Movie poster for the classic western, Red River. Courtesy of United Artists.
Two things should be obvious about Chisholm Trail movies. First is that they were not intended to document historical facts but to present entertaining stories. We might expect the filmmakers to be at least superficially familiar with written accounts of the trail, whether memoirs or histories. But we should not expect to see the results of extensive research in the many kinds of sources used by historians. What we should expect are inaccurate dates that fit the imperatives of the tale being told and strange, non-Kansan geography necessitated by the budgetary constraints of California-based movie companies. In addition to whatever “history” is depicted in the film, we are bound to witness romantic, humorous, and even musical scenes, all designed to appeal to the theatergoing audience.1

A second point about such films is that despite all their inadequacies, in the midst of all their distractions there may reside a fiction that seriously attempts to address the Chisholm Trail experience. The screenplays of these Westerns, like the novels and short stories upon which they are often based, may play fast and loose with the facts but still offer us insights into what we recognize as “larger” or “deeper” truths about the people and events of the past. Each of the six summaries below is an effort to cut through the many extraneous elements in the film and focus on its historical theme: the story it tells about the Chisholm Trail.2

1. Rebecca Martin, “Shootouts, Showdowns, & Barroom Brawls,” Kansas Heritage 13 (Winter 2005): 16–23, takes a lighthearted approach to Westerns about Kansas from the 1930s and 1940s. She emphasizes how formulaic they are, adopting typical devices (such as the gunfight) that audiences expected. Also noted are the historical inaccuracies, senseless plots, weak characterization, and heavy use of stereotypes about women, blacks, and American Indians. Martin recognizes, however, that in the end, Westerns were all about entertainment. What she misses, and what this essay intends to focus on, are the serious attempts by several of these films to address the nature of the American experience in the nineteenth century.

2. This discussion is limited to six feature films currently available on DVD. Several B Westerns that used the Chisholm Trail and cattle towns as their subject include The Old Chisholm Trail (1942); South of the Chisholm Trail (1947); Gunmen of Abilene (1950); Abilene Trail (1951); and Badman’s Country (1958).
First, chronologically, is _The Texans_, a 1938 film whose screenplay was based on Emerson Hough’s 1923 novel, _North of 36_. Hough’s biographer, Delbert E. Wylder, suggests that the epic quality of the original cattle drive story was weakened by a confused and complicated script that attempted “to make the love story of some interest.” But director James P. Hogan, whose career had been built entirely on B-movie series such as the Bulldog Drummond and Ellery Queen mysteries, succeeded in crafting an entertaining romantic epic. As we might hope, the film effectively dramatizes the economic motives behind the first drive to Abilene as well as the violence and hardships that had to be endured along the trail. Surprisingly, however, the romance is no mere add-on to widen the audience appeal but is an integral part of the tale. The Chisholm Trail is envisioned by the hero as a means of reuniting the North and South, and his love story symbolizes that reunion. _The Texans_ recalls those sentimental novels of the late nineteenth century in which sectional reconciliation is represented by the rebel woman who sheds her southern loyalties under the sway of the northern man’s romantic attentions.

Reconstruction was “an era of lawlessness—of smoldering hates—of oppression,” we are told before the story begins. “The South was ruled as a conquered enemy. Northern politicians wallowed in an orgy of power—of plunder by organized mobs—of tribute and tyranny and death.” This lurid and melodramatic characterization of political reunion, reminiscent of _The Birth of a Nation_ (1915), is played out in the busy gulf port of Indianola, Texas, in 1865. Confederate veterans, still in their ragged uniforms, are forced to load confiscated furniture aboard a steamboat. Corrupt Union soldiers levy imaginary “taxes” on civilians to line their pockets. A merchant grossly overcharges for a suit of clothes and will gladly take land script if cash is unavailable.

Ivy Preston (Joan Bennett) is a beautiful, fashionably dressed and coiffed southern belle who finds in all this confusion an opportunity to steal a wagonload of rifles. Her goal is to smuggle them to rebel troops hiding outside town under the leadership of her beau, Alan Sanford (Robert Cummings). Sanford is desperately loyal to the losing cause and plans to join General Jo Shelby’s cavalry in Mexico City and serve the Emperor Maximilian.

