Kirksville Community Sale Barn

Hey, what'll ya give me?

“Sale Barns Do Million Dollar Business Here,” was the title of an article that appeared in the Kirksville Daily Express May 18, 1952. That article reported that many people don’t consider sale barns a big business even though $3⅔ million would change hands each year.

The Kirksville Community Sale, located at 116 South Wabash, is one of the oldest sale barns in Missouri still operating in the original location. Started by Austin Martin in 1920 in an old livery stable south of the Wabash Station, it has been in operation for 61 years.

Martin ran a cash-only business, which is a mind-boggling fact in a day where checks are so prevalent. After the sale he would ask for an escort to follow him home so no one could rob him on the way.

Fred A. Bailey, the second owner of the barn, recounts what happened after the sales were over. “I used to work for Mr. Austin and when the sale was over he would always send to town and get a gallon or two of coffee and a sandwich, and a piece of pie apiece, but before he sent for it he would tell some of us we could go home if we wanted to — but most of the time we stayed to partake of the pie and coffee and sandwiches. Then if we had an extra penny or two he would say we could have a game of “crackaloo” and we’d get over behind the stove in the wintertime and match pennies.”

The old livery barn was torn down about 1925 or 1926 and replaced with a pole structure. All livestock was sold by the head out of the pens until scales and a ring were put in around 1949 or 1950. Cement floors were added to the sale area and pens in 1954.

At first about all that was sold was horses and mules along with farm machinery, hay and posts. Then about 1928, when farmers could take tractors and farm more in less time, horses started getting scarce so more hogs, cattle and sheep were sold.

In 1952 Bailey bought the barn from Martin for $10,000. In the first years he and his wife, Opal, owned the barn, the average sale was $20,000 to $30,000. Even though they were used to selling 800 to 1,000 head of hogs every week, Bailey recalls a sale in the fall of 1964 that kept them running. Trucks were lined up from the railroad tracks to Franklin Street. Bailey gives no economic reason for this; he attributes it to the time of year.

Bailey has many fond memories of the excitement that seems to linger around the old barn. He brought back to life the good times along with the scary ones in these stories he related.

“One time we had some pigs people didn’t want to buy so I sold the sow by the pound. Then I said the first five kids to

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Working the Ring

Clarence Findling was working the ring in this 1952 photo of a sale in progress. The Kirksville Community Sale Barn is one of the oldest sale barns in Missouri. Frederick Bailey currently owns the barn, which is still in its original location on Wabash Street south of the old Wabash Railroad Station in Kirkville.
get over in the ring and catch a pig could have it. But it kind of surprised me because the first person in the ring was a 50-year-old man."

Almost immediately after finishing this story, Bailey started another on a slightly more serious note.

"We hadn't been there too long and a man backed up to unload five calves and he started to pull away before the boys got the gate shut. One calf got out so we yelled at the man that owned them. He got nervous and excited and backed up too fast and hit the shoot and bounced away and another calf got out. Then he did that until he had three calves out. Two of them are all we got drove back in and the other one went about two miles south of town.

In the process of trying to catch him we got him overheated so we cut his throat and butchered him on the spot and paid the owner by the average weight and price of his other calves."

Then with a small chuckle Bailey added, "A friendly farmer turned us in for rustling cattle."

Bailey also described a kind of "rodeo event" at the sale barn. "A buyer that bought mostly bulls would have us turn his bulls together and let them fight before we loaded them

The Community Sale Barn is still a busy marketplace on Saturdays. Pictured above is Lorne Reese during a sale.

At first only horses and mules were sold at the community sale barn. After more scales and pens were added, however, cattle, sheep and hogs were taken there for sale also. This photo was probably taken in the 1930s.
in the truck so they wouldn't fight and hurt the other cattle after they were loaded. It was always kind of a show for anyone around."

The auction has always been a consignment sale. Livestock was brought in by farmers. It was then numbered, penned and sold. Buyers from John Morrell, Oscar Mayer and other packers along with local farmers and traders lined the wooden benches every Saturday to watch the procession of animals. Usually a sale lasted from three to five hours depending on the weather and the time of year.

As they could 61 years ago, buyers and traders can still come every Saturday to hear the current owner, Frederick Bailey, call for bids in the extraordinary chant of the auctioneer.

Modern technology has provided machines to speed up the sale and make it as efficient as possible, but there is still that country feeling when the auctioneer calls, "Hey, what'll ya give me?"

After 60 years in operation the Kirksville Community Sale Barn is still going strong. Various improvements over the years changed the barn considerably.

Every Christmas pictures were taken of the employees to use as an advertisement in the local paper. Employees in the 1957 Christmas photo are (first row, left to right) Frank Goldsberry, Donnie Riley, Ralph Major, J. W. Harris, Lee McElhinney, Jane Copp, Frederick Bailey, Opal Bailey, Ira Harris, Bob Mabie, Donnie Findling and Fred A. Bailey. In the back row are Clarence Findling, Butch Long, Janet Bailey, Ernie Welch, Bob Conner and Dr. Rodabaugh.