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Roma Saleyards

The hub of the country's cattle industry opens its gates to the visiting public.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY MANDY MCKEESICK

THE ROMA SALEYARDS in south-western Queensland extends you an invitation. On any given Tuesday – as up to 10,000 beasts pass before the auctioneer – you can be part of the action. With news stories reporting record prices during a tenacious drought in this part of the nation, the time is ripe to visit Australia's largest cattle selling centre.

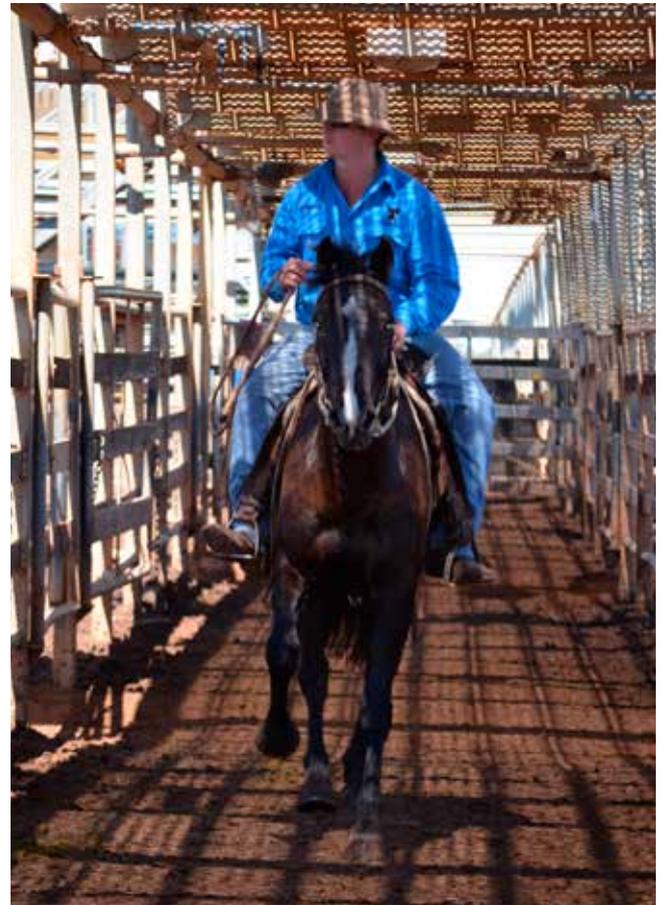
The Maranoa Regional Council owns and runs the saleyards and actively encourages visitors on sale days. "I'm a retired grazier," tour guide James Stinson, 72, tells me, "but I still own property near Roma and have been buying and selling cattle in these yards since the 1960s." Following James onto a raised viewing platform, I quickly see that there's a saleyard uniform of Blundstones, blue jeans, collared shirts and Akubra hats. He then proceeds to introduce me to the cast of characters who make up a day at the sales.

Terry Hyland started his working life as a stock agent, but for the past nine years has channelled this experience and perspective into his role as saleyards manager. "These yards were built back in 1968 and were originally short ironbark posts and sawn timber rails. That was alright for Herefords, but when *Bos taurus indicus* [Zebu] cattle started coming in, they soon found out the rails weren't high enough," Terry says, with a wry grin, before launching into statistics.

"We've been averaging 9200 head on a Tuesday store sale since January, which has been a big turn-off due to the drought and high prices, but 13 May 2014 was our record when we sold 13,615 head in 10 hours. Next year we expect to sell our ten-millionth beast."

As Terry talks I look over the 378 selling pens filled with cattle and wonder just how they got there. From all over outback Queensland, and from as far west as Alice Springs, the cattle have come – Brahman to ▶

Auctioneers (right) and their teams tread the catwalk selling cows and calves. Each beast is stenciled (below) with a pen number allowing traceability within the saleyards.



A team of horsemen move cattle within the saleyards on sale days; here contract stockman Ryan Wirth canters under the auctioneer's catwalk to pick up another pen of steers to move to the scales.