Kirk Jordan (Randolph Scott) demonstrates his continuing allegiance to the Confederacy by leading his fellow soldiers in a round of “Dixie,” but he is determined to get rid of his ragged uniform and put the war behind him. Four years have been “wasted” for a cause that he now recognizes was not a good one. He rejects the idea that all northerners are as evil as the carpetbaggers and is willing to work with them. “We got a living to fight for now,” he says. Alan is probably close to the truth when he tells Ivy that Kirk is “a Yankee at heart.”

Ivy’s family ranch, located near the Rio Grande, is threatened by the villainous carpetbagger administrator Isaiah Middlebrack. Middlebrack is oddly willing to forgive Ivy for the smuggling of weapons but informs her that the state legislature has given him the authority to tax her ten thousand head of cattle at a dollar per head or to confiscate land of an equivalent value. Ivy schemes with her grandmother to get Middlebrack drunk while she rounds up her ranch hands and stampedes the cattle across the river to Mexico. Ultimately, she wants to drive the cattle down to Mexico City to help feed the troops.

Kirk has cooperated with Ivy up to this point because he is in love with her, but now he proposes an entirely different way of evading the tax. He has heard that the railroad has come to Abilene and buyers will pay $15 to $20 a head for the cattle. Not only will such a sale make them rich, but it will begin the process of pulling the North and South together again. For Kirk, if Texans were to take advantage of this new northern market, it would mean “we’re one country now.” Indicative of her growing affection for Kirk, Ivy agrees to recross the Rio Grande and head north.

Corrupt and drunken state officials in Austin, anxious about the loss of tax revenue if Ivy and Kirk were to blaze a trail to Abilene, order Middlebrack to pursue them with a military escort. At this point in the story, _The Texans_ suggests the possibility of a conflicted relationship between the Union Army and a southern state government. An army general tells the politicians he thinks their tax scheme is “legalized swindling,” signaling his reluctance to accompany Middlebrack. His cavalry proceeds, nevertheless, to capture the fugitives and turn them back toward Texas. Along the way Indians cause confusion by starting a fire and stampeding the cattle, providing cover for Kirk’s old trapping buddy to murder Middlebrack. Soon after, the cavalry’s commander reveals that he never

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3. _The Texans_, directed by James Hogan; screenplay by William Wister Haines, Bertram Millhauser, and Paul Sloane; produced by Lucien Hubbard; 1938; black and white; 92 minutes; distributed by Paramount Pictures.


approved of this mission and will now gladly guide Ivy and Kirk to the Kansas border.

In Abilene, an official of the Kansas Pacific Railroad dashes the hopes of local citizens by announcing that his company will no longer operate west of Topeka because the track to Abilene has proved unprofitable. Kirk shouts out that there are now ten thousand head of cattle to be loaded up, and the crowd bursts into celebration. Despite his success as a drover, Kirk decides to return to his life as a trapper because he believes Ivy is still in love with Alan. Alan limped into camp one night on the trail, humiliated by his failed expedition to Mexico, and Ivy declared to all that the two were engaged to be married. But in Abilene, when Alan tells her he is excited about joining a wonderful new secret organization called the Ku Klux Klan, Ivy says he is just a “boy playing at soldiers” and joins Kirk and his friend as they leave town to do some trapping.

Reviewers of Texas (1941), our second Chisholm Trail–themed film, noted that director George Marshall nearly overwhelmed his tale of the first cattle drive to Abilene with action, humor, and romance. The New York Times, for example, found the movie surprisingly entertaining, even though it was a “carefree piece of hokum” that “obscured” the cattle drive with all sorts of gun battles and pursuits on horseback. Although unlikely to ever approach the classic status of Marshall’s previous Western, Destry Rides Again (1939), Texas does offer the pleasure of observing the buddy chemistry of two young soon-to-be megastars, William Holden (Dan Thomas) and Glenn Ford (Tod Ramsey). More memorable still is the characterization of the evil dentist, Doc Thorpe, by Edgar Buchanan. Buchanan’s mumbling and bumbling manner brilliantly interweaves drama and humor on a nearly line-by-line basis.

