

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Seven

Cattle Drives

LESSON IDEA

To show the courage and determination required to drive a thousand herd of cattle from Texas, through badlands and Indian territory, to rail lines in the Kansas cowtowns.

PREPARATION

We recommend obtaining a copy of *The Cowboys* (published by Time-Life Books, Inc.) from your local library, for an excellent pictorial history of the Texas cattle drives.

* * * * *

PITY POOR OLD Jesse Chisholm. He ate some bad bear grease in 1868 and died not long afterwards. He never knew that the trail he blazed from San Antonio, Texas to Abilene, Kansas would become one of the most famous cattle trails in American history. Or that between 1867 and 1884, millions of cattle would be prodded along his trail, destined for the slaughter houses of Kansas City and Chicago, to help feed a hungry and growing nation.

There were other trails leading from Texas to the cowtowns of the Great Plains: the Dodge City Trail, the Goodnight Trail, the Abilene Trail, and the Western Trail. Up these trails cowboys drove the longhorn steers to reach cattle pens squatting near newly laid railroad spurs. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 had opened up vast new opportunities for Texas cattlemen to get their meat to market quickly. From the cattleman's point of view, the longhorn steer was an ideal product. By the hundreds of thousands, these wild and woolly cattle roamed throughout Texas and Mexico. They were well-adapted to their sur-

roundings, feeding on the scrubby prairie grass, and capable of withstanding violent changes in temperature. What is more, they were free for the taking. Descendants of cattle that first arrived in Mexico on Spanish galleons, these longhorns had grown to be independent mavericks that became rip-snorting mad when corralled.

The first cattlemen acquired their herds by hiring some men to round up a few thousand strays then pushing them northward, letting them graze on the hundreds of miles of grasslands between Texas and Kansas. On a three-month drive up the Chisholm Trail, a steer would often gain as much as 400 pounds before it reached the railroad siding. What an ideal product for any businessman! The longhorn took care of itself, cost nothing to feed, and increased its weight along the trail — thereby increasing its selling price. At the start of the great cattle boom it cost little or nothing to get beef to market, but as open prairie land became more scarce, cattlemen were forced to both feed and breed cattle for market.

A cattleman usually had little difficulty finding enough men to drive a herd up north. Plenty of youngsters barely out of their teens willingly strapped on a six-gun and mounted a horse for a drive that would take them through badlands and Indian territory.

A typical drive would include at least ten men, including the trail boss and the cook. The cowboy's day began at 4 a.m., with the cook rousting them out of their bedrolls for a breakfast of steaming

sourdough biscuits, juicy steaks, and black coffee. By sun-up the cook had carefully repacked his chuckwagon and was bouncing off down the rutted trail to get set up at the noonday site.

When the trail boss was satisfied that each man was in his proper position, trailing behind or alongside the herd, he'd give the word to move out. A thousand head of cattle would begin moving north. There was plenty to worry about on a drive; cowboys faced threats ranging from bears to rattlesnakes, and from blizzards to flash floods to cattle rustlers. But what they probably feared most of all was a thunderstorm during the night.

ONE COWBOY described what happened to him on a fearful and violent night in June of 1874, when shafts of lightning ripped holes in the earth around him and stampeded the entire herd. Galloping through the drenching darkness, Robert T. Hill remembers: "I found myself and another rider chasing a small bunch of cattle close upon their heels. Never before nor since has thunder sounded to me so loud as on that run or have lightning crashes come so rapidly and so near.

"At a crash that was the climax, my horse stopped dead in his tracks, almost throwing me over the saddle horn. The lightning showed that he was planted hardly a foot from the edge of a steep-cliffed chasm."

During that chaotic night, a lightning bolt killed the lead steer and another bolt knocked a fellow rider unconscious. It took several days for the men to locate all of the 2,500 head that had been scattered by the storm.

When the nights were fair and the sky was so clear a man could count each star in the Milky Way, the

cowboys on guard duty hummed or sang to the herd. Some of the most popular tunes were hymns, not because the cowboys were especially religious, but because the tunes seemed to have a calming effect on the steers. Often the cowboys made up their own songs, such as this one:

*Oh say, little dogies, when are
you goin' to lay down
And quit this forever siftin' around?
My horse is leg-weary and I'm
awful tired,
But if you git away I'm sure to
get fired –
Lay down, little dogies, lay down.*

Guard duty generally lasted two hours each night. By keeping an eye on the movement of the Big Dipper, the cowboy on duty usually knew when his two hours were up and he could climb back in his bedroll. To keep awake and alert on those night-time vigils, the cowboys would drink bitter black coffee, or even smear tobacco juice inside their eyelids.

Back in the camp, the cook usually waited until the men were bedded down before performing his last chore of the evening. He'd find the North Star, then point the wagon tongue in that direction, so they'd know which way to travel in the morning.

