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Article Summary: Originally the longhorns driven up to Nebraska by cowboys were shipped east by train. Later Panhandle ranchers wintered and fattened Texas cattle for sale to Indian agencies and military posts.

See also Part I of this article:

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Early Nebraska Markets for Texas Cattle

NORBERT R. MAHNKEN

Part II

The first breath of spring in 1871 started the Texas cattlemen up the trail. It soon became apparent that the stream of cattle to northern markets during this season would reach a greater volume than ever before. Spurred on by reports of the fabulous profits gained by drovers during the extraordinarily successful season of 1870, Texas cattlemen the next year put every size, type, and condition of cattle on the trail. Dust churned by the hoofs of thousands of long-horns hovered over the Chisholm Trail, and by the end of the year over 600,000 southern cattle had entered Kansas. This number was probably never again equalled during the subsequent years of trail driving.

Nebraskans interested in the trade expected a correspondingly large increase in the number of cattle that would be driven to the Platte Valley. During the winter Judge Fant had returned to Texas, where he had busied himself traveling about the state, meeting drovers and ranchers, and placing before them the merits of Schuyler as a market. He spent several weeks in Austin while the state legislature was in session, and there met with leading figures of the state.¹ As a result of Fant's untiring zeal and his many contacts in Texas, the local press in Nebraska confidently looked forward to busy and prosperous times at Schuyler and other Nebraska markets.

One cloud darkened the otherwise pleasant prospect, and that was the failure to obtain a beef packing plant for Omaha. A group of Omaha citizens during the winter sought strenuously to interest first, eastern investors, and then Creighton and Loveland in the plan

¹ Omaha *Herald*, November 30, 1870.

to build Omaha's first packing plant. Neither group seemed to believe that conditions warranted their undertaking the enterprise and the plan was reluctantly abandoned.² The cattle coming to Nebraska would have to be sold to the same buyers who made the season of 1870 a successful one.

The hopes of most of the Texans who in 1871 pointed herds up the trail were to be disappointed, for profits nowhere equalled those of the previous year. By 1871 the favorable conditions which had made the previous season a banner year had disappeared. The end of the Franco-Prussian war and the consequent termination of foreign contracts for beef to supply the military forces of the two powers were immediately reflected in a downward trend in prices for dressed beef and cattle. The rate war between the eastern railroads was ended and the resultant adventitious benefits for the cattlemen were no more, since the new rates were high, if not actually excessive. Nor did the cattle reach the markets in as good condition as usual, for the grasses of the plains that season were woody and lacking their usual nutrient qualities, storms were frequent and stampedes many, so that the longhorns lost rather than gained weight on the trail.

The market at Abilene, Newton, and other Kansas towns was sluggish, "absolutely flat" a contemporary observer noted,³ and buyers were choosy. On the Chicago market good grades of Texas cattle, which during the previous season had sold for \$5.50 per hundred now brought only \$2.70.⁴ Common varieties of cattle could hardly be sold toward the end of the season, and many Texas drovers who had carelessly brought mediocre or poor grades up the trail found it impossible to dispose of their herds. Thousands of cattle were turned out on the prairie, the drovers deciding to graze them through the winter in the hope that by spring the cattle would be in good condition, buyers more active, and prices higher. Virtually every likely location along the creeks in northern Kansas and southern Nebraska was chosen as temporary headquarters by some outfit, for fully half of the cattle brought up from Texas found no satisfactory market and were thrown upon the prairie for the winter.

The number of cattle handled at Schuyler during 1871 declined considerably. Settlers were closing the trail from Abilene to Schuyler.

² *Ibid.*, September 7, November 23, 1870.

³ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1871.

⁴ *Omaha Republican*, July 26, 1871.

