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2023 - Transportation in the Flint Hills

Trails and Tracks Across the Flint Hills

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Recommended Citation

Grauer, Michael (2023). "Trails and Tracks Across the Flint Hills," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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The Conestoga Storm
Zak Barnes

TRAILS AND TRACKS ACROSS THE FLINT HILLS

Human beings have traveled across the Flint Hills for millennia, establishing routes north to south, east to west, northeast to southwest, and vice versa.

Clovis, Folsom and Cody peoples traversed the Flint Hills in search of big game 12,000 years ago, creating trails and trade between cultures. Subsequent generations hunted, drove livestock, carried goods and immigrated across the region, searching for “opportunity” and new vistas. From contact, conflict and connection, crossroads formed, intersecting people and place and forever changing the Flint Hills.

TRADE AND IMMIGRATION ROUTES

The **Santa Fe Trail**, the first international road for commerce and immigration in U.S. history, ran through the Flint Hills. The bulk of the trail was in Kansas, with the Flint Hills part primarily in Morris and Marion counties. The trail also crossed the southeast corner of Wabaunsee County near the town of Wilmington, located at the trail’s junction with the Military Road from Fort Leavenworth by way of Topeka.

Although Hispano traders had been traveling east to St. Louis and on to the eastern United States since the 1780s, William Becknell’s 1821 trip from Missouri to Santa Fe, which at the time was in Mexico, is usually recorded as the “opening” of the trail. The trail connected the United States to Mexico and Mexico to the U.S. and European markets.

Travelers on the trail — going both directions — contended with outlaw attacks, lack of clean water, shortages of grass to feed stock, disease, wildlife and accidents along the route. They also faced threats from Native nations that defended their buffalo hunting territories and sometimes stole horses and mules.

Four companies of the U.S. Sixth Infantry under Maj. Bennet Riley provided the first protection for Santa Fe Trail caravans in 1829. The military's use of oxen — cattle trained to be draft animals — to pull their supply wagons was a first on the Santa Fe Trail. Charles Bent followed with a caravan pulled entirely by oxen in 1831. By the 1840s, oxen had become the preferred draft animals on the trail for wagons traveling west. Unlike mules and horses, oxen didn't require the hauling of grain for feed; they ate prairie grasses.

Because the Santa Fe Trail wore out their hooves and made oxen footsore,

teamsters first tried wrapping their hooves in leather coverings, like moccasins.

These quickly wore through, and iron shoes on oxen became common.

Many Mexican traders used mules and donkeys for their caravans going east to Missouri. Crossing Mexican donkey jacks with Missouri mares produced the famous Missouri mule.

Because of their unrivaled skill in packing mules efficiently, by the 1850s, New Mexican "arrieros" (muleteers) made up the majority of mule packers in the American West. The U.S. Army hired New Mexican arrieros and adopted their methods.

Hispano traders also used "carretas," two-wheeled carts pulled by oxen, to transport their goods on the Santa Fe Trail.

After 1821, the year Mexico won independence from Spain, the Santa Fe Trail became an immigrant route in both directions. Spaniards expelled

from Mexico followed the trail through the Flint Hills to Missouri. Hispano merchants took goods and their families on the trail to Missouri, establishing supply networks that reached to New York, Philadelphia and Boston and across the Atlantic to London, Paris and other European trade centers. U.S. entrepreneurs and their families took the trail west to become Mexican citizens in Santa Fe, Chihuahua and Mexico City.

In 1846, during the Mexican-American War, the Santa Fe Trail became a military road taking troops and supplies to the U.S. Army of the West in Mexican California and what would become New Mexico Territory. Army wives and children accompanied the married officers and enlisted men to posts along the trail at Fort Larned and Fort Dodge in Kansas and points farther west.

The **Oregon Trail** (also called the Oregon-California Trail) skirted the Flint Hills to the north, cutting northwest across Pottawatomie County before immigrants forded the Big Blue River at Independence Crossing in Marshall County. Northwest of Marysville, the trail connected with another route from St. Joseph, Missouri, and headed into Nebraska Territory and beyond. The first wagon train on the trail left Independence, Missouri, in 1841. Over 300,000 emigrants braved the dangerous journey.

In 1849, a group of Cherokees and Euro-American settlers blazed the **Cherokee Trail** from Salina, Oklahoma, to the West Coast — a lengthy trek through Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Nevada. Before the Civil War, the Cherokee Trail was a major route to northern California. The trail was also a main stage road from Denver, Colorado, to the Overland Trail north of Denver and to the Montana gold fields in the late 1860s.

The Cherokee Trail ran through the southern part of the Flint Hills from El Dorado to where the trail met the Santa Fe Trail east and south of Galva, Kansas. Augusta Stewart of El Dorado wrote in her 1859 diary that 100 wagons per day rumbled along the trail. A stone Cherokee Trail way station remains standing in El Dorado today.

