The Stockyard

John Graves*

*Iowa State University

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A TRUCK filled with squealing hogs enters the stockyard district of a small Iowa city. The big tires hum as they roll over the brick pavement, past a dirty-windowed grocery store on a bare grassless corner, the dingy unpainted shacks, a junk yard, and a tall Negro woman standing at the curb waiting for an early-morning bus. The wood in the truck bed creaks, and chains and loose bolts rattle as the truck bumps across the railroad tracks.

The driver slows the truck as workers cross the street to the plant of the Abigail Packing Company. Opposite the packing plant, heavy-jowled men in gray business suits greet each other suavely as they enter the office building. Secretaries and stenographers in tight skirts and high heels click importantly to their desks.

Truckloads of lowing cattle pass on the way to the cattle yards. Men talk and joke as they walk to work, past the serum plant and the stench of the rendering works where greasy-overalled men swing axes and cut up the dead, puffed carcasses. A beer sign swings in the breeze in front of a small, once-yellow-painted restaurant. A waitress in a stained apron serves coffee, beer, and ham-and-eggs to men with manure-stained shoes and boots and broad-brimmed hats.

"Prices are steady to strong with a heavy demand for packing sows," the radio blares.

"Hey Sal! Bring me a couple a’ rolls and a beer."

The loading dock of the hog yards is crowded with big trucks, squealing hogs, and sweating truck drivers. "Soey, ya, ya, soey!" A canvass slapper pops across the back of a
big black sow, and the hogs slowly step onto the dock and walk down the ramp to the alley.

The buyers are busy with their long sorting poles, catching a running hog behind the ear with the tip of the pole and pushing him through the open sorting gate. The man holding the gate slams it shut, and a more suitable animal runs past and onto the scales. The buyers let the heavy hogs of the company order buyers go onto the scales with the light hogs and unmercifully sort the pick-up load of hogs belonging to a small farmer. The order buyers gloat and the farmers are red-faced and frowning. One buyer sorts hogs with a look of contempt on his face, paying no attention to the arguing farmer. Another talks earnestly with a farmer, splits the difference over an argument, and goes inside to the scale beam to weigh the hogs. The head buyer swears when he finds out, and says they aren’t in business for the farmer’s health. The man says nothing. He has a wife and three children at home.

“Ya, ya, ho! Ya, ya, ho!” The boy yells and swings the canvass slapper, and the hogs are driven off the scales and into the waiting pens.

The yard workers yell and curse as they move hogs from one end of a pen to the other. The stream of water from a hose splashes back and forth across the manure-littered cement floor, and the watery mess is pushed into the sewer drain with a long-handled squeegee.

Two men with long poles walk to pen number eighty-four. The gate swings open and hooks into the fence on the opposite side of the alley. One of the men walks into the pen. “Hey, ho, ya, ya, ho!” he yells, and the hogs get up and move toward the open gate. The other man stands and counts, and when 50 hogs have passed, the gate is closed. The men walk down the alley behind the hogs, yelling and beating the poles on the sides of the wooden fence. Another gate is opened, and the hogs start to the killing floor.

“Ya, ya, ya!” The men yell and swear, and the hogs move slowly up the long chute. Suddenly the hogs stop and turn, crowding blindly to the bottom of the chute.
Fifty small army tanks, crushing anything that stands in the way. One man climbs the side of the chute, and the other doesn't make it. The hogs thunder on down to the bottom, and he looks at his crazily bent leg.

There is a partition dividing the chute down the middle. On the other side, a driver walks behind a load of choice steers. "Hey, hey, ho! Hey, ho!" He jabs at the steers with the long shock prod; they jump and forge on ahead, hurrying to the killing floor. A gate slams shut behind them.

