

History of the Farm Bureau Stockyards
A compiled history by Brad Caudill, TCFB Executive Director 2005-2006
Written during Brad's tenure in 2005-2006

This anecdotal history has been compiled using minutes and research conducted by Mr. Caudill, it has not been verified by all parties involved in the history of the yards.

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For nearly 70 years the Visalia Livestockyards property owned by the Tulare County Farm Bureau has served as a landmark in eastern downtown Visalia. Many local residents who grew up in the area are so used to seeing the sales yard that they hardly notice it anymore. But with the sudden growth of the City of Visalia, many who drive by these days find the location something of a curiosity. Once there were a string of Farm Bureau livestock auctions like our own scattered throughout the valley. Today, virtually none remain in existence.

Our 21.5-acre site housing the stockyards and Farm Bureau offices is now looked upon with envy by developers. But back in the late 1930s, the stockyards were looked upon with envy for a completely different reason. Just how and why did the Tulare County Farm Bureau become involved with owning a livestock auction situated on 20 acres in downtown Visalia?

The Tulare County Farm Bureau was established in 1916 as part of the University of California Cooperative Extension Service. The original office was located in an old adobe structure on east Oak Street in Visalia. That same year a farm advisor in Kern County had introduced the experimental concept of marketing hogs at auction a practice he had observed on a trip to Australia.

The first sale of this kind in the south valley took place in February 1917 in Wasco where three cars of fat hogs, one-half car of cattle and various sundries were consigned. Based on this early success, the concept was introduced to both Tulare and Kings County Farm Bureaus who readily agreed to hold auctions of their own. This would eventually prove to be easier said than done.

The California Farm Bureau Marketing Association had its birth October 1, 1918, when the first directors' meeting was held in the Civic Auditorium in Visalia. The organization's first members were the Kern County Farm Bureau, the Tulare County Farm Bureau and the Kings County Farm Bureau. Later, Fresno, Madera, Merced and Stanislaus counties affiliated.

Tulare County's first sale of this type, organized by what was then known as the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association with assistance by the Agricultural Extension Service of the University of California, was held at the Southern Pacific Yards in Visalia on March 2, 1918. Five carloads of hogs were sold at about one cent above local prevailing prices, thus proving the new auction concept a success. During that first year of auctions in Visalia and Porterville, 8,648 hogs were sold.

In 1928, swine marketing at auction was expanded to include the sale of cattle. Prior to this time, cattle had been sold in what basically was a buyer's market. Periodically a train would depart from San Francisco with cattle buyers on board. As the train stopped at various rail locations where producers had brought their stock to present them for sale, the buyers would survey the pens of cattle and offer a price. If the seller did not take the buyer's offer, then they had very few if any selling options remaining. Thus, competitive bidding at auction seemed like a valid concept to many producers. The mechanics of the auction

process, including the grading of livestock prior to auction, was open to endless debate however.

Just as the new sales concept was being introduced, the depression set in. With its onset, the movement of cattle under this method was greatly reduced. For a number of years sales of cattle at a central auction languished causing what was known as the cooperative shipping association to disband due to lack of interest from cattlemen. Then, in 1935 another group became interested in a marketing program. Thirty one cattlemen formed the Tulare-Kings County Cattlemen's Association at Porterville. Farm Bureau proposed that this new group team up with the Pacific States Livestock Marketing Association and again try holding regular auctions as had been done with hogs. The group remained split on the Farm Bureau proposal as livestock producers often are and the proposal failed to gain momentum.

In the spring of 1936, a group of cattlemen who had supported the auction plan formed the Tulare County Livestock Exchange and sought the assistance of the Tulare County Farm Bureau, the Pacific States Livestock Marketing Association and the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association. Like something out of an episode of "Survivor", various alliances formed among these groups, with each alliance proposing a slightly different marketing strategy.

