

Chisholm Trail

The "Chisholm trail" was a dirt trail used in the latter 19th century to drive cattle overland from ranches in Texas to Kansas [railheads](#). The trail stretched from southern [Texas](#) across the [Red River](#), and on to the [railhead](#) of the [Kansas Pacific Railway](#) in [Abilene, Kansas](#), where the cattle would be sold and shipped eastward.

The trail is named for [Jesse Chisholm](#) who had built several trading posts in what is now western [Oklahoma](#) before the [American Civil War](#). He died in 1868, too soon to ever drive cattle on the trail.

Business aspects

By 1853, Texas cattle were being driven into [Missouri](#), where local farmers began blocking herds and turning them back because the [Texas longhorns](#) carried ticks that caused diseases in other types of cattle. Violence, vigilante groups, and cattle rustling caused further problems for the drivers. By [1859](#), the driving of cattle was outlawed in many Missouri jurisdictions. By the end of the Civil War, most cattle were being moved up the western branch of the [Texas Road](#), which joined the Chisholm Trail at [Red River Station](#) in [Montague County, Texas](#).

In [1866](#), cattle in Texas were worth only \$4 per head, compared to over \$40 per head in the [North](#) and [East](#), because lack of market access during the American Civil War had led to increasing number of cattle in Texas.

In [1867](#), [Joseph G. McCoy](#) built stockyards in [Abilene, Kansas](#). He encouraged Texas cattlemen to drive their herds to his stockyards. The stockyards shipped 35,000 head that year and became the largest stockyards west of [Kansas City, Kansas](#).

That same year, O. W. Wheeler answered McCoy's call, and he along with partners used the Chisholm Trail to bring a herd of 2,400 steers from Texas to Abilene. This herd was the first of an estimated 5,000,000 head of Texas cattle to reach Kansas over the Chisholm Trail.^[1]

The importance of cattle drives began to diminish in 1887 with the arrival of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad in Texas.

Route

Today, most historians consider the Chisholm Trail to have started at the Rio Grande or at San Antonio, Texas. From 1867 to 1871, the trail ended in Abilene. Later, Newton, Kansas, and Wichita, Kansas, each served as the end of the trail. From 1883 to 1887, the end of the trail was Caldwell, Kansas. Ellsworth, Kansas is also considered a major influence of the trail.

In Texas, there were hundreds of feeder trails heading north to one of the main cattle trails. In the early 1840s, most cattle were driven up the Shawnee Trail. The Chisholm Trail was previously used by Indian hunting and raiding parties; it went north from Austin through Waco and Fort Worth. The trail crossed into Indian Territory (present-day west-central Oklahoma) near Red River Station (in present-day Montague County, Texas) and entered Kansas near Caldwell. Through Oklahoma, the Chisholm Trail generally followed the route of US Highway 81 through present-day towns of El Reno and Enid

Challenges

On the long trips the cattlemen would have a lot of difficulties. The trips could take up to two months. They had to cross major rivers like the Arkansas and the Red, and innumerable smaller creeks, plus the topographic challenges of canyons, badlands, and low mountain ranges. The weather was less than ideal. In addition to these natural dangers, there were rustlers, occasional conflicts with Native Americans if a trail boss failed to pay a toll of 10 cents a head to local tribes for the right to cross Indian lands (Oklahoma at that time was Indian Territory, governed from Fort Smith, Arkansas), and the natural contrariness of the half-wild Texas longhorn cattle themselves, which were prone to stampede with little provocation.

The Beginning of the Chisholm Trail

By the end of the Civil War, Union and Confederate forces had consumed most of the beef east of the Mississippi. Up until then, pork had been the leading meat source in ordinary diets and now, millions of people had developed a taste for beef. As a result, when it was available, a steer would go for as much as \$50 a head back east.

During the Civil War, untended herds of wild longhorns multiplied by the millions. Texas ranchers had become "cattle-poor". Though thousands of cattle roamed the ranches, ranchers considered themselves lucky if they could get \$3 a head. The shortage of beef in the East, together with an increasing taste for it, created a demand that promised great profits if the cattle-poor ranchers could get their longhorn herds to the eastern cattle markets.