Established as a route for gold-seekers during the Pike's Peak Gold Rush in 1859, the **Smoky Hill Trail** also traversed the northern Flint Hills, through Wabaunsee and Riley counties. The Butterfield Overland Despatch stagecoach line followed this Smoky Hill Trail to Denver beginning in 1865.

CATTLE TRAILS

To meet the demand for beef after the Civil War and to avoid inflated freight charges for hauling cattle to the Midwest and eastern U.S., Texas cattlemen walked

MEXICAN PACKING SYSTEM

The packing system Mexican traders used on the Santa Fe Trail included an "aparejo," a specially designed pad for carrying heavy, odd-sized items over long distances without injuring the mule or donkey. Each aparejo fit a specific animal and was embroidered with individual symbols that matched symbols on the "corona" (blanket) and "gruper" (leather band) to avoid confusion. Packs were loaded over the aparejo, and other goods were loaded on top and around the "rajas" (boxes).

their cattle north from south Texas through today's Oklahoma to railheads in Missouri and later in Kansas. This industry changed the American diet.

However, the threat of so-called "Texas fever" to domesticated cattle forced livestock owners in the Kansas Territory and then the newly formed State of Kansas to use preventive measures to protect their livestock. Texas cattle had developed immunity to the disease, but they carried ticks that could spread it.

Before the Civil War, pro-slavery and free-state livestock holders worked together to set up vigilance committees to turn back herds of Texas cattle. Severe outbreaks of Texas fever in 1858, 1859 and 1860 resulted in state legislation in 1861 prohibiting Texas cattle from entering Kansas.

After the Civil War and successive outbreaks of the disease, the Kansas legislature in 1867 set the "dead line" at the sixth principal meridian, just west of Wichita, banning the driving of Texas cattle into Kansas at any point east of the line. But because the lure of profits from beef cattle was so attractive, Texas cattlemen — with the encouragement of Kansas livestock commission agents — still drove Texas longhorns carrying the disease through the Flint Hills to Abilene, the town that was the farthest west cattle-loading location on

the Kansas Pacific Railway (later the Union Pacific Central Division), from 1867 to 1872.

Drovers — the men hired to push cattle safely north to Kansas — were typically 15 to 25 years old. Roughly 75% were white; the remaining 25% were either African American, Hispanic or American Indians.

Drovers faced the greatest challenges while attempting to cross rivers with their herds of cattle and horses. Quicksand, flash floods, and cattle and horses who spooked in the water took a toll on these drovers, most of whom could not swim. Far more died on the trail by drowning or horse or cow wrecks than at the hands of other people. They also tolerated poor food, bad water, lack of sleep, unceasing work and sorry wages to "see the elephant" on the trail.

The most famous of the cattle trails was the Chisholm Trail. However, the drovers who used it did not call it that. Instead, they generally referenced specific sections: the Eastern Trail in Texas, the Abilene Cattle Trail in Indian Territory, and the Abilene or Texas Cattle Trail that ran north of the Cimarron River into Kansas.

Born of Scottish and Cherokee parents, the Chisholm Trail's founder, Jesse Chisholm (1805-1868), had a trading post in Indian Territory. Because he was multilingual, Chisholm was a



Paxico, Kansas, Depot 1
Don Wolfe

critical mediator between the Cherokee Nation, the Republic of Texas, the United States and western Oklahoma Indigenous nations.

From Chisholm's trading post, drovers pushed their cattle along Chisholm's wagon road from about today's Purcell, Oklahoma, across the border to Caldwell, Kansas, and north to Abilene.

Starting in the 1871 cattle-driving season, after the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway had reached Cottonwood Station (now Strong City) in March, Texas drovers adjusted their trailing routes to Abilene and Junction City. Splintering from the West Shawnee Trail that had been blazed through Indian Territory to Junction City

starting in 1867, drovers left that trail near the Cowley-Butler county line and drove their cattle northeast through the Flint Hills in Butler and Chase counties to Cottonwood Station, a hurriedly built frame structure located one and a half miles north of the Cottonwood River. This new route became known as the Texas Cattle Trail. Once at Cottonwood Station, drovers loaded their cattle on the Santa Fe Railway for the Kansas City, St. Louis and Chicago stockyards.

TRAILS TO TRACKS

The “progress” of the railroad spelled the end of the trails. The Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railway Company, known as the Katy Line, reached the Indian Territory line south of Chetopa, Kansas, in 1870. Passenger and freight service from Atchison, Leavenworth and Kansas City became available across Kansas (and through the Flint Hills) to Dodge City and down to Santa Fe by 1880 on the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway. After the railway built a spur line from Newton to Wichita, the railroad then built farther south to Wellington and Caldwell. At Wellington, the line headed west-southwest.

