

Joseph McCoy's Dream: Abilene, Kansas, and the Opening of the Great Cattle Drives up the Chisholm Trail 150 Years Ago

by James E. Sherow

Growing up in Kansas, I often heard the quip that the state had never legalized gambling because it had farming. The same has always been true of the cattle trade. A couple of years ago I traveled with my cousin, a cattle trader, to the sale barns. I watched as cattlemen bought and sold with only a vague notion of future market prices. Bidders were anticipating grazing conditions, the price of alfalfa, feedlot overhead, meatpacking costs, and consumer demand as they calculated their returns. I wondered how anyone could confidently predict a profit given the historically high prices of cattle that year. I wisecracked to my cousin that cattle trading seemed little more than institutionalized gambling, to which he agreed.

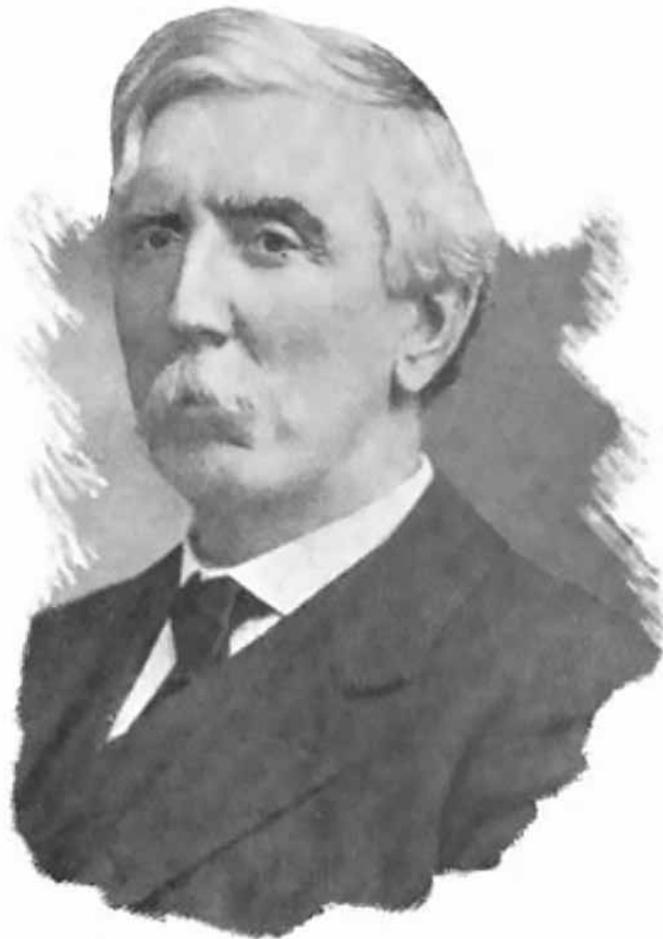
One hundred fifty years ago the McCoy brothers—William, James, and Joseph—of Springfield, Illinois, bet their collective fortunes on the slapdash way station known as Abilene, Kansas. Instead of a few rough-hewn cabins in an endless sea of prairie grasses, they saw a bustling outlet for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Texas cattle coming up the Chisholm Trail. Success in the cattle trade has always been based on buying low and selling high. This principle motivated Joseph, the youngest of the three brothers, to gamble on establishing a Texas cattle market outlet at Abilene, Kansas. On September 5,

1867, he realized his goal as a locomotive departed from his brothers' Great Western Stock Yards with the first stock cars loaded with Texas cattle.

Several factors led Joseph McCoy to believe in his Abilene venture. During the Civil War years, the Union Army had blocked Texans' access to northern and New Orleans cattle markets. As a result, the numbers in their free-ranging cattle herds multiplied on the vast mesquite grass rangelands. By the end of the war, as one prominent Texan put it, "a man was poorer in proportion to the number of cattle bearing his brand."¹ This was not the case in New York City, where butchers paid fifteen cents per pound for an animal that returned a mere five cents in Texas.

Between 1860 and 1865, northern cities swelled, with New York becoming the largest by far. This urban population growth created a strong demand for beef. McCoy wagered on owning an outlet where Texas cattle could be bought for pennies per pound and then sold for dollars on the hoof in New York City. All that was needed was a safe outlet where milled cattle could be sold and

1. "The Texas Cattle Trade," *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), June 17, 1873.