Efforts to reach a consensus eventually failed causing Tulare County Farm Bureau to proceed with an experimental auction on its own which was open to all cattlemen should they decide to participate. Thus, Tulare County Farm Bureau led the county's cattle industry into a modern era of livestock marketing.

The sale was set for April 18, 1936 at the Southern Pacific Yards in Visalia and the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association was asked to coordinate the actual selling. The top animal brought \$7.40 per cwt., thus making the sale a success. Nevertheless, the approach was not without its detractors and skeptics. But despite the early-day problems, the number of cattle sold at each auction slowly continued to grow.

In the fall of 1937 a group was formed to investigate the feasibility of constructing a new sales yard to service the San Joaquin Valley. The minutes of the Tulare County Farm Bureau disclose a site was selected on September 8, 1939 and the Farm Bureau was requested to spend \$16,000 for the purchase of land and to build corrals and purchase equipment. These funds had been obtained by an assignment of consignor's refunds volunteered by a large number of sales patrons, the savings account of the Tulare County Farm Bureau and through a private loan from the Jordan Estate.

Under the umbrella of the Tulare County Farm Bureau, just over 6 acres of land on Ben Maddox in Visalia was purchased for \$1,500. Plans for the 1,300-animal capacity auction yard were designed by the California College of Agriculture and the facilities cost approximately \$10,000 to construct. The site for the auction was in the country at that time outside of the city limits by a safe distance.

It was agreed that Tulare County Farm Bureau would build the facilities (corrals) and lease them to the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association on a per-head basis.

The Visalia Livestock Yards were dedicated on March 9, 1940 and the first regular auction at the new yards was held March 14, 1940. An estimated 2,500 guests were on hand for the dedication of the yards and a barbecue. The new, state-of-the art stockyards served hog and cattle producers from all over the valley and as far away as Santa Maria.

The Farm Bureau Marketing Association charged a 2.5% commission on all stock sold, with one-half of one percent (.005) going for rent to the Tulare County Farm Bureau. Expenses related to marketing were taken out of the remaining 2%, and any balance

remaining was refunded to producers who participated in the auction at the end of the year. It is these producer refunds which were used in part to help construct the facilities.

Soon thereafter, Tulare was followed by Madera, Fresno and Kings Counties in constructing sales yards. The auction concept was taking root throughout the valley, although in Tulare County at least, hog sales were declining as sales of cattle were increasing. In 1943 the Farm Bureau newsletter reported the "pig business was as bad as it's ever been", although cattlemen had for the most part by now embraced the new auction and were finding it profitable.

In 1943, the Tulare County Farm Bureau Livestock Department was instilled with powers of general management over the stockyards. That same year, due to the success of the stockyards and the increasing number of cattle moving through each week, plans were made to build a caretaker's house at the stockyards. Board minutes reveal the motion was made that construction costs were not to exceed \$3,000.

In late 1943 the Tulare County Farm Bureau Board of Directors discussed the purchase of 2.5 acres from the Bliss family property adjacent to the stockyards where the current Farm Bureau offices now stand. The sale was completed in 1944, giving the stockyards frontage on Ben Maddox Way.

The stockyards grew and improved and in 1944 it was announced that the Visalia auction was responsible for setting the price for livestock in the San Joaquin Valley. That year steer prices were topping out at around \$12.70 / cwt., and cattle were being trucked in from Paso Robles, Northern California and even Southern Oregon.

By 1944 more cattle than hogs were being sold through the Visalia auction. It was announced that the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association wanted to move from offices in Hanford to Visalia. In August of that year the Tulare County Farm Bureau decided to construct an office building at the stockyards where cattle sales were running as high as 1,000 head per week in some weeks. Herman Colpein, a long-time Tulare County cattleman, reported to the Farm Bureau board that in 1944 38,000 head of hogs and 41,000 head of cattle had been marketed through the Visalia yards.

