Long Days, Low Pay, and Hard Work

The Cattle Drive Cowboy

By Mary W. Madden

The era of the long cattle drives from Texas to the Kansas railheads was a colorful period in our state’s history. A railhead is a shipping point on the railroad. The main characters were the cowboys, primarily young men described by one observer as “anyone with guts and a horse.”

The year was 1867. The Civil War had ended and there was a shortage of beef for people in the East to eat. Because Texas did not experience Civil War battles like the eastern states, the cattle herds had been undisturbed and were able to grow. Five million longhorn steers were now grazing on Texas ranges.

Joseph G. McCoy was among the earliest businessmen to recognize the enormous profits to be made if he could get cattle to eastern markets. A quarantine line was drawn in Kansas dividing the areas where Texas cattle could and could not be driven. The new town of Abilene was east of the quarantine line. It was so sparsely populated, however, that no one objected to McCoy’s plans to drive cattle to the Abilene railhead. Thus, in 1867 the first longhorns were driven up the Chisholm Trail from Texas to meet the newly arrived Kansas Pacific Railway. This marked the beginning of the Kansas cattle town era.

As Kansas became more settled, the railroads and the quarantine line gradually moved farther west and south. As a result, Abilene relinquished its cattle trade to Ellsworth and later to Wichita, Caldwell, Newton, and finally to Dodge City, the “Queen of the Cattle Towns.” Served by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, Dodge City remained the main terminus of the “long drive” from 1875 to 1885, longer than any other cowtown.

Cattle drives began in the spring with roundup. Cattle were branded with the rancher’s unique brand to identify each owner’s herd. It took about a dozen cowboys to trail two thousand head of cattle, which was an average size herd. On the trail it was the cowboy’s primary job to make sure the cattle had enough water and grass.
The cowboy’s job was often slow and tiring but there were also periods of intense chaos. Lightning on the open prairie was particularly feared. The cowboy riding his horse was often the tallest point on the flat Plains and made a likely target for lightning to hit. Lightning also startled the cattle which could stampede five miles before being brought under control. Rivers swollen by spring floods were another hazard to cowboys and cattle. For his hard work, a cowboy earned one dollar a day plus food.

Cowboys spent about eighteen hours a day in the saddle tending the stock. Special clothing and gear was needed. A broad-brimmed hat kept the sun and rain out of the cowboy’s eyes. A bandanna, or wipe, was used to mask trail dust. Leather chaps protected the cowboys legs from sharp horns and thorny bushes. Cowboy boots had pointy toes to slip easily into stirrups and high heels to keep the boots from sliding out. Next to his saddle, a cowboy’s boots were his most prized possession.

After thirty to forty days on the trail, the cowboy reached his destination, the Kansas cattle town. Paid at the end of the trail, cowboys often went in search of comforts not available to them on the trail. Dance halls, saloons, and gambling establishments all catered to the cowboys. As a result, cowtowns gained the reputation for lawlessness and violence, although it was never as bad as television westerns would have us believe.

Because of the general rowdy behavior of cowboys, however, trainmen learned to turn off train lights before pulling into town. In the 1870s one brakeman recalled arriving in Dodge City at 2:00 A.M. “The streets were lit with coal-oil lamps. At least, that was the intention—most had been shot out. Shooting out a light was the height of cowboy humor. Not even the train lights or our hand lanterns were safe from the cowboys’ casual practice shots.”

In 1885 the Kansas legislature passed a law against bringing cattle from Texas or Indian Territory into Kansas. Diseased cattle brought up the trail had angered Kansas ranchers and farmers. Railroads were also being built directly into the cattle-raising areas of Texas. This removed the need to drive cattle to Kansas.

Today, Kansas ranks third among all states in beef production, and men and women continue to work as “cowboys.” Even though the period of the long cattle drives has passed into history, the image of the cattle drive cowboy is the one that remains a symbol of Kansas and the West.

Additional Reading:


During the 1860s-1880s the Chisholm Trail served as the major route to many Kansas cowtowns. Use this map of the cattle trails and the story on pages 7-8 to help answer these questions.

1. Name the major Kansas cowtowns on the Chisholm Trail.

2. What were two main railroads across Kansas in the 1860s-1880s? (How did they affect the cattle trade from Texas?)

3. What three present-day states did the Chisholm Trail go through?

4. What was Oklahoma called in the 1860s? (Do you know why?)

5. Besides the Chisholm Trail, name two other cattle drive trails.

6. Why did the cattle trade centers move south and west across Kansas?

7. About how many miles were the cattle driven from San Antonio to Abilene?
Cowboy Crossword Puzzle

Read the clue and find the vocabulary word that fits into the puzzle.

ACROSS
3. A shipping point on a railroad
6. A herd of cow ponies
7. Texas cattle
8. Cowboy's transportation
12. Pointed, to go into stirrups easily
14. Joseph ___ made Abilene a cowtown
17. Kept the sun out of a cowboy's eyes
18. Cared for cattle on the train
19. Cowboy term for bandanna
20. Protected cowboys' legs from thorns and horns
23. Holliday's railroad
25. Queen of the cowtowns
28. Supplied locomotive with fuel and water
30. Cattle rode in this
31. How cattle were moved from Texas to Kansas
33. Person in charge of running a locomotive
34. Scientific name is Bison bison
35. Cattle drive restriction

DOWN
1. The main cattle trail from Texas to Kansas
2. How a cowboy controlled his horse
4. A founder of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe
5. A cowboy's sleeping bag
9. Worked at the chuck wagon
10. A group of cattle
11. It pulled the train
13. Worn on boot heels
15. "Anyone with guts and a horse"
16. A series of cars pulled by a locomotive
21. A name for a bar in 1880
22. A cowboy's most important piece of equipment
24. A town where cattle were gathered and shipped from
26. Carried cowboys' food and belongings
27. Grassland
29. He linked cars together
32. A high mountain pass in Colorado

VOCABULARY
Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe
Hat
Bedroll
Herd
Boots
Holliday
Brakeman
Horse
Bridle
Longhorns
Buffalo
McCoy
Cattle Drive
Prairie
Chaps
Quarantine
Chisholm
Railhead
Chuck wagon
Raton
Cook
Remuda
Cow
Saddle
Cowtowns
Saloon
Cowboy
Spurs
Dodge City
Steam Engine
Drover
Stock Car
Engineer
Train
Fireman
Wipe