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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CHISHOLM TRAIL DROVER

Before the Civil War, most Texas cattle were driven in small herds to markets by their owners, but in the boom following that war, entrepreneurs bought steers by the thousands to supply the demand for beef back East. A typical trail herd in this post-war era numbered between 2,000 and 3,000 head, and some cattlemen sent fifteen or more herds up the trail in a single season.

THE START

*Come along boys and listen to my tale
I'll tell you my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail.*

Much preparation occurred before a herd of cattle ever started up the Chisholm Trail. First, cattle from different ranches were assembled in one location. Then, no matter how many different brands might be on their hides, they would all be road branded with the same brand. A trail boss and a crew of eight or ten drovers were hired, each man provided with seven to ten horses for the drive. A wrangler was hired to manage the horses, and a cook was hired for the chuck wagon, which was stocked with cured pork, corn meal, beans, and flour.



ERWIN E. SMITH (1886-1947)

*A cowboy cutting animals out from the herd on the LS range; 1907, nitrate
negative; Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX;
LC.859.149*

Most of a droving crew were young men, ranging in age from their early teens to their early twenties. Of the 35,000 men and boys estimated to have driven cattle in the trail-drive era, a third were Mexican or African-American.

THE DRIVE

*Well it's up in the mornin' before daylight
Before I sleep the moon shines bright.*

The first few days out, the cattle would be pushed twenty or more miles to tire them and get them accustomed to the rhythm of the drive. After that the pace slowed to eight to twelve miles a day; fifteen miles was a big day. The slower pace allowed the cattle plenty of opportunity to graze. If all went well, cattle would arrive in Kansas weighing more than when they left Texas even though they had walked several hundred miles. Cattle weren't so much driven as herded north.

A day on the trail began early with breakfast at the chuck wagon before moving the cattle off the bed

ground and heading them north. Two experienced cowhands would take up the point position on either side and toward the front of the herd. The trail boss would ride ahead to scout out water or a good place for dinner at noon and camping at night. He would then ride back and signal to the point riders who would steer the herd in that direction. Swing riders rode behind the point riders; then came the flank riders. At the back of the herd, riding in the dust and pushing the slow and the lame cattle were the drag riders, usually the most inexperienced in the crew.

Such a slow pace could be tedious for the drovers. A trail herd of a couple of thousand steers could easily stretch out over a mile, so the cowboys were spread out much too far for conversation. That is why a trail-driving song, such as "The Old Chisholm Trail," was created—a cowboy could sing it to entertain himself and thus help relieve the boredom of the drive. Other times, however, the drive could be so exciting as to be potentially



LONGHORNS-ROYAL
Don Wolfe

fatal, as when a stampede broke out or when rustlers or Indians threatened.

After the noon meal a drover would often catch another horse from his string for the afternoon ride. Then at suppertime he would turn that horse loose and catch up his night horse. Cattle were usually in camp ten hours a night. That allowed them time both to rest and to ruminate. Bovine stomachs have four compartments, so to get the full food value from what cattle eat, they must chew their cud, thus passing the grass through all four.

When the herd would first arrive on the bed ground, it would be settled down, then all but two drovers would go to the chuck wagon to eat. After some two hours, two other cowboys would mount their night horses and ride to the herd to relieve the two men who were there. Those two would then ride to the wagon, turn their horses loose, and eat their supper. After eating and before unrolling their blankets, the cowboys would visit around the camp fire, tell stories, and sing to entertain their fellow drovers. These chuck-



CHANGING SHOES Jeremiah Ariaz

wagon songs often told stories about bad horses, wild cattle, outlaws, or events that had happened on roundups.

Night herding (also termed riding night guard) was necessary to make sure no cattle strayed during the night and also to be ready should something spook the herd and cause a stampede. The night horse was always a sensible, sure-footed mount with good night vision. Each drover took his turn during the night, riding a circle around the herd and singing aloud during his

watch. Unlike trail-driving or chuck-wagon songs, a night-herding song was intended to entertain the cattle, keep them calm, and sometimes help to keep the cowboy awake. Night-herding songs were long (the cowboy had two hours to fill), slow (to have a lullaby effect), and sad (because the rider might be homesick and feeling miserable, especially if it were a cold, dreary night).

A common complaint of the drover was lack of sleep. He spent long days and

short nights with more than two hours of sleep lost each night because of riding night guard. Those who complained to the trail boss were told that they could sleep in the winter. Another complaint was the monotony of chuck-wagon cooking: *It's bacon and beans most every day/I'd rather be eating prairie hay.* The menu might occasionally be varied by venison or buffalo meat or even beef, should the trail boss order the butchering of a lame steer or a stray that had gotten into the herd.

Among the very real dangers faced on the Chisholm Trail were stampedes. Drovers chasing after cattle that were running pell-mell over rough and unknown territory in the middle of a clouded night risked injury or death should their horses fall or plunge over the edge of an unseen canyon. However, more cowboys died by drowning while swimming herds across flooded rivers or being struck by lightning during a fierce plains thunderstorm than were killed in stampedes.

THE END OF THE DRIVE
*We hit Abilene, we hit her on the fly
Goin' to quit punchin' cows
in the sweet bye and bye.*

After several months and hundreds of miles, the herd would at last reach Abilene. There a drover would draw his pay (usually a dollar a day, good wages for that era). Often his first purchase was a bath, a shave, and a haircut. Then came the temptations of the saloons, gambling houses, and dance halls of Texas Abilene (the town's permanent citizens lived north of the tracks in Kansas Abilene). After a couple of days of fun, and with his pockets empty, the drover would head back to Texas, ready for next year's trip up the Old Chisholm Trail.

Jim Hoy, a native of the Flint Hills, is a past board chair of the Symphony in the Flint Hills and is currently the director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University. In 2015 he and his wife, Cathy, also a past SFH board chair, were named "Friend of the Flint Hills" by the Flint Hills Discovery Center Foundation. He has published seventeen books, including Flint Hills Cowboys.