With the end of the Civil War, cattlemen needed a new route to get their cattle to market. Joseph McCoy, an enterprising promoter, was the first to see promise in a shorter, more direct route through Indian Territory to the new railheads slowly moving west through Kansas Territory.

Working a deal with the Railroad, McCoy built cattle pens and a new hotel at the railhead in Abilene, Kansas, then hired surveyors to mark a new route back south to Texas. They began with a route almost due south to Wichita, then followed Jesse Chisholm's trade road 220 miles to his trading post on the north Canadian River. From Jesse's trading post, they headed almost due south to Texas to the closest practical Red River crossing along the way, later known as Red River Station. With a safe, easy route from Texas across Indian Territory to Abilene, now marked, McCoy distributed handbills throughout southern Texas inviting cattlemen to bring their herds to Abilene.

Thus, the legendary Chisholm Trail was born and in years to come a love affair with the old west and the American Cowboy would spread across our country and around the world that continues today.

Along the Chisholm Trail

Introduction

In the latter half of the 19th Century, cattlemen rounded up longhorns by the millions in Texas, cropped their ears, branded their hides, and drove them north across the Indian Nations into Kansas. Somewhere along the way, without intending to do more than work for a hard day's pay and board, they launched the legend of the American cowboy.

The cattle drives followed three major routes through what is now Oklahoma. One of those routes, known as the Chisholm Trail, crossed just a short distance from my back door when I lived in Duncan, Oklahoma. I have moved on, but traces of the trail remain to this day.

The following pages explore the past, discover the present, and anticipate the future of this historic cattle trail. Ride along on this virtual trail, and we'll face cattle stampedes, river crossings and other hazards encountered by the hardy individuals who followed the original trail.

The Trail's Predecessors

Texas longhorns were descendants of cattle brought over by the Spanish. English cattle may also have been bred into the line -- I've seen arguments both for and against, and so far have found the arguments against to make more sense. (Show me DNA testing and I'll reconsider.)

Whatever the genetic background, the fact remains that the longhorns were left alone to survive in the wilds of northern Mexico and southern Texas while the men went away to fight each other in the Civil War. Nature converted the once domesticated animal into a lean and hardy breed, fully capable of defending itself against most predators with its long horns and sharp hooves.



The end result was a breed of cattle, resistant also to disease and drought, that flourished until it numbered in the millions. As the buffalo were all but hunted out of existence, their place (in the southern regions, anyway) was taken over by the longhorns. Yet within half a century, the Texas longhorns also were nearly extinct as a species.

At the end of the War Between the States, a seemingly endless supply of longhorns existed. Harry Sinclair Drago writes in *Wild, Woolly & Wicked* that they were considered next to worthless in Texas. Thousands were killed for the tallow and hides -- a good cowhide might bring as much as \$3. Markets for the entire animal were rare -- primarily New Orleans and Mobile, which couldn't handle them in any large quantities.

Small herds of cattle were driven through the Indian Nations (a part of what later became the state of Oklahoma) to markets in Missouri and Illinois, when possible, during the war. After the war, if the cattlemen could get their product to Chicago, a market was waiting for them there -- paying as much as \$35 to \$40 a head. This first trail was called the Shawnee Trail, and later was known as the Texas Trail or the Texas Road.

The year was 1866. The war was over, but bitter emotions lingered. And not just because of the war.

The Indian Nations had been settled by Native Americans who had been forced to move there while under the presidency of Andrew Jackson. Known as the Civilized Tribes, these formerly Eastern residents were interested in starting new lives -- and weren't that thrilled to have Texas cattle trampling their crops and grazing pastures intended for domestic cattle.



Then, if the cattlemen made it to Kansas or Missouri with their herds intact, they had to deal with roving bands of ex-soldiers who called themselves Jayhawkers or red-legs, and who enjoyed murdering Texans.