In 1887, the Santa Fe Railway laid track from Kiowa, Kansas, across Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) to the Texas Panhandle. But due to Texas railroad law, the railway was forced to charter

the Southern Kansas Railway of Texas to enter Texas. The SKRT then built through Canadian, Texas, to Panhandle City (now Panhandle) by 1888. The SKRT used a spur to Washburn and part of the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway Company’s line to reach Amarillo. In 1908, it built its own line to Amarillo, connecting Kansas City and Amarillo directly via the railway’s lines.

Cattle then became the primary product shipped on the railroad from Amarillo to the Flint Hills, then on to Kansas City.

Cattle owners in New Mexico, Colorado, West Texas, western Oklahoma and southwestern Kansas shipped cattle to the Flint Hills from Amarillo to “finish” them to sell as fat cattle in Kansas City. Because of the volume of cattle loading there, Amarillo became the largest cattle shipping point in the United States, and the Kansas City Stockyards cornered the Western cattle market. The railroads phased out the hauling of live cattle by 1970 because trucks replaced cattle cars.

Long-distance travel through the Flint Hills by foot, horse, mule, carriage and wagon continued well into the 20th century, but the trails blazed by these means began to fade into memories. Today, though, wagon ruts, swales, and cuts through ravines and riverbanks – along the Santa Fe, Cherokee, Oregon,

THE OSAGE AND THE KAW

The Kanza (Kaw) and Osage tribes largely dominated the region around the Santa Fe Trail east of the Arkansas River near present-day Ellinwood, Kansas. During the 1825 survey of the trail, the U.S. government brokered treaties with both tribes at Council Grove, Kansas, guaranteeing “unmolested passage along the route and for a reasonable distance on either side of it to citizens of the United States and Mexico” and an agreement “to render aid and assistance to travelers between Missouri and Santa Fe.” The survey commission agreed to pay \$800 in merchandise to the head of each tribe.

Deriving their name from the Siouan word “aca” (“south wind”) for their warriors’ use of the power of wind, the Kanza (Wind People) gave the state its name. Their domain was most of present-day northern and eastern Kansas, with buffalo hunting grounds in western Kansas.

The 1825 treaty reduced their 20-million-acre territory to a 30-mile-wide, 2-million-acre reservation beginning just west of today’s Topeka. A treaty in 1846 slashed Kaw territory to 256,000 acres at present-day Council Grove. The 1859 treaty removed the town of Council Grove from Kaw hands, leaving the tribe with only 80,000 acres. Finally, on May 27, 1872, over the strong protests of Chief Allegawaho and his people, a federal act moved the Kanza to a 100,137-acre site in what is now northern Kay County, Oklahoma.

From several thousand people, the Kanza population declined through disease and starvation to 1,500 people by 1800, to 553 by 1872 and to 194 by 1888.

The Osage Nation’s ancestral territory stretched from southwestern Pennsylvania to southeastern Colorado and from southern Wisconsin to northern Louisiana, and it included all of the present states of Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. The Osage migrated to the trans-Mississippi West with a cluster of bands settling in west central Missouri. By 1750, the Osage had established control over half or more of Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

After the Indian Removal Act of 1830 brought eastern tribes into Indian Territory (today’s Oklahoma), Osage-Cherokee hostilities forced the U.S. government to remove all Osage bands from Arkansas and Indian Territory to Kansas in 1839. In 1871, the government moved all of the Osage from Kansas back to Oklahoma, their third displacement in 50 years.

Chisholm and other trails — are still visible in parts of the Flint Hills and surrounding land, once a traveler gets off the turnpike. Touch the ground in these special places and you just might

sense the tread of a moccasin, the clop of hooves or the rumble of wagon wheels that crisscrossed the Flint Hills and were forever embedded in the history and soul of Kansas.

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The author thanks cattle trail historians Margaret and Gary Kraisinger and Wayne Ludwig for their assistance on the route of the Texas Cattle Trail in the Flint Hills.

TIME ZONES, OR, HOW TO AVOID ARRIVING BEFORE YOU LEFT

Back in the early settler days, a Flint Hills traveler journeying from Eskridge, Kansas, to Alta Vista, Kansas, wouldn't know what time it was in Alta Vista when he started his journey, because each town had its own local time. The time was based on when the sun was at its highest — "high noon." Because of the earth's rotation, high noon would happen in Eskridge before it would happen in Alta Vista. The traveler just had to reset his watch upon arrival at his destination.

But with the advent of much faster railroad travel, a traveler heading west could potentially arrive at an earlier local time than the one he had left. Railroad schedules on the same tracks often could not be coordinated. Trains sometimes collided.

To solve the problem, the major railroad companies divided the continent into four time zones, effective November 18, 1883. Most Americans and Canadians immediately accepted the new time zones. In 1918, the U.S. government officially adopted five time zones as the country entered World War I: the Eastern, Central, Mountain, Pacific and Alaskan zones that are still in use today.



Remnant
Kim Eichler-Messmer