Kansas Historical Marker for Abilene, home of Joseph McCoy’s Great Western Stock Yards.
During the day on September 4, 1867, workers busily erected large tents beside the tracks of the Union Pacific Railway Company, Eastern Division (UPED). Under canvas shade, one special table was set with bottles of wine, serving plates, and glasses while cooks nearby prepared a “substantial repast . . . peculiar to camp life.” Joseph McCoy, the host of this “auspicious event,” as he would later call it, anxiously anticipated the arrival of his guests—his buddies in the Illinois cattle business “and others”—UPED railroad managers, politicians, and businesspeople along with their spouses. By evening, the guests had arrived and found everything ready for a night of drinking wine, making toasts and speeches, eating, singing, and most likely drinking more wine. They came prepared to witness on the following day the first loading of four hundred Texas cattle into twenty stock cars bound on the first leg of a trip with the Chicago stockyards as their ultimate destination. On the following day, September 5, 1867, before the sun had set, the celebrants watched as the locomotive steamed out from Abilene with its first load of Texas longhorns driven along the Chisholm Trail to McCoy’s Great Western Stock Yards.¹

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1. Scholars of the American West are quite familiar with two of the core texts on the Texas cattle trade: Joseph McCoy’s Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest (1874; reprint, Columbus, Ohio: Long’s College Book Co., 1951) and J. Marvin Hunter’s compiled and edited volume, The Trail Drivers of Texas, 5th Printing (1924; reprint, Austin: University Press of Texas, 2006). Both have been reprinted many times and are readily available today, as are many old classics on the Chisholm Trail. The primary histories are Sam Ridings, The Chisholm Trail: A History of the World’s Greatest Cattle Trail (1936; reprint, First Creative Texts, 2015); Wayne Gard’s The Chisholm Trail (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954); Frank Dobie, Up the Trail from Texas (Random House, 1955); Henry Jameson, Miracle of the Chisholm Trail (Tri-State Chisholm Trail Centennial Commission, 1967); and Donald E. Worcester, The Chisholm Trail: High Road of the Cattle Kingdom (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).
In the great game of cattle wheeling and dealing, McCoy believed Abilene to be his ace in the hole. He knew the recent history of the Texas cattle trade well enough to have confidence in the potential success of his Great Western Stock Yards. The most formidable risk lay in dealing with Texas fever, a disease that devastated the domestic herds of Kansas farmers but left longhorns unscathed. There were also the difficult dealings with the owners and managers of railroad companies. Yet the nature of the Civil War had produced attractive-looking odds for creating a profitable outlet for Texas cattle to enter eastern markets. All Joseph McCoy had to do was find the right place along the right railroad that had good connections to the eastern markets, with ample grass and water resources to sustain cattle awaiting transit and with the least potential to spread Texas fever to Kansas cattle.

That right place was the unlikely burg of Abilene, the right railroad the UPED, and the right route the Chisholm Trail.\(^2\)

Given its appearance in 1867, few people could have imagined that Abilene, Kansas, would become a crucial link in the cattle trade. In the fall of that year, Alexander Gardner, a nationally renowned photographer, visited this small, nondescript town. There he took several photographs that showed the bonds of technology and ecology that McCoy relied upon to create his cattle-shipping empire. At first blush, Gardner’s photographs show little more than a creek, a prairie-dog town, a newly built three-story building, and stockyards with stock cars sitting on a rail siding.

O n the surface, these images show few signs of the impending greatness of this lonely site on the UPED tracks. Yet for a brief moment in time, from 1867 to 1872, it would become the hub of the cattle trade in the United States, all because of the foresight and ambitious aspirations of a young Illinoisan cattle trader from Springfield. Only twenty-nine years old, Joseph G. McCoy understood that Abilene offered the sine qua non for linking together into one gigantic system the rapidly growing national and international beef markets, millions of cattle in Texas, the ecology of the open grasslands in the public domain, and the technological advances in railroads and shipping.

Another reason that McCoy thought Abilene’s prospects were good was that its location seemed to skirt the problems associated with the spread of Texas fever. McCoy was well acquainted with how the “Spanish fever” had shaped the Texas cattle trade well before 1867. Midwestern cattlemen’s and farmers’ shorthorn herds never encountered this disease unless they were near a drive of Texas longhorns. All ranchers were perplexed by the fact that longhorn cattle seemed unscathed by the disease, but midwestern cattlemen knew that whenever Texas cattle were close, their own cattle rapidly succumbed to the disease in distressingly large numbers. So it was in Kansas in 1860.

Even under the best conditions, establishing a farmstead in a territorial state was hard work and often led to failure. Given the conditions endured by Kansans in 1860, it is a wonder that any of them remained in the territory a year later. They suffered under high temperatures compounded by a severe lack of rain. Major Surgeon Thomas C. Madison kept the daily weather reports at Fort Riley, and his records indicated the harsh, dry conditions of that spring. In March, Madison recorded zero rainfall at the post. In April, he recorded only a mere .13 inch of rain. In May, only 1.16 inches of rain fell on four separate days—the 5th, 7th, 22nd, and 31st. Temperatures soared at the same time, with highs of 89 degrees in April, 95 in May, 97 in June, 113 in July, and 108 in August. Altogether, during what should have been the prime planting and harvesting seasons, farming had turned into a dusty disaster.\(^3\)

By September, only the lucky were eking out a miserable existence in the territory. At best, farm families endured a desperate situation and looming destitution. In Lyon County, the people of Fremont Township reported a corn crop that might produce two bushels to the acre. In Pike Township, people reported a similar situation where the year before they had harvested seventy bushels of corn per acre. In Auburn Township in Shawnee County, farmers had raised a mere ninety-five bushels of corn, whereas the year before, they had harvested over thirty thousand. Of the sixty-four families living in the township, thirty-three were flat broke. Judge Graham of Center Township in Madison County noted that three-fourths of the residents were on the verge of leaving. Making matters worse, “Spanish fever” appeared and decimated the small cattle holdings, leaving families without dairy or meat animals.

