



## THE CHISHOLM TRAIL

The city of Wellington, Kansas, lies just 7 miles east of the cattle trail of the 1870's that led to the largest cattle market of its time in the entire world. While those days are over 120 years gone by, it is fitting that we reflect on those times and be aware of what a rich heritage is connected with what came to be called the Chisholm Trail.

A newcomer to this area may be surprised to see so many things around our town and in the Wichita area named for the Chisholm Trail. So many things in fact, that many of us only have a vague idea or awareness of the circumstances that caused the trail to come into existence let alone the exact years that it flourished. We truly do live in an area rich in historical significance during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

America is a very young country by comparison to those of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the old world whose great civilizations date back thousands of years. Not so for the area in which we live. The mid-west was a great and grassy plain filled with wild animals and the Native American people called the Indians.

Except for those of Native American heritage, most living in this area are of old-world ancestry. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American Civil War played a major role in the creation of this route which became known as the Chisholm Trail.

At the time of the Civil War from 1861 to 1865, very few white settlers had yet come to this area of Kansas. In fact, Kansas had only become a state in 1861, and most of its southern populations were east of the Arkansas River. What lay west of there was mainly populated by Native Americans and buffalo, with a few coyotes and bobcats sprinkled in, what many people referred to as wilderness. Generally speaking, it was vast grassland with what few trees there were growing near streams or rivers. The many trees here today have been artificially introduced by human beings.

Two key factors led to the creation of the great Chisholm Cattle Trail. One was the Civil War, and the other was the millions of wild long horned cattle that roamed over Texas. These are thought to be the descendants of Spanish cattle first brought to Mexico in 1541 by Francisco Vasquez de Coronado.

Over the 300 years following that time, many cattle escaped from their Mexican owners, multiplied, and gradually populated the area of Northern Mexico and Texas with a wild breed that was gaunt and lanky, and very durable. They had to be to survive and multiply on their own in such a harsh environment. In addition, they were very dangerous and could very easily kill a man on foot. The long horns were truly wild animals, and there were about six million of them roaming free over

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Texas. They were not the kind of cattle we are familiar with today. In fact, even then, cattle east of the Mississippi River were almost entirely of English origin, short horned, fatter, and more docile.

Kansas became a state the same year the Civil War began. In this war, the northern Yankees and southern Confederates killed one another in order to settle their differences. Americans spent from 1861 to 1865 killing one another.

Many young Texans went eastward to fight in that war, a few perhaps fought for the North, to stop slavery, but most fought for the South to keep slavery. When the war was over, those that survived returned to their ranches and tended the long horned herds. But the long horned cattle they raised were not of great value in the sparsely populated Texas, with an overabundance of cattle. In fact, that is about all they had. There were so many long horned cattle in Texas, that the vast majority of them roamed wild and free. The other States had consumed cattle during the war.

In the years before the Civil War, on occasion, Texans had herded their cattle north and eastward across the Indian Territory, we know today as Oklahoma. One of the earliest Kansas cow towns was Baxter Springs, before Kansas was even a State. These earliest cattle drives were headed towards Northern Missouri and a few even went all the way to Chicago. The best part of such a drive was that not only could the cattle feed off the land on the way, but they were worth three to five times more what they were in Texas when they reached the market.

The market was often at the first railhead, where the cattle were bought by dealers who shipped them east to slaughter houses, although sometimes they were bought by local ranchers for the purpose of feeding them and trying to fatten them up. A very tough challenge because these animals were naturally lean and remained half wild.

Often drovers had no set destination in mind when they left Texas, but drove the cattle northeastward until they encountered a market. A few herds early on were even driven all the way to New York and the New England area. And there were many hazards along the trail. Of course the cattle provided food for the drovers on the way.

## JESSE CHISHOLM

There are many references in and around south central Kansas to the old Chisholm cattle trail of the 1860's and the town of Caldwell. It actually passed about 7 miles west of Wellington. In fact, some of the very first Wellington businessmen of the 1870's so badly wanted the trail to go through Wellington that they got together and tried to plow up the route west of town in order to get drovers to veer eastward and pass through Wellington. But they were unsuccessful. The trail followed a nearly straight line from Caldwell to Wichita and Wellington just simply lay a couple miles east of that line.

While we often see and hear of things in this area named after the trail, perhaps not many of us know all that much of its actual history. Some may think that its name had something to do with the

Texas cattleman John Chisum (spelled differently). But John Chisum never traveled this trail, and in fact was moving to New Mexico, to begin ranching there, about the time the first cattle herds began moving up this trail to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas.

The fact is, Jesse Chisholm, for whom the trail was named, had already passed away in March of 1868 at the age of about 62, long before 1871, the best year for the trail when some 600,000 head passed northward along it and several years before people started calling it, for lack of a better name, "Chisholm's trail". Before about 1871, the route had been referred to sometimes as the 'Kansas Trail' or the 'Abilene Trail', or simply 'The Cattle Trail'. It was about three years after his death that most people finally settled on calling it Chisholm's Trail, or the Chisholm Trail.

Born in Tennessee, the old home of the Cherokees of the East, Jesse was of mixed heritage. His father was of Scottish descent, while his mother's maiden name was Rogers and she was believed to be mostly Cherokee Indian.