The cattlemen also had to deal with unhappy farmers and ranchers, prohibitive laws and uncooperative weather.

David Dary, in his book *Cowboy Culture -- A Saga of Five Centuries*, says 260,000 head of cattle headed toward Kansas and Missouri that first spring and summer, but only about half reached their destinations.

CHISHOLM TRAIL.

The Chisholm Trail was the major route out of Texas for livestock. Although it was used only from 1867 to 1884, the longhorn cattle driven north along it provided a steady source of income that helped the impoverished state recover from the Civil War. Youthful trail hands on mustangs gave a Texas flavor to the entire range cattle industry of the Great Plains and made the cowboy an enduring folk hero.

When the Civil War ended the state's only potential assets were its countless longhorns, for which no market was available—Missouri and Kansas had closed their borders to Texas cattle in the 1850s because of the deadly Texas fever they carried. In the East was a growing demand for beef, and many men, among them Joseph G. McCoy of Illinois, sought ways of supplying it with Texas cattle. In the spring of 1867 he persuaded Kansas Pacific officials to lay a siding at the hamlet of Abilene, Kansas, on the edge of the quarantine area. He began building pens and loading facilities and sent word to Texas cowmen that a cattle market was available. That year he shipped 35,000 head; the number doubled each year until 1871, when 600,000 head glutted the market.

The first herd to follow the future Chisholm Trail to Abilene belonged to O. W. Wheeler and his partners, who in 1867 bought 2,400 steers in San Antonio. They planned to winter them on the plains, then trail them on to California. At the North Canadian River in Indian Territory they saw wagon tracks and followed

them. The tracks were made by Scot-Cherokee Jesse Chisholm,qv who in 1864 began hauling trade goods to Indian camps about 220 miles south of his post near modern Wichita. At first the route was merely referred to as the Trail, the Kansas Trail, the Abilene Trail, or McCoy's Trail. Though it was originally applied only to the trail north of the Red River, Texas cowmen soon gave Chisholm's name to the entire trail from the Rio Grande to central Kansas. The earliest known references to the Chisholm Trail in print were in the Kansas Daily Commonwealth of May 27 and October 11, 1870. On April 28, 1874, the Denison, Texas, Daily News mentioned cattle going up "the famous Chisholm Trail." The herds followed the old Shawnee Trailqv by way of San Antonio, Austin, and Waco, where the trails split. The Chisholm Trail continued on to Fort Worth, then passed east of Decatur to the crossing at Red River Station. From Fort Worth to Newton, Kansas, U.S. Highway 81 follows the Chisholm Trail. It was, Wayne Gard observed, like a tree—the roots were the feeder trails from South Texas, the trunk was the main route from San Antonio across Indian Territory, and the branches were extensions to various railheads in Kansas. Between 1871, when Abilene ceased to be a cattle market, and 1884 the trail might end at Ellsworth, Junction City, Newton, Wichita, or Caldwell. The Western Trailqv by way of Fort Griffin and Doan's Store ended at Dodge City.

The cattle did not follow a clearly defined trail except at river crossings; when dozens of herds were moving north it was necessary to spread them out to find grass. The animals were allowed to graze along for ten or twelve miles a day and never pushed except to reach water; cattle that ate and drank their fill were unlikely to stampede. When conditions were favorable longhorns actually gained weight on the trail. After trailing techniques were perfected, a trail boss, ten cowboys, a cook, and a horse wrangler could trail 2,500 cattle three months for sixty to seventy-five cents a head. This was far cheaper than shipping by rail. The Chisholm Trail led to the new profession of trailing contractor. A few large ranchers such as Capt. Richard King and Abel (Shanghai) Pierceqqv delivered