Despite the entertaining distractions, viewers can easily follow the story about the Chisholm Trail. Once again, like The Texans, the movie begins with a script that sets up the postwar context: “With the ending of the Civil War, an even greater, more relentless war began . . . the fight for food . . . Famine rode the North and the South . . . and though countless head of cattle roamed the vast ranches of Texas, they perished . . . There was NO TRANSPORTATION, NO RAILROADS. . . . The paths to the market were bloody trails of Indian depredations, outlaws, rustlers . . . It remained for a frontier Adventurer of the period to find the answer.”

Dan and Tod are proud veterans of Jeb Stuart’s cavalry, but they now find themselves standing before an unshaven, disheveled, tobacco-spitting judge in the Dickinson County Courthouse. They came from Texas to Abilene to work on the railroad, but no jobs are to be had. Hungry, like many others, they stole a hog. The judge is willing to punish a Union veteran for some unmentioned crime with less than half a day in jail, but he has no patience with “rebel riffraff” and fines each the exorbitant sum of $50. Windy Miller (George Bancroft), the local tycoon who has brought the railroad to town, pays the boys’ fine because he is himself a “Texican.” He then invites them to a boxing match that night meant to celebrate the opening of the “Largest Cattle Corral in the World.” The overly long fight scene, featuring a bare-chested Holden, might seem to have nothing to do with the trail narrative. Nevertheless, it serves to establish Abilene as a thoroughly masculine and violent environment.

6. Texas, directed by George Marshall; screenplay by Michael Blankfort, Horace McCoy, and Lewis Meltzer; produced by Samuel Bischoff; 1941; black and white; 94 minutes; distributed by Columbia Pictures.

When the young men return to Texas, they once again engage in the postwar “fight for food.” They rope a steer for dinner and are soon pursued by a posse of cattlemen led by the local sheriff. After the partners split up to better avoid capture, Dan barges into a saloon and immediately begins to make a sandwich for himself, even though he has no money. He barely avoids the sheriff’s clutches. Tod, meanwhile, has begun to settle down in a job at a local ranch.

Hunger (if not famine) may have been the motive, according to Texas, for making the first cattle drive to Abilene, but the film is primarily interested in dramatizing the fear of risk among the cattle owners. When the drive is actually shown, it takes less than two minutes of screen time, and there are no storms, no Indians, and no outlaws in sight. The real problem is not on the trail but in town. Criminals seek to exploit the ranchers’ fears for their own profit. Doc Thorpe is the mastermind behind a cattle-rustling operation, in cahoots with Miller and another rancher, Matt Lashan (Addison Richards). The rustlers begin to illegally round up a herd to take to Kansas. However, when the cattlemen begin to organize to “fight fire with fire,” Thorp tries another approach. Miller travels from Abilene and tells the ranchers he will take charge of driving their herds north, but in return for assuming the terrible risk, he offers to pay them only $2 a head. Following some huffing and puffing, the owners agree.

Suddenly, Tod rises up to plead for a far more profitable alternative. He has heard that cattle buyers in Abilene are willing to pay $15 to $18 a head. Isn’t this worth taking a risk, he asks. He will himself drive the seven thousand head from his ranch and show others it can be done. Tod is the “frontier Adventurer” that Texas needed.

Of course, Doc Thorpe and his cabal see this new plan as a direct threat to their scheme. They hire Dan and men from the Lashan ranch to raid the drive before it arrives at Abilene. Not realizing that Windy Miller is one of the conspirators, Dan convinces his crew that they can all get rich by forgetting the raid and instead stealing from Miller. Miller later corners Dan, but the younger man is much faster on the draw. Meanwhile, Tod brings in his cattle without incident.

Once all are back in Texas, more blood flows. Thorpe wants Dan to kill Tod, but Dan refuses. Matt Lashan therefore takes a shot at Tod and wounds him. Dan chases after Lashan and kills him. He then confronts Thorpe in his office, and both are killed. The Chisholm Trail is now presumably safe for more drives to Abilene.