Jesse Chisholm himself was neither cowboy nor a cattleman. He was a trader between white men and the Indians in and around Wichita, Kansas, and the Oklahoma Indians to the South. His trading post was on property he owed along the Chisholm Creek now within the Wichita city limits. In fact today, you may visit Chisholm Creek Park in Wichita near the location of Chisholm's early day trading post.

He made trading trips and established a route southward into Oklahoma Indian territory as early as 1865. This route was to become the cattle trail. Other traders and travelers including James R Mean and William Mathewson used Chisholm's route southward as well. Mead and Mathewson streets still exist in Wichita.

It was on one of these trips in March of 1868, after he had helped to guide the first cattle drive up his route in 1867 that Jesse Chisholm fell ill and died in what is now Blaine County, Oklahoma. This was during the second of only about ten years the cattle trail enjoyed before it was shut down by settlers fencing their land as they homesteaded the south central Kansas area south of Wichita.

Jesse Chisholm was, by all records, a man liked, trusted, and respected by early settlers and Indians alike. Jesse was said to have spoken 12 Indian dialects. The following picture shown here is the only photograph known to have been taken of him. This was taken in the later years of his life, and perhaps not long before his death. It may have been taken at Leavenworth, Kansas, perhaps in the summer preceding his death, when it is claimed that he made one or more trading trips to that area.

But most curious, and perhaps least known, is the fact that a man named Joseph G. McCoy probably did more than any one man to establish the early cattle drives up what was later to be referred to as the Chisholm Trail.

The 60 year old Jesse Chisholm was compensated by 30 year old Joseph McCoy to show and point out to Texas cattlemen his route northward across the Oklahoma Indian territory from the vicinity of Anadarko, Oklahoma, to his trading post along Chisholm Creek in Wichita, -- and to encourage the

sometimes hostile Oklahoma Indians not to attack the drovers and their herds. As mentioned above the first cattle were brought northward the route in 1867.

#### JOSEPH G MCCOY

Little known to many other than historians, is the fact that an ambitious 30-year old man named Joseph G McCoy probably did more than any other one individual to establish cattle drives up the route that was later to be called the Chisholm Trail.

The forward looking and fairly wealthy McCoy was a cattle trader from Springfield, Illinois, who came westward into Kansas searching for the best location to establish a railhead for loading cattle to be shipped to the eastern states, where the Civil War had consumed most of the cattle.

He had learned that wild cattle brought to Mexico by Coronado, had multiplied and migrated into Texas, and several million were free to be had by those willing to round them up. Those in Texas who were doing just that, were beginning to get wind of Kansas markets but were afraid to drive herds northward, not knowing for certain where they could be sold.

McCoy verbally contracted with officials of the Kansas Pacific Railway to personally build cattle pens and loading facilities, if they would extend their line to a point which later became the Kansas cattle market at Abilene. McCoy was to send word to Texas cattlemen of this shipping point, and would in turn receive \$1 for each carload of cattle that left Abilene terminal.

During his efforts to establish what would soon become the world's largest cattle market, McCoy enlisted the help of Jesse Chisholm in showing cattle drivers the route he had used since 1865 across the Oklahoma Indian Territory to and from his trading post in Wichita.

The first year cattle herds came northward to Abilene, 1867, was a wet year, not all that good for driving cattle, and only about 35,000 cattle came up the trail. But McCoy with the help of his two older brothers, was encouraged, and in addition to the cattle pens, built a three-story frame hotel building at Abilene. They also sent representatives to Texas advertising the route, and took out ads in newspapers and dispersed circulars throughout Texas advertising the trail and cattle market.

As a result, 75,000 came up the trail in 1868; 350,000 in 1869; 300,000 in 1870; and the best year of all was 1871 when 600,000 were driven up the trail.

But settlers were also following the railroads westward into Kansas, and settlers didn't like cattle drives crossing their newly staked out land. Thus came the barbed wire and problems. Meanwhile the railroad extended on to Newton, then to Wichita, each in turn becoming the market at the end of the Chisholm Trail.

The railroad had reached Dodge City, and settlements south of Wichita had virtually closed off that land to the cattle drive by 1876, so the Chisholm Trail was abandoned by many, and Dodge City

became a railhead and market. When the Santa Fe Railroad came to Caldwell in 1880 however, the old Chisholm Trail came to life once again.

As all this took place, Joseph McCoy had been having serious problems with the Kansas Pacific Railway. Having spent the money he came to Kansas with, and then gone deeply in debt, he was forced to make demand on the railway in the fall of 1870. They not only refused to pay, but repudiated the contract and become insulting.

Judgment was rendered for McCoy for the full amount in the District Court at Junction City, but the decision was appealed by the railway to the Kansas Supreme Court, and it wasn't until 1872 that Joseph McCoy was awarded the money due him. But by this time his creditors had sold off his holdings at great loss, and McCoy had essentially lost the fortune he had worked so hard for.

Joseph Geiting McCoy, who perhaps did more than any other one man to establish the Chisholm Trail, passed away on October 18, 1915, in Kansas City, a man worth only a small fraction of what he might have been worth, had the KPR officials kept their word to him.