

Grass Judging Contests

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SOMETHING new came to livestock shows in Texas this past winter—grass judging contests for 4-H and FFA boys. The first one was held at Fort Worth on January 29th and the second at Houston, February 5th. The Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors originated and fathered the idea. Of course there was nothing very novel about grass identification contests. They have been held for years. The newness was in getting the young folks to really study grasses and to show off their knowledge at state competitions.

Perhaps the real credit for originating these contests should go to the grand champion steer at the 1948 Houston Fat Stock Show. This steer was an Aberdeen Angus. According to newspaper reports he weighed 750 pounds and the boy who fed him paid out \$700 for feed. Headlines screamed, "Champion Steer Brings \$12,500!" Pictures and interviews crowded the papers and magazines.

A few of us sat down for a little high voltage figuring. Now things in the cow business have reached a pretty pass, we reflect, when we reward somebody for putting gains on a steer at a cost three times what the animal would bring in the open market.

Texas is a grass state. Fifteen bushels is a good corn crop in these parts. And here we were digging deep into our pockets, encouraging boys to spend time and money learning the art of cattle feeding. Corn belt folks, with 100-bushel yields, can feed out livestock. In Texas with a few exceptions we graze them or go broke.

For several months we kept thinking of what could at least leaven this lump of

insanity. A Lord High Agricultural Educator told us that the feeding program was what the people wanted; that the boys and girls had to have a program that was both educational and competitive and this was the only one in sight. While driving around the State, always seeing overgrazed pastures, we kept thinking of those words, "educational and competitive." At last the idea of having grass judging contests at livestock shows was born.

The first person consulted about this notion was Bill Allred of the Soil Conservation Service. Bill assured us that such contests were practical and named off a few characteristics of grasses that people should know.

Next we talked the project over at College Station with the A. & M. Extension Service officials. They agreed to go along with us on the contests.

A few weeks later we had a meeting at the Rice Hotel in Houston with representatives of the Soil Conservation Service, Extension Service, Vocational Agriculture teachers, and the Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors. This was a five hour session; no intermission; no holds barred. Out of it came a list of 35 grasses for the Fort Worth show and 33 for Houston. We tried to select the most important ones for each city's trade area, and of course there was much duplication between the two lists. The characteristics decided on for study were native or introduced; cool season or warm season; annual or perennial and whether good, fair or poor grazing. There was plenty of discussion at times over the grazing values. It was

decided that while the grazing values could be open to argument, as far as the contests were concerned, what we determined would go.

Except for differences in the lists of grasses, contest rules for both shows were the same. There were no entry fees. Teams consisted of three boys and two alternates. Only one 4-H Club team from each county and one FFA team from each chapter could compete. The three team members would be named before the judging. Alternates would be eligible to compete for individual prizes.

At Fort Worth, the Southwestern Livestock Exhibition put up the prizes. At Houston, the Association of Soil Conservation District Supervisors footed the bill. The three members of each of the five top teams were given bronze medals and each team awarded appropriate ribbons or banners. The individual high scoring boy won a gold medal, second through fifth places—silver medals, and sixth through tenth place boys—bronze medals.

The November 1948 issue of the bulletin printed by the Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors, TEXAS TOPSOIL, carried both grass lists and their characteristics. Going to all District Supervisors, County Agents and Vocational Agriculture teachers, it stirred up lots of interest. All told about 4,500 boys studied grass as never before. Fourteen hundred of them took part in Soil Conservation District contests.

In the local contests there were quite a number of ties for first place with 100 per cent grades. Mostly these ties occurred where specimens in full seed were judged. So we went to work and grazed on the samples for Fort Worth and Houston. They were plenty tough. Another thing that kept down perfect scores was that of the 40 samples at Fort Worth and 33 at Houston we threw in some duplicates.

For instance, one card had just the seed head. Farther down the line there was the same grass, but with leaves and roots and no seeds.

Scoring was on the basis of one point for each sample correctly identified and one point for the right answer to each of the four characteristics. If a boy flunked on the identification, of course the answers for the characteristics were automatically wrong.

At both shows we used three sets of cards that were on long tables. One boy to each card first lined up ten feet behind the tables. A bell rang and they started judging. At one minute intervals the bell rang again as a signal to move to the next card. It turned out that a minute was too long. Forty-five seconds would have been ample, half a minute even better, especially when the samples were easy.

Forty-seven teams participated at Fort Worth and there were twenty-nine at Houston. The Fredericksburg, Texas, FFA team, coached by Joe Tatum, won both championships. Their Fort Worth score was 514 of a possible 600 and at Houston they scored 393 out of 495. For several years Tatum had been emphasizing grass, and his boys demonstrated his fine training.

Grading the cards of course, took longer than the judging itself. But men of all three agencies helping the State Association pitched in.

Grass judging contests will now be permanent features at the Houston and Fort Worth shows. In addition to them the State Fair of Texas at Dallas will have its first this fall. The Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors will sponsor the contests at these three major shows. Locally the Soil Conservation District Supervisors will sponsor them.

As their popularity spreads these contests will go a long way toward making Texans really know about grass. Right

now, most livestock men think anything green is grass. Mighty few of them understand that the leaves of a grass plant are just as vital to its health and vitality as the roots. Entirely too few of them can recognize the plants on their pastures and ranges.

Another important feature of these contests is that they are giving the public a

chance to know Soil Conservation Districts and their Supervisors. The Supervisors can't bring a farm to a stock show, but they can sponsor a grass contest. And it's a grand sight watching a hundred or more boys at one time working like beavers over the most important and most neglected and abused crop in the world—grass.