

TALES OF HOW OPERATION T-BONE GOT STARTED

BY JOHN C. PARROTT, JR.

Al Kruse has often been called the “Father of Operation T-Bone” and justly so. It was his idea in the first place that got the thing off the ground. He and the First State Bank rode herd on the whole affair for many years.

In the early days the local cattle shippers were feeding a lot of cattle to the prime grade and the best market for them was in Chicago. Every week during the late fall and early winter they made shipments over the Northwestern Railroad to Chicago. The local shippers used to invite Al to ride with them but he declined the invitations after hearing Raymond Merk describe how drafty, cold and uncomfortable the caboose could be. Al replied after getting an invite, that if and when they had a Pullman car available on the cattle train he would be happy to go with them and their cattle to the Chicago market.

One day a representative of the Northwestern Railroad came into the bank to visit Kruse about the cattle business. At that time Al approached him about hitching a Pullman car to the train. The railroad man said it would be impossible since they could not get heat and light through all the cattle cars back to the Pullman car. At a later date it dawned upon Al that perhaps they could put the Pullman first and the cattle cars on behind. The railroad men were a little embarrassed that they had not thought of the idea. The railroad then agreed to furnish the Pullman for the shippers and others if they could charge a little extra and fill the car.

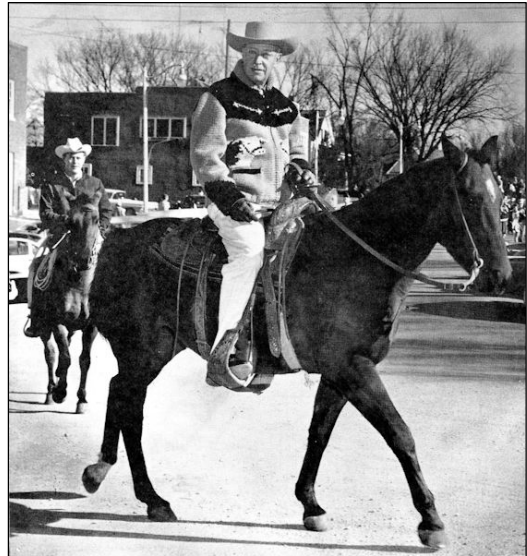


Figure 1 - Al Kruse, "Mr. T-Bone", on the lead horse followed by Jim Boyd in the 1970 parade.



Figure 2 – The first Operation T-Bone trip, arriving in Chicago on Sunday morning, December 9, 1951.

A short time later Al mentioned the subject to a group out at Elmer Carlson’s cabin one night. Everyone was so enthusiastic that the idea was unstoppable. Thus, Operation T-bone was born.

A trainload of cattle and a Pullman car full of shippers and businessmen were soon signed up to make the trip to Chicago. The railroad was delighted and gave full cooperation. Al went into Chicago a few days before the big shipment to make arrangements on that end.

The naming of the affair came about from a discussion between Al Kruse and Joe Sklenar who was then editing a paper owned by Elmer Carlson. Elmer assigned him to be publicity manager for the project and he really did a bang-up job. One night, at a meeting between Al and Joe, they began discussing names for the event. Joe suggested "Operation Sirloin". That sounded pretty good to Al, but he preferred "Operation T-bone". It was okay with Joe and it has been called that ever since.

The Northwestern Railroad pulled out after the first year, so the Rock Island was contacted. The top officials were so impressed with the operation they joined in immediately. It really became a happy marriage that lasted for many years. Each year a group of Rock Island Railroad officials would come out a day in advance of the shipment. Their purpose was to make friends and to have a good time. Some of these men held high positions in the Rock Island Line such as: Ben Wells – General Manager, Bernie Schwartz – General Freight Agent, Orville Morgan – Superintendent of Lines, Carl Weston – Livestock Agent, John Steward - Freight Agent and M.F. Parks – Passenger Agent. They observed what was needed and desired and did their best to provide it. It was a big task for them to get the cattle cars assembled here and to make ready the Pullman cars after they had found them.



Figure 3 – The first T-Bone Banquet enjoyed at the LaSalle Hotel in Chicago and hosted by the First State Bank of Audubon.

In the meantime, it was a job for Kruse and the personnel at the First State Bank, to get things co-ordinated on this end. The Railroad wanted to know in advance how many cattle cars and Pullmans to get ready. Hotel LaSalle in Chicago wanted to know how many rooms to reserve how many would be to the breakfast and how many would attend the dinner sponsored by the First State Bank. The bus company wanted to know how many passengers there would be to transport from the Union Stock Yards to the LaSalle Hotel.

The thing that created these problems was the shippers and business people who waited until the last minute to make reservations for the trip. However, the Railroad officials cooperated the best they could. Kruse made friends with the head caterer named Otto from the LaSalle Hotel who helped a lot in making the affairs at the hotel run smoothly.

Operation T-Bone caused more of a stir than was ever thought possible. The Railroad and Union Stock Yards both had their public relations men get into the act from the very start. The Chicago Tribune Newspaper also got into the act and had a large spread about the event on their front page, along with a full page of pictures. Of course, the wire services covered the action and spread it to most papers in the nation as well as the London Times. Feature writers from numerous magazines also did their share to spread the work about Operation T-Bone. One writer called Al from New York, wanted to know all of the details. He stated that he didn't need any pictures as he had some of our cows and bulls. Kruse asked

him how he knew the cattle were cows and bulls and he replied that the ones with the white faces were bulls and the black ones were cows. At that point Kruse suggested that he better get some help to write his article.

In the early days, several people had a hand in starting and putting on Operation T-Bone, including Ed Howe of the First State Bank and Earl Foster of Carlson's Hybrids. In later years there were others who contributed a great deal to the success and progress of Operation T-Bone. But Kruse often remarked "It is the cattle shippers that are the back bone of Operation T-bone". When it was all said and done it was Al Kruse, with the backing of the First State Bank that really provided the leadership and backing that got the thing off the ground and kept it going for so many years. It is no wonder that Al Kruse has often been called "Mr. T-Bone".

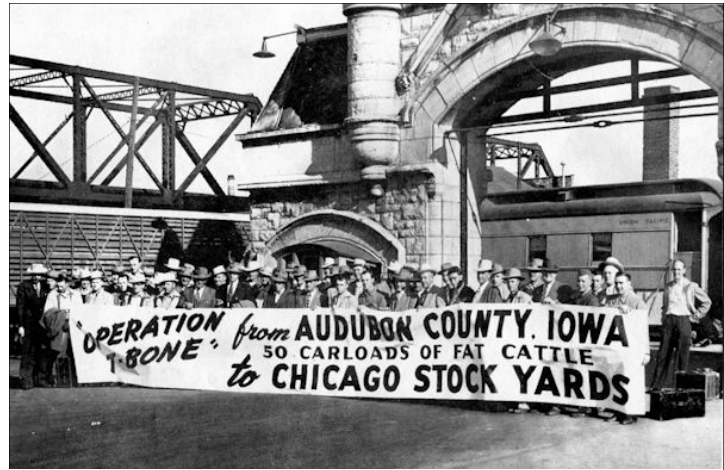


Figure 4 - First Operation T-Bone Shippers just disembarked from the Chicago and Northern Railroad train which brought their cars of cattle to the Chicago market.