

Chester and Minnie are enjoying their time together. Minnie admits that she thoroughly enjoys not having any schedule. They merely do as they wish. This includes taking day trips, doing yard work, spending time with family and their new St. Bernard puppy, "Sam," and helping out with a few farm chores at Benny's farm.

This past week Chester was the honored guest at the local Extension Office Annual Dinner and meeting. He was presented with a plaque in appreciation for his more than 50 years as a "Friend of 4-H." Chester was deeply touched that so many friends and family turned out to honor him, including a granddaughter from Florida and a granddaughter and great-grandchildren from the eastern part of Pennsylvania.

Retirement for Chester Davis is not retirement from everything. He says that he'll still do an occasional sale here and there but the livestock auction at the fair will now be handled by his son Benny and partner Wayne Templeton. With a twinkle in his eye, he adds that he'll probably be there to lend them a hand and he's looking forward to it!



Chester and Minnie with their new St. Bernard puppy, "Sam."



OMESTEAD NOTES