Next is the classic Red River (1948), widely regarded as one of the greatest of all Westerns.” For Howard Hawks, among the most important of Hollywood directors, it proved to be his first and last attempt to free himself from the studio system and make an independent film.” For the star of the film, John Wayne, Red River established the older and darker authority figure that provided the actor with the most memorable role he would play during the remainder of his career.

The rather large critical and historical literature on Red River has focused primarily on the psychology of the key characters and their relationships within a capitalist enterprise. Robert Sklar, in his influential essay “Empire to the West: Red River (1948),” argues that Hawks made a bold film set against the historical drama of westward expansion. In the foreground is a human drama “of tyranny and rebellion and reconciliation.”

Texas cattle rancher Thomas Dunson (John Wayne) is a visionary entrepreneur struggling to find a market in the north. His ruthless attempt to enforce a contractual commitment made with his drovers leads to a mutiny headed by his adopted son, Matthew Garth (Montgomery Clift). While Dunson is a heroic man among men, Garth “serves as a bearer of the feminine principle in a society of men without women,” says Sklar. Garth, whom Dunson sees as too “soft” on the cowboys, responds favorably to their understanding of the drive as a compact among equals. Several of the drovers had themselves been ranchers who lost their land during the Civil War. Late in the story an
assertive woman, Tess Millay (Joanne Dru), is introduced. The mutual attraction between her and Garth assures us of his masculinity, and more importantly, it is her feminine recognition that father and son love each other despite their estrangement that brings reconciliation at the end of the movie.

In an extreme version of Sklar’s position, Randy Roberts and James S. Olson contend in John Wayne: American that the psychological clash between Dunson and Garth is central to Red River and that everything else, including the spectacular scenes of the cattle drive, is “incidental.”13 But recently Geoffrey O’Brien has written that the epic cattle drive is not “the movie’s background but its essence.” The conflict of human passions, he suggests, is actually “subverted by the elemental immediacy of the cattle crossing the Red River.” In stark contrast to the orthodox interpretation of the film, O’Brien believes that “what persists beyond all else is the movement of the herd itself, that slow and weighty progression that threads the film together, those interminable linking shots of cattle herded across plains and down slopes and through dense rain.”14 More than two decades earlier, Jane Tompkins also argued that the epic cattle drive was the most crucial aspect of Red River. The film emphasizes “the historic nature of the enterprise, the danger, the uncertainty, the raw energy of the cowboy recruits, the huge, lumbering mass of animals, the dust, dirt, commotion, sweat, and grueling physical hardship of the journey.”15 Nevertheless, our understanding of western history and of Western films in particular is impaired, she says, by a cultural blindness to the fundamental role of animals. The cattle in Hawks’s tale are everywhere; they are the very reason for the drive, and yet they are ignored. Tompkins explains, “Cattle exist, from a human point of view, in order to die and become meat, and it’s hard for people to look at that fact very closely.”16

It is indeed the case that much more film footage is devoted to the cattle drive itself in Red River than in any of the other movies discussed in this essay. The town of Abilene, however, receives due attention as the terminus of the Chisholm Trail. Once again, the Dunson/Garth drive, like those in The Texans and Texas, is depicted as the first drive, and also, as in the other films, its arrival is dated earlier than what historians tell us. Near the conclusion of Red River a handwritten page from “Early Tales of Texas” says that “excitement and wild hilarity greeted the trail weary men” when they entered town on August 14, 1865.17 The fictional Kirk Jordan and Tod Ramsey also arrived in 1865, but Joseph G. McCoy, the Illinois cattle dealer who established the railhead shipping

16. Ibid., 114.
17. This fictional chronicle of the first drive appears in the form of brief excerpts throughout the prerelease version of the film. That version is available in The Criterion Collection edition.
operation at Abilene, informs us in *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* that a herd from Texas first broke the trail in the summer of 1867.\(^18\) The Civil War ended in the spring of 1865, and it is likely that the filmmakers sought to heighten the drama of the first drive to Kansas by locating it amidst the urgent transition of the immediate postwar months. All three movies place the drive in the context of Texas rather than Kansas history, thus highlighting the initial motivation and the originating circumstances for the enterprise rather than the delivery of the cattle to the railroad and ultimately the northeastern market.