The years 1870 and 1871 witnessed the first great flood of settlement into the South Platte counties of central Nebraska. The population of the state was increased by some 40,000 people (35%) in 1871, and a large proportion of these pioneers took up land claims in southern Nebraska, particularly in those counties through which the new line of the Burlington from Lincoln to Kearney was to be built, and along the tributaries of the Blue River. Some 11,500 acres were occupied in Gage county during March, 1871 alone.⁵

This rapid settlement in the Blue Valley meant that drovers on their way to Schuyler must now pass through territory quite heavily populated, and in these areas the animosity of settler toward cattleman again boiled to the surface. Editors friendly to the Fants noted in July that their cattle found the trail to Schuyler hard and dangerous. Heavily armed settlers stampeded the cattle, occasionally stole a few head, and threatened to hail the drovers into court to force payment for real or supposed damage to crops and gardens. Everything short of physical violence was done to discourage the drovers. Dillard Fant, in personal charge of one of the Fant herds, was met by sixteen armed men who hoped to drive off the cowboys and stampede the herd. The Texans, however, did not bluff easily, and the raiders rode away unsuccessful. Disgusted and discouraged were many of the drovers when they reached Schuyler, where they complained that their herds had been "fearfully maltreated" and consequently arrived in "poor condition." Judge Fant went to Lincoln to meet with state officials to ascertain what action could be taken to suppress the disorders and protect the cattlemen along the Blue.⁶ The governor assured Fant that the past troubles would be investigated, and that those guilty of the theft of cattle would be prosecuted if they could be identified by the aggrieved parties. No action was taken, however, for opinion among the settlers was generally too unanimous to make any punitive action possible or politically expedient. Cowboys rather than settlers were brought into the courts, as in Jefferson county, where a group of Texas cowboys were arrested on charges of having carelessly set a prairie fire.⁷ The troubles continued throughout the eastern counties until the end of

⁵ Omaha *Central Union Agriculturist*, May, 1871, p. 133.

⁶ Omaha *Herald*, July 5, 1871.

⁷ Fairbury *Gazette*, October 21, 1871.

the season. Near Schuyler a Texas herd belonging to Bob Lott stampeded during a storm and drifted into Dodge County. Settlers in the area set upon the herd, killed and packed away quite a number of the herd before the cattle were rounded up again. Prosecution was impossible, though it was common knowledge who were involved in the slaughter.⁸

When once the herds reached Schuyler, prices offered were none too high. Choice beeves, which during the previous season had sold at \$25 seldom brought more than \$17, and prices for cows and young stock declined in direct ratio. Even contracts for supplying the Indian agencies were not as lucrative as formerly. During the previous season some contractors had received as much as 6¼c per pound for beef furnished the northern agencies. In 1871 C. C. Cox of Nebraska City felt fortunate to get a contract for the Upper Missouri agencies at \$2.87 per hundred.⁹