At its second annual convention in 1899, the National Live Stock Association conferred upon Joseph McCoy an honorary life-time membership. He was recognized for his pioneering work in opening Abilene, Kansas, as an outlet for "a large cattle shipping business." His biography, as published in the convention's proceedings, recounted how his "project was ridiculed as a wild, visionary, chimerical scheme, that could not possibly succeed. . . but a trail was established to Texas . . . and it remained in use for twenty years, until 1887, and over it came fully ten million head of live stock moving northward, seeking a market; . . . and [it]. . . became a source of supply of breeding; or, if you will, seed cattle to replace the buffalo on the vast plains; . . . and thus became the basis of thousands of herds now located upon stock ranges in the mid-continent regions." Joseph G. McCoy sketch from Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the National Live Stock Association, Denver, Colorado, January 24, 25, 26 and 27 (Denver, CO: News Job Printing Company, 1899), 109.

bought and then transported eastward by rail. In short, it was pointless to drive cattle to Abilene without the growth of those urban markets.

The Texas cattle trade and drives depended on free and abundant natural resources found throughout the public domain. The sine qua non of the trade, water and grass, abounded throughout the region. It was essential that prairie grass, the stored solar energy fueling the trade, be free and unregulated. As McCoy fully realized, sustaining these natural resources made the cattle drives possible despite the risks—especially the risk of Texas fever.

Rhipicephalus annulatus, a tick native to the warm climate of Texas, harbored a deadly protozoan. When the tick fed on a bovine host, this protozoan was released into the cow's bloodstream. Over generations of exposure, native Texas cattle had developed immunity to the protozoa, but northern cattle lacked this trait. Texas cattle carried the tick with them as they entered midwestern and East Coast markets, where the ticks found their way onto the hides of northern cattle. Once a protozoan found itself in its host's system, it invaded the red blood cells and multiplied to the point of rupturing the cell membranes, releasing numerous "daughter parasites." The newly freed parasites sought other red blood cells to attack, and their spores multiplied again. This feeding frenzy resulted in internal bleeding and the rapid death of the infected animal.

As I show in my essay in this issue, Kansas farmers had ample reason to fear the spread of Texas fever to their domestic herds. In 1860, while Kansas farm families struggled with searing drought, longhorns spread the fever to small Kansas domestic herds in close proximity to anywhere Texas cattle had been driven. Farmers demanded laws to prohibit the importation of Texas cattle into the state, and the legislature complied. The Civil War suspended the threat of Texas fever in Kansas, but it reappeared in 1866 as Texans, desperate to sell cattle into eastern markets, attempted cattle drives through portions of Kansas and Missouri. This time Kansans and Missourians responded with violence.

What became known as the Chisholm Trail did not pass through any inhabited areas in 1866, and McCoy's outlet at Abilene, if connected to the trail, could sidestep furious farmers. His gamble paid off for a while until Texas fever began striking down domestic herds in Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. The pall of Texas fever hung over the trade, leading to quarantines and bans throughout the Midwest and East. The disease continued to shape the entire industry until

Theobald Smith, a veterinarian working for the Department of Agriculture, finally identified the cause of the disease and a cure for it in 1889, long past the end of the great cattle drives.

Although Texas fever played an immense role in shaping the Texas cattle trade and drives, other powerful forces intervened, too. Railroad transportation links tied the Kansas cattle towns to immense and burgeoning national and international markets. Entrepreneurs in these small cattle outlets such as Abilene, Ellsworth, Newton, Wichita, Caldwell, and Dodge City thought that through sheer effort they could control the ebb and flow of cattle as middlemen in this vast trade network. However, as Joshua Specht shows, savvy business strategy on the part of Ellsworth boosters was not enough to anchor the town as the preeminent cattle outlet in the state.

