

Gate to plate Taking stock of Embrun exchange

By Anne Davelaar

Have you ever wondered how that porterhouse steak you had for dinner last night got from the farm to your plate?

The complicated process takes place almost every Monday morning between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. at the Embrun Livestock Exchange, attracting farmers and dealers from eastern Ontario, western Quebec and even from New York state.

Business is brisk as a crowd of pick-ups, cattle-trucks and cars jockey for space around the sprawling metal exchange, built in 1950. An office-worker states that on an average Monday between \$75,000 and \$100,000 worth of livestock changes hands.

No wonder a staff of over 25 people must be on hand to process the livestock. Besides three office-workers and three auctioneers, at least 19 farm-lads are kept busy. By unloading the animals, herding them through the auction process and loading them up after sale, they can "make from \$50 to \$75 a day", according to their boss, Jean-Paul Menard.

To protect the consumer,

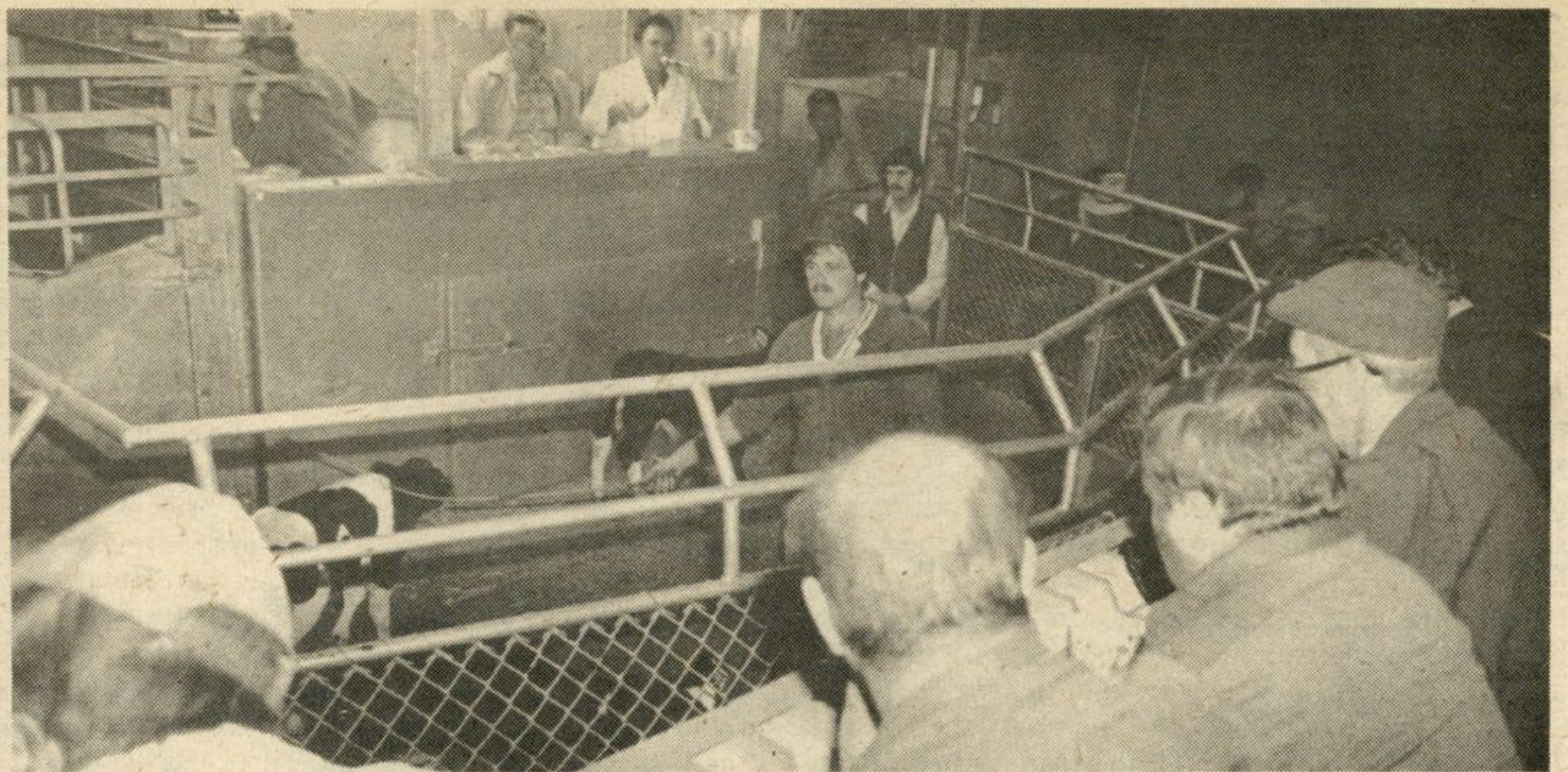
Ministry of Agriculture officials also take part in the processing. Roger Guillemette, antemortem and meat inspector, watches the unloading closely. If he suspects disease in an animal, he immediately places a tag marked 'HELD' on it, separates this animal from the others and calls in the vet, who has the last word in the case.