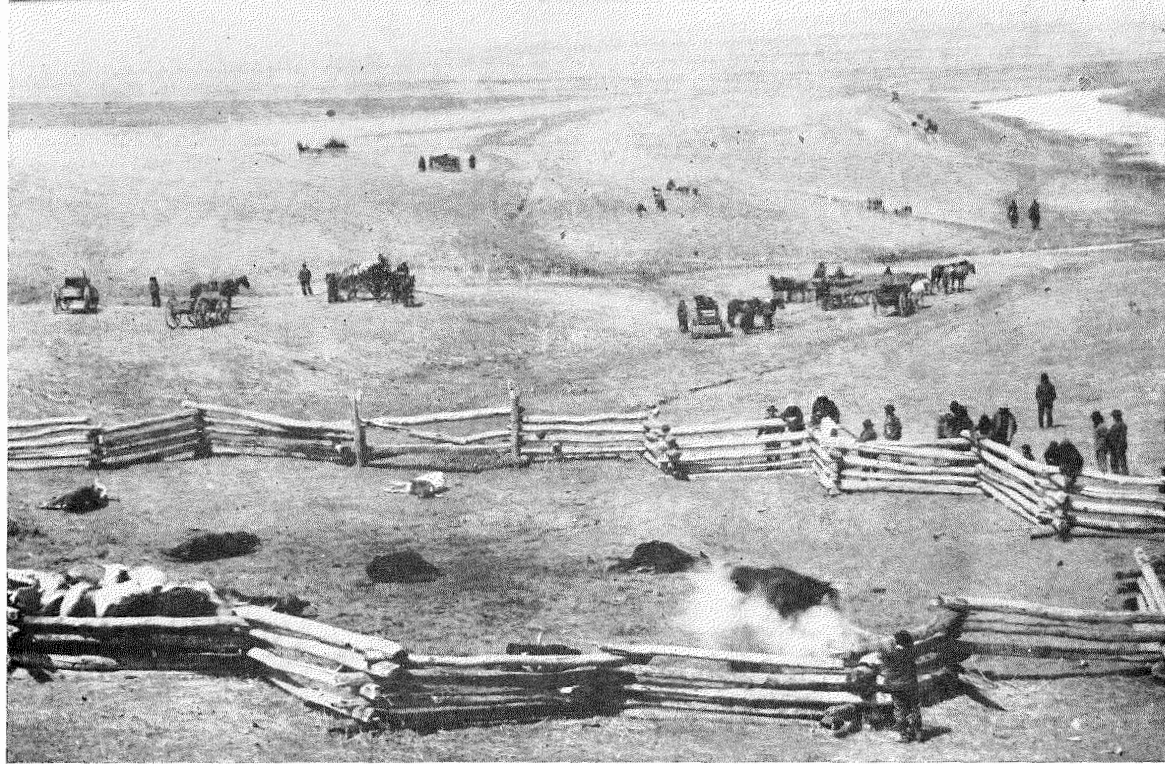
As had been the case at Abilene, many cattle were not sold at Schuyler and were driven westward for the winter. Throughout the South Platte country were to be found herds of Texas cattle, put there by luckless owners in the hope that market conditions would improve by spring. Yet the climax of their woes was still to come in the form of the worst prairie winter the Texans had yet experienced. On November 15, 1871, cattlemen were still riding in their shirt-sleeves, it was so warm. That night, however, it began to rain, the temperature fell, the rain froze in the ground, and then followed a snow storm which lasted three days. At Lincoln the weather observer recorded a low of 17 degrees below zero and a 70 mile per hour gale.¹⁰ At Fort Kearney a total of 20 inches of snow fell during a week's time,¹¹ and the storm covered much of Nebraska and northern Kansas. For the Texas cattle unused to such weather the storm was unbearable. In many sections of the state deep snows lay on the ground all winter, snow and ice coated the grass, and the longhorns could find no food. From cold and starvation they died by the thousands, and when the spring thaws finally dissipated snow and ice the gaunt carcasses of the victims of nature's caprices carpeted the plains and the valleys where they in vain sought shelter and food.

⁸ *Omaha Republican*, October 4, 1871.

⁹ *Ibid.*, June 21, 1871.

¹⁰ *Nebraska History Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 3.

¹¹ *Fairbury Gazette*, November 25, 1871.



GOVERNMENT BEEF ISSUE AT FORT DUCHESNE, UTAH

Indian reservations were one of the chief markets for Texas range cattle. This is a typical scene on the Uintah Reservation.

In Franklin county a herd of 1,500 Texas cattle was so decimated that by spring only 600 were still alive. Out of another herd of 2,400 head being wintered in the eastern part of Harlan county all perished but 450.¹² Their owners were but two of the many cattlemen who watched their herds die off and disappear during the winter, who left the state "busted" and disgusted cowmen. Though some cattlemen made an attempt to recoup their losses in part by skinning and selling the hides of dead cattle, for most of the trail drivers the year 1871 could only be called catastrophic.

Schuyler's brief period of prominence as a cattle market ended with this year. Dillard Fant, convinced that the Nebraska town was becoming inaccessible, sold only a few hundred head there and in Omaha in 1872, and marketed most of his herds in Wichita, Kansas. Although Texas cattle were reported at various points in eastern Nebraska as late as 1874, they were always small herds of only 200 or 300 head, and their mention in the press was usually occasioned by the difficulties the drovers were experiencing. The last large herd of Texas cattle being driven to Schuyler in 1872 was set upon by angered settlers of Butler county during a foggy morning and several hundred of the stampeded steers killed. Once again the drovers threatened legal action, but though several arrests were made it was impossible to obtain a conviction through a prosecuting attorney and jury kindly disposed toward the settlers. This was the last big herd to move up the Blue Valley. In Kansas the citizens of Abilene had invited the drovers to take their trade elsewhere after the season of 1871, and the trails as well as the leading markets for Texas cattle moved westward both in Kansas and in Nebraska.

