The Role of the Cattle Trails

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THE ROLE OF THE CATTLE TRAILS

BY WAYNE GARD

NEBRASKANS, no less than Texans, are familiar with the bawling of steers on their way to market. Nowadays the beef animals are confined in the slatted stock cars of a freight train or in big motor trucks. They are headed for stockyards and packing plants in cities like Omaha, Kansas City, and Chicago.

Today it takes a bit of imagination to picture the era in which cattle and other livestock were taken to market on foot. Yet that kind of marketing, which in America began in colonial times, lasted longer than the present one of power vehicles has prevailed thus far. The earlier moving of cattle and other meat animals on the hoof affected the development of the country in many ways.

Although cattle trailing often is associated with the Lone Star State, Texans make no claim to having innovated that means of moving herds from one place to another. The trailing of cattle and sheep to markets, to the ranges of

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new owners, or to and from summer pastures goes back beyond the day of Abraham. In the New World, in 1540, Coronado brought into what later became the United States large herds of cattle and sheep. They were intended to supply meat for his expedition in search of fabled cities of gold.

Trailing cattle to market on the Atlantic seaboard began at least as early as 1655. In the spring of that year, John Pynchon and his cowboy helpers took from Springfield to Boston, over a trail known as the Bay Path, a herd of stall-fattened cattle. By 1700, farmers in many sections of New England were trailing cattle and hogs to the cities for slaughter. Soon those who lived farther south began making similar drives to Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston.

After 1800, as the frontier was pushed westward, farmers began making longer drives from Kentucky and Ohio. In the 1820's, stockmen took herds from Ohio and Indiana to Baltimore. Sometimes they trailed cattle and hogs together over backwoods roads. Except for the boss and perhaps a flanker, who rode horseback and carried blacksnake whips, the men were afoot. At night they bedded the herds at farms, where the owners bought corn for them. The animals forded most of the streams, crossing others by ferry. Some of the trails they used became later the routes of railroads.

In the 1830's and 1840's, large cattle herds from Illinois and Missouri were trailed to Chicago and to Buffalo, Boston, and other eastern cities. By the outbreak of the Civil War, railroads were hauling cattle across the eastern states, but some still were taken to market afoot. In the fall of 1863, Walt Whitman watched a large herd raising dust as it was taken through the streets of Washington. Men on horseback, he noted, cracked whips and shouted. Some of them led the cattle with a wild, pensive call, "between the cooing of a pigeon and the hoot of an owl."

The assumption that the trailing of cattle from Texas

began only after the Civil War is, of course, erroneous. The trailing after the war marked an increase in an activity that had been going on for several decades. Even under Spanish and Mexican rule, a few small drives had been made to Louisiana. This trailing increased during the period of the Texas Republic.

Just when the first Texas cattle were trailed north is uncertain. A herd of fifteen hundred was said to have been taken to Missouri in 1842, but the first northward drive of definite record was made in 1846. In that year, Edwin Piper took a thousand head to Ohio.

While other northward drives followed, the demand for beef by the influx of gold-seekers to California led to long drives from Texas to the Pacific Coast. From 1849 to 1860 a number of herds were pointed west over trails made hazardous by lack of grass and water and by the attacks of Apache raiders.

Meanwhile, drives to Louisiana and to the north continued and, in the 1850's, increased in volume. The trailing to the north during this period was largely over the Shawnee Trail, which crossed the Red River at Rock Crossing near Preston. It led through the eastern part of the Indian Territory, past Fort Gibson, and on to various points in Kansas and Missouri. Some of the herds were trailed on to Quincy or Chicago, and a few were taken to New York.

Most of the cattle from Texas were half-wild Longhorns, some of which had been captured in the brush country. They were descended mainly from Spanish cattle that had gone wild, but they had a small mixture of blood from British breeds that early settlers had brought from the older states. The toughness that made them good animals for the long trails did not enhance them in the eyes of some buyers.

