IT'S A COMMON JOKE across the state that unless you know your way around the cattle auctions you'll buy a milk cow every time you scratch your nose.

It should be worth the gamble to get a closer look at the weekly sales which have become a combination circus, gossip center and business convention for the average farmer.

Every Monday in Franklin, La., at one of the many cattle auction barns throughout the state, some 250 people begin gathering at 8 a.m. and hang around until the last head of cattle passes through the auction ring at 7 or 8 p.m. During that time approximately $40,000 will have been spent and 400 or 500 cattle will have found either a new home or an unceremonious grave.

Franklin's kingpin on Monday is glib-tongued Billy Knight Jr., the stockyard's auctioneer, who like all good men in his trade rattles off the bids so fast that the average person doesn't have the slightest idea what he is saying.

By 1 p.m., when the auction begins, the entire block is jammed with cattle trucks of every size and shape. At the front of the pens (which will house 1500 cattle, 500 hogs and 50 horses and mules) stands the small rawdust arena.

Seats close to the iron bars are reserved for the big buyers. Behind them sit the selling farmers, their families, the farmers who come to keep abreast of prices—and the spectators. Ice cream and peanut vendors blend their voices with those of the bleating cattle and the excited auctioneer.

Down in the ring stands S. A. Knight, manager and part owner of Franklin Stockyards, Inc. He has the toughest job—setting the stockyard's price on the animal as it comes into the ring.

"Sell a good milk cow, Billy," he shouts. After looking in the cow's mouth, he tells the crowd, "She's a young one now!"

Billy Knight (no relation) takes over. He works with both his hands, quickly turns his head from side to side while rattling off figures. In all this confusion he catches the nods or hand movements of his buyers. His face gets redder and redder as he gasps for breath at regular intervals. The bidding finally stops at $250, a good price for a milk cow on that day's market.

These photographs show you what went on during one recent sale day at Franklin. During that day, this is what was traded: 410 cattle, 304 hogs, 35 horses and mules and 25 goats.

Said one spectator: "I keep coming every chance I get, and it still fascinates me!"

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Busy men on sale days is Dr. Leo Pfrimmer, the veterinarian. He tests blood samples of milk cattle before okaying them; rejects sell for meat.

Bull in ring beside Jeff Law and 4-H Clubber Lawson Schilling Jr. (at animal's head) brought youth $295, or 40 cents for each of the 730 pounds.
ABOVE: Auctioneer Billy Knight Jr. is caught in middle of typical spiel of his trade as he holds microphone (hidden in hand) to mouth, while pointing with other hand toward buyer who has just given him a bid for animal. All he sometimes gets from buyer is a nod or hand movement to indicate bidding.

LEFT: Spectators, sellers and prospective buyers all are intent on business as cow and calf are being auctioned during regular Monday sales at Franklinton, La. Pair brought $194. Tag on animal’s ear is wired in; it is key to records of cow for the day: When it arrived, who was owner, who bought it.

While being auctioned off, this pig got curious and played part of the real “ham,” eying spectators through piperellas; buyers stared right back.

Behind the sales arena, tagged cow is moved to scale after being sold. John Vining (back to camera) finds this one weighs 830 pounds.

Manager and part owner of stockyard is S. A. Knight, who checks tabulations in office. Staff of five handles payments to farmers after sales.
Here is the original bison pair that Aubrey J. Marceaux bought from the government more than a decade ago to start his cattle-crossing experiments.

Crossing Cattle and Bison

AUBREY J. MARCEAUX

This Kaplan, La., man bred Brahman and buffalo to get some interesting offspring.

Marceaux has three sons—Duffy, 31; Fred, 26; A. J. Jr., 22—and one son-in-law—Roy Green—in business with him. He has 1000 head including about 300 pure-bred Brahman. He has a love of his kind of life.

"Why did I fool with the buffalo?"
He explains. "I love to breed animals. I wanted to see if buffalo would improve the breed."

In the early 1940s Marceaux bought two bison (American buffalo) from the United States government. "I paid $100 apiece for them," he says. "The freight cost more than the animals."

From this pair he got several offspring. One, a buffalo cow, he bred with a Brahman bull. The half-and-half bull cross still is alive. He's about 9 years old now and sires several calves a year.

Breeding the bison mostly with Brahman, Marceaux got down to a cross that was only one-sixteenth buffalo. "This animal had practically no visible buffalo characteristics," Marceaux says.

From his experiments, he found out:
(1) The crosses usually are hardier and more able to withstand the elements than noncrossed cattle. Purebred buffalo evidently don't survive in Southwest Louisiana; Marceaux says his original pair died shortly after they were brought to Kaplan.

(2) Bison and cattle are difficult to cross breed. "The buffalo and the buffalo crosses stick to their own kind pretty much," Marceaux explains. However he has not found that the crosses were sterile.

(3) Both buffalo and buffalo crosses are hard to handle. "They wander off by themselves, are rough and liable to injure the rest of the herd," Marceaux says. "I've found that the more buffalo they have in them the meaner they are."

(4) Buffalo crosses produce little meat in proportion to the feed they eat. To a cattleman this is a telling point. "It is the reason I decided not to seriously pursue the project any further," he says. "However, there will be crosses in my herd for years to come. In this sense, the experiment goes on."

Marceaux now is concentrating on cross breeding Angus and Brahman.

Was the buffalo experiment a failure? When asked that, Marceaux smiles patiently: "It wasn't a failure. I found out what I wanted to know, and found it out for myself."