

TOBACCO AUCTIONEERING IS OLD CUSTOM THAT DEFIES HISTORIANS

(By Gerald Tetley)

Although the tobacco auctioneer of the Old South has become a national curiosity, through his alliterative "cry," the history of this ancient profession is so nebulous as to defy more than a circumstantial web of background material.

If tobacco today is one of this country's worst economic headaches and as such commands much national attention, there is a question mark also about the origin of the auction system.

Since the tobacco cry assumed part and parcel of audible advertising, there has been a steady rise in the number of total strangers breaking motor trips to attend a tobacco sale. Most of them stand in awed silence and many wonder how it all started.

They want to know why the auctioneer sings his tune and where he gets his lingo from.

Gift Not Inherited

Norman Love, one of Danville's best auctioneers, seems to challenge the long handed down story that the capacity to auction tobacco is attributable to an inherited gift. His father never sold tobacco, but for years the son was a ticket marker and was on the buying line right behind the auctioneer. He caught the technique and then, he says, hid him off by himself, hit on the tune and practiced it. Louie Love, his brother, learned in the same way and Norman Love's son is now a ticket marker in the buying line next to his father.

On one point alone does there appear to be unanimous opinion, that the tobacco auction is sung because a man can sing for hours without over-exercising his larynx, when pure speech would soon wear out his vocal cords. That is why the old timers could sell tobacco from 9 to 5 with an hour for dinner and appear in top form afterwards.

Nearly all tobacco auctioneers are musical, which seems to help in the perfection of this odd operatic intermezzo between the piles of golden weed.

Music in the Business

The motive of music also runs strangely through the business of crying tobacco in public sale. As early as 1810 the old chronicles tell how tobacco farmers, when they ar-

rived at Lynchburg, would be met by a man with a trumpet who would thus announce the arrival of tobacco. The "gentlemen speculators" undoubtedly the genesis of the pinhooker—then gathered round, broke open the tobacco on the street and gave their opinion as to the quality and what they would pay. Naturally, all sorts of abuses crept into this system and in 1825 the Virginia legislature ordered an inquiry into the auctioning of tobacco and remedied some of the abuses.

Apparently the old fashioned inspector who appraised tobacco finally became the auctioneer by starting a price in the presence of the planter and the buyers and running up the bid.

The laryngeal factor in tobacco selling finds an interesting counterpart in that the priests of the early Roman church who, having to say mass for the peasants all day long, intoned their services. Musicologists find an intriguing similarity between matches of the auctioneer's tune with a major triad or a diminished fifth and the ecclesiastical incantation of liturgical music.

Few Auctioneers—Big Money

Tobacco auctioneers draw big money as a rule, because their art is limited to few. It is understood that there are "schools" where the art of auctioneering tobacco is taught.

As a matter of precise fact, while the auctioneer of today may be more streamlined and perhaps faster, the men who cried tobacco 30 years ago were local characters and eminent in their own domain.

There was no such thing as a "starter," that is to say a man preceding the auctioneer to tip him off as to what figure he shall start the next pile. The art of instant appraisal of tobacco's worth was one of the prime assets of the old auctioneer.

The memory of many of them persists. There was Capt. A. J. Ellington who sold at Aeree's for many years. He was the perfection of sartorial splendor appearing at the warehouse a few minutes before 9 o'clock each day, with his plug hat, his morning coat and striped trousers and wearing gloves—often spats in bitter weather.

His gray whiskers and his eyeglasses gave him an owlish look and

he could easily be mistaken for a visiting congressman. At 9 he would carefully withdraw his gloves which he used to slap out the winning bid. Then he would start a dignified monotone and Capt. Ellington was still going strong towards falling light.

Controls Interfere

The tuneful lay persists, though the day has passed when there was a distinction between the auctioneer who had a "lively" sale doing a bit of clowning on the side to overcome some of the repetitious monotony. There were men who could twist their tongues around syllables at lightning speed and who never seemed to pause to catch a breath. The others were labeled just "plain" auctioneers and were out for speed and the shortest distance between opening bid and the knockout.

The day of the oldtimer has gone, however, and much of the art has given way to certain controls ordered by boards of trade.

While the auction system has withstood the tests of time and has been alternately applauded and damned with faint praise, it is now going through a new testing period with a strong suspicion that the federal government would like to see it discarded entirely and the sale of leaf restricted to the graded appraisal method.

To do this would be to deal a further blow to the South which has a large investment in the form of warehouse realty and highly trained staffs. Most of the leaf men agree that the auction system is the best yet devised for the sale of leaf.

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