The alleyways of the exchange are clogged with traffic and signs warn that visitors enter at their own risk. All the while, the voice of the auctioneer on the public-address system rises above the bleating goats, bellowing cattle and squealing pigs, as it informs farmer and dealer whether prices are rising or falling.

Regent Menard, his uncle Leo Menard and Del Spratt are the focal point of the auctioning process, as they take turns at the microphone above the semicircular fenced-in ring. Livestock auctioning is a three-man operation. One punches in the exact weight of each animal on a computerized scale, equipped with a display screen for the customers. The second fills out the bills of sale and the third runs the bidding.

The auctioneer often uses the telephone beside him to keep track of the latest Toronto and Montreal figures, in order to determine the best price for each animal. A fraction of a cent per pound can mean the difference between profit and loss for the farmer.

"We rely a lot on our own judgement," says Regent Menard, who has been an auctioneer for about 20 years. "We also rely on the farmers here for the prices they want."



The action is fast at Embrun Livestock Exchange every Monday with auctioneers Regent and Leo Menard and Del Spratt keeping things hustling. (Mary Rowsell Photo)

The dealers, some of whom are agents for six or seven companies, also use telephones, provided at their front-row seats so they can keep in constant touch with their clients. Farmers and their families fill the rest of the stands.

Once he has announced the weight and the best price for the animal, the auctioneer starts the bidding at a lower figure. Sometimes the pace is furious as people raise their hands to outbid each other. At other times the auctioneer needs all his wit and charm to make the best sale possible. He uses his gavel freely and switches easily back and forth between English and French.

In the snack-bar farmers congratulate each other on especially good deals as they enjoy coffee and hamburgs, served by two women who find this a pleasant way to get out of the house, and earn some money too.

All seems to be running smoothly at the Embrun Livestock Exchange, but appearances can be deceiving. Having lost thousands of dollars in sales in the past, the three Menard men and their partner, Del Spratt, now work with bonds guaranteed by the bank for large sales. Small sales are risky, "but you've got to take a chance," says Jean-Paul Menard.

"We have to be careful," says Regent Menard when asked about his company's profits. "They charge us a big insurance because everybody smokes in the barn."

As the day wears on, farmers and dealers load up their trucks at the back of the building and gradually disperse. The Embrun Livestock Exchange is only a small link in the chain of events leading from farm to table, but a glimpse of its operation leaves one with lots of food for thought!

