

# ROUTE OF THE CHISHOLM CATTLE TRAIL IN KANSAS

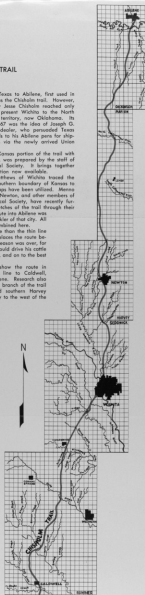
THE CATTLE TRAIL from Texas to Abilene, first used in 1867, has become known as the Chisholm trail. However, the original road used by Jesse Chisholm reached only from his trading post at present Wichita to the North Canadian river in Indian territory, now Oklahoma. Its extension to Abilene in 1867 was the idea of Joseph G. McCoy, an Illinois cattle dealer, who persuaded Texas drovers to bring their herds to his Abilene pens for shipment to Northern markets via the newly arrived Union Pacific, Eastern Division.

This map, showing the Kansas portion of the trail with its continuation to Abilene, was prepared by the staff of the Kansas State Historical Society. It brings together the most accurate information now available.

In 1936 Warren L. Matthews of Wichita traced the route in detail from the southern boundary of Kansas to Wichita. His notes and maps have been utilized. Menna Schmidt and A. J. Frey of Newton, and other members of the Harvey County Historical Society, have recently furnished information and sketches of the trail through their portion of the state. The route into Abilene was mapped by Stewart P. Vancil of that city. All their findings have been combined here.

The trail really was more than the thin line depicted on the map. In places the route became miles wide before a season was over, for each herd boss naturally would drive his cattle to the most abundant grass, and on to the best available water.

This map attempts to show the route in general from the Kansas line to Caldwell, Wichita, Newton, and Abilene. Research also indicates the existence of a branch of the trail in northern Sedgwick and southern Harvey counties, apparently slightly to the west of the road shown here.



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## The Chisholm Trail

### I. INTRODUCTION

THE YEAR 1967 marks the centennial of the opening of the Chisholm trail as a major highway for Texas cattle bound for Kansas railheads and eastern markets.

The driving of cattle overland was not new in 1867. Since their domestication thousands of years ago, cattle have been herded from place to place as pasture conditions and owners' needs required. In the Western United States large numbers of cattle and sheep were driven across what became Kansas, on both the Oregon and Santa Fe trails, to provide stock and meat for settlements as far away as the Pacific coast. In 1852 and 1853, for example, as many as 2,500 head of cattle were sometimes moved in one herd the entire 2,000 miles, and most of these drives were remarkably successful.<sup>1</sup>

During the four years of the Civil War millions of cattle accumulated and ran wild on Texas ranges because it was impossible to get them to market. After the war several drives were started north through southeastern Kansas and Missouri, for animals worth \$3 or \$4 in Texas would bring 10 times that much in Northern cities hungry for beef. These were the Texas Longhorns, lanky, cantankerous critters, tough, hard to manage, but nevertheless much in demand as meat on the hoof. Homesteaders in Kansas came to resent the drives from Texas, and oppose them, because the Longhorns carried fever-bearing ticks which endangered domestic cattle. As early as February 1, 1859, a Kansas quarantine law had been passed to restrict the Texas drives, and succeeding legislatures added new prohibitions.

On February 26, 1867, an act was approved which barred drives from Texas or the Indian territory into Kansas between March 1 and December 1, except for that part of the state south and west of a point approximately 25 miles north of Newton. This restriction

1. Louise Barry, "Kansas Before 1854: A Revised Annals," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. 32 (1966), pp. 430, 431, 445, 449, 450, 461; v. 33 (1967), pp. 32-34.

might have had serious consequences for the embryonic business had it not been for the Union Pacific, Eastern Division (known as the Kansas Pacific from 1869 to 1880), which built west across Kansas, to reach Abilene that summer. True, this town lay inside the prohibited area, but settlement was still so sparse that no one objected when a young cattle dealer from Illinois advertised that he would buy Texas cattle and hold them in pens at Abilene for loading on east-bound Union Pacific trains. This astute young man was Joseph G. McCoy, who saw the profits waiting for the man who could arrange to exchange cheap Texas beef for Northern cash. He persuaded the railroad to build a spur to serve the stockyards he proposed to build by September 1, and the drovers, by means of widespread handbills and circulars, to bring their cattle to Abilene.