*Red River* shows us that the Chisholm Trail was blazed and Abilene became its terminus because there was a rebellion in the ranks of Dunson’s crew. The tyrannical rancher is determined to take his cattle to Sedalia, Missouri. Rumors that the railroad has reached Abilene fail to sway him from his original plan. Once Garth takes control of the drive, however, he heads for Kansas because, unlike his father, he is concerned about the exhaustion and impatience of his men.\(^19\) In fact, according to historian Don Worcester, there was indeed a conflict of opinion and sudden change of plans in the first cattle drive directly from Texas to Abilene. The herd was owned and managed by a Col. O. W. Wheeler and his two partners. Wheeler wanted to spend the winter of 1867–1868 in Kansas and then continue the drive west to San Francisco. But, as Worcester tells us, “Abilene proved to be the last stop for Wheeler’s herd, for his partners, fearing cholera as well as Indian attack, refused to continue. To Wheeler’s disgust they shipped the cattle to Chicago from [Joseph G.] McCoy’s pens.”\(^20\)

In other ways, however, *Red River* departs significantly from the historical record. Although it is fair to say that both men were heroic capitalists, Wheeler was an experienced drover from California, whereas Tom Dunson was a Texas rancher making his first drive. Dunson dreams of creating a personal empire and is willing to brutally manipulate others to that end, but McCoy says Wheeler “was no theorist or dreamer desiring to attempt impossibilities.”\(^21\) Wheeler and his associates responded to McCoy’s promotion of his Abilene operation and organized their drive accordingly, but Matthew Garth proceeds toward the Kansas Pacific line solely on the strength of hearsay among the cowboys. Garth decides on the new route after the herd has crossed the Red River into dangerous Indian Territory, but the Wheeler crew changed course well south.

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Based on a story and screenplay by Daniel B. Ullman, *Wichita* is a more balanced portrayal of mythical gunner Wyatt Earp, played by Joel McCrea, focusing on his difficult but ultimately successful attempt to bring peace to the town before moving on to Dodge City. Although *Wichita* should be applauded for portraying Wyatt Earp as a complex personality, the film also deserves credit for its depiction of the town business leaders’ ambivalent response to a new regime of law and order. It shows viewers that “the withdrawal of herds, and consumers, from an ‘unfriendly’ shipping center always remained a possibility. The problem for the cattle town people was not to rid themselves of visitors prone to violence, but to suppress the violence while retaining the visitors.”

of the river, leaving the Shawnee Trail when it swung east toward Dallas and then on to Missouri. By portraying an untried visionary in conflict with a younger and even less experienced man willing to redirect the cattle drive based only on rumors and under the threat of possible hostile attacks, *Red River* successfully transformed an already risky cattle enterprise into a truly dramatic adventure.

Wichita became a shipping point on the railroad in the spring of 1872, and by the time Wyatt Earp entered town two years later, it had become the leading cattle town in Kansas. A strong, athletic twenty-six-year-old, Earp took a job as a bouncer at a brothel, a trade for which he had been arrested and fined several months earlier in Peoria, Illinois. He attracted the attention of the town marshal when he helped a police officer track down some wagon thieves. In April 1875, he joined the police force and fulfilled the rather unglamorous duties of arresting horse thieves and drunks. Only a year later, however, he was

Gunfight in Abilene depicts a later stage of development focusing on the conflict between a cattle trade that has become established and a growing population of farm families settling in the vicinity of the trail. Throughout the film, cattlemen are presented as the bad guys, but the killing of the two local leaders of the cattle trade does not result in a satisfying resolution to the cattlemen-versus-farmer plot. The audience is left wondering whether these leaders will be replaced, perhaps by even greater antagonists, or whether the farmers will succeed in pressuring the trade to move west beyond Abilene.