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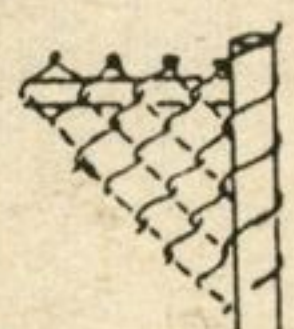
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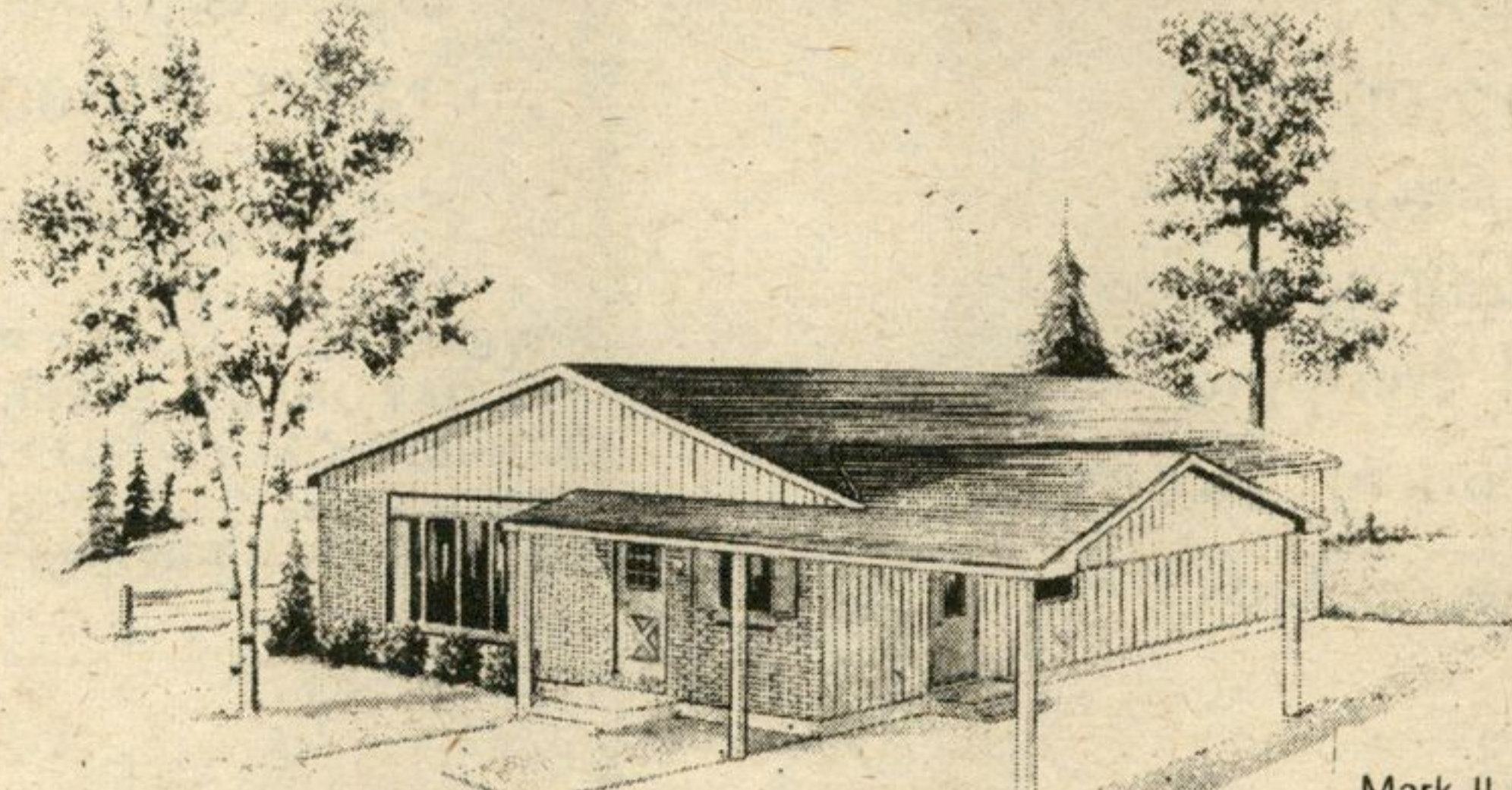
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