The effects of Texas fever played a role in giving Ellsworth an advantage over Joseph McCoy's Abilene outlet. The disease, however, also proved a liability in hindering the agricultural economy around the city. Conflict raged over whether Ellsworth would become a permanent home for shipping longhorns or the trading center for a vast farming domain. Other factors, well beyond the control of the cattle advocates in Ellsworth, shook the building blocks of its cattle trade. Changes in railroad transportation links to the eastern markets gave a competitive edge to cities such as Wichita, and geography gave Wichita a further advantage over Ellsworth. Specht skillfully shows how a mobile service industry of saloon keepers, hoteliers, and retailers, who filled the desires of Texas cowboys, drovers, cattle buyers and sellers, were actually a liability to the long-term economic health of Ellsworth. In the end, the townsfolk of Ellsworth saw little future in catering to hell raising Texas cowboys.

Yet cowboy culture, its myth and lore, has flourished long past the days of the Texas cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail. Jim Hoy views Joseph McCoy as the progenitor of the myth of the Texas cowboy. McCoy wrote *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (1874), in which he described the life of a cowboy as

One of considerable daily danger and excitement. It is hard and full of exposure, but is wild and free... He lives hard, works hard, has but few comforts and fewer necessities... He enjoys a coarse practical joke or a smutty story; loves danger but abhors labor of the common kinds; never tires riding, never wants to walk. He would rather fight with pistols than

pray; loves tobacco, liquor and women better than any other trinity.²

It took little time before this lifestyle was celebrated in song and movies. In his article, Hoy explores several of the themes most commonly celebrated in cowboy songs, most famous of which is “The Old Chisholm Trail.” The song, as Hoy reveals, touched upon nearly all of the cowboy traits described by McCoy. Trail driving incurred danger, hard work, boredom, love of horses and a frolicking good time in cattle towns.

The Hollywood Western, however, enshrined the cult and myth of the cowboy even more indelibly than song did or could. The history of cattle driving, as Bruce Kahler reminds us, is seldom, if ever, reflected well in movies. First and foremost, cowboy movies entertained rather than documented the history of driving cattle along the Chisholm Trail. As Kahler also submits, movie makers often attempted to portray the “experience” of being a cowboy.

Among all of the cowboy movies ever made, Kahler’s theme is best represented in his analysis of *Red River* (1948). This classic established John Wayne, who played Thomas Dunson, as the embodiment of the self-made, independent, hard-nosed Texas cowboy. Montgomery Clift’s character, Matthew Garth, Dunson’s adopted son, blazes the trail to Abilene despite his father’s outright opposition. The story delves into Garth’s love interest, Tess Millay, played by Joanne Dru, who, despite the main street fight between Garth and Dunson, is able to reconcile

father and adopted son. More than this, Kahler shows how *Red River*’s director, Howard Hawks, accentuated the “experience” of trail-driving cattle. Kahler explains how Westerns like *Red River*, more than entertainment, “depict certain aspects of the American experience that ring true for audiences even a century and a half later.”

In 1899, thirty-two years after Joseph McCoy established Abilene, Kansas, as an outlet for Texas cattle, the assembled members of the second annual National Live Stock Association convention conferred upon him an honorary life membership in recognition of his pioneering work in making “the wilderness to bloom and blossom as the rose.” A short biography of McCoy appeared in the published proceedings of the convention and explained the nature of the rose. It read in part: “At Abilene, Kansas, all the conditions were found requisite for the scheme [of giving Texas cattle a Northeast urban market] and 1867 found Mr. McCoy busy building [in Abilene] facilities incident to a large cattle shipping business.” What became known as the Chisholm Trail reached into Texas, and by 1887, the biographer claimed, over “it came fully ten million head of live stock moving northward, seeking a market.” The legacy of McCoy’s endeavors ultimately made beef cheaper and more available to consumers and became a “source of . . . seed cattle to replace the buffalo on the vast plains” that formed “thousands of herds located upon stock ranges in the mid-continent regions.” The biographer had legitimate reason to confer upon McCoy the title “Founder of the Southwestern Cattle Trade.”³ [KH]

2. Joseph McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (1874; reprint, Columbus, OH: Long’s College Book Co., 1951), 10.

3. *Proceedings of the Second Annual Convention of the National Live Stock Association, Denver, Colorado, January 24, 25, 26 and 27* (Denver, CO: News Job Printing Company, 1899), 232–34, 323–24.