their own stock, but trailing contractors handled the vast majority of herds. Among them were John T. Lytleqv and his partners, who trailed about 600,000 head. Others were George W. Slaughterqv and sons, Snyder Brothers, Blocker Brothers, and Pryor Brothers. In 1884 Pryor Brothers contracted to deliver 45,000 head, sending them in fifteen separate herds for a net profit of \$20,000. After the Plains tribes were subdued and the buffaloqv decimated, ranches sprang up all over the Plains; most were stocked with Texas longhorns and manned by Texas cowboys. Raising cattle on open range and free grass attracted investments from the East and abroad in partnerships such as that of Charles Goodnight and Irish financier John Adairqv or in ranching syndicates such as the Scottish Prairie Land and Cattle Company and the Matador Land and Cattle Company.qv Texas tried to outlaw alien land ownership but failed. The XIT Ranchqv arose when the Texas legislature granted the Capitol Syndicate of Chicago three million acres for building a new Capitol.qv The Chisholm Trail was finally closed by barbed wireqv and an 1885 Kansas quarantine law; by 1884, its last year, it was open only as far as Caldwell, in southern Kansas. In its brief existence it had been followed by more than five million cattle and a million mustangs, the greatest migration of livestock in world history.

CHISHOLM, JESSE (1805?-1868).

Jesse Chisholm, Indian trader, guide, and interpreter, was born in the Hiwassee region of Tennessee, probably in 1805 or 1806. His father, Ignatius Chisholm, was of Scottish ancestry and had worked as a merchant and slave trader in the Knoxville area in the 1790s. Around 1800 he married a Cherokee woman in the Hiwassee area, with whom he had three sons; Jesse was the eldest. Sometime thereafter Ignatius Chisholm separated from Jesse's mother and moved to Arkansas Territory. Jesse Chisholm was evidently taken to Arkansas by his mother with Tahlonteskee's group in 1810. During the late 1820s he moved to the Cherokee Nation and settled near Fort Gibson in what is now eastern

Oklahoma. Chisholm became a trader and in 1836 married Eliza Edwards, daughter of James Edwards, who ran a trading post in what is now Hughes County, Oklahoma. Chisholm took trade goods west and south into Plains Indian country, learned a dozen or so languages, established small trading posts, and was soon in demand as a guide and interpreter. Eventually he interpreted at treaty councils in Texas, Indian Territory, and Kansas.

He was active in Texas for nearly twenty years. While president of the Republic of Texas,qv Sam Houston,qv who probably met Chisholm at Fort Gibson between 1829 and 1833, called on him to contact the prairie Indian tribes of West Texas. Chisholm played a major role as guide and interpreter for several Indian groups at the Tehuacana Creek councilsqv beginning in Spring 1843, when he coaxed several tribes to the first council on Tehuacana Creek near the Torrey Brothers trading post eight miles south of the site of present Waco. Over the next year and a half he continued to offer his services to Houston, and on October 7, 1844, Chisholm got Comanches and others to attend a meeting at Tehuacana, where Houston spoke. In February 1846, while visiting the Torreys' post from a trip south of San Antonio, Chisholm was hired to bring Comanches to a council at Comanche Peak (Glen Rose today). The meeting was held on May 12. Finally, on December 10, 1850, Chisholm assembled representatives from seven tribes at a council on the San Saba River. At some of these meetings and on trading trips he was able to rescue captives held by the Indians.

By 1858 Chisholm ended his trips into Texas and confined his activities to western Oklahoma. During the Civil Warqv he served the Confederacy as a trader with the Indians, but by 1864 he was an interpreter for Union officers. During the war Chisholm resided at the site of Wichita, Kansas; Chisholm Creek in the present city is named for him. In 1865, Chisholm and James R. Mead loaded a train of wagons at Fort Leavenworth and established a trading post at Council Grove on the North Canadian near the site of present Oklahoma City. Many of his Wichita friends followed, and their route later became the Chisholm Trail,qv

which connected Texas ranches with markets on the railroad in Kansas. Chisholm attempted to arrange an Indian council at the Little Arkansas in 1865, but some tribes held out. In 1867, with the aid of Black Beaver, famous Delaware leader and guide, he induced the plains tribes to meet government representatives in a council that resulted in the Medicine Lodge Treaty. Chisholm died of food poisoning at Left Hand Spring, near the site of present Geary, Oklahoma, on April 4, 1868.

Chisholm Trail