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Harley Smith (below), covered in metallic paint, finishes his morning shift stenciling cattle. Belinda Riehl (below centre) with her B-double truck from Robertson's Transport of Tarooom.



Rod Turner (above), Landmark auctioneer, makes a final inspection of cattle in the morning light. Marking pen numbers on cattle (left) at sunrise on sale day. Brahman-cross cattle (above centre) await their turn to be sold.



BEARINGS: ROMA SALEYARDS

Number of animals sold annually:

300,000–400,000

Record number of animals sold in

one day: 13,615

Number of sales per week: two – a

store sale on Tuesday and a fat sale on Thursday

A fat sale is: cattle sold for slaughter

A store sale is: cattle sold for fattening or breeding

Size of saleyard complex: 49ha

For more information: Contact Roma Visitor Information Centre on 07 4622 2325 or romavic@maranoa.qld.gov.au

Stocky looking Charolais bulls in a water yard prior to sale day. While bulls may be sold at weekly sales, the Roma Saleyards also holds up to 15 dedicated stud sales a year.

Angus and all manner of crossbreds inbetween. In years gone by they were droved to the yards as large mobs, but today they come in stock trucks of all descriptions.

At one end of the scale is Rex Wells from Wallumbilla in his small 7m-tray truck. He reverses up to a ramp and offloads 16 Santa Gertrudis heifers. When his trucking day is over he will join a team of agents working in the yards. “I’m a jack-of-all-trades and master of none,” he says, cheekily.

Around the corner from Rex, blond-haired and smiley Belinda Riehl, who represents the minority in a male-dominated profession, uses side gates to unload 70 Hereford cows from her multi-trailer 25m B-double truck. “My sisters and I drive for our grandparents, Robertson’s Transport of Taroom,” she says. “Now I’m starting to feel like a celebrity. I was even on TV on *Outback Truckers* in July.”

“The trucks must be in by the curfew of 8pm and then the drafting and scanning starts,” Terry tells me. “It can be 2am or later when they finish.” Five drafting yards, under bright spotlights, allow the eight livestock agencies that operate out of Roma to sort and pen animals. Then contractors scan the radio-frequency identification tag each beast is legally required to have in its ear.

Once the night work is complete, the sale is ready for the stars, the auctioneers who tread the catwalks. Brad Neven is the principal of Watkins and Co. “Watkins is the largest privately owned stock agency in Roma, and I’ve been selling here for 25 years, which makes me the longest serving agent,” he says. Brad will sell more than 20 per cent of the animals but it takes a while to understand him with his mile-a-

minute patter. And that’s before he starts with industry jargon and saleyard acronyms.

PTIC stands for pregnancy tested in calf. CFA means cast-for-age (culled from a mob due to age). NSM means not station mated. “It can also mean not sure mate,” a wag calls from the buyer’s alley. Brad is quick, selling pens in seconds. He takes bids on the smallest of indications so it pays to make no sudden movements, lest you find yourself the proud owner of a dozen Brahman cows.

Animals are usually sold on a cents-per-kilogram basis and you can put your own skills to the test by estimating the weight and therefore the final price. Harley Smith works on the scales and can help you here before results are displayed on large overhead screens. I try not to stare at the metallic streak in Harley’s hair – as the sun breached the horizon this morning he was stencilling pen numbers onto cows with silver paint.

There are many other saleyard characters here, including the plainclothes detective I have been unknowingly standing next to for 10 minutes. He’s Scott Jackson from the Queensland Stock and Rural Crime Investigation Squad. Then there’s Jed Taylor, the government stock inspector responsible for bio-security and animal welfare; Ryan Wirth, a contract stockman on his horse, moving cattle between yards; and Ellen Clanchy and Samantha Blanks in the office, who collate buyers’ purchases at the end of the day. They are all part of a workforce of more than 120.

Come here on one of the tours to have a look for yourself. Stay as long as you please, and if the truckie’s big breakfast from the canteen has worn off, there is always, appropriately, a steak sandwich for lunch. The work around you will continue. This well-oiled machine will have all animals cleared by midday on Wednesday in readiness for the next sale on Thursday. The action never stops at the Roma Saleyards.