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3. A few younger scholars have explored aspects of the trade, and their work has yet to reach the book stage. Kristin Hoganson, “Meat in the Middle: Converging Borderlands in the U.S. Midwest, 1865–1900,” *Journal of American History* (March 2012), explores the cultural intersection of the trade in Illinois. Joshua Specht, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Texas Longhorn: An Evolutionary History,” *Environmental History* (April 2016), stresses how the longhorns were “both technology and laborer . . . ideally suited to nineteenth-century ranching, largely because the animals themselves performed much of the labor involved in beef production.” Specht’s work is the most cutting-edge to date.
In fact, Spanish fever had made its presence known throughout the counties from the eastern boundary of the territory to the westernmost organized ones, a little west of Fort Riley. Territorial Kansans correctly associated the presence of the disease with the arrival of Texas cattle being driven near their own herds. Texas drovers favored a few routes through Kansas as they headed their herds north toward Illinois. One route extended along the Neosho River to the Verdigris River, then to Eagle Creek and along the Cottonwood River to Dow Creek and the Kaw River Valley. From there, most drovers took their herds east to the Missouri River, where a ferry took them to St. Joseph, Missouri. By 1860, the tracks of the Hannibal Railroad had reached the city, and the railroad company provided direct access to the Chicago market. The other route led along the eastern border of the state and followed the military road connecting Fort Leavenworth to Fort Towson to the south. This trail also led to Missouri River ferry crossings that provided connections to the Hannibal Railroad line.

Texas cattlemen also drove their stock north along what they called the Shawnee Trail. From central Texas, the trail led through Indian Territory below the southeastern border of Kansas. Once in Kansas, the trail crossed the southeastern portion of the state and beyond into Missouri until reaching either the city of Sedalia or St. Joseph, both of which had rail connections leading east.

Along all of these routes, Spanish fever struck native cattle herds with a vengeance. In six weeks, Texas longhorns left a trail of dead animals from the Neosho River to the Kaw Valley. In a short time span, one estimate put the Kansas losses at over three hundred head of cattle. Although this overall loss may appear small, it created an intolerable situation for farm families. Most of the residents owned small herds that supplied their immediate meat and dairy needs. If fortunate, they
possessed a few steers for market. In one township in Lyon County, William Shockly lost four cows, one bull, and two calves. S. F. Graham and his family lost four cows and two steers. G. R. Harper’s family suffered the loss of four steers, one cow, and two yearlings. In total, this one township lost over forty cattle in the space of a week.4 Farmers gathered in Emporia to discuss their situation and how to respond to it. They were angry and wanted restitution. At the very least, to a person, they resolved to keep Texas longhorns out of their county. Failing to achieve this goal meant that anyone pursuing stock raising in Kansas “may as well abandon that branch of the . . . business at once.” They were not ready to forsake cattle raising, so they resolved to use force “sufficient to secure the end aimed at.”5

Earlier in the year, the residents of Bourbon County had devised a recommendation for preventing the spread of Texas fever that the Kansas legislature would eventually embrace. A mass meeting of angry residents living in Osage County took place on account of the “severe losses” that they had endured as a result of Texas cattle drives through their township. The farmers wanted formal legislation that would “prohibit droves of Spanish cattle from passing through [their] township after the first of April each year, and until the last day of October.” They, like many others, believed that longhorns posed no imminent danger to their native herds during the cold months from November through March. Experience seemed to support their thinking, even if they failed to understand the reason why this was largely the case.6

Without hesitation, the members of the first Kansas state legislature acted to protect their livestock raisers from Spanish fever, now called Texas fever. In section 4 of “AN ACT to provide for the protection of Stock from Contagious Diseases,” the legislature placed strict restrictions on the movement of Texas cattle into the state of Kansas. The law prohibited anyone from driving “any drove or droves of cattle from the States of Texas, Arkansas or the Indian territory lying south of the State of Kansas, between the first day of April and November in each year.” Governor Charles Robinson signed the legislation into law on May 1, 1861.7

During the Civil War, Kansas farmers’ fears of Spanish fever receded as ranchers in Indian Territory and Texas lost all access to cattle outlets in Kansas. About the only markets that Texans could reach were Mississippi River towns or New Orleans, and once those cities fell to Union forces, no other safe outlets remained. By May 1862, the port city of New Orleans had fallen to Union naval forces commanded by Flag Officer David Farragut. The Union presence in the city cut off all river traffic that could have delivered Texas beef to Confederate forces. By the middle of June, fewer than half of the meat stalls in the city market had anything to offer, and what was offered was of inferior quality, hardly suitable for sale. A reporter for the New Orleans Picayune simply called the beef “wretched.” Even this meat commanded exceptionally high prices. A beefsteak cut from this inferior grade commanded over a dollar a pound, whereas prior to the war, a “vastly superior steak” had seldom realized more than forty cents a pound.8

The editor of the Picayune anxiously longed for a return to prosperity. The Civil War had wrecked the trade that had once flowed into his city, along with its commercial health. The cost of food had dramatically risen, and as a result, many people had vacated the city to look elsewhere for work and sustenance. One factor could alleviate the situation and bring down food costs: the importation of beef and mutton from the “great grazing State,” Texas.9

The editor took heart from the example of driving sheep to New Orleans. In 1862, Texans with large flocks of sheep in the Rio Grande River Valley had driven their animals to New Orleans and received a nice return on their efforts. As reported, the sheep had crossed rich meadowlands dotted with numerous freshwater ponds. The care given by the drovers resulted in animals reaching the city in better shape than animals “imprisoned” and crowded onto steamboats and flatboats without anything to eat but dry hay. The reporter thought the same result would come to postwar Texas ranchers who raised “fat and deliciously flavored beeves” on their mesquite grass (Hilaria belangeri) pastures.10

Yet more often than not, driving cattle from Texas to New Orleans resulted in emaciated animals on arrival. First, the drovers had a difficult path to travel before reaching New Orleans, given the Union forces’ readiness