dismissed when he got into a fistfight with a candidate for election to marshal. Earp made the unwise decision to ignore his dismissal and embezzle municipal fines. He was ordered to leave Wichita.23

None of these details can be learned by watching Wichita (1955), our fourth Chisholm Trail movie, directed by Jacques Tourneur and based on a story and screenplay by Daniel B. Ullman.24 Earp is played by the fifty-year-old Joel McCrea (who also starred in Tourneur’s Stranger on Horseback the same year and Stars in My Crown in 1950). Because of his age, Earp must be given a past, and so we are told that he has experience with violent cowboys and, in fact, has a reputation as a town tamer. He rides into Wichita just as the first cattle drive is about to arrive, but he holds on to the hope that he can start a small business


24. Wichita, directed by Jacques Tourneur; screenplay by Daniel B. Ullman; produced by Walter Mirisch and Victor Heerman; 1955; color; 81 minutes; distributed by Allied Artists Pictures.
and settle down with a good woman. Predictably, when the cowhands raise hell, Earp feels compelled to put on the marshal’s badge. *Wichita* is about Earp’s difficult but ultimately successful attempt to bring peace to the town before he heads to Dodge City and even greater glory. According to his biographer, Andrew C. Isenberg, Wyatt Earp was not the mythical gunman “unwaveringly committed to justice in a frontier territory” but a man who “donned and shucked off roles readily, whipsawing between lawman and lawbreaker, and pursued his changing ambitions recklessly, with little thought to the cost to himself, and still less thought to the cost, even the deadly cost, to others.”

Ullman creates a Wyatt Earp who is forced by circumstances to drastically change his character. Although we are shown early in the film a man who has a longer gun, harder fists, and a faster draw than other men, nevertheless, Earp cares for women and children and is deeply disturbed by violence. He yearns for the opportunity to become a hardworking businessman and a respectable citizen. But he admits to the local newspaper editor that trouble seems to find him; he was “born under a troublesome star.” Sure enough, when a drunken cowboy shoots and kills a five-year-old boy, Earp is immediately transformed into a tough and unyielding lawman. Extraordinary confidence and strength of will enable him to arrest the leaders of the rabble-rousers. He takes down a sign over the main street declaring, “Everything Goes in Wichita,” and puts up a sign announcing that the carrying of guns on the streets is prohibited.

*Wichita* should be applauded for portraying Wyatt Earp as a complex personality, but a still greater achievement is its depiction of the town business leaders’ ambivalent response to a new regime of law and order. Sam McCoy (Walter Coy), celebrated by locals as the entrepreneur most responsible for bringing the railroad to Wichita, immediately recognizes Earp as a “natural born lawman.” But as the new marshal proceeds to impose his will on the community, McCoy begins to worry that future cattle drives will be discouraged from coming to town. Eventually, he turns against Earp because he sees him as a threat to Wichita as a “cattlemen’s town.” Mayor Andrew Hope (Carl Benton Reid) agrees that perhaps Earp’s “reforms are a little too aggressive,” but he is reluctant to fire him. Thirteen years after Tourneur’s movie, in a groundbreaking study of the Kansas cattle towns, Robert R. Dykstra criticized the many legends that had developed about these communities for failing to acknowledge the “internal complexities” of their law-and-order campaigns. He was apparently unaware that *Wichita* had successfully depicted businessmen who had to walk a fine line. The film shows us that, as Dykstra says, “the withdrawal of herds—and consumers—from an ‘unfriendly’ shipping center always remained a possibility. The problem for the cattle town people was not to rid themselves of visitors prone to violence, but to suppress the violence while retaining the visitors.”

Earp recognizes the disgruntlement and that what is at stake is the kind of city Wichita wants to be but says he will neither change his methods nor quit. Saloon owner Doc Black (Edgar Buchanan) hires men to assassinate Earp, but in the effort, they accidentally kill Sam McCoy’s wife. In a final showdown, McCoy now stands with Earp. Earp outdraws a cowboy seeking revenge for his brother, who was shot by the lawman, and McCoy shoots Doc Black, who tries to ambush them from a second-floor window.

