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The Founders

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JESSE'S HANDS
Gesine Janzen

THE FOUNDERS

The Chisholm Trail was no one's idea. No single individual cut a path from Texas to Kansas. No one person emerged from the instability and confusion of the postbellum Great Plains to say, "This is how the cattle industry can thrive today." No one could claim he discovered the trail; no one could claim it as his.

While the Chisholm Trail was a product of collective effort in response to a shared need, the efforts of two particular individuals acted as catalysts, creating an environment where the trail could thrive. One was a Scot-Cherokee trader-turned-statesman; the other was a business-savvy entrepreneur from Illinois. And though Jesse Chisholm and Joseph McCoy may have never met, together they laid the foundation for the greatest cattle trail in America.

Jesse Chisholm's father was a merchant slave trader in Tennessee. His mother was a Cherokee woman about whom little is known. Born in 1805 or 1806 to Ignatius and Mary (Rogers) Chisholm in the Hiwassee region of Tennessee, Jesse Chisholm was the oldest of three sons. His father left early in his life, and Mary Chisholm moved her family first to Arkansas, then to the Cherokee Nation in eastern Oklahoma.

In 1836 Chisholm married fifteen-year-old Eliza Edwards, whose father ran a trading post in present-day Hughes County, Oklahoma. Chisholm established

himself as a trader in Texas, “Indian Territory,” and southern Kansas. His chain of trading posts between present-day Wichita and Oklahoma City served as markers for the trail that would eventually bear his name.

During the Civil War Chisholm acted as a trade intermediary between certain tribes and the Confederacy. Later he would act as an interpreter for Union troops. Throughout the conflict Chisholm resided on his ranch in present-day Wichita. In 1867 Chisholm brought Plains Indians to a negotiation with the United States government that resulted in the Medicine Lodge Treaty.

By the time Jesse Chisholm died in 1868, another man, Joseph McCoy, had extended the trail from Wichita to Abilene where it met the Union Pacific rail line.

Born in 1837 in Sangamon County, Illinois, Joseph McCoy was ambitious and smart with an eye for opportunity. The Knox College alumnus initially

worked as a cattle buyer in Illinois and had a hand in shipping cattle to large Midwestern and Eastern cities. McCoy found the cattle transportation system in post-Civil War America ripe for innovation. He saw his chance and took it.

McCoy knew that the Texas longhorns that littered the Texas landscape were potentially valuable. The challenge was moving them out of Texas and to metropolitan markets back east, where an increasing taste for beef made cattle a precious commodity.

The longhorns were