In January 1945, a bid to construct the new office building for the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association was accepted and it was agreed that Tulare County Farm Bureau would make a payment on the building at a rate of \$1,000 a year until the debt was paid in full. Construction funds were to come from rental fees that had been set aside by Farm Bureau for future development and expansion. By now, the initial seed money provided by consignors had long since helped pay off the original construction debt. By mid-year, the largest sale of cattle through the Visalia yards to date was reported — 1,508 head sold by 210 consignors. Luckily, due to some recent logistical changes, that week's sale was able to conclude by 8:00 p.m. a record. In July, the new offices for the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association had been completed and the move from Hanford complete. The caretaker's house was being remodeled and would be ready for occupancy in August. Tulare County Farm Bureau remained housed in the old adobe offices located at 112 E. Oak Street in Visalia. Membership dues, by the way, cost \$10 per year in 1945.

Animal agricultural advances during this period of history were breathtaking literally. A new process for fly control that involved a diluted spray with a chemical called DDT directly onto the hides of livestock was proving successful. In fact, many new insecticides containing DDT were introduced for citrus and other crops. Tests for a compound called 2, 4-D used for weed control were also underway. Tulare County was also considering building a new 4-story courthouse at a construction cost of \$670,000 on a new, five-acre

site that cost \$25,000. The total cost of \$810,000 including paving and landscaping was highly contentious and the subject of much debate among Farm Bureau members.

By 1948 the livestock yards had outgrown the site and it was announced that more land and additional corrals would be needed. More space for Farm Bureau offices was also being discussed because by the end of the year, Tulare County Farm Bureau boasted a membership of 3,704. By 1950, Farm Bureau was actively looking for more land to buy adjacent to the stockyards. Farm Bureau as an organization was also changing. Over the years, Farm Bureau had become increasingly political, often urging members to write to their congressmen to oppose such legislative items as price ceilings on meat animals. Soon, California Farm Bureau Marketing Association offices required expansion, and this was completed quickly as all rental fees received from the stockyards had been dedicated for the sole use of the livestock people and future expansion of the yards. Also in 1951, a long-awaited building program looking toward a new sales pavilion, restaurant and other sales-related facilities was announced. Cost of constructing the new concrete-block structure was estimated to be \$80,000, but it would be the most modern of any such facility in the country. Hydraulically-operated gates, cushioned seats and mechanically transported sales ticket rushing through pneumatic tubes were but a few of the innovations. Also in 1951, the California Farm Bureau Marketing Association concluded 33 years of operation as a non profit organization of county Farm Bureaus. A new incorporated farmer's co-op continued under the same name.

The new sales pavilion, restaurant and offices were dedicated in April 1953. These were heady times for the organization and a sense of deep pride in the new facilities grew with every tour be it the local Boys' Club or national livestock groups. About that same time, another new livestock innovation began to take form with the introduction of a voluntary beef promotion program. The newly organized California Beef Industry Council mailed ballots in June of 1954 to 50,000 beef producers in the state asking them to support a beef "check-off" of ten cents per head. Of this dime, eight cents was to stay in California and two cents was to go to the National Livestock Meat Board to promote beef consumption country-wide.

By 1955, sheep sales in Tulare County had been introduced to help make up for lagging hog sales. The stockyards had become so busy that they started having sales on two days each week, not just one.

In August 1955 construction of a new Tulare County Farm Bureau office at the stockyards was authorized at a cost not to exceed \$50,000. The cost of the structure was estimated to be around \$11 per square foot, but the expenditure was deemed necessary because the Farm Bureau had finally outgrown the old adobe structure that had been occupied since the early 1900s.

The new Farm Bureau office, where we are housed today, was designed to contain 4,450 square feet with an assembly hall boasting nearly 1,600 sq. ft. The building was planned to accommodate the Farm Bureau Secretary (County Manager), Cal-Farm Insurance Services, two insurance adjusters and the Federal-State Market News Services. It was designed to connect to the existing marketing association structure that had expanded over the years to keep up with the needs of the stockyards.