So far we have examined films that tell the story of the first cattle drives to Abilene and Wichita and of how the cattle towns on the Chisholm Trail responded to those dramatic events. The last two films are both dated earlier than *Wichita*, but they depict a later stage of development in the towns. They focus on the conflict between a cattle trade that has become established and a growing population of farm families settling in the region of the trail.

_Gunfight in Abilene* (1967) is a skillful interweaving of three plots, all of which receive equal emphasis in the movie. Cal Wayne (Bobby Darin) is a Confederate major who has returned to his hometown of Abilene one month after the war and is soon prevailed upon to take up his old job of town sheriff. The first tale is about why Cal is “gun-shy,” unable to wield a pistol because he accidentally killed a friend and fellow soldier in the war and is now wracked with guilt. The second story recounts his relationship with Grant Evers (Leslie Nielsen), a powerful cattle broker and older brother of the man Cal killed. Cal

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25. Ibid., 7.


27. *Gunfight in Abilene*, directed by William Hale; screenplay by John D. Black and Berne Giler; produced by Howard Christie; 1967; color; 86 minutes; distributed by Universal Pictures.
In Abilene Town, Randolph Scott plays newly minted town marshal Dan Mitchell, a man who in only four months on the job has fearlessly established law and order in 1870 Abilene. He takes pride in maintaining a safe and peaceful community, but also accepts that the town exists to entertain the weary and thirsty. This ambivalence is revealed by his attraction to two very different women, the respectable Sherry and Rita, the sexy and savvy dance-hall girl. In the end, following a showdown between farm families seeking to claim their government homesteads and violent cattlemen, Mitchell turns against the cowboys and walks off with Rita. Courtesy of United Artists.

does not reveal what he has done until late in the movie, so the main tension between the two is the fact that they are both in love with the same woman.

The third plot pits farmers against cattlemen. On his way home, Cal meets Cord Decker (Michael Sarrazin), a Union veteran. Both are eager to put the war behind them, and they become friends. Cal is forced to intervene on his friend’s behalf when Cord, still in uniform, is kicked and beaten by several cowboys. Later, when Cord has taken up farming, three of Evers’s men, including former sheriff Joe Slade (Donnelly Rhodes), charge him with stealing a calf. They tie him to a wagon and brutally whip him nearly to death. In his role as sheriff Cal admits there is little to be done, since the incident occurred on Evers’s land and could be considered a case of trespassing. When Cord dies from his injuries, Cal cautions angry farmers not to take the law into their own hands.

Throughout the film, cattlemen are presented as the bad guys. They tear down a farmer’s barbed-wire fence and drive the cows over his cornfield. After another such incident, angry farmers gather in the street outside Grant Evers’s office to demand restitution. Grant is a businessman who seeks to avoid violent confrontations and maintain a balance of power between the cattle and farming interests. He agrees to pay for the damages, but Slade, who expects to gain greater power and wealth in the cattle company, tells Grant he’s made a serious mistake by appeasing the sodbusters. Grant recognizes that Slade is himself a disruptive influence on the farmers and tries to pay him off. Slade wants more money, Grant resists, and Slade kills him. In the final gunfight on Abilene’s main street, Cal overcomes his anxiety about guns and outdraws Slade.

Slade’s death in a showdown brings a typically swift end to the story of Cal’s guilt-ridden fear of guns, and Grant’s murder just as quickly eliminates the rival for the woman he loves. But simply killing off the two local leaders of the cattle trade does not result in a satisfying resolution to the cattlemen-versus-farmer plot. The audience is left wondering whether these leaders will be replaced, perhaps by even greater antagonists, or whether the farmers will succeed in pressuring the trade to move west beyond Abilene.