McCoy went further. He spread word among the cattlemen that the Chisholm trail was an easy route from their Texas and Oklahoma ranges to Abilene. Originally this was the route traveled by Jesse Chisholm from his trading post at the mouth of the Little Arkansas river in present Wichita to the villages of his Indian customers on the North Canadian river in present Oklahoma. This route, said McCoy, could easily be extended into the Texas range-lands, and almost due north from Wichita to Abilene. It was not long before Texas drovers, already northbound with their herds, started some of them to Abilene, and so it was that the summer of 1867 saw the beginning of a new and colorful era in the history of the American West.

Starting in 1871 other Kansas towns became prominent as other railroads built west. That year Newton became a major market, though for only one season, when the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe intersected the Chisholm trail there. In 1872, when a Santa Fe subsidiary built into Wichita, the northern extension to Abilene ceased to exist as a cattle trail. Wichita boomed for several years, but by 1876 homesteaders' fences contributed to the abandonment of another segment of the trail. The Kansas Pacific, not to be denied its portion of this lucrative business, encouraged a new trail from south of the Kansas border to Ellsworth, where cattle were driven from 1871 to 1875. The Santa Fe, which completed its track to the western Kansas line in 1872, helped make newly established Dodge City the "Queen of the Cowtowns" from 1876 to 1885. However, neither Ellsworth nor Dodge was on the Chisholm trail.

With the arrival of the Santa Fe at Caldwell, on the southern Kansas border in 1880, cattle drives up the Chisholm trail received

new impetus. By the mid-1880's, however, the disappearance of the open range by the fencing of land for farms, and through more restrictive quarantine laws, brought an end to the trail drives.

These colorful drives from Texas ranges to the Kansas railheads, from 1867 to the 1880's, caught the public fancy. Range ditties and cowboy ballads became a part of American folk music; Western good men and bad men added their bit to the history and mythology of the American West.<sup>2</sup> Of all the drives, those over the Chisholm trail have become best known in song and story, and the trail itself, pounded by the feet of millions of Longhorns, became in places miles wide and sometimes as bare as a modern highway.

Through the years the Kansas State Historical Society has published several significant articles dealing with the Chisholm trail and the cowtowns it served.<sup>3</sup> Without attempting to repeat that information, the following brief survey of the opening of major cattle drives to Kansas railroads, featuring contemporary comments, is presented to mark this commemorative year.

## II. CONTEMPORARY NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS RELATING TO CATTLE DRIVES AND THE CHISHOLM TRAIL

Although Kansas newspapers did not use the term Chisholm trail until a later date, they did begin to take note of the new cattle trade in August, 1867. On August 24, the Marysville *Enterprise* commented:

The Topeka Leader is informed that there are several thousand head of Texas cattle at Abilene, Dickinson county, and that there is no sale for them. They will not bear transportation east, and the supply is far ahead of the demand for the army on the plains. These cattle were driven into the State by another route than that laid down by law.

Less than a week later, on August 29, the *Kansas Weekly Tribune*, Lawrence, editorialized more enthusiastically:

We have sometimes attempted to give statistics of cattle sent from Kansas and the Southern country, but they were so far beyond apparently reasonable figures that we have to give up.

A few days ago, we met Mr. McCoy, of the firm of McCoy & Co., who are now establishing cattle yards near Abilene, in this State. The firm are the

2. Nyle H. Miller and Joseph W. Snell, *Why the West Was Wild* (Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, 1963), pp. 99-100, 255-272.