ONCE THE COWBOYS reached the Red River with their herd, they began to get a bit edgy. This was the border between Texas and Indian territory – a stretch of land 300 miles wide. Once they crossed this treacherous river, they were no longer under the protection of Texas law.

At Red River Station, the crossing for the Chisholm Trail, dozens of graves along the banks were grim reminders that not every man had survived the Red River. A trail boss named Old Man Todd describes what happened at Red River Station in June of 1871. Midstream, the lead steer panicked, started swimming in circles and bawling like a baby. His sudden loss of courage left the rest of the steers behind him leaderless and confused. Todd yelled to his young sidekick, Foster, to get into the water and help the frightened steer. Foster relates what happened next: "I stripped to my underclothes, mount-

FOR THE SERIOUS STUDENT

Several valuable books are available on cowboys and cattle drives. We recommend: *Charles Goodnight: Cowman And Plainsman* and *Life On The Texas Range*, both by historian J. Evetts Haley; *The American Cowboy In Life And Legend* by Bart McDowell, published by the National Geographic Society; *The Cowboys*, a Time-Life book; and *The Longhorns* by J. Frank Dobie.

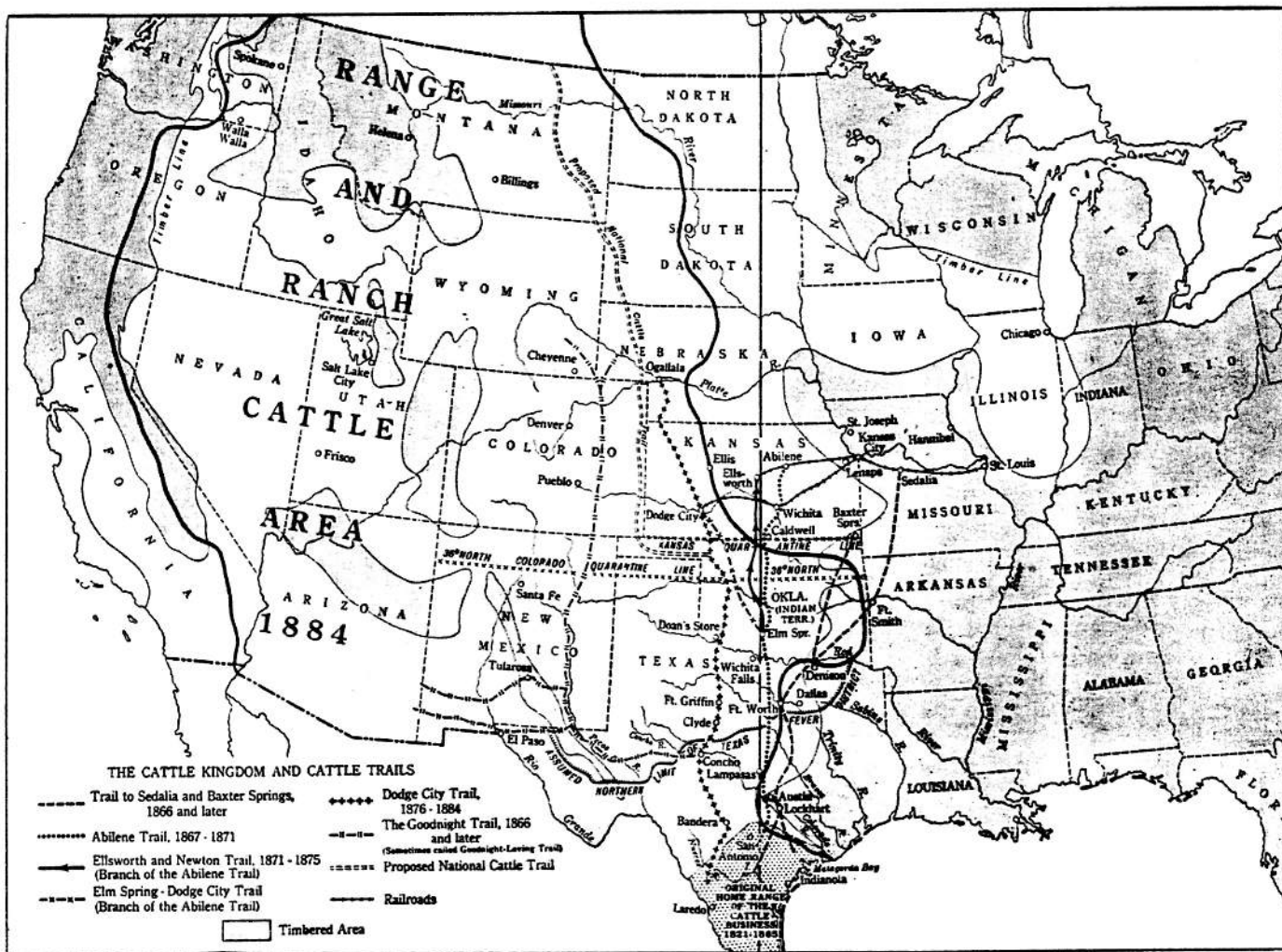
ed a big horse called Jack Moore, and went to them. I got off the horse and right on to the cattle. They were so jammed together that it was like walking on a raft of logs. When I got to the only real big steer in the bunch on the yon side, I mounted him and he pulled for the shore. When I got near the bank, I fell off and drifted downstream to the horse, who had to come across. It must have been nine o'clock in the morning when I climbed out on land. I kept the herd together until nearly sundown – no hat, no saddle, no underclothes – before the outfit got across to help me.”