The last of the towns in eastern Nebraska which hoped to benefit from the Texas trade was Beatrice. In the fall of 1872 a considerable number of small herds passed through Gage county on their way to feeders in eastern Nebraska. These cattle had been driven up from Ellsworth, the new market on the Kansas Pacific. It was the hope of a small group of Beatrice citizens that during the following year Beatrice would stand in somewhat the same relation to Ellsworth as Schuyler had to Abilene. Yet though a number of large herds were driven from Ellsworth to the vicinity of Beatrice, chiefly cattle owned by W. T. Burnham and Cad Pierce, at most only 15,000 cattle reached the Gage county town that year. A few of these were

¹² Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 868, 960.

shipped east over the Burlington, many more were sold to local buyers, and a considerable number were wintered on the Otoe reservation. Whatever hopes Beatrice might have entertained of becoming a cattle market were dashed by the refusal of the Burlington to grant equitable rates for the haul from Beatrice to Chicago. Cad Pierce, the well-known Texas cattleman who was most interested in the possibilities of Beatrice was killed at Ellsworth in August, 1873, by Ed. Crawford, a gunman serving as a police officer, and with his death were extinguished the hopes of the promoters at Beatrice.¹³

After the closing of the yards in Schuyler the Nebraskans interested in the cattle trade made Kearney the center of their activities for a few years. After the Civil War there had been a small but steady trickle of cattle from Abilene to various western points, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming or Idaho. Those venturesome drovers who during these years undertook the long trek through territory occupied by hostile Indians found it advisable to keep close to the army posts. Fort Kearney became the first stopping point out of Abilene for those drovers moving their steers to the mining camps or ranches of the west. Here on the military reservation along the Platte the cattle were rested and supplies for the chuckwagon replenished before the outfit hurried on westward to Fort McPherson, the next halting point along the westward trail.

After 1869 another group began to make Fort Kearney a point of some importance in the cattle trade. During that year the first permanent ranches within Nebraska handling Texas cattle the year round were established. Along the Platte river near Fort McPherson and farther west between the North and South Platte a number of pioneer cattlemen located ranches and purchased their first herds of Texas cattle in 1869. At Ogallala the Lonergan brothers brought in their first Texas cattle. Near Plum Creek (Lexington) Daniel Freeman, who had formerly operated a road ranch on the Overland Trail, now turned his interest to cattle raising, and was running 500 head of mixed native and Texas stock. Several herds grazed in the area near North Platte, among them that of M. H. Brown, who in 1868 brought in 800 head of longhorns, thus becoming the earliest of Nebraska's ranchers dealing in Texas cattle.¹⁴ Somewhat larger were

¹³ *Beatrice Express*, July 24, August 21, August 28, September 11, September 25, 1873.

¹⁴ *Plattsmouth Nebraska Herald*, March 13, 1870.

the herds of Keith and Barton, made up of 1,000 longhorns, chiefly cows, purchased in 1869 and turned out to graze between the forks of the Platte around O'Fallon's Bluff, about eighteen miles west of North Platte. Another group of pioneer cattlemen, Bratt, Coe, and Carter, established their home ranch about four miles southeast of North Platte and laid claim to the range between the Platte river, Medicine and Red Willow creeks, west of Fort McPherson and east of O'Fallon's Bluff. They contracted for 2,500 Texas cattle to be delivered at Fort Kearney in the fall of 1869. By the following spring an estimated 7,000 head of Texas cattle were owned by Nebraska cattlemen along the Platte between Plum Creek and Ogallala. In September, 1870, a publicist for the Union Pacific reported several new herds in the area between the forks of the Platte. The Moore brothers, near Sidney, had added 1,400 cattle to the thousands of sheep they were handling. Part of the Creighton herds purchased at Schuyler were to be wintered along the South Platte west of the range claimed by Keith and Barton, while other new arrivals in the vicinity of North Platte were the Bent brothers with 1,000 head, and Benjamin Gallagher, who located his home ranch at the old Gilman ranch, twelve miles from Fort McPherson.¹⁵