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10. Ibid.
Only fifteen years old at the time, E. M. Daggett helped drive a herd of steers rounded up north of Fort Worth, Texas, with the goal of reaching Shreveport, Louisiana. He tied sacks of biscuits, dried beef, and coffee to his horse and rode along a rough route. As he recalled the ordeal, the herd “stampeded pretty nearly every night from the time we left the prairies . . . until we got them loaded on boats for shipment to New Orleans.” The proceeds from the drive were hardly worth the effort. The price per head amounted to little more than six dollars. On the ride home, Daggett had to hide repeatedly from African American Union troops stationed between Marshall, Texas, and Fort Worth. During the Civil War, driving cattle out of Texas proved difficult at best and rendered poor returns on investments.12

The editor of the Picayune correctly realized that New Orleans was cut off from the immense herds of Texas cattle that languished without any prospect of reaching the markets of his city. Even the scant number of herds that reached New Orleans arrived showing “very bad usage on the long route from Texas.” The editor attributed their condition to either a scant supply of forage or a “rebellious spirit” that produced “a very lean and unwholesome condition of flesh and blood, in man or beast.”13

Not until the very end of the Civil War did Texas cattle start returning to the New Orleans markets. A slight change began in July 1862, when a Yankee steamboat, appropriately named the New York, transported the first Texas cattle to travel the river since the fall of New Orleans to Union forces in May. The 106 head of cattle launched the editor into poetic joy: “Hard times come no more, Better times come of yore.” This gave hope to the editor that Texas cattle would now arrive via steamboats


rather than driven over land, which would result in longhorns only “somewhat reduced” before reaching the city. Of course, this trade relied on Union forces and Yankee ships, which was not an ideal situation for rebel cattle-men.¹⁴

If Union control of the Mississippi River made it almost impossible for Texans to deliver cattle into the New Orleans market, transportation costs made such drives unprofitable regardless of whether Texas cattle could reach the city market. Drovers from eastern Texas who headed their herds due east to Shreveport, Louisiana, hoped to load the animals onto steamboats headed downriver to New Orleans. What they had not foreseen were the high riverboat transportation costs, which surpassed the initial purchase price per head. As a result, cattle piled up at Shreveport as drovers waited for either the cost of transportation to fall or cattle prices to rise. Anticipating an increase in cattle prices proved hopeless as the numbers of cattle at the port increased. This created a dismal state of affairs for cattlemen when—after having driven herds three hundred miles to Shreveport—they had to sell their stock for less than it had cost to buy it in the first place.¹⁵

In addition, drovers had to confront the fact that some shippers dominated the trade out of Texas to New Orleans. Sam L. Allen, who had his company office in Houston and shipped out of Powder Horn, Texas, was one such individual. Powder Horn was a port town on Matagorda Bay that by 1857 had a semiweekly line of steamers sailing to New Orleans.¹⁶ After the end of the Civil War, William J. Bennett recalled that Allen had sent runners advertising his connections to the New Orleans market. Soon thereafter Allen held a monopoly on shipping cattle out of Powder Horn to New Orleans. But Allen’s line could handle only so many cattle, which still left millions of longhorns bunched on the central rangelands of Texas, waiting for other outlets.¹⁷

With the end of the Civil War, Texas ranchers knew there were other options than New Orleans for placing their herds into rapidly growing urban markets. They possessed enormous herds that were essentially worthless without outlets to markets commensurate with the size of their holdings. As one rancher summarized his plight,

Any man in [Texas] who does not own 400 head of cattle and 70 or 100 horses and mules is worse than worthless. Beef sells here at five cents per pound, horses and mules from $15 to $30 for round lots; and are within 250 miles of a good market. As far as the eye can reach in every direction, and as far as you may go, the country is alive with stock. The whole

¹⁵. Olathe (KS) Mirror, July 20, 1865.
market of the United States might be supplied here, and there would not be any apparent decrease.\textsuperscript{18}

Judge Quinlan of San Antonio, Texas, succinctly described the situation this way: “A man was poorer in proportion to the number of cattle bearing his brand.”\textsuperscript{19}

By June 1866, many drovers had attempted to drive their herds east to the Mississippi River docks. In a letter from Travis County, the writer noted that “a large amount of all kinds of stock has been driven to Missouri, Tennessee, Louisiana, and other States.” However, the drovers faced some deadly obstacles going east. Unusually high rainfall in May had flooded many rivers and made swimming cattle across them exceptionally dangerous. One report mentioned that large numbers of horses and cattle had drowned while crossing these swollen streams. As a result, a letter writer predicted that “Texas stock speculators” would sustain serious losses. For Texas ranchers, it was simply a matter of too many cattle with too few places to go.\textsuperscript{20}

With the plight of 1860 still fresh in their memory, Kansas farmers knew that they had good reason to fear the spread of Spanish fever with the return of Texas cattle drivers. Obviously, they dreaded having their herds in the vicinity of longhorns. While farmers displayed remarkable ignorance about the nature of this disease, they recognized that their own domestic shorthorn cattle often suffered immensely whenever Texas cattle herds were nearby. They also realized that the legislation passed in 1861 still allowed Texas cattle to enter the state. Understandably, they took every action within their power to prevent any losses to their own herds, and they wanted their legislators to craft restrictive measures to keep Texas cattle completely out of the state.

In January 1865, it was clear to nearly every observer, whether in the South or the North, that it was just a matter of time before the Confederacy would fall. For those serving in the Kansas legislature, the end of the war raised the frightening prospect of the return of Texas cattle to the state. These lawmakers understood just how unpopular Texas cattle were among their constituents. In February 1865, they enacted a more stringent law prohibiting any drive of cattle from “the state of Texas, or from the territory south of the south line” of the state from entering.

Governor Samuel J. Crawford signed this legislation into law on February 11, 1865. One would think that this act would have thoroughly discouraged Texas drovers. However, the 1865 act had little real effect on Texas cattle drives into Kansas toward the end of the Civil War. Even if Texas ranchers wanted to drive a herd into Kansas, the situation in Texas precluded them from putting one together. In the first place, in the spring, Confederate forces were still resisting the Union Army. Not until June did Texas commanders finally capitulate, which meant the season was far too late in the year for anyone to organize a herd for a drive north.