In St. Louis in 1854 the *Intelligencer* noted that scrawny steers trailed five hundred miles from Texas could be sold at fifteen dollars each only because they had been raised on grass alone. "They never ate an ear of corn in

their lives," it added. "An attempt was made to feed them corn and provender at the stockyards, but they ran away from it. Texas cattle are about the nearest to wild animals of any now driven to market. We have seen some buffaloes that were more civilized."

In New York four years later, the *Times* remarked that some recently arrived Texas cattle "were barely able to cast a shadow." They would not weigh anything, it added, "were it not for their horns, which were useful in preventing them from crawling through fences." A week later the same newspaper reported that among the arriving cattle were "140 from Texas, said to have been grazed in Illinois, but it must have been by the roadside as they came along. Their appearance indicated that they had tasted little even of the prairie grass."

In 1853 those Texas drovers who took their herds north began to be plagued by trouble in Kansas and Missouri. This was because their Longhorns, although themselves immune to the livestock disease then called Texas fever, carried ticks that gave the fever to cattle in the territory through which the herds passed. So many Kansas and Missouri cattle became infected with this disease that the farmers demanded laws to stop the trailing from Texas. In some places they formed angry mobs to turn back the herds. In several cases they killed Texans who refused to obey their orders.

The outbreak of war in 1861 stopped nearly all the trailing except for some to feed Confederate forces, a few drives to Mexico, and a little contraband trailing, even to New Orleans. After the war, the returning soldiers found much of Texas a vast reservoir of Longhorn cattle in various stages of wildness. As their Confederate money was worthless and gold was scarce, many farmers and ranchmen began to gather cattle to trail to northern markets.

The drovers who pointed their herds north in 1866, in larger volume than ever before, ran into worse trouble than before the war when they reached Kansas and Missouri. Many herds were stopped and had to graze for the

winter in the northern part of the Indian Territory. It became apparent that a new trail would have to be opened. The new route would have to be west of the settlements and thus avoid trouble with farmers over Texas fever.

While Texas drovers talked of the need for a new trail, a young Illinois cattle dealer, Joseph G. McCoy, began doing something about it. In the summer and early fall of 1867, he established at Abilene, Kansas, on the Union Pacific Railroad (later to become the Kansas Pacific), a new cattle market that was beyond most of the farm settlements. He invited Texas drovers to bring their cattle to his market by a new and more westerly route that later came to be called the Chisholm Trail.

This trail, which in time carried more cattle than any other, took its name from the fact that, from the central part of the Indian Territory to Wichita, it followed the wagon tracks of a Scotch-Cherokee trader, Jesse Chisholm. From its opening in the fall of 1867, it increased its load every year to the peak year of 1871. After that, Abilene citizens asked the drovers to use other markets. They had concluded that the cattle business was not worth the crime and vice it brought to their town.

In the next few years, the Chisholm Trail business was divided between Ellsworth and Wichita. Later it went to Dodge City and Caldwell. In 1876 a rival route, the Western Trail, was opened to Dodge City and began handling an increasing number of herds. A fork of the Chisholm Trail also helped to supply this new market.

Later there were still other trails, some farther west and others extending from the Kansas cow towns to Colorado, Nebraska, and the territories to the north and northwest. Not all the Texas cattle trailed to Kansas were shipped to Kansas City or Chicago stockyards or to Illinois feeding pens. Many went to stock new ranges that were being opened to ranching as the hide hunters cleared them of buffaloes. The Texas cattle were cheap and could go

through most winters with little, if any, supplemental feeding.

In their trailing of cattle, the Texas drovers developed a few techniques of their own. From the early cow hunts, they perfected the roundup; and, partly from the Mexican *vaqueros,* they became experts in roping. They also worked out new methods for handling herds on the trail. Each man had several horses, including one good for night work. The herd was strung out on the trail, perhaps for half a mile, to avoid crowding and consequent overheating. Two trusted cow hands rode in the lead, one on each side, as pointers. Behind them, at intervals, rode the swing men and the flank riders, to keep the cattle in order. In the dusty rear were the unenvied drag men to prod the laggards.