Another range was also being occupied by cattlemen during these years—the territory along the South Loup river. A Texan, Captain Streeter, wintered 800 head on Ash Creek in Custer county during 1869-1870 and lost only two head. He was soon followed into this rancher's paradise by other cattlemen who soon claimed the Loup valley for thirty miles.

Through Kearney were driven during 1870 the first Texas cattle destined for the Nebraska Panhandle. The Coad brothers invested profits garnered during construction of the Union Pacific in several thousand head of longhorns and purchased the building at the Old Scotts Bluff pony express station which they now made their ranch house.¹⁶ Their range lay along the south side of the North Platte river from the Wyoming border to the mouth of Pumpkin creek. At about the same time the Creighton brothers brought in their first 1,000 head of Texas cattle and held them on the upper reaches of

¹⁵ Omaha Herald, September 7, 1870.

¹⁶ Shumway, *History of Western Nebraska*, p. 100.

Pumpkin Creek. The third of the pioneer cattlemen in this area, H. V. Redington, located a ranch between Lawrence fork and Pumpkin Creek, also during 1870. Within the next two years several additional ranches were established in the same region, and from the Panhandle there also came an ever-increasing demand for longhorns.

These early Nebraska cattlemen, whether of Custer county or from the Platte valley usually contracted for their cattle to be delivered at Fort Kearney. By the time the military reservation was abandoned in 1871 it was widely known as an ideal location for fattening and conditioning the herds brought up the Chisholm trail.

In three well-defined areas, in the Platte valley around North Platte, in the Panhandle along the North Platte and Pumpkin Creek, and in Custer county along the South Loup, ranches had become firmly established by 1871. Two factors had been of prime importance in the choice of locations for these ranches—easy access to markets and protection from hostile Indians. The ranchers along the Loup, located as they were within 30 miles of Kearney, looked to that point for their market and shipped most of their cattle eastward. Many of the first ranches in this area were established by Texans who discovered that longhorns wintered in Nebraska during a reasonably mild winter would add weight speedily and increase in value as much as 25% during the winter months.

Cattle were also shipped eastward from the North Platte region as early as 1870. During the spring and summer of that year Keith and Barton shipped one car load of stock weekly to Omaha, while in November of that year 1,440 head were shipped by the Creightons.¹⁷ However, most of the cattle in this area were consumed in the local market. In North Platte itself, where after 1870 were located Union Pacific shops and 800 workers, Keith and Barton as well as Bratt and Company established their own wholesale and retail meat markets.¹⁸ The Union Pacific Hotel was operated by Keith and Barton, and its dining room served steaks and mutton from the proprietor's herds. There were also 800 troops at Fort McPherson and commissary officers at this and other military posts along the Platte made extensive purchases from the local cattlemen. Some of the cattle from the Circle herd of Coe and Carter were also

¹⁷Plattsmouth *Nebraska Herald*, March 13, 1870. *Omaha Republican*, November 16, 1870.

¹⁸North Platte *Enterprise*, February 8, 1873.

sold to furnish beef to the Pawnee at the Genoa agency.¹⁹ The State Board of Agriculture reported that the value of the beef produced and sold by the Lincoln county cattlemen during 1870 approximated \$75,000.²⁰ Though that figure must be discounted somewhat, it is obvious that the industry in this area had reached sizeable proportions. A few years later M. C. Keith estimated that his firm had from 1870 to 1874 sold some 2,000 head of cattle, half of which had been shipped eastward, and half, chiefly old cows, had been butchered for local market.²¹ During these early years their annual fall shipment to the Chicago market averaged about 250 head, and the partnership prospered, in spite of the financial panic of 1873.