Four steers are crowded into the narrow knocking pen. A young Negro in a white tee shirt and tight Levis walks along the cement ledge at the top and side of the pen. He is broad-shouldered and lithe, the muscles scarcely rippling as he swings the light sledge hammer in a wide arc. There is a dull crack as the hammer hits the skull, and the steer crashes to the floor. Four times the hammer swings. The side of the pen lifts, the floor drops down, and the stunned animals roll out. They are quickly shackled, the chains rattle and clank, and the electric motors raise the animals clear of the floor. The throat is cut, and blood pours out onto the floor, splashing onto the gum boots of the workmen. The men work silently and quickly. The head is skinned and removed. The carcass is lowered, and the rest of the skinning begins. The breast bone is split, the carcass is raised to the half-hoist position, and the hide is pulled and pounded from the back. On it goes. It is hoisted clear of the floor, and the hide is completely separated. Quick, deft knives open the belly and the viscera falls to the floor. The government inspector quickly examines the carcass and the pile of intestines, paunch, and lungs. The tail is removed, and the carcass split down the back. Not a motion is wasted. The carcass is enclosed in a white shroud. It moves along the overhead track to the cooling room to await the trucks and refrigerated railroad cars. More cattle are driven up the chute, and the knocking pen is empty for only a few seconds. On the other side of the wall, hogs squeal as they are driven into the shackling pen.
It is noisy, and the never-ending chain clanks and goes around and around, up to the next floor, never stopping. Dust clouds the air, and a huge sweating Negro fastens the shackle just above the hoof of a hog. He drags the hog within reach of the never-ending chain, and drops the shackle into the notch. The hog is pulled from the pen, squealing and kicking as it is lifted to the sticking rail. Again and again he drags the hogs to the moving chain, and there is a continuous line of hogs hanging from the chain, moving up.

A large fat Mexican stands at one side of the sticking rail, a bored look on his face. He gives the knife a quick upward thrust and then dips the point until it strikes the backbone. The hogs move along the rail over the bleeding pit, occasionally emitting a gurgling squeal. Blood splashes on the iron grates, and the carcass is automatically dropped into the scalding vat. The sticking knife misses its mark. The live hog shrieks and kicks as it drops into the vat of hot water. The hogs pass through the vat and on through the dehairing machine.

The men talk, sometimes laughing, sometimes cursing, as they work.

"Say, Man, I saw you with that blonde down at Brownie's last night."

"Hey, pretty good, huh?"

"Too damn many Niggers on this floor. Got 'a watch those black bastards."

The tendons on the hind legs are opened, and the gambrel sticks inserted. The carcass moves on. It is washed, singed, the head is dropped. Again the inspectors work quickly. The saw whines as it cuts through the backbone and splits the carcass. Intestines move slowly along a wide belt. A man strips the pancreas glands from the ruffle of fat between the stomach and small intestine. He drops the insulin-rich glands into a small perforated bucket. There is an ugly scar on his right hand, and two fingers are missing. The carcass goes on to the cooling room.

The ham moves slowly along a belt. A man pulls it to
one side and skillfully trims off the fat. His movement seems unhurried and effortless. In the cutting room, women move the knives quickly through the bacon, removing excess fat. The short and heavy Polish girl with yellow braids across the top of her head works quietly and says nothing. A slender Negro girl rubs her buttocks up against the timekeeper as he walks by. Her eyes roll and the white teeth flash in a grin. “Ha! What’s a’ matter?” she says softly. “Scared?” The shrill laughter from the other girls echoes across the room.

Railroad refrigerator cars are moved close to the side of the plant, and huge semi’s back up to the canvas-fitted openings. The names on the trucks speak of many places: Alabama, Texas, California. Men wearing heavy coats and gloves move the carts back and forth between the waiting cars and trucks, and the huge chilled room filled with meat.

The trucks and railroad cars roll through the night to distant cities. The meat is unloaded at the packing company’s branch house. Buyers arrive, buyers and sellers argue, and then agree on a price. The meat is put into smaller trucks, and carried out over the city. One of the trucks turns into a driveway at the rear of a supermarket. The driver and a man on the loading platform check the orders and then carry the meat into the building.

The meat display case is clean, white, and shining. Smiling attendants in neat white uniforms work behind the display, cutting and sawing. Each package is enclosed in a neat transparent wrapping. A woman in a fur coat and white kid gloves walks slowly by the display, makes a selection, and pushes the wire grocery cart on down the aisle. The music from the tape recording floats soothingly over the shoppers.

John Graves, Ag. Sr.