Individual cattle tended to keep about the same positions in the strung-out herd. Ambitious steers that kept in the lead often were useful in starting the herd across a river or into a corral. Some drovers belled them and took them back to Texas to use the next season. The importance of having good lead steers was shown in an item in the Dallas *Herald* in the spring of 1873. A herd of twelve hundred cattle stampeded within the town of Dallas. That is, all but two of them did. "The two that didn't take fright," reported the *Herald,* "had led the drove from the time its owners started out. During the alarm of the rest of the drove, they stood motionless. The drivers had the satisfaction of seeing the frightened cattle return and gather 'round the more composed leaders."

For the cowboy, the trail was a road to high adventure. It carried him to new scenes and often to exciting encounters. For years afterward he would sing:

> I woke up one morning on the old Chisholm Trail,
> Rope in my hand and a cow by the tail.
> Feet in the stirrups and seat in the saddle,
> I hung and rattled with them Longhorn cattle.

The drive from Texas to Kansas took a month or more, depending on the part of Texas from which the herd started

and the luck the outfit met on the way. The cost usually was estimated at a dollar a head. On the trails there were no farms to sell warm meals to the drovers and corn for the cattle. The Longhorns were used to living on grass, and usually they could find enough along the trail. Sometimes they would be stopped for a day or two to fatten on lush grass in the Indian Territory, even though that was forbidden.

Food for the men came from the chuck wagon, a Texas invention. In some of the early trailing, provisions and a few cooking utensils were carried by a pack mule. Soon after the Civil War, drovers began adapting wagons for trail use, the hinged rear end opening down to form a table for the cook. After that, those who still used pack mules were scorned as "greasy sack outfits" and their mules as "long-eared chuck wagons."

The chuck wagon was well suited to the drovers' needs. Wide tires helped it to go through mud and sand. Extra sideboards gave space for the men's bedrolls and other equipment. The chuck box at the back served as a cupboard. Usually the wagon carried a keg of water, and sometimes it was underslung with a hammock or "possum belly" for firewood.

An early description of a chuck wagon was given by a writer who watched one being loaded in front of the grocery stores at Matagorda, Texas, early in 1874. He noted:

> The outfit of a Texas drover is a scientific fit. There seldom is a cover to the wagon—it's too much trouble. The whole is exposed to public gaze. There are kegs of molasses, jugs of vinegar, boxes of bacon, sugar, and a variety of other provisions. Some things are strapped to the sides in a helter-skelter but perfectly secure manner. Sometimes bundles of kindling are tied to the hind axle.

A good cook was an asset to any trail boss. One who could provide tender steaks, fluffy sourdough biscuits, and tasty son-of-a-gun stew could do much to keep the men contented while far from home and deprived of the entertainment offered by frontier cow towns.

Most of the trailing was done in the spring and early summer, starting as soon as the new grass was high enough to support the herds. Other drives were made in the fall, after rains had made the grass green again.

The cattle were especially nervous during the first day or two of the drive, but soon they became accustomed to the routine. In June, 1854, Tom Candy Ponting and Washington Malone were trailing 150 fat Longhorn beeves east from Illinois. They happened to enter the village of Attica, Indiana, on a Sunday morning. "Just as we got between two churches," Ponting recalled, "both bells began to ring. I was near the head and stopped the oxen. I talked to the cattle as if they were children. They listened a moment and then moved on."

Yet handling cattle on the trail was not always that easy. Flooded streams often brought danger and delay, and quicksands might appear in new places. Careful use of men on horseback and of lead steers was needed to induce the cattle to wade into a river and start swimming. In the middle of the stream the cattle might start swimming around in a circle instead of going on across. Then the trail hands would have to go in on their most dependable horses and try to break up the mill before the frightened cattle became exhausted and were drowned. The cowboy's highest tribute to a mount was to call him "a horse to ride the river with."