The cattlemen of the Panhandle, operating within the area of protection afforded by Fort Laramie, sold almost exclusively to government contractors at that point, the beeves to be delivered either to military units or to the Ogallala and Brule Sioux who received their annuity goods and rations in that area. From 1871 until August, 1873, the temporary Red Cloud agency was located southeast of Fort Laramie, near the present town of Henry, Nebraska. Here more than 6,000 Sioux and a smaller number of Cheyenne and Arapahoe gathered periodically to receive their rations,²² made up in large part of Texas beeves furnished by Nebraska and Wyoming pioneer cattlemen. The profits gained from supplying beef on government contracts for the Indians were very considerable, for in 1870 prices paid averaged \$4.39 per hundred pounds. Even during the adverse year of 1871 it was still possible to make money in spite of the fact that the average price paid to contractors sagged to \$2.60²³ as a result of general depressed conditions in the cattle trade and the revelation of past graft and dishonesty in the awarding of contracts by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Beef steers purchased at Kearney for \$12 to \$15 could after a few months on the range be sold to the government for \$25, the investment netting 50% or better. Equally satisfactory prices were being paid at the military posts along the upper Platte and on the Laramie Plains. There could be no doubt that in spite of the losses due to the rigors of winter on

¹⁹ Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday*, 176.

²⁰ *Third Annual Report*, Nebr. State Board of Agriculture, 1871, p. 264.

²¹ Curley, *Nebraska*, p. 364.

²² Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1871, p. 2, 698-699; 1872, p. 267.

²³ Dale, *Range Cattle Industry*, p. 79.

the northern plains and occasional bands of marauding Indians the early cattlemen of the Panhandle were making phenomenal profits. Almost without exception the early cattlemen reinvested their profits in further expansion of their herds, so that the number of cattle in the area increased steadily.

The harsh winter of 1871-1872 proved a severe blow to the cattlemen of the central portion of the state, though the Panhandle escaped the full fury of the winter's storms. Keith and Barton also reported only slight losses among their cattle grazing between the forks of the Platte. The longhorns held along the Loup river suffered greatly, and losses of 35% (over 2,000 head) were reported among Bratt, Coe and Carter's herds. In part the heavy losses of the latter firm were due to the fact that 1,520 head of mixed Texas cattle which had "hard usage on the trail"²⁴ arrived just a week prior to the November storm.

The setback was only temporary, however. Weather conditions were ideal during 1872, the market improved—in October good Texas cattle were selling at \$2.75 and \$3.25 in Omaha and at \$4.20 in Chicago²⁵—and the cattlemen successfully weathered the storm. Bratt, Coe, and Carter, who were perhaps hardest hit, recouped part of their losses with the aid of \$10,000 in Federal funds, payment of their claim for damages due them for 450 cattle allegedly killed during the winter by Indians under Spotted Tail and Red Cloud while hunting in the Republican valley.

After the completion of the Burlington line to Kearney in the fall of 1872 and its junction with the Union Pacific at that point, new stock yards were built. During the next two years business was very brisk. The movement of Texas cattle into the vicinity of Kearney did not slacken until after 1874. Much of the land around the town was rapidly settled during these years, but about 100 square miles of land adjoining the Platte River southeast of Kearney remained the domain of the cattlemen. This vast stretch of choice pasture had been the old Fort Kearney military reservation, and even after the post itself was abandoned in 1871 the land was not opened for settlement until five years later. A few squatters had settled on the reserve, but the cattlemen had no need to fear them since they

²⁴ Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday*, p. 222.

²⁵ Omaha, *Central Union Agriculturist*, October, 1872, p. 290.

had no legal title to the land, and the drovers could not be held liable for any damages the squatters might suffer. Into this choice locale was driven the greater share of longhorns sold to Nebraska ranchers, for here, free of molestation by "nesters," the cattle could graze until turned over to the northern buyers.