By the early spring of 1866, order and conditions had improved enough for Texas drovers to organize herds intended for northern markets. Realizing this, and understanding the potential economic gains to be realized from the Texas cattle trade, Kansas legislators softened their position. Governor Crawford signed into law an act repealing the 1865 legislation that had prohibited Texas cattle from entering the state.

Few Kansans favored this act of the legislature, and many feared the “destruction of thousands of dollars-worth of stock, and the ruin of now prosperous farmers.” However, there was a motivating factor in the legislature’s change of heart. Apparently, several prominent Kansas stock buyers saw a great opportunity in traveling to Texas, buying cattle cheaply, and reaping fantastic returns when unloading them into northern markets. Obviously, their ambitions would be thwarted at the outset without a repeal of the 1865 legislation.\textsuperscript{21}

When the legislature passed its 1866 act regulating Texas cattle drives, it left intact the provisions of the 1861 act. The legislation of 1865 had not, as one of its provisions, repealed the legislation of 1861. Consequently, the door opened for Texas drovers to take their herds through Kansas after November 1. By the end of April, reports flowed back into Kansas newspapers that thousands of cattle had been gathered and were bound for Kansas. This information set off alarms throughout the state. An article from the Wyandotte, Kansas, Gazette encouraged “farmers in this and adjoining counties” to combine to “make a crusade against any persons who shall dare

\textsuperscript{18} Howard Union (Glasgow, MO), October 12, 1865.
\textsuperscript{19} “The Texas Cattle Trade,” Inter Ocean (Chicago, IL), June 17, 1873.
attempt to bring Texas cattle” anywhere near the city and its environs.\textsuperscript{22} Texas drovers simply wanted to get their herds to St. Joseph, Missouri, so that they could load the cattle into the freight cars of the St. Joseph and Hannibal Railroad, which led directly to the Chicago market. Some northeastern Kansas cattlemen raising shorthorn herds were prospering by doing just that. In August, they loaded thousands of cattle on the St. Joseph and Hannibal line. William Elsworth, who owned the St. Joseph and Elwood ferry, did a booming business hauling Kansas cattle across the Missouri River to his landing at St. Joseph. During one early morning at the end of July, between 2 and 9 a.m., he transported 1,048 cattle across the river. In the month of July, he brought over 7,000 head of cattle, all raised in northeastern Kansas.\textsuperscript{23}

The conflicting aspirations of Texas ranchers and Kansas farmers resulted in making the cattle-driving season of 1866 one of the worst ever encountered by Texas drovers. Their problems did not include a lack of animals to drive north; they had plenty. They did not lack rail connections that would transport their herds north; there was one at Sedalia, Missouri, and another at St. Joseph, Missouri. Their problems lay in where the cattle trails led.

The respective routes to the two Missouri rail connections passed through the southeastern portion of Kansas and the southwestern portion of Missouri. The farmers in those areas were aware of the thousands of longhorns being assembled into herds south of the Kansas and Missouri borders and were ready to mount massive resistance to the intrusion of Texas herds. For the Texas drovers, their efforts proved “disastrous in the extreme.” By one estimate, Texans managed to save “only a few thousand” of the over 240,000 cattle that they attempted to drive to the railheads in Missouri. For the stockmen involved, this season became known as the “Waterloo of sixty-six.”\textsuperscript{24}

Not all Kansans opposed the transit of Texas cattle through the state. Some enterprising individuals anticipated making remarkable gains from this pent-up cattle trade. As reported in the papers at the time, some Kansans left for Texas to purchase cattle at rock-bottom prices with the intention of driving them north to fetch higher returns.\textsuperscript{25}

More often than not, they found themselves in discouraging situations as they neared or crossed the southern border of the state. The sheriff of Douglas County, a Mr. Knowles, acquired 200 head of cattle, and the

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\item \textsuperscript{22} “The Wyandotte Gazette Says,” \textit{Daily Kansas Tribune}, April 29, 1866.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{Daily Kansas Tribune}, August 8, 1866.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{25} “Southern Cattle,” \textit{Emporia Weekly News}, March 17, 1866.
\end{itemize}
McCoy and his older brothers James—pictured here with Joseph in the early 1870s—and William managed a highly successful cattle-buying and -selling operation in Springfield. Ever on the lookout for new lucrative opportunities in the cattle trade, they foresaw vast potential gains in moving Texas beeves into eastern markets or into the territories if only they could control the selling and buying at a spot accessible to Texas drovers. After some intensive investigation, Joseph, whose aggressive entrepreneurial bent made him stand out among the three brothers, thought he had found the perfect location to connect Texas cattle with domestic and international urban markets.

Leavenworth firm of Repine, Eves & Co. purchased 1,000 longhorns. In May 1866, Knowles's herd was grazing on the upper reaches of Rock Creek in the Cherokee Neutral Lands (today the lower southeastern counties of Kansas), where he thought he was outside the area where Kansas law applied. About fifteen men “called on” him and ordered him to take his cattle back south of the border immediately. Repine and Eves met a harsher reception. They were keeping their cattle south of the border when about fifty head of their herd stampeded and crossed into Kansas at Turkey Creek (in present-day Chautauqua County). Some “citizens” quickly organized a vigilante posse, overtook the cattle, and slaughtered all of them.26

Kansas farmers reacted fiercely, given their good reasons to fear the spread of Texas fever, and they never hesitated to prevent the passage of longhorns anywhere near their own herds. In May in Johnson County, men met in several townships and formed committees charged with informing Texas drovers that they must avoid bringing herds into the state. A. Arrasmith chaired a meeting in Oxford Township in which a resolution was drafted notifying “the owners of Texas cattle that they will be resisted by law and all other means.” In Shawnee Township, Samuel Pitt conducted a meeting that made it clear that the local stockmen had “suffered greatly heretofore, and we well know that Texas cattle and our cattle cannot range and live on the same lands.”27