As hazardous as the river crossings were the stampedes. No matter how trail-broken the herd had become, anything that startled one or more of the Longhorns could panic the whole herd into one of those wild and unpredictable rushes. A stampede, or "stompede" as the trail hand was likely to call it, could be set off by any unusual sound or smell. It might be the crackling of a dead stick, the snort of a horse, or the sudden howl of a wolf. Marauding Indians might burn a sack of buffalo hair on the windward side of a herd to start the cattle running.

Stampedes were much more common at night. For

(Drawing by A. Castaigne, **Scribner's Magazine,** June, 1892.
Photo, courtesy Denver Public Library Western Collection)

Trailing Cattle to Market

that reason, the trail boss tried to choose a bedding ground with no nearby cliff over which the cattle might tumble in the darkness. Those trail hands on night duty often hummed or sang lullabies to keep the cattle asleep. Despite every precaution, though, a frightening thunderclap might have them up and off in an instant.

When that happened, every man in the outfit dashed for his horse and started out after the rushing brutes. Riding alongside the leaders, the horsemen often tried to turn the cattle into a circle and thus put the herd into a mill. Yet they dared not push them into too compact a mass lest those in the center be trampled or suffocated. They ended the mill as soon as they could to keep the cattle from losing weight. Sometimes it would be several days before the whole herd could be reassembled, even if all the bunches could be found.

In any stampede, the trail hands had to be careful not to be caught in front of the rushing cattle. That might mean quick death from trampling, although, if the stampeding Longhorns saw a horse or a fallen rider in time, they might split ranks and go around. For a fellow who was unhorsed in front of a crazed herd, Mark Reeves had a bit of advice. All the fallen puncher needed to do, said Reeves, was to bend over, facing the oncoming cattle, hold his hat between his teeth, and shake his coattails over his back. But most cowboys were less than eager to test that advice, especially at night.

An equally dreaded hazard was raiding by Indians. Sometimes there were white rustlers along the trail, but they were greatly outnumbered by the redskin marauders, especially during the early days of trailing. Although the Indians preferred buffalo meat, hunting it was less easy than stampeding a passing herd of Texas cattle and making off with some of the steers. Often the Indians were even more interested in the spare horses of the trail outfit and would raid the camp and run off as many of them as they could.

In the later years of trail driving, the Indians did less raiding than begging and blackmailing. Usually the trail boss could satisfy them with two or three steers. When he could, he gave them strays from another herd or lame animals that were having trouble keeping up with the drive. Some of the tribes imposed fees for allowing herds to cross their reservations, but the drovers often evaded such taxes.

For the men who rode the trail, the days were long and tiring. By the time they reached some market town in Kansas, they were ready to celebrate. They had been in the saddle for weeks, with monotonous diet, no women, and no entertainment beyond the nightly howling of the coyotes. Their wants were met quickly. Abilene, which had been a sleepy village of a dozen log cabins, roofed with dirt, and a few business buildings, became in a few weeks a riotous cow town. Soon it had eleven saloons with gambling rooms in the back, several dance halls, and a whole colony of sporting women.

The frontier Texas cowboy liked to wear his pistols wherever he went and to fire them whenever the spirit moved him. Residents of the cow towns soon became aware of that habit. Young J. B. Edwards, who delivered ice to the Abilene saloons, saw much of this revelry. He recalled:

> When a man from Texas got too much tanglefoot aboard he was liable under the least provocation to use his six-shooters. Not less than two were always hanging from his belt. If his fancy told him to shoot, he did so—into the air or at anything he saw. A plug hat would bring a volley from him at any time, drunk or sober.

The various trails out of Texas carried an estimated nine or ten million cattle. This appears to be the largest migration of domestic animals in recorded history. Even after railroads were available, the trailing continued for a decade, although in diminishing volume. Texas acquired railroads to the north and east in time for the 1873 trailing season, and a rail line tapped the Chisholm Trail at Fort Worth in the summer of 1876.

Fairly large rail shipments were made from Fort Worth, Dallas, and Denison. Fort Worth shipped 51,923

head in 1877, the first full year in which it had a railroad. Yet the rail shipments were only a fraction of the trail herds. The railroads did not have enough stock cars to carry them all. In addition, rough roadbeds, protruding horns, and inexpert handling often led to injury of the cattle.