3. See Everett Dick, "The Long Drive," *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 17, pp. 27-97; John Nessel, "The Chisholm Trail," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. 5 (1936), pp. 3-14; and George L. Cushman, "Abilene, First of the Kansas Cow Towns," *ibid.*, v. 9, pp. 240-258. The best book-length study of the subject is Wayne Gard, *The Chisholm Trail* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1954). A more recent booklet, in popular style, is Henry B. Jameson's *Miracle of the Chisholm Trail* (1967).

Joseph C. McCoy told his own story in *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade* (Ramer, Millett, & Hudson, Kansas City, Mo., 1874). Ralph F. Bieber's edition of McCoy's work was published as v. 8 of the *Southeastern Historical Series* (The Arthur H. Clark Company, Glendale, Calif., 1940). Bieber's new material, plus his helpful footnotes, greatly enhanced the original McCoy.

largest cattle dealers in the United States, and after full investigations, they have commenced operations in Kansas. The law against bringing Southern cattle into Kansas, is not applicable to that portion of the State west of the sixth principal meridian, and hence these gentlemen have selected a site in the rich valleys of the Smoky Hill river as their headquarters for collecting, buying and selling beef cattle. Mr. McCoy impressed us as a far-seeing, intelligent gentleman, who understands all about his undertaking. We have heard that within an incredibly small portion of the country, there are now sixty thousand head of surplus cattle seeking a market. Mr. McCoy says that when this new company get their hotel and cattle yards, for the accommodation of "man and beast," built, from twenty thousand to one hundred thousand dollars' worth of cattle can be sold a week. Their purpose is not only to purchase cattle themselves, but to provide for the purchase and sale by stock raisers and cattle dealers, and to open up the way for furnishing a market for the immense herds of the Western plains, which shall give cheap beef to the laborers of the East.

When it becomes necessary for dealers to go so far West as to get beyond the line prescribed by the law to protect farmers against the Spanish fever we have a practical demonstration of the great necessity of a railway directly into the Indian country. Hundreds of thousands of what are called Texas cattle are driven around us beyond the confines of civilization, the profits of the trade in which would greatly benefit our city and the State, if we had railway communication in such a manner as not to endanger the stock of the farmers on the route of transit. These Texas cattle are not diseased themselves, while at the same time they communicate disease to other cattle, and there is no better beef in the world than they afford.

On September 5, 1867, the first rail shipment left Abilene for Chicago and soon the entire country was aware of what was going on in Kansas. A special correspondent of the New York *Daily Tribune* filed a report from Abilene on September 24, entitled "Beef From Texas." That report, published November 6, is probably the best piece of contemporary journalism dealing with the cattle trade of 1867. Because of its comprehensive nature it is reprinted here in full.

The "South-West" has not been much in the mouths of Americans. The words "North-West" have in the halls of Congress, and on the hustings of half the nation, awakened a million echoes that were electric with the imperious power with which they were uttered. And the North-West is great. But the South-West is greater. It is unknown, however. The black pall of Slavery, and the gunpowder smoke of sectional violence, border ruffianism and social lawlessness have obscured it for over a quarter of a century. But this occultation is at an end, and now look at the South-West on a map of the United States. Western Arkansas, Western Louisiana, the Indian Nation Reserve (larger than Pennsylvania), Texas, and New-Mexico, are but a portion of the region. It abounds in the sweetest natural grass and in running water, and has a climate in which the mowing-machine is unnecessary to the stock-breeder, and in which cattle are never sheltered or fed during what New-

Englanders call Winter. This vast section is superior to any and all others in the United States for purposes of stock-raising.

