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# How Much Wood Would a Woodchuck Chuck...

By Unknown

How did you learn to speak so fast?

"I used to go to a lot of auctions with my dad.

In our area, there was this brilliant auctioneer.

I was fascinated by his ability to hold the attention of 400 or 500 people.

I wanted to do that someday too.

So I would listen to him.

I began by practicing with numbers."

"Then you move on to tongue twisters, for example,

**in German:**

A big black bug bit a big brown bear."

**"Or:**

would a woodchuck chuck.

Then you start with numbers.

You start building up speed and establishing a rhythm."

"It takes a lot of practice and you really have to love to talk."

Have you got another example?

Can you try saying it in slow motion?

OBSERVATIONS ON A NEW LANGUAGE

A FILM BY WERNER HERZOG

**WORLD LIVESTOCK:**

AUCTIONEERS CHAMPIONSHIP

Can you decode

what you just said for us?

"Well, I'm selling.

In slow motion, I'm saying,

'I bid \$30.

Would you give me \$30.50?

Would you give me \$30.75?'

And so on."

"More so than that,

it's the personal feeling I get."

"I've managed to reach a goal

I've had since I was six years old.

That one day I'd become

World Champion Livestock Auctioneer."

"I can hardly believe  
that I've done it."

"Well, I started practicing  
when I was a student  
at the National Auction Institute.

I also took lessons  
with an opera teacher  
to learn breathing techniques.

He taught me to breathe properly,  
to develop my volume and stamina.

I used to drive down the motorway  
and try to sell

to every telegraph pole that went by.  
I'd pretend

they were bidders at an auction."

"Then at every junction  
it would start again."

"This broke the monotony of traveling  
and gave me the chance to practice."

"I have a few friends in this trade.

They are real, true friends.

They tell me when I make mistakes."

How did you turn professional?

"It always takes practice  
to make perfect."

"When I started out

as an auctioneer in 1965,

I was just a kid from the country.

Uncle Sam got me.

After that I started auctioneering."

"And just like Ralph here,

I used to hold auctions with myself."

"You can never get too much practice."

"But where I really started from...

You probably won't believe this.

I was the only one in our family

who would milk the cows."

"I'd sit down on a bucket

and every time I pulled on the udder,

I'd take a bid."

"And then I'd be through milking."

The world championships take place

in the village

of New Holland, Pennsylvania,  
one of the centers  
for cattle farming in the US.  
We thought it important  
to show some of the surrounding area  
because it is home  
to a community of Amish people.  
Here they till the soil  
and raise the cattle the biblical way.  
The Amish are a sect  
who originally come from Switzerland.  
However, they mainly consist  
of a group of German immigrants  
who arrived from the Palatinate  
around 200 years ago.  
These days, they still speak  
an old Palatinate dialect.  
Their most remarkable trait  
is their puritanical attitude  
towards developments in our society.  
The Amish reject the ideas  
of capitalism and competition.  
So they are the very antithesis  
of the world championships  
that are being held  
in their region this year.  
The Amish also reject progress.  
They dress the same  
as they did 200 years ago  
and still follow  
many of the same customs.  
The orthodox Amish  
even reject electricity and cars.  
Today, they still drive  
horse-drawn carriages.  
It may appear strange at first,  
but there's a lot to be said  
for their way of life.  
They have refused  
to participate in war.  
They don't suffer  
from the pollution problems  
that afflict the rest of the US.  
The Amish

don't normally like being filmed.  
They turned away  
as soon as they saw us.  
They viewed the championships  
with an air of mistrust.  
Even so, they still pitched a tent  
outside the auction room  
and handed out  
free snacks from their farms.  
The venue for the championships  
is an arena in this building.  
Inside, we eavesdropped  
on an auctioneer  
while he warmed up.  
"We only have about an hour left now  
until the contest starts  
and there are 53 competitors here  
from all over the US and Canada.  
In fact, we don't have enough cattle  
for all the auctioneers  
and each has just three to six  
minutes to show what they can do.  
That's not enough time.  
Normally, we need  
ten to fifteen minutes  
so that we can really warm up  
and satisfy the buyers  
and the judges."  
And which of you gentlemen  
is going to win?  
"The best. That guy over there."  
How do you find out  
who is going to bid?  
"No idea, you can just tell.  
They wink, signal with a piece of card  
or do this with their fingers."  
How do you pick them out  
from the crowd?  
"I just find them. It's a gift."  
We were curious to see  
if the Amish could understand us  
when we spoke German.  
"I couldn't understand it."  
What kind of work do you do here

during the auction?

"I open the door  
and let the stock off the scales."

What is telling

is that their dialect has no way  
of saying "world championship".

Before the auction, which sold  
cattle worth two million marks,  
you could inspect the produce  
in stalls behind the auction room.

This contest is sponsored  
by the "Livestock Market Digest",  
a trade magazine,  
published in the US each week.

This is the 13th annual World  
Livestock Auctioneering Championship.

I must point out  
one thing about the jury.

Their decisions  
are based on professional criteria.

They are organizers and buyers.

They select the contestant  
they would most like to work for them.

We'll start  
by showing a scene from above  
to make it clear  
how proceedings work.

The stalls are behind the auctioneers,  
who take it in turns to lead.

The cattle enter the arena  
from the right, over the scales  
and leave to the left.

The buyers are dotted about  
in the crowd.

The most interested buyers  
sit in the front row.

The auctioneer is handed a note  
stating the weight.

Buyers bid  
per 100 pounds of live weight  
and for all cattle in the arena  
at that particular point in time.

When a bid is accepted,  
it is written on the note

and then sent via a conveyor belt  
to the main office.  
The competition is underway.  
Needless to say, we were unable  
to film all 53 competitors,  
but we were lucky enough  
to catch the overall winner.  
Look out for slight hand movements.  
This is how you spot buyers.  
They too are competing  
against each other,  
just not as openly as the others.  
This is the first time  
that a woman has ever competed.  
The cattle have ground to a halt  
on the scales.  
The auctioneer says  
that all this waiting  
has made him nervous.  
This is Ralph Wade  
from Miami in Oklahoma.  
He came in second.  
The next auctioneer  
adds a little variety.  
He's been working for 50 years.  
He starts by miscounting  
the number of cattle.  
He announces Canadian Steve Liptay,  
who later goes on  
to win this world championship.  
This type of language  
is somehow frightening,  
but fascinating at the same time.  
What frightens me personally  
is the idea that our system  
has managed to produce a language  
that almost surpasses  
the boundaries of extremity.  
Sometimes I ask myself,  
"Where did church liturgy come from?  
Where did the language of propaganda  
come from?  
And how did our economic system  
spawn this language?"

But at the same time,  
it exerts a deep, musical fascination.  
Sometimes I think  
that this here could be  
the last remaining lyrical form.  
This auctioneer  
was the final contestant  
after only three hours.  
From this we can work out  
that each slot  
lasted no more than three minutes.  
The afternoon ended with buyers  
paying and loading up their cattle  
while bystanders bid for cakes.  
The awards ceremony took place  
in the evening  
in the town of Hershey,  
an hour's drive away.  
Leon Wallace from West Monroe,  
Louisiana, came third.  
Ralph Wade from Miami, Oklahoma,  
came second.  
And here is the new world champion,  
Steve Liptay.  
It took him a long time  
to grasp that he had really done it.  
Steve thanks everyone  
and says  
he knows of no other profession  
where the best come together  
and compete against each other  
for the title of World Champion.  
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