



## Move 'em Out

The Livestock Exchange building may be headed for its last roundup.

By Robin Chotzinoff

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Doc's, one of the finest watering holes in Denver, has dried up. Known variously as the Old West Tavern and the Stockyards Inn, and managed by more than one Doc, the bar was located in the old Livestock Exchange building at 47th Avenue and Marion Street until two weeks ago. And that building has stood on its rise overlooking the Stock Show building for close to a century, a genuine stockyard to its north, I-70 whizzing overhead to the south, and a whole lot of not much stretching in the other directions.



Seems like old times: Jim Clevenger in his brokerage office at the Livestock Exchange.

The Livestock Exchange used to be the epicenter for the buying and selling of cattle from all over the country, especially during the National Western Stock Show. But over the past thirty years, as Denver's meatpacking plants closed down and the cattle business began moving toward video and telephone sales, the building has slowly emptied. The closing of the bar could be the nail in this particular coffin.

On its last weekend of life, during the last weekend of the 2003 Stock Show, more than one father-son team with decades of National Western experience between them drank at Doc's, sang along with "Ghost Riders in the Sky," and probably would have cried if they hadn't had to be so damn manly.

"There's so many people mad about that bar closing down," says Jim Clevenger, who owns a ranch and farm brokerage housed down the hall from the bar's back entrance. "There was even a petition going around, for all the good it did."

The way he heard it, the bar's managers were chased out by higher rents, a result of the building now being managed by a court-ordered receiver. "The management's avoided me so far, but I hear they've hit everyone else," Clevenger says, chain-smoking in an office that is wall-to-wall Western memento. "I'm willing to go up 10 percent, but that's it, and they'd have to clean the carpet, give us air conditioning, maybe some security so we don't get robbed every year. That kind of stuff."

That's pretty basic stuff, especially now that so many office buildings are trying to woo tenants with all manner of special deals and services. Still, Clevenger loves his place, old carpets and all. Back in the '20s, perhaps the heyday of the Livestock Exchange, his space was a ladies' lounge. "You know, where the cattlemen's wives hung out, smoked, waited around for their husbands to conduct business," he says. To this day, one corner of his office is taken up by a large, pink-tiled restroom -- complete with two marble-walled stalls! -- where he not only conducts the obvious business, but stores papers and



keeps beverages suitable to various times of day.

"Want any coffee?" he offers. "Any booze? Still have some Jack Daniel's left from the Stock Show. I get a good crowd in here then. Most of this stuff all over my office was given to me by ranchers. They want to see something of themselves when they come by my office, or that's what they say." And that something might be a vintage Budweiser poster showing the Battle of the Little Big Horn, two red-leather Mexican bar stools, an old cross-cut saw painted with a view of the Sierra Nevada, a bronze cowboy statue, a white lace garter or the old Zapata Ranch brand, featuring the sole of a shoe.

In the farm and ranch business, it's important that your office's appearance -- and its location -- have the appropriate Western roots. This building's tenants include the state brand inspector, the Maverick Press and the National Bison Association.

"Rural America identifies with the stockyards," Clevenger says. "I sell ranches all over the country, and when people ask me where my office is, I say down by the stockyards in Denver, and they know right where it is. It gives them a comfort level. Now, I hang out in Cherry Creek, I have cocktails at Mel's, and those people have never heard of this building.

"By the way," he adds, "this building is shot."

Until recently, Clevenger says, tenants acted as their own supers, weighing the annoyance of finding and changing lightbulbs against the cheapness of the rent. But neglect has pummeled the building. Fire safety is shaky, and there are three kinds of air conditioning, including none. Dust drifts down the hallways, and the carpeted floors have a damp smell. Although the grand entry features a phalanx of once-gleaming wooden doors, only one is unlocked.

Just above it are giant brass letters that read: THE DENVER UNION STOCK YARD COMPANY 1916. When you walk through the door, that's the year that hits you in the face. Little has been changed -- let alone restored -- since the place opened. Marble and brass are everywhere, as is the kind of '40s furniture that people pay big bucks for on South Broadway.

It's beautiful.

"I love this place, and I'll be amazed if it's still around a year, a year and a half from now," says Mike Nester, proprietor of Torn Leggin's/Law Dawg custom leather shop, a tenant for fourteen years. Until last fall, when the building went into receivership, he also acted as de facto building manager for its owner, Jim Orr (who did not return calls for this story). Orr, Nester says, used an odd but effective method of determining who paid him what rent.

"A person would say, 'This is what I can afford,' and Jim would accommodate that," he recalls. In return, the tenant got lots of charm and a spotty selection of amenities. "Jim didn't make that much rent -- not enough to keep up the building entirely. And he ended up with some whiny tenants. One wanted a new air conditioner, another wanted carpet. I equate it to marriage: I love you, now change."

In September, the building was nearing foreclosure, and Meridian Commercial Real Estate took over its management. "They told us they were rewriting leases to reflect current market conditions," Nester remembers. "It's ridiculous. They don't know anything about this building, and since they took over, it's falling apart."

"I think the building is neat," protests Bill Hirschfeld, an employee of Meridian Commercial Real Estate and the building's receiver. "We're not trying to increase rent outrageously," he says. "But some people

were paying nothing, no rent at all. And we have to make this building pay for itself during this period of uncertainty. We have to do some of the maintenance that's never been done."

Meridian has approached only three tenants so far, he says. Two of them left, but one signed a five-year lease.

"Yeah? Well, there's rumblings that this whole building is coming down," counters Gretchen Bunn of the Rocky Mountain Quarter Horse Association, headquartered at the Livestock Exchange since the mid-'60s. "And they can't do that. That slaps us in the face. How can you not remember your livestock past? It ticks me off. I know that I might have to move. That happens. But if they don't preserve part of all this, I will be very, very mad."

Bunn has worked in the building since 1971. "Right now, I guess you could say it's diminishing in excitement, but it used to be full of people," she says. "The USDA, the breed associations, the livestock newspapers. And the bar was always a meeting spot. Of course, times have changed. The party atmosphere of the '70s is no longer politically correct. Cattlemen have moved out. It got classy to move to the Tech Center when the limo went there, I guess."

Her organization, however, has no limo and no such plans. It plans to hang on until told otherwise. "First of all, you don't find rent this cheap," she explains. "Second of all, we have lots of horse shows nearby. And during Stock Show, this is still a hub, and we like that."

"I can't say I'd miss the people, since there aren't that many anymore," Bunn adds. "But I'd miss the marble and the old style."