The imperfect census of 1860 conceded to Texas one-eighth of all the cattle in the United States, crediting her with 3,500,000 head, of which 600,000 only were milk stock. The rest were "stock" cattle, what Texan drovers call "beeves." The Indian Nation (as the reserves occupied by the Seminoles, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Osages are geographically styled here) is the paradise of cattle-breeders, who, with rare endowment of natural wealth, have the option any year to become cotton-planters. The blue grass stands back high in black-walnut or oak openings, the soil beneath dark as ink, and the climate so semitropical that barns and sheds are unheard of except as conveniences to keep saddle and carriage horses at hand for immediate use. The war found some of these civilized Indians so rich in herds that they did not know their wealth, and could not use it. One of them was supposed to own 100,000 horned cattle and 20,000 horses and mules—but neither he nor his slaves knew how many he had. Cherokee farmers who owned 10,000 head of stock were numerous. With their climate and their soil there was no limit to the possibility of their wealth. All that they had to do was to sit still and allow multiplications to take place, interfering with nature's stewardship of their estates but once a year, to use the branding-iron. So it was in Western Arkansas and Louisiana, and the large trade of New-Mexico in dry hides suggests the number and size of her herds.

The cattle of the Northern and Middle States were exhausted by the war, even to the killing of the large milch cows that were heavy enough to be accepted as beef. But the war saved the cattle of the South-West. It penned them up for five years and closed all the outlets. They ceased to go to New Orleans after Butler captured it. They ceased to cross the Mississippi at all points after Grant opened it. The Rebels in arms could not get cattle from their Rebel brethren in the South-West, and the brethren would not and could not sell to the Yankees. So the cattle multiplied for about five seasons, and waxed in years and weight. But the war ended. The bars were down, and the cattle started for the best market. About 250,000 head crossed the Red River, destined for Northern and Eastern States. But they were stopped on the lower borders of Kansas and Missouri by armed ruffians organized to blackmail the expected drovers. Passage across the States' lines was denied and forbidden, except on the payment of so much tribute money, toll, or tax per head.

These toll-gatherers, robbers by instinct, and murderers and robbers by education, were by their numbers and their arms persuasive. One Texan Company paid \$42,000 for the privilege of passing their lawless gate. Another paid \$11,000. Texas suckles brave men, and some of the drovers resisted this highway robber, and undertook to drive on. Their cattle were turned back, the herds were fired into with revolvers, and stampeded and widely scattered; many of the animals were killed and wounded, and the drovers were threatened with death. In the instances in which the owners of the herds persevered in escaping this monstrous villainy, their cattle were detained on their way till the frost further North had killed the grass. Of course the animals arrived in market poor. Many of the drovers were wholly broken up, and the luckiest were hit and badly hurt in the market. So that peace did not let down the bars that had so long penned up the cattle of the South-West. They became

so plentiful that they were almost worthless, as well as burdensome. Thousands upon thousands of "beeves" in Texas could not find buyers at from \$8 to \$10 a head in coin. In the mean time the Union Pacific Railway was advancing up the Smoky Hill Valley.

Last June a young cattle-dealer, with Scotch blood in his veins, and the shrewdness, courage, and enterprise of his race in his head, Joseph G. McCoy, the junior partner of the widely known firm of McCoy Brothers, went to Kansas to see if he could not find a path wherein the Texan and Indian cattle could walk in peace to the East. He passed up the line of the railroad, "prospecting," as they say out here. He carried a map of the United States, whereon with his finger nail he had traced air lines from the cattle ranges of the South-West to the track of the Union Pacific. The distances, the grass, the richness of the land, the neighborhood of timber, the peacefulness of the Indian tribes through which the trails would run, indicated Abilene, a water station of the road, as the place where, God willing, he would establish the biggest mart in America for receiving and shipping cattle. The point was well selected. It was 165 miles west of Kansas City, on the Missouri, less than 375 miles from Northern Texas, 75 from the mouth of the Arkansas—set within a rim of stratified limestone in the loveliest and richest of valleys, well wooded and well watered, with which the Connecticut River bottom or the Mohawk flats wouldn't dare invite comparison. The trail to it was straight and level, crossing the Red River at Bolen's, and running past Chism's Ranch, Fort Arbuckle, and the mouth of Little Arkansas, with abundant water all the way, and superabundant blue-stem and bunch grass in the wide valleys, and bunch and buffalo grass on the uplands, and sufficient wood for camping purposes. There were no organized bushwhackers and mustered-out Rebel soldiers on the road to exact toll in coin. The semi-civilized Indian tribes contented themselves each with a lame steer or two for meat for the day, as sufficient pay for traversing their lands.