Throughout the late spring and early summer, any Texas drover attempting to pass through Kansas met with concerted opposition. In May, men turned out near Owl Creek (Linn County) and stopped a herd of six hundred Texas cattle that was being driven north. As reported, the Kansans residing there were “wide awake and determined to keep the Spanish fever” from destroying their own herds.28 In June, the sheriff of Greenwood County arrested a drover, made him pay a $75 fine, and then forced him to drive his herd south of the border.29 In July, again in the Neutral Lands near Fort Scott, an armed group attacked a Texas herd and “shot down” a number of the cattle.30 In late July, folks residing near Pleasant Hill struck down a herd, killing 150 cattle intended for the St. Louis market.31 Understandably, these farmers willingly took every conceivable action to prevent any losses to their own herds.

Besides losing their herds, Texas drovers themselves risked bodily harm if not, on rare occasions, death once they entered Kansas. J. Hargus recalled helping his stepfather drive a herd north starting out in Martindale, Texas, in March 1866. When they crossed over the southern borders of Kansas and Missouri, they claimed to have encountered a man named James M. Dougherty

27. “To Whom It May Concern,” Olathe Mirror, May 17, 1866.
tied to a tree.

Dougherty, merely twenty years old, had headed a crew driving a herd of one thousand longhorns toward Sedalia, Missouri. From there, he intended to load the cattle into Missouri Pacific Railroad stock cars bound for St. Louis. As Dougherty himself recalled what followed, somewhere near the Kansas-Missouri border, horse-mounted vigilantes stopped him, and the leader told him that “them thar steers couldn’t go an inch fudder.” Dougherty tried to negotiate a safe passage, but the vigilantes would hear nothing of it, given their fear of Texas fever. The border men dragged the young Texan from his horse, tied him to a tree, took a hickory switch, and whipped his back until it was lacerated and bleeding.32

Next, the vigilantes stampeded his herd, but luckily, the cowboys in the rear of the herd understood the danger and raced ahead of the rampaging animals until they found a meadow to the west, where they milled the herd until it had calmed down. Once in control of the cattle, they drove the longhorns several miles westward, where they hoped to be out of harm’s way. In the meantime, Dougherty’s tormentors untied him and told him to leave and not come back. Instead, the young Texan adroitly followed the path left by his stampeding herd and eventually found the rest of his outfit.

With considerable resolve, Dougherty eventually disposed of his herd. He held his cattle near Baxter Springs, Kansas, for a couple of weeks while he recovered from his beating. Then he took one hundred head and, under the cover of night, drove them to Fort Scott, where he was able to sell them. Next, he worked out an arrangement with a buyer in Baxter Springs and sold the remaining herd to him.

Hargus may or may not have met Dougherty while working his own herd north. He may simply have heard tell of Dougherty’s plight, as it was a well-known tale. Regardless, Hargus’s experience was less harmful. His stepfather, Reverend W. H. Farmer, managed to deliver the herd to the outskirts of Joplin, Missouri, where he grazed the cattle all summer long. Unlike Dougherty, Farmer had friendly connections in Missouri, and through these he arranged to pay $10 for each head of cattle that any farmer lost within a ten-mile radius of Farmer’s herd. This gave local farmers insurance coverage and Farmer time enough to fatten his longhorns before loading them into stock cars bound for St. Louis.33

The majority of drovers, however, had to wait until November to take their herds to either Sedalia or Saint Joseph. By September, drovers had gathered large herds south of the state border, and some attempted to drive them north a good month before Kansas law allowed it. Some ran the risk of driving herds through western Missouri, then circling back into Kansas to reach the St. Joseph ferry crossing. Toward the end of September, despite having been harassed by armed farmers, a few Texas drovers reached Ellsworth’s ferry operation with over 1,500 head of cattle.34 By the end of September, it was reported that immense herds were being readied for drives to Saint Joseph, as this city had become favored over Sedalia for its better rail connections. Drovers had over 100,000 longhorns ready to enter the state once the cold weather of November arrived.35

Even with November 1 marking the time when Kansas law allowed Texas cattle to be driven through the state, Kansans still organized to prohibit drives anywhere near their homes and farms. Josiah Kinnaman, who lived near Eureka, Kansas, helped organize a meeting with the expressed purpose of stopping any drives through Greenwood County. The attendees drafted a clearly stated resolution: “We hereby give notice to owners, dealers, herdsmen, and contractors in [the Texas cattle trade] of our determination” to prevent any drives. And “we will not hesitate to take the lives of men or beasts, if it should become necessary, in order to protect our property.”36

In November, the situation had become dire for Texas cattlemen on the southern border of Kansas. What struck Joseph McCoy, as he later summed up the situation, was that very few of them “found their way to a profitable market.” While drovers waited for the first “very cold” weather of November to appear, McCoy described how the grass had “long become dead and unnutritious,” resulting in cattle losing so much weight that they often sold for less than the drover had paid for them in Texas. Making matters worse, after the first frost had dried out the grass, the “whole country” was set on fire. This

could have been the work of Cherokees who had grown impatient with Texas cattle eating up their rangelands. Setting the grass on fire destroyed the stored solar fuel supply for the Texas herds, and this lack of fuel forced drovers out of the area. In summing up the 1866 season, McCoy recognized it as “one of great disaster to Southern drovers.”

The debacle of 1866 gave the young Illinoisan a vision for creating a great and safe cattle outlet for Texas longhorns. It came to him when he met thirty-one-year-old W. W. Suggs, who had, like many other young men of his day, wandered about the West looking to make good prior to the Civil War. After the war, Suggs returned to his native Texas and in 1866 drove a herd of longhorns, hoping to unload them in Illinois. Like Dougherty’s, Suggs’s back showed the scars left by a well-laid-on hickory branch. Despite his ordeal, he somehow managed to bring his herd to Christian County, Illinois, where he overwintered it. In the early spring, he looked for a buyer, who turned out to be Joseph McCoy.

