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Introduction: The Chisholm Trail

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INTRODUCTION THE CHISHOLM TRAIL

It all began with grass, large expanses of unbroken ground that had sustained bison and Plains Indian peoples for millennia. In one brief moment in American history, it all changed.

In the years following the Civil War, old and new worlds collided in the ultimate display of man's dominion over land and beast. The age of the great cattle drives, the largest migration of livestock in the history of the world, lasted fewer than two decades, but it left an indelible mark on the landscape and culture of a rapidly changing nation. By the time the Kansas wind had swept away the hoof prints of the last Texas steer, the Chisholm Trail had come to symbolize a bygone era.

As the wide open spaces disappeared, Hollywood taught us about the dance halls, sheriffs, and gunfights that left dusty streets littered with the bodies of outlaws taken down by the six shooter of Wyatt Earp. But we missed the story of resilience—of the men *and* women, cowboys, *and* Indians, who risked their lives for their livelihoods—of landscape, people, and cattle that were shaped by the Chisholm Trail. In its wake were barbed-wire fences, neat rows of wheat, and progressive cities.

Despite the best efforts of some—and to the relief of many—the Flint Hills were physically untouched by the trodden swath that stretched from Texas to Abilene. But here both the virgin sod and spirit of the trail remain unbroken—and bison, cowboys, longhorns, and dreamers still find freedom in an endless sea of grass.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
MONUMENTS
Don Wolfe



WAITING FOR THE CHASE
Crystal Socha

THE HISTORIC CHISHOLM TRAIL

In the annals of our nation
Stands this immortal tale.
The remarkable migration:
Beef up the Chisholm Trail.

One hundred fifty years ago,
War stopped, to our relief.
But for our nation yet to grow,
The people needed beef.

Then came a man named Joe McCoy
Whose visionary plan
Would bring alive the great cowboy
And change our history's span.

He saw where railroads sent their trains.
His vision it was keen:
Move Texas cattle up the plains,
Clear on to Abilene.

So Joe McCoy built stockyards here
To take the herds of beeves,
And ship them on from the frontier
To markets in the East.

In Texas, longhorns ranging free
Were worth four bucks a head,
But in the cities they could bring
Ten times that, people said.

So Texas drovers heard those words
And chose to venture forth.
They gathered up vast cattle herds
And bravely brought them north.

Now Jesse Chisholm had a store
Where Wichita now stands.
He headed south in days of yore
To trade with Indian bands.

The drovers followed Chisholm's track
On up to Wichita.
Then kept on north, not looking back,
Till Abilene they saw.

With that, the Chisholm Trail was blazed
Into our nation's story,
And generations now have raised
The legend into glory.

*Ron Wilson is a cowboy poet
from Riley County.*