After driving his stake down at Abilene, McCoy set his house in order at the East, and returned to Kansas and his enterprise in the last week of July. On the 1st day of September he had a stock and shipping yard built that would hold 800 head of cattle and load a train of 40 cars in two hours, had a ten-ton Fairbanks' scale in position that would weigh a carload at a time, and had Texas and all the South-West placarded with hand-bills, in which he invited drovers to come to Abilene, and offered to pay cash for all the cattle they would drive there, and gave them guarantees of innumerable bank and railroad Presidents that he was a responsible and an honest man, and of Governors of States and well known politicians that gentlemen from Texas would not be molested nor made afraid on account of their little participation in the Rebellion, either on their arrival at their destination or on their way there. Then guests were invited from Illinois and Missouri as well as Kansas—beef packers, cattle dealers, railroad officials and their wives and daughters—to see the first shipment of beeves over the Union Pacific Railway. They came at the appointed day and saw a train-full weighed, loaded, and started to the East, and then, in a great tent, they celebrated the important event with a feast.

That was on the 5th of September. To-day is the 24th of September, and the tent is gone, and in its place is a handsome three-story hotel,<sup>4</sup> painted a

4. The famed Drovers Cottage, owned by McCoy.

delicate wood color, with green venetian blinds to the windows, and hard finished plaster on the walls and handsome accommodations for 80 guests at bed and board, and possibility of feeding at well-spread table three times that number. Opposite the hotel is a banking-house (the McCoy's are bankers as well as buyers of cattle on a thousand hills), and behind the hotel is a vast livery-stable for the horses of the drovers, to recruit those kept for the return trip, and to "get up" those sold when the droves are sold. And near the hotel will soon go up a large store, in which everything a Texan man or woman can need, from bacon and flour to revolvers, shawls, and bonnets, will be sold. And here are the drovers, the identical chaps I first saw at Fair Oaks, and last saw at Gettysburg. Every man of them unquestionably was in the Rebel army. Some of them have not yet worn out all of their distinctive gray clothing—keen-looking men, full of reserved force, shaggy with hair, undoubtedly terrible in a fight, yet peaceably great at cattle-driving, and not demonstrative in their style of wearing six-shooters. Some of them are paying "lightning prices" for ready-made clothing to two Jews, who have extemporized a store out of an empty corn-bin, and are selling the goods they receive from Fort Leavenworth, at from 150 to 200 percent profit, almost as fast as they take them from the boxes. These Rebels are getting reconstructed fast.

The cattle they drove here are grazing all over this magnificent valley under the care of herders. The drovers usually herd after arrival from thirty to sixty days to recruit the animals before selling. And such pasturage! The steer that would not fat here visibly would have starved to death in the garden of Eden. But just look at them as they wade in the grass, and see their Fulton-market roundness and glossiness. With difficulty I credit the statement that there are 25,000 head here now waiting shipment. Yet here they are, and 10,000 more are known to be on the way here, and full 50,000 will have arrived at the close of the season. Four times as many would have been driven here as have been, if the stock-men of the South-West had known that there was a safe and sure way out from the lock-up, which the war first and the toll-demanding ruffians afterward had established.

