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Farmers walk through the pens to examine the animals that will be auctioned at the Christiansburg Live Stock Market

GENE DALTON/Staff

Bull market

Livestock buyers and sellers carry on the auction tradition in Christiansburg

By KEVIN KITTREDGE

CHISTIANSBURG — It's kind of hard to ignore the smell. It greets you at the Christiansburg Live Stock Market — a rich, humid smell, like a million potted plants.

It's there as you eat the good fried cornbread and beans Dean Caldwell serves in the restaurant.

It's there as you sweat in the wood stove-heated office.

And it's there as you crouch with the



PLEASE SEE **MARKET/2** Market owner Joe Stewart (in coveralls) talks with farmers before the auction starts

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Market

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cattle men on the steep sale-ring bleachers and watch the parade of cows — big, skittish, future prime ribs, veal cutlets and Big Macs — being bought and sold by the pound on the hoof.

What it is, mainly, is the smell of many large mammals living close together, the smell of life at basic levels.

It's the sort of thing you either like or you don't. Or maybe you just get used to it, the way old Byrd Flinchum must have after coming here for more than 50 years.

Flinchum shows up every Thursday, more regularly than most people go to church.

"He's been coming here longer than I have," said 73-year-old Joe Stewart, who is both the owner of the market and its auctioneer.

Stewart, who bought the livestock market in the 1950s, also owns a farm and serves on the Montgomery County Board of Supervisors.

After a half-century, Stewart's livestock market seems a living part of this hillside off Roanoke Road in Christiansburg where an acre or so of cattle cover the slope. The floors of the stalls and sale ring, after 50 years of constant fertilizing, is new topsoil in the making.

On any Thursday there also is the grunting and snorting and mooing of goats and hogs and cattle as the weekly livestock auction gets underway.

Though a recent fire of suspicious origin did some \$40,000 worth of damage to market's wooden stalls, Stewart said he will remain open for business as usual.

Byrd Flinchum used to come here to buy and sell cattle. On a recent Thursday he just warmed his 95-year-old bones by the office stove, wearing blue jean coveralls and a gray Homberg hat, and waited for someone to ask him how he was.

Someone did. "I haven't died yet," said Flinchum, gripping his cane.

Then someone asked Flinchum how many children he had.

"I haven't had none," Flinchum said. "My wife had them all."

You couldn't say this place lacks characters.

Joe Stewart may not have been here quite as long as Byrd Flinchum. But he's been auctioneering long enough to have sold, by his estimate, more cattle than anyone else east of the Mississippi River.

Stewart is a gravelly voiced, grandfatherly guy in pin-striped coveralls. He knows his steady customers well enough to have nicknames for some of them — "Checkbook," "Truck Bed," "Junior." With others, he remembers doing business with their fathers, or their grandfathers.

In the old days Stewart said auctions were much busier. There was more farmland and less development, fewer government regulations and not as many other ways to buy cattle.

"Fifteen years ago," he said after wrapping up the day around supertime, "we'd have been selling here all night."

But people still arrive here every Thursday, just like they have for more than five decades: slow-talking, sharp-eyed New River Valley farmers and professional cattle

PIG		75
HOGS - GRADED		150
BOARS SOWS STAG		200
SRW PIG UNIT		225
SHEEP	GOATS	100
CATTLE	UNDER \$20	100
	20-39	150
	40-49	200
	50-99	250
	OVER	300
MILK COWS		300
BOW BATS		400
BULLS HOGS OVER		400
HANDLING CHARGE	1% OF GROSS	



Byrd Flinchum comes to the auction at the Christiansburg Live Stock Market every Thursday. On cold days he enjoys the warmth from the pot-bellied stove in the market's office. GENE DALTON/Staff

buyers. They are hardworking men who aren't afraid of getting a little cowflop on their work boots, and who know the sound of it just about as well as the smell.

Like a poker table, this is no place for fools.

"It's a real art, buying cattle," said Jess Thomas, a farmer who lives near Blacksburg. "If you don't understand it, you'd better leave it alone."

You should understand this to understand anything: the cattle business comes down to pounds.

A pound of cow brings a chunk of money. Two pounds brings two chunks. If you can grow a pound cheaper than you can buy a pound, then sell the cow, chances are you'll make a profit.

That means a farmer looking to buy a cow here probably wants a

skinny one with a long backbone, which indicates growth potential.

"I look for long cattle without too much flesh. I can put it on a lot cheaper than I can buy it," said Zane Jones, a Craig County farmer.

If the cow puts on lots of weight, and the farmer sells it six months or a year later for more than he paid to buy and feed it, he makes a profit, farmers say.

If he does that enough times, he makes a living.

Jones said a farmer these days also needs high volume because profit margins are smaller. "Used to be you could keep a dozen and get along. Now you've got to have 100, 150."

It's a gamble anytime, farmers say. Cows die. Sometimes cows die

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