In 1870, Abilene functions as a sort of oasis in the midst of the surrounding cattle country, according to Abilene Town (1946), our final film. It serves Texans, announces the opening narrative, as “the end of the trailhead’s thousand-mile, ninety-day-long boredom.” Texas Street, Abilene’s main thoroughfare, sharply separates two types of businesses. On one side are the saloons and on the other the merchants. There is a moral tension between them but also a recognition of their mutual economic

28. Abilene Town; directed by Edwin L. Marin; screenplay by Harold Shumate; produced by Jules Levy; 1946; black and white; 89 minutes; distributed by United Artists.
dependence upon the cattle trade. As one saloon owner puts it starkly, “No saloons, no trail herds. No trail herds and the merchants starve to death.”

Town marshal Dan Mitchell (Randolph Scott) has been on the job only four months, yet he has fearlessly established law and order. Guns are dutifully kept behind the bar, and Dan quickly and forcefully deals with any cowpoke who happens to get “too enthusiastic.” He takes pride in maintaining a safe and peaceful community, but he also accepts the fact that the town exists to entertain the weary and the thirsty. This ambivalence is revealed by his attraction to two very different women. Sherry (Rhonda Fleming) is the respectable daughter of the merchant responsible for hiring Dan, Ed Balder (Howard Freeman). She has her hopes for the handsome marshal and persuades him to accompany her and her father to church. But she is frustrated by his fun-loving nature and chides him because he “can’t decide which side [of the street] has the most interesting women.” The other woman she has in mind is Rita (Ann Dvorak), the sexy and savvy dance-hall girl who enjoys playing hard to get with the wide-eyed Dan. Rita celebrates the wide-open nature of Abilene in her songs (“You can do most anything you doggone please”) and is committed to keeping it that way. She even buys a partnership in the saloon where she performs.

This delicate balance is disturbed by a wagon train of farm families eager to claim their government homesteads. Dan instinctively helps lead them through town to a camp nearby. Whenever the homesteaders are on screen, they sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” thus identifying them with the North and opposing them to all the Texans in the area. Dan is clearly moved by these people. He says he likes that song; his father died in the war. But back in Abilene, the saloon owner worries about the possible consequences of recent developments. “If they [the merchants] ever decide they can make more money off homesteaders than they can off cattle, they’ll join up with the farmers.”

From this point on, events conspire to turn Dan toward the homesteaders and against the cowboys. One cowhand, seeking revenge against the marshal, unsuccessfully ambushes him in an alley. A group of ranch hands burns down some farms in the region, kills a farmer and a young girl, and then destroys the homesteaders’ camp. Sherry is convinced that Abilene will always be violent and implores Dan to take her away, but when he replies that “being afraid would take half the fun out of life,” the relationship ends. In town from what remains of the farmers’ camp and ready to fill the romantic void is Henry Dreiser (Lloyd Bridges). Henry tries to purchase some barbed wire from Ed Balder, but the general store merchant refuses. Henry succeeds, however, by sweet-talking Sherry with his vision of land, wheat, and family.

The final straw for Dan is when drovers stampede their cattle over the barbed-wire fences, killing seven more people in the process. This is a “fight for the state of Kansas,” Dan tells townsfolk in the street; he then proceeds to order all the saloons to turn off their lights. Angry cowboys take out their frustrations on the barrooms under the marshal’s approving eye. Sherry’s father finally does his arithmetic and recognizes that the growth of farming will be good for business. When the homesteaders march into town for a final confrontation with the cowboys, Balder says, “The world’s changing.” Dan declares that “the tame are taking over Abilene, and they’re tougher than you think.” The cowhands believe him and walk resignedly out of town. Rita walks off blissfully with Dan. Her livelihood may lie in ruins, but she gets her man.

Prominent among the historical themes in the above films are the entrepreneurial motives and risks behind the cattle drives; the endurance, often heroic, of the many physical and psychological hardships on the trail; the respite and entertainment that cattle towns provided for weary men; the complexities involved in providing law and order in boom town environments; the persistence of sectional antagonisms when northerners and southerners were brought together just a few years after the Civil War; and the tensions created by the economic and social transition from the cattle trade to farming. Chisholm Trail movies may not offer much in the way of historical information, but their fictional accounts serve to humanize that time and place. They depict certain aspects of the American experience that ring true for audiences even a century and a half later. [KH]