Once across the river, all the cowboys had to worry about were Indians – the Cherokees, Creeks, Kiowas, and Comanches, to name a few. None of these tribes liked the idea of white men herding thousands of cattle across their hunting grounds. Their displeasure was most often shown by swift raids to stampede the steers, or by extorting a dollar

a head from the trail boss for the privilege of passing through Indian land unmolested.

James Baker recalls one Indian raid on a drive in 1870: “We were aroused last night by the guards and found Indians running thru camp yelling and shooting. They stampeded our herd and in the confusion that followed got 15 of our horses, leaving us only 5, looted our wagons, stealing all of my expense money. We spent the day gathering up the cattle and, with part of the men walking, managed to drive them . . . a distance of 15 miles.” Whenever possible, the trail boss avoided trouble by giving the Indians a beef every day. It was better than getting killed.

WHEN THE DRIVE finally reached the Kansas-Oklahoma border, the Indian danger diminished, but then two other threats loomed: angry farmers who resented cattle trampling their crops, and ruthless





border bandits who stole cattle and killed for pleasure. "There was scarcely a day," recalls Bill Poage, "when we didn't have a row with some settler. The boss was arrested twice in one day for trespassing. A settler would plow a furrow around his claim. According to the laws of Kansas, this was a fence. Any loose stock that crossed it was trespassing and the owner was liable for damages."

For the Texas cowboys, it was a relief to reach Abilene and the end of the Chisholm Trail. Once in town they hankered for a hot bath, a shave, haircut, some new duds, and a friendly bar – not always in that order.

Abilene was a quiet, respectable community of about twelve log huts when Joe McCoy arrived from Springfield, Illinois with some big ideas. He started constructing cattle pens near the Kansas-Pacific Railroad line which passed through Abilene. When the pens were completed in 1867, Abilene started booming. By 1870, Abilene sported a furniture store, a jewelry store, two churches, a newspaper, and an abundant supply of entertainment centers for free-spending cowboys.

Being a thriving cowtown had its drawbacks, however. Businessmen certainly couldn't complain about the profits they were making from the cowboys, but those same hard-riding spenders had some bad habits: They got into fights, shot up towns, killed each other and sometimes total strangers.

Stern lawmen did their best to maintain peace in Abilene, but by 1871 the townsfolk had had enough of the Texas cowboys and politely asked them to leave.

The end of the trail gradually moved farther and farther west, passing through the towns of Ellsworth, Newton, Caldwell, and Hays City. It finally reached Dodge City and there it stayed. Dodge soon gained the dubious distinction of being the "Queen of the Cowtowns." In next week's lesson we'll look at the lives of Wild Bill Hickok, Marshal in Abilene, and Bat Masterson, Marshal in Dodge City during its wildest days.

The invention of barbed wire in 1874 and the increase in farming, were fatal to these famous Kansas cowtowns. As more and more barbed wire fences were strung up around farm lands, it became impossible to drive a herd unimpeded across thousands of miles of open prairie land. The cattle drives ended as the prairie, once inhabited only by buffalo and Indians, was conquered by the farmer and the plow.

DURING THE WEEK

To a cowboy, a gun was as necessary as a horse. No one dared suggest that guns be registered or confiscated. Today, however, there are those who say Americans have no right to own personal firearms. Discuss the dangers of gun control with your children. For background material, we recommend *Gun Control Means People Control* by Phoebe Courtney. It is available in paperback for \$1.75 from your local American Opinion Bookstore or directly from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

The Family Heritage Series

Editor: Wallis W. Wood

Staff Writers

Sally Humphries and Frank York

For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

The *Family Heritage Series* is an outstanding series of weekly lessons for the home, written to stimulate interest and spark discussion about the legacy we have received.

The *Family Heritage Series* is for all parents with school-age children. It is sure to be valued by all Americans who participate in its Heritage Hour discussions, and would be especially welcomed as a gift.

The *Family Heritage Series* is published by the Movement To Restore Decency, a project of The John Birch Society. The annual subscription rate is twelve dollars for fifty-two lessons, mailed monthly. Individual lessons may be purchased in any quantity at four copies for one dollar. Address all orders and subscriptions to The John Birch Society, 395 Concord Avenue, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178. ©1974 by The John Birch Society