

The Chisholm Trail

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The Civil War, our nation's darkest hour, had finally ended. During the four-year long conflict, Union and Confederate forces consumed most of the livestock east of the Mississippi. Fields lay fallow as farmers abandoned their crops to take up arms. Many of the men who should have returned to their farms and ranches paid the ultimate price on bloody battlefields from Gettysburg to Savannah. Food was scarce and a newly united nation was hungry.

As most of the Civil War battles had been fought in the eastern United States, Texas had remained relatively peaceful. Thousands of longhorn cattle left to roam freely over the Texas plains had multiplied into the millions. This overabundance of cattle caused the price to drop to about four dollars a head in Texas while that same cow would fetch forty dollars on the east coast. Resistance to disease and able to survive on scrappy grasslands, these longhorns provided a solution for ranchers to recover the financial losses they had suffered during the war and a means to feed a recovering nation. The only problem was getting them there.

In 1867, a cattle buyer from Illinois, Joseph McCoy, passed through Abilene, the site of a recently laid track of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. There McCoy found "a small dead place, consisting of about a dozen log huts, four-fifths of which were covered with dirt and roofing," but he saw an opportunity. Studying maps, he realized that the Texas longhorns could be herded to Abilene to board the railroad. Purchasing nearly 500 acres, he set to work developing an efficient way to get Texas cattle to the rest of the United States. He built holding pens, chutes, barns, and even a hotel in the tiny town. To round up business, he sent his men south to persuade ranchers to send their herds north to his stockyard. He coaxed cattle buyers from the Chicago meat packing plants to set up shop in Abilene. Just two Months after McCoy first saw Abilene, the first shipment of cattle, 35,000 head, had traveled the Chisholm Trail to Abilene and were loaded onto twenty railroad cars, bound for Chicago.

The Chisholm Trail started as a group of Native American and wildlife trails leading out of Texas. The trails merged near the Red River as it crossed into Indian Territory (current-day Oklahoma). A Scot-Cherokee trader, Jesse Chisholm, operated two trading posts, one in the southern Indian Territory and the other in eastern Kansas. Using the Trail, he traveled with his wagon selling goods to the Native American tribes and settlers. The Trail originally known as McCoy's Trail soon took on the name Chisholm's Trail, as herds of cattle followed Chisholm's wagon ruts on their path north.

The Chisholm Trail, the width of four football fields laid end-to-end, ran for 800 miles. The constant beat of hooves wore down the path until it was lower than the surrounding land. Jacob Bennett of Oklahoma was one of the first cowboys on the Trail. As he recounted in a Library of Congress interview in 1920, "The grass came up to a rider's heels on horseback and when a critter laid down in them days, it was lost from sight and you'd have a hard time finding it 'til you run across the very spot it was laying." In the midst of the grassy fields on either side lay bare circle-like bedding grounds, each a record of a herd staying the night. The trail was littered with the bleached skulls and skeletons of the cows and horses that succumbed to the travails of the Trail. On occasion, a simple wooden cross or a pile of rock marked a low mound, the grave of a cowboy who had died with his boots on.

The danger of stampede was ever present on the Chisholm Trail. The longhorns were wild and easy to spook. Jake Byler, a fifteen-year-old cowboy on the Trail, told of his first stampede, "The boss was on first guard that night smoking Bull Durham in his pipe. A strong wind was blowing from the south and it jarred the fire out of his pipe and that south wind whipped the sparks right over into the herd. They were gone!" The cowboys chased the longhorns at a dead run for six hours, until their horses were nearly dead with exhaustion. Finally, the cowboys calmed the herd, but the cattle made a second break and ran all night.

As the Chisholm Trail crossed into Indian Territory, many tribes demanded tolls, often payable in cattle. The scrawniest cows would be cut out of the herd and given to the tribe. One trail boss's journal described how hungry the tribes must have been because they ate the cow as soon as it was killed, not waiting for it to be cooked. After paying a toll, the herds were allowed to pass peacefully.

Inclement weather was always a threat on the Trail. Lightning storms, flash floods, and sudden

snow storms claimed the lives of both man and beast. One cowboy noted that his clothes stayed wet until he reached Abilene. At night, the cowboys would often move the campfire from spot to spot so they would sleep on the warm spot where the fire had been.

The Chisholm Trail was responsible for the greatest migration of livestock the world has ever known. From 1867 to 1884, nine million head of cattle traveled the 800 miles from San Antonio to Abilene. The Chisholm Trail was eventually closed to herds as more people moved west. Settlers began circling their fields with barbed wire, greatly limiting the open range. An 1885 Kansas quarantine prohibited Texas cattle from entering Kansas because of fears the steers were carrying “Texas Fever”, a fatal livestock disease. Railroad lines expanded, with new railheads opening in Texas. While the trail-drive era ended less than twenty years after it began, the legends of the Cowboys that rode the Chisholm Trail will endure forever.

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