While sealing the deal, Suggs told McCoy of “Texas’ great supply of cattle and the insurmountable barrier in Southwestern Missouri and Southeastern Kansas” to any passing of longhorns. This chance meeting launched McCoy on a mission to find a suitable location for a cattle-loading depot on the UPED where drovers like Suggs might conduct their business unimpeded and unmolested. From that moment on, Suggs and McCoy became fast friends and business accomplices.

One other cattleman provided Joseph McCoy with the impetus to build an outlet for Texas drovers. In 1866, while some drovers like Suggs headed toward Illinois, others pushed on for Sedalia. However, those who finally did make it to the rail connections and stockyards in Sedalia lost heavily in terms of animals and money. Colonel John Jacob Myers was one such unfortunate fellow. By 1867, he had tucked quite a bit of life’s experiences under his belt. He was born in 1821 and raised in Missouri. As a

This 1875 photograph shows Broadway Avenue in Abilene. In 1867, two events—combined with the lack of interest in other towns—helped establish this “very small, dead place” as the location for the McCoy brothers’ stockyards and shipping facility. First, the Kansas legislature pass new legislation that made it a little easier, under strict conditions, to bring Texas cattle into the state. Second, the UPED was making rapid progress in laying its tracks. On March 14, 1867, workers completed the laying of track just west of Mud Creek, providing Abilene with a rail connection. By the end of April, trains had begun running on regular schedules from Salina east to Wyandotte, today’s Kansas City, Kansas. After some negotiation, McCoy managed to buy a small parcel of land from Charles Thompson, and immediately set to work building his operation.
young man, he traveled extensively through the western portions of North America, served in the U.S. Army during the War with Mexico, married, and took his family to Texas by 1851. With the outbreak of the Civil War, he joined the Texas cavalry and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel before the end of the war. After the war, he resumed his farming and ranching and, like many other Texas cattlemen, desired a means to place his cattle into northern markets. Much older than the youngsters James Dougherty and W. W. Suggs, Myers too bore signs of abuse received for his effort to drive a cattle herd through Kansas in 1866.

In June 1867, Myers, who was assessing the prospects for driving cattle into the state, stopped to rest at the Hale House in Junction City, Kansas, which offered some of the finest accommodations west of the Missouri River. Myers probably understood that an improved climate existed for the importation of Texas cattle into Kansas. By the middle of October 1866, the tracks of the UPED had reached Junction City, and many living there aspired to make Junction City a major point of commerce, especially for ranching and farming. This was a good place for a Texas cattlemen to get a read on the future possibilities of driving cattle to that portion of the state. The hotel parlor, known for its elegant furniture and tasteful decor, also provided a good setting for a successful Illinois stock buyer to assess the possibilities of cornering the transportation of Texas cattle on railroad lines headed east.

Following up on his meeting with Suggs, Joseph McCoy arrived in Junction City in June 1867. One day, while staying at the Hale House, he saw a man whom he described as “a small sized, quiet gentleman, who was evidently entering that class upon whose head Time had begun to sprinkle her silver frosts.” McCoy was introduced to this Texan from Lockhart, the fifty-six-year-old Colonel J. J. Myers. McCoy took the opportunity to discuss with Myers his vision for opening a stockyards location where Texas drovers could safely ship or sell their herds. Myers agreed to hear McCoy out, so the two of them left the hotel and walked a few blocks until they found a lumber pile. There they sat for the next two hours, discussing the potential future of driving cattle into Kansas.

As McCoy recalled, Myers advised the young stock buyer “that such a depot, for cattle sale and shipment, was the greatest need of Texan stock men, and that whoever would establish and conduct such an enterprise, upon legitimate business principles, would be a benefactor to the entire Texan livestock interest, and would undoubtedly receive all the patronage that could reasonably be desired.” Together they discussed how to avoid trouble with Kansas farmers and find another route for placing Texas cattle into the burgeoning urban markets to the east. From that moment on, McCoy fixed his attention on building a loading dock, which in time would be at Abilene, Kansas.

Joseph McCoy and his brothers James and William were ever on the lookout for new lucrative opportunities in the cattle trade. Together, they managed a highly successful cattle-buying and -selling operation centered in Springfield, Illinois. Joseph, the youngest of the three, had the most to prove. James and William had already established themselves in the rapidly growing cattle markets of Illinois and New York. According to Joseph, in 1866, it was not unusual for them to buy and ship a thousand head of cattle at a time that would sell for $80 to $140 each. By the time Joseph joined James and William in their endeavors, the three brothers did so much buying and selling that they amassed enough capital to invest elsewhere.

Joseph’s aggressive entrepreneurial bent made him stand out among the three brothers. People who encountered him observed a nearly irrepressible spirit. Samuel Wilkison, reporting in 1867 for the New York Tribune, described Joseph as a “young cattle-dealer, with Scotch blood in his veins, and the shrewdness, courage, and enterprise of his race in his head.” While Wilkison captured one aspect of McCoy’s personality, he missed how prickly he could be and how intensely he could lash out in response to an affront, real or imagined. Undoubtedly, McCoy could harbor a grudge for a long time—years, in fact.

In 1874, McCoy complained about Wilkison’s article and berated the reporter as possessing “more stupid incredulity than brains.” Somehow, McCoy had read the Tribune piece as characterizing the opening of his Texas outlet at Abilene as “a visionary farce.” McCoy, by that time smarting from his own run-in with the UPED, probably thought Wilkison had given far too much credit to the management of the railroad company for advancing the Texas cattle trade. In the 1867 write-up, Wilkison had lauded the company as the “cheapener of beef to the people of the United States.” McCoy found

Why Abilene, Kansas?