Kearney as a cowtown proved to be far more boisterous than Schuyler had been. Cowboys looking for fun and a place to spend their money could find it easily. Gamblers, saloonkeepers, and prostitutes, who had formerly made "Dobytown," just off the limits of the Fort Kearney reservation their headquarters, now moved into town and began to help the cowboys part with the cash in their pockets. Occasionally youthful enthusiasm got the best of the young riders as they dashed down Wyoming avenue shouting and firing their pistols to announce their arrival, and townspeople, unable to enter into the spirit of the occasion complained about the Texans "shooting up the town." Finally in 1874 a substantial jail was built—a "Blue Eagle Hotel" the local editor called it²⁶—and though its first occupant was reported to be a temperance lecturer arrested for drunkenness, it was designed primarily to impress the visitors from the south. At about the same time a vigilante committee was organized, made up of Civil War veterans who chose to speak of themselves as the "Kearney Guards."

The "Guards" played an important role in the last cowboy "raid" on Kearney. In October, 1874, a group of cowboys in town for a final celebration before returning to Texas became more boisterous than usual. "Texas" Spence and Bill Bland, two rough characters among the cowboys, started a free-for-all in one of the saloons, which ended with the usual "shooting up the town" (the only casualties were store windows). Two days later the cowboys, in number about twenty-five, returned. While they were in Weibel's saloon a hurried call was sent out for the vigilantes. About fifty of them soon gathered, heavily armed, and engaged the cowboys in a running gun battle as they rode south out of town toward the Platte. In the affray two cowboys, "Texas" Spence and another named Schoenberg, were wounded, the former fatally.²⁷ The remaining herders camped on an island in the Platte River. While here they talked loudly of

²⁶ North Platte *Enterprise*, June 20, 1874, quoting the Kearney Junction Press.

²⁷ North Platte *Enterprise*, October 31, 1874.

returning to capture and burn the town. In Kearney itself the "Guards" drilled daily, practiced marksmanship, and made the Burlington depot their arsenal.²⁸ The comic-opera war ended soon thereafter when the Texans thought better of their announced plans to return to the town and gathered their belongings and headed south.

This was the last serious trouble with the cowboys in Kearney. A prominent Kearney citizen was killed in 1875 by Jordan P. Smith, a Texas trail boss, but the speed with which the Texan was apprehended and brought to trial served to emphasize that Kearney's days as a cowboy paradise were past. The Kearney "Guards" were thereafter organized into a company and incorporated into the state militia, further indication that the town had become sedate and respectable.

Already Kearney had been supplanted by Ogallala as Nebraska's leading cowtown. In 1875 the Western Trail was followed to Ogallala by a few venturesome Texas drovers. During 1873 and 1874 the Republican valley had been cleared for the trail through western Nebraska. Buffalo and Indians, who up to that time had closed the valley to cattlemen, were removed, the former exterminated by buffalo hunters, and the latter eliminated by government action prohibiting hunting in the valley, and by the removal of the Ogallala Sioux agency to northern Nebraska. The greater share of the Texas cattle brought to Kearney in 1875 arrived in the herds of those Texans such as Millett and Mabry and Dillard R. Fant who had government contracts. From the Buffalo county point the cattle began another lap of the long journey which took them northward through Nebraska to the various Indian agencies in Dakota Territory. After the season of 1875 the cattle driven to Nebraska passed into the hands of government contractors or the owners of ranches in Nebraska and Wyoming, and their needs were best filled at Ogallala, the new cowboy capital.

Yet the glory of Ogallala might never have been but for Schuyler, and the other Nebraska markets. The fact that the Fants had been dissatisfied with the facilities and prices at the Kansas Pacific market in Abilene, and thereafter together with the Union Pacific had built up Schuyler as an alternative market speeded greatly the introduction of Texas cattle into Nebraska. The market at Kearney

²⁸ Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 423.



From Harper's Weekly February 27, 1886

CATTLE IN A BLIZZARD ON THE PLAINS

had stirred the interest of those pioneer Nebraskans, former construction contractors, road ranch operators and freighters, who now turned to ranching, and had also provided the cattle needed for their range operations. The Indian agencies and military posts within the area had provided the single most profitable market for drovers and local cattlemen alike. These marketing opportunities stimulated the Nebraska range cattle industry in its initial decade, and laid the foundation for a number of great ranches.