THE CHARACTERISTICS OF STOCKERS AND FEEDERS.

It is not our intention at this time to discuss the question as to whether it pays best to buy and finish good to choice strong weight stockers or light and common to medium grades. This is a question which depends largely upon local and market conditions. In this matter it is safer to depend upon the intelligent judgment of the feeder than upon any general principle involved.

It is necessary, however, to establish a standard grade of stockers and feeders, which we shall attempt to describe; otherwise we should confuse rather than define. If there is one grade of stockers and feeders that is more uniform than another it is the good to choice grade that will under proper management develop into prime steers. It would seem wise therefore, to consider the desirable characteristics of stockers and feeders which are to be converted into prime bullocks.

It is a comparatively easy task to name the characteristics of the prime steer, or at least to describe one which will meet the present requirements of the market; not so the stocker or feeder. In the former case, we have a finished product. In the latter, we are obliged not only to determine whether the steer in finishing will take on that smoothness of outline, that condition and that quality demanded by the market, but also that the same steer when placed in the feed lot will meet the requirements of the farmer. The farmer carries the steer through the fattening process that he may.
realize a profit by the enterprise. As a rule he is not particular whether he secures his profit by the increased value of each pound of beef by converting the relatively cheap, raw material in the form of stockers and feeders into high priced prime steers, or whether he has realized that profit by being able to produce gains in live weight without a gain in value per pound. Manifestly it is to the former source of profit that he must look with greatest confidence. It is clear, however, that by overlooking the factor of selecting steers which have the ability to economically convert grain and forage into beef we disregard a possible source of profit and run great risk of sustaining loss in our feeding operations where with proper regard to this factor a substantial profit is possible. To put it in another way, we may say that when put into the feed lot the stocker is expected to gain in live weight; such gain may be made at a great loss, or under favorable conditions at a profit. The ability to make economical gains in flesh and fat is thus shown to be of vital importance.

We may say then that we demand in the good to choice stockers and feeders, first, the ability to finish as prime steers, and second, the ability to make economical gains in flesh and fat. As far as our present knowledge of the matter goes, we look for indications of these tendencies in the form, quality and constitution of stockers and feeders.

1. Form.—The general form should be low-set, deep, broad and compact rather than high up, gaunt, narrow and loosely made. Stockers and feeders should be low-set or on short legs because animals of this conformation are almost invariably good feeders and capable of early maturity. They should be deep, broad and compact because this conformation indicates good constitution, capacity for growth and of ultimately producing a relatively high percentage of the most valuable cuts. They should possess straight top and underlines which should be nearly parallel, should be low at the flanks thus forming what we have spoken of above as good depth, for the barrel of stockers and feeders as well as dairy cows should be roomy. An animal which is too paunchy, however, is objectionable to the butcher. The matter of low flanks should, I believe, be emphasized as it is an almost unfailing sign of good constitution and good feeding quality. It should be borne in mind that in the stocker and feeder, thin in flesh and largely destitute of external or surface fat we are afforded the best opportunity we are ever able to
get of determining the covering of natural flesh characteristic of the animal.

Secure as much smoothness of outline as is consistent with low flesh, being especially careful to avoid too great prominence in hips, tailhead and shoulders. Avoid rough, open shoulders, sway backs and large coarse heads with small eyes set in the side of the head. Short, broad heads and short thick necks indicate strong tendencies toward beef making. A large, prominent and mild eye is to be desired. The mild eye denotes that the animal has a quiet disposition which all feeders know is so desirable in a steer intended for the feed lot. The distance between eye and horn should be short and the horn should be flat and of medium fineness rather than round and coarse. The lower jaw should be heavily coated with muscle; the muzzle, lips and mouth should be large without coarseness. In speaking of a large muzzle, we refer to the nostrils being prominent and the openings large.

2. QUALITY.—We may here well distinguish between what might be called (a) general quality and (b) handling quality. (a) General quality. By general quality is meant general refinement of external conformation as seen in the head, horn, bone, compactness and smoothness of outline. General quality is affected by nothing so much as breeding; in fact the two are very closely associated. We seldom find good quality in a plainly bred steer and we generally find it in the well-bred, high grade animal. The desirability of general quality can not be too strongly emphasized. While it is a characteristic that involves many points and is difficult to describe, its presence or absence is quickly discerned by the trained eye of the intelligent buyer. It is this characteristic in the stockers andfeeders more than any other that we depend upon as indicating that the animal has within it the possibility of making a market topper or at any rate a prime steer.

The ability to select stockers and feeders which have within them the possibility of making prime steers is one of the first and most important lessons for the stockman to learn. Profits in steer feeding come not so much from skill in feeding and management as from intelligent buying and selling. The profit resulting from an increase during the fattening period, of the value per pound of the total weight of the animal is as important as that resulting from the method employed in the feeding and management. It is seldom
possible to produce at a profit gains which do not increase the value per pound of the total weight of the animal. Hence the importance of intelligent buying, or the selection of feeders and stockers of good quality.

(b) Handling quality. Good handling quality indicates that the possessor is a good feeder. It shows that the animal is in good health or thrift and capable of beginning to gain as soon as an abundance of food is supplied. We speak of cattle as possessing good handling quality when the skin is mellow and loose. A thick, mossy coat of hair of medium fineness and a moderately thick skin are also desirable.

3. Constitution.—The points indicative of a good constitution have practically been covered under I. Form. Good constitution is indicated by a wide, deep chest, by fullness in the heart-girth, depth and breadth of body, and good handling quality. While, as we have said above, we want refinement of form and bone, otherwise spoken of as general quality, we do not want that refinement carried to the point of delicacy in the animal. Too much refinement means delicacy or a lack of constitution and no animal lacking in constitution should find its way into the feed lot. The desirable characteristics of beef form, quality and constitution should be found in well-bred high grades of any of the leading beef breeds. In the interest of uniformity in the finished product it ought to be observed that high grade Herefords can usually be put on the market in the fewest number of days and suffer most from carrying beyond the point of ripeness; that Shorthorns and Aberdeen Angus grades while a little slower to mature are in fully as strong demand in the market as are grade Herefords; and that Aberdeen Angus and Galloways may be carried longer on full feed than other breeds of beef cattle, without indications of bunches or rolls of fat which are so strongly discriminated against in our markets.

After all that may be said, however, as to breed, the important consideration is to see that the steer should be a high grade of some one of the beef breeds and that the selection of the individual should receive more attention than the selection of the breed.

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