39. Ibid., 73–75.
himself nowhere in the reporter’s admiration, and he let Wilkison know it—seven years later.\footnote{McCoy, Sketches of the Cattle Trade, 103.}

The McCoy’s foresaw vast potential gains in moving Texas beeves into eastern markets or into the territories if only they could control the selling and buying at some spot accessible to Texas drovers. The demand was evident, and the means were beginning to come into focus. Railroad links to growing urban markets or open trails leading into the territories to the west were coming into view. The geography had to be just right because Texas drovers were understandably gun-shy, literally, about mixing with Kansas farmers and ranchers in the eastern half of the state. McCoy, after some intensive investigation, thought he had found the perfect location to connect Texas cattle with domestic and international urban markets.

In 1867, two events opened the door for the McCoy brothers. First, the Kansas legislature passed the new legislation that made it a little easier, under strict conditions, to bring Texas cattle into the state. Representative William Brown, a lawyer from Emporia, certainly had no intention of allowing Texas cattle anywhere near the farmers and ranchers in his district because he knew their fierce opposition to the presence of Texas cattle. However, Brown also realized, as did other businessmen in the state, the promise of buying cattle for pennies on the dollar in Texas or Indian Territory and then reaping handsome profits by selling the stock at the prevailing market prices in the Midwest.\footnote{See “From the Capital,” Emporia Weekly News, February 15, 1867; “Members and Officers of the House of Representatives,” in D. W. Wilder’s The Annals of Kansas, New Edition, 1541–1885 (Topeka: T. Dwight Thacher, Kansas Publishing House, 1886), 450; “An Act for the Protection of Stock from Disease,” in The Laws of the State of Kansas Passed at the Seventh Session of the Legislature Commenced at the State Capitol on January 8, 1867 (Leavenworth, KS: Printed at the Bulletin Book and Job Office, 1867), 263–65.}

Brown’s legislation mirrored the former 1861 act in that it allowed Texas cattle into the state during certain cold months of the year. The act permitted Texas drovers to drive cattle freely into Kansas during December, January, and February. But that was where the similarity with the 1861 act ended. Brown devised a quarantine line to protect the northern tier of counties and the eastern half of the state from cattle entering anytime other than during the winter months. The line, however, allowed drovers to drive cattle west of it at any time of year provided the herds were kept at least five miles away from any settlement or ranch unless the residents gave permission.

The quarantine also cleverly kept Texas cattle herds from being driven through the state to the Union Pacific Railroad that was being built across the state of Nebraska. This aspect protected the corporate interests of the UPED by ensuring the convenience of shipping cattle on its line. Even if the officers of the Union Pacific tried to undercut the freight rates of the UPED, Texas drovers still lacked direct access to Union Pacific stockyards in Nebraska during the prime shipping months of the fall. Brown’s legislation met with nearly unanimous approval in the House, passed in the Senate, and was signed into law on February 26, 1867.

Second, the UPED was making rapid progress in laying its tracks. On March 14, workers had completed laying track to just west of Mud Creek. Abilene then had a rail connection. By early April, the company’s rails were within a few miles of Salina, Kansas, the midway point across the state. By April 29, trains had begun running on regular schedules from Salina east to Wyandotte, Kansas (today Kansas City, Kansas). Although Salina and Abilene were both well within the quarantine line, from Joseph McCoy’s standpoint, they rested well west of where troubles had erupted between Texas drovers and Kansas farmers the year before.

Encouraged by his conversation with Colonel Myers, McCoy first attempted to convince the folks of Junction City of the fine prospects that could be developed by establishing a shipping facility. McCoy approached one of the “leading business men” to acquire lots next to the tracks of the UPED. The owner, according to McCoy, in an act of “donkey stupidity and avarice,” asked for an exorbitant amount of money for his property. This unsatisfactory attempt to effect a deal shifted McCoy’s focus to the west.\footnote{McCoy, Sketches of the Cattle Trade, 41.}

McCoy’s next stop was Solomon City because he was aware of its rich potential to become the shipping point for Texas cattle. Despite McCoy’s view that the city had the potential to be a “fine site for stockyards,” the residents greeted his proposition with “stupid horror.” After failing there, he tried to convince the people of Salina that stockyards there would be of great benefit to the city. Given their fears of Texas fever, the citizens of Salina deemed McCoy little more than “a monster threatening calamity and pestilence.” At this point, McCoy turned...
his attention to “a very small, dead place” called Abilene. After some tedious negotiations, he managed to buy a small parcel of land from Charles Thompson, the farmer who owned the town site.\textsuperscript{44}

McCoy knew Abilene had all the traits that made for a good cattle-shipping point, but he mischaracterized the country surrounding Abilene when he described it as “entirely” unsettled. This term implied that there was no one nearby who would get up in arms about the presence of longhorns and Texas fever. “Sparsely settled” might have been a more appropriate description, and those residents would need pacifying. McCoy also understood that the ample water sources and “excellent grass” made the area “adapted to holding cattle.” After sealing the deal with Thompson, McCoy went straight to work building his operation, beginning on July 5, 1867.

Despite having negotiated a successful contract with Thompson, McCoy expressed a low opinion of him. Thompson served as a representative in the Kansas legislature, which led McCoy to say, “Alas! for his virtue.” But McCoy probably remained on good terms with Thompson for sound reasons. For the two men to make good on their agreement, there had to be a way for McCoy to build his stockyards and shipping facility despite the fact that Abilene lay within the quarantine line imposed by the legislature.

The key lay, as McCoy saw it, in convincing the governor of the lucrative potential of his enterprise. Certainly, it would not hurt to have Thompson on his side, working a deal in Topeka. Governor Crawford, who sensed “the magnitude and importance” of McCoy’s undertaking, “freely gave a letter commending” McCoy’s

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 44.

In this illustration from Joseph McCoy’s Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest, one gets a sense of the prosperity the cattle trade brought to Abilene. There were, however, critics of McCoy’s venture. Although he described Abilene as “entirely” unsettled, there were in fact residents concerned about the impending approach of Texas cattle. Part of the 1867 legislation called for a quarantine line to protect the northern tier of counties and the eastern half of the state from cattle entering anytime other than during the winter months, and Abilene lay within this quarantine line. Despite settlers’ opposition, McCoy obtained the blessing of Governor Crawford, who sensed “the magnitude and importance” of McCoy’s undertaking.
Abilene venture and the integrity of the McCoy brothers, as McCoy remembered the governor’s role in vetting Abilene. The fact that Texas drovers combined to provide a $50,000 bond to cover any stock losses incurred by Kansas farmers as a result of Texas fever might also have played a role in the governor’s disposition.\textsuperscript{45}

Of course, critics opposed making an exception for Abilene. By 1865, William Lamb had built up a small herd of about twenty cattle in Dickinson County. In August 1867, he wrote to the governor regarding his concerns about the impending approach of Texas cattle. He referred to the 1867 legislation and asked, “If there is such a law why not enforce it, for there is now, or will be still coming, several thousand head of Texas Cattle.” The settlers, Lamb claimed, were against McCoy’s operation. He explained that there were “some very fine herds of cattle in this part of Kansas, and now to have the Texas cattle fever break out among them, would indeed be to [sic] bad. We are all afraid.”\textsuperscript{46}

By October 1867, the situation had turned dire for some in the county. Newton Blair, in a letter to the governor, accused all the locally elected officials from whom “those Cattle Men thought they had anything to fear” of being “bought up.” He failed to find any justice of the peace who would take up his charge that Texas cattlemen had broken the state law. He also believed that local farmers had lost cattle due to “Spanish fever” and that Texas drovers had refused to reimburse the farmers for their losses. Blair was at a loss for what to do next when “civil courts refuse to act.”\textsuperscript{47}

According to McCoy, the governor retorted, “I regard the opening of that cattle trail [the Chisholm Trail] into and across Western Kansas, of as much value to the State

\textsuperscript{45} William Lamb and “Others” to Governor Samuel Crawford, September 10, 1867, Letters received, Governor Samuel Crawford, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, KS.

\textsuperscript{46} William Lamb and “Others” to Governor Samuel Crawford, August 31, 1867, Letters received, Governor Samuel Crawford, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, KS.

\textsuperscript{47} Newton Blair to Governor Samuel Crawford, October 7, 1867, Letters received, Governor Samuel Crawford, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, KS.
as is the Missouri river.” With the governor’s blessing in hand, the McCoy brothers still had several tasks to complete before they could count on shipping cattle east on the UPED trains.48

McCoy had to finalize details with the officers of the UPED before he could make Abilene the loading center for Texas cattle herds. At the corner of Fifth and Clark Street in downtown Saint Louis, Missouri, stood the colonial redbrick office building housing the railroad company offices. The president of the firm, John D. Perry, had his office on the second floor. In the spring of 1867, when Joseph and James entered the president’s office, they greeted a man little prepared to accommodate their proposal. The McCoy brothers intended to ship tens of thousands of Texas cattle in UPED freight cars. Perry thought the brothers’ proposition little more than a pipe dream.

Perhaps Perry understood something the McCoys did not. At the time, his company lacked the rolling stock that could facilitate the loading of tens of thousands of longhorns. In the fall of 1866, the Junction City Weekly Union reported that the company had yet to receive its order of a mere twenty cattle stock cars. In other words, in October 1866, the UPED lacked the resources to haul a single steer. In the near future, the twenty cars, if one car could haul 20 to 25 head of cattle, could transport only 400 to 500 head at a time. Consequently, an untold number of beeves would be left awaiting the next available loading, with the McCoys anticipating the arrival of individual herds numbering 1,000 animals or more. Perry knew he would have to invest heavily in stock cars if he were to meet the demand for the number of cattle estimated to arrive at the McCoys’ stockyards. A lack of the necessary rolling stock would obviously blemish the company’s reputation. So maybe there was more to Perry’s initial hesitation than thinking the McCoys foolish dreamers.

Perhaps in an attempt to mask his company’s lack of rolling stock, Perry’s bluster astonished both McCoy brothers. He knew he could order more stock cars, which he soon did, adding seven more cars by the middle of August, but he did not have them when he met with the McCoys.49 Therefore, he responded aggressively, “I do not believe that you can, to any extent, establish or build up a cattle trade on our road. It looks too visionary, too chimerical, too speculative and it would be altogether too good a thing to ever happen to us, or our road.” While Perry downplayed McCoy’s vision, he was savvy enough to realize that his company could make a haul if the risk were left entirely with the brothers.50

After a brief moment of what appeared to be reconsideration, Perry told Joseph, “If you think you can get cattle freighted over our road (it is just the thing we want) and are willing to [use] your money in a stock and other necessary appendages, we will put in a switch and, if you succeed, I will pledge that you shall have full and fair recompense.” McCoy would later come to realize just what “fair recompense” was to mean, but when he and James left the office, they believed that they had nearly all of the pieces put together that would allow them to harness the vast potential of the Texas cattle trade.51

Joseph McCoy must have felt great pride, and perhaps some trepidation, while celebrating the building of his stockyards at Abilene on that cool night of September 4, 1867. As the celebrants ate and drank the food and wine he had supplied, his mind raced in anticipation of his prospects. He knew he was undertaking a huge gamble with his and his brothers’ fortunes. But all the pieces seemed to be coming together. Longhorns had arrived over an extended Chisholm Trail, the stock cars stood ready to be loaded the next day, and cattle prices in Chicago and New York seemed strong. Above the eastern horizon of an unbroken grassland, a waxing moon rose, casting a soft glow on the festivities. Many stood and gave rousing toasts to the young McCoy’s achievement. Then it was Joseph’s turn: “Whether this enterprise ultimately proves to be to our financial weal or woe, as individuals, it has been begun and will be prosecuted to the end, with the confident hope that it will be of great benefit to the people of the Southwest and the Northwest, as well as to the laboring millions of the Northeast.”52


50. McCoy, Sketches of the Cattle Trade, 41–42.

51. McCoy, Joseph vs. the Kansas Pacific, McCoy, J. G. Collection, Archives, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, KS, 47.

52. McCoy, Sketches of the Cattle Trade, 212.