So say the most intelligent of these Texas drovers, and they also say that 200,000 head of beeves will surely be here next year for sale and shipment. Now mark. These animals, "beeves," can be bought by thousands in Texas at from \$8 to \$10 per head in gold, or \$12 to \$14 in currency. They can be driven to Abilene at an additional cost of not over \$2 a head, in from five to eight weeks' time. They can be shipped from here to St. Louis at \$100 a car-load, and to Chicago for \$150 a car. Joseph McCoy tells me that they can be afforded in Chicago at 4 cents gross, with satisfactory margins to drovers, shippers and railroads. Surely the butchers of more than one city and State have got to come down, and surely there was grateful reason in the toast to the Kansas Pacific Railway as the cheapener of beef to the people of the United States.

S. W.

By mid-October items like these began to appear in Kansas newspapers:

The amount of business done on the Union Pacific road at present, both east and west, is unprecedented and constantly on the increase. . . . On Wednesday night forty cars went east, loaded with cattle from Abilene. On



Thursday night the same number. The cattle trade alone forms a very important item of freight, as many thousand head are to be shipped yet. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Eleven hundred head of Texas cattle passed this city [Manhattan] on the U. P. R. R. last Monday night, for the Chicago market. They were from Abilene, and are part of a drove of nine thousand bound for Chicago. We learn that there is about thirty-five thousand head near Abilene awaiting shipment to points east.<sup>6</sup>

Junction City, one of Abilene's first competitors for the cattle trade, maintained an interest in what was going on in Abilene, and the Junction City *Union* provided bits of news like the following, dated November 2, 1867:

We visited the stock yards of McCoy & Brothers, at Abilene, a few days ago, and was gratified to witness the extent of their improvements. Aside from the stock yards they have erected a large three story hotel, neatly and elegantly furnished in all its apartments— They have already built up quite a business point on the road. From various accounts we learned that the amount of cattle in that neighborhood yet to be shipped is from six to ten thousand head. Drovers told us that from here to Texas the whole country was black, having been burned off by Indians and settlers.

A week later, on November 9, the *Union* noted that the trade had already expanded to Abilene's near neighbor, Solomon City, also on the Union Pacific:

Extensive and convenient stock yards for the shipment of Texas cattle, have been erected at Solomon City, and are now in shipping order. We are glad to note this addition to the business facilities of that point. We understand the item of salt to drovers is a large one, which the saline properties of the water in the neighborhood of Solomon amply meets without any expense. This is highly attractive to drovers. For this and other reasons, these yards will command a very large proportion of the cattle trade of the next season.

There were Kansans who did not consider the cattle coming over the Chisholm trail a boon. For example, this editorial appeared in the *Kansas Radical*, Manhattan, September 28, 1867:

#### AN EVIL TO BE REMEDIED

Kansas . . . is suffering to-day from the law passed last winter designing and arranging a manner in which the cattle of Texas, and the Indian country are brought into direct competition with our Kansas cattle for the markets east. Under that law, the cheaply raised cattle of that lower country are shipped on board the cars at points west of here and sold to butchers and cattle buyers at prices that no Kansas farmer can compete with. Cattle can be purchased down in that lower country for a song, and if they cannot be purchased for a song, they can be stolen for a whistle and their price at the shipping stations west is little or nothing. For every head of stock that is shipped from these stations one head belonging to some Kansas farmer is

5. *Kansas Weekly Tribune*, Lawrence, October 17, 1867.

6. *Kansas Radical*, Manhattan, October 19, 1867.

crowded out of the market. Every man must see how this matter will work. The stock business must be abandoned in Kansas or a remedy applied. Now is the time for the people to wake up to this matter and instruct their representatives who are to be elected this fall, to adopt some legislation that shall secure the relief needed. To be sure there are a few beef eaters in our towns who are glad to see beef crowded down to a price to which it is destined to come to, and for which farmers cannot raise it; but as a State and as a community Kansas or Kansans are not beef eaters, but beef raisers. This matter is going to be one of importance before long.

In spite of some of these early adverse comments, the Chisholm trail and the herds which traveled it contributed mightily to the cattle industry of the entire Great Plains. Settlement, the range cattle industry, and the packing houses all eventually profited because of the "long drives" from Texas.