That was an era in which some of the Texas railroads were in the control of financial manipulators in New York. Officials of the roads were too busy extending their lines and selling shares of stock to go after the cattle business or to offer attractive rates. Repeatedly the Fort Worth *Democrat* took to task the Texas railroads for not soliciting cattle shipments as did the Kansas roads, whose agents were active in Texas. "A do-nothing policy will not secure the cattle trade for any line," that newspaper said in 1876. "If our Texas roads want this traffic, they must compete for it."

At that time, comparative costs favored trail driving. Said the *Democrat*:

> Two thousand head of cattle, or one hundred carloads, cost by the Missouri, Kansas and Texas to St. Louis $10,000, and by the Texas and Pacific $11,500—a difference of $1,500 in favor of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas. To drive two thousand head to Kansas costs $1,000. Thence by rail to St. Louis $7,500, total $8,500—a difference in favor of the Kansas routes of $1,500 over the Missouri, Kansas and Texas and $3,000 over the Texas and Pacific. These differences are altogether too great. So long as they exist, we may look for the trade to go where it has always gone—to Kansas.

The decline of trail driving in the late 1870's and early 1880's came not so much from the competition of railroads as from the westward extension of farms and fenced ranches. The push of settlers into the plains of Kansas had led to the extension of quarantine lines, leaving only Dodge City and Caldwell as trail markets in that state. Even in Texas, barbed-wire fences were being built around many pastures, some of them crossing the cattle trails. After the season of 1884, the Chisholm Trail was virtually closed. Dodge City, still at the head of the Western Trail, had its big year as a cow town in 1885. Stockmen asked

Congress to establish a national trail through eastern Colorado, but their plea went unheeded.

The 1880's, in addition to bringing more settlers and fences to the frontier, saw the building of new railroads. All through that decade, the rail lines carried an increasing share of the cattle moved from Texas to northern markets and to new ranges. Gradually rain and wind erased the hoof marks on the trails, and grass began to reach over the beaten paths. Even the river crossings became hard to find as some streams changed their courses and as new growths of willows and cottonwoods appeared on the banks.

On the nation's economy, the trails had made a more lasting impression. The Longhorns taken over them from Texas had enlarged the business of cattle feeding in Illinois and elsewhere. They also had spurred the starting of cattle ranches on the northern ranges. The new spreads in Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas were stocked largely with cattle that had been walked all the way from Texas.

This effect of the trail drives was noticed especially in Wyoming. The editor of the Cheyenne *Leader* reported that the season of 1871, the peak year of the Chisholm Trail, was "a memorable one in the stock business on the plains. Its success was doubted by many newcomers, but the year has closed with their unlimited confidence in the complete practicality and profits of stock growing and winter grazing. The number of cattle is double, if not four times larger than in 1869."

In Wyoming and adjoining states, the trails brought not only cattle to stock the plains and the mountain valleys but ponies for use in tending the northern herds. Some of the Texas cow hands who had come up with the herds stayed on to work. Mastery of the arts of roping and branding enabled them to command high wages. More than a few of the transplanted Texans set up homesteads and began acquiring herds of their own.

The trail driving filled a need for more beef and

brought the price down for the housewife. Although some of the early Texas beef was tough and had to be sold at a discount, the feeding of Longhorn steers in the Midwest soon overcame that handicap. As early as 1869, two years after the opening of the Chisholm Trail, the directors of the Union Stockyards and Transit Company in Chicago noted the change. In their third annual report, they observed that consumers "demand this Texas stock as it lessens to them the price of beef."

Before the trails were closed, the upgrading of Texas cattle by the use of bulls of British breeds had further improved the quality of the beef. On thousands of American dining tables, beef had replaced pork as the chief meat item. The trail drives were a major factor in that change.

Even Europe felt the impact of the American cattle trails. In the 1870's, Texas beef began to reach Europe in large quantities. Ships carried it on the hoof, in tubs, in tin cans, and in the form of frozen sides. While consumers welcomed it, European cattle raisers became aroused against this competition from across the Atlantic. In several countries they induced their governments to bar imported beef by means of high tariffs or quarantines based on imagined diseases.

In the American Midwest, the trail drives spurred the growth of Chicago and Kansas City as centers for beef packing. Although Cincinnati had remained the chief meat-packing city until after the Civil War, Chicago had done some slaughtering as early as 1820, shipping meat over the lakes to Detroit, Buffalo, and Rochester.

By 1850, Chicago had three small stockyards. Drovers often grazed their herds in pastures just west of the Chicago River before trailing them into the city. The Union Stockyards, owned principally by the nine railroads then entering Chicago, began business on Christmas Day, 1865. Beef packing there took a big spurt two years later as Texas Longhorns began coming in by the trainload from the head of the Chisholm Trail at Abilene.

Meanwhile the profit to be made by packing beef did not go unnoticed in Kansas City. A small packing plant was built there in 1859, in the period of the Shawnee Trail; but the Civil War had ended its operation. In 1868, as Texas Longhorns from the Chisholm Trail came in from Abilene, a new plant was built. In the following year, Kansas City handled three million dollars in cattle money.

In 1871, Kansas City, with seven railroads, had four packing plants in operation. A now-familiar name was brought in when one of the plants was leased that year to the Milwaukee meat-packing firm of Plankinton and Armour. As its meat business grew, Kansas City built two lavish gambling houses for entertaining visiting cowmen.

The trail drives spurred the building of more Western rail lines and affected the routes of some of them. Rival roads hastened to tap the trails. Others built into the Texas cattle country, foreseeing the day when beeves would be taken to market by rail instead of on foot.

The trails also gave incentive to the development of refrigerator cars and the canning of meat. The first refrigerator car, which appeared in 1867, the year the Chisholm Trail was blazed, was a mere icebox on wheels. Direct contact with the ice caused the meat to become discolored and to spoil soon after its removal. Before long, improved cars kept the ice and the meat in separate compartments. In the summer of 1869, George H. Hammond began shipping refrigerated meat from Chicago to Boston. Twelve years later, Gustavus F. Swift was doing such shipping on a larger scale. The use of refrigerator cars and the canning of meat encouraged the building of packing plants in such cities as Omaha, Wichita, and Fort Worth, which were near the sources of beef.

For the cattle-raising sections of Texas, the trails offered a way of escape from the poverty in which the Civil War had left the state. The trails enabled the cowmen to convert into cash the Longhorns that were overrunning many ranges. By selling surplus cattle, along with the

annual yield, many could pay their debts. Some sold enough trail animals to buy land for new ranches, to build fences and windmills, and to bring in better breeding stock.

Travel up and down the trails also helped to heal the animosity that the abolition movement and the Civil War had engendered. Joseph G. McCoy observed in 1874 that the cattle trade was a means "of bringing about an era of better feeling between Northern and Texas men by bringing them in contact with each other in commercial transactions. The feelings today existing in the breasts of all men from both sections are better than they were six years ago."

Even for the cowboy, who viewed the cattle drive less as a business venture than as a lark, the trails had lasting rewards. Every puncher carried memories of far horizons, winding rivers, faithful mounts, and thundering stampedes. He had survived dangers that made the hazards of a more settled life seem tame. He had stories of buffaloes and Indians that grandchildren would ask for again and again. He might sing:

> With my knees in the saddle and my seat in the sky,
> I'll quit punchin' cattle in the sweet by-and-by;

but he would treasure to his last moment the vision of a Longhorn herd strung out on the green prairie or bedded down for the night under the gleaming stars.

Today few traces of the old cattle trails remain. They live on in song and story and in many an outstanding canvas. Yet the last word on the great trail drives and the men who made them has not been said. They still offer grist for forms of art above the level of the gunsmoke writers who have exploited them in pulp stories and on the movie screen. They could be a backdrop for a musical show as satisfying and as successful as "Oklahoma!" or for a great novel. We at least can hope that someone will provide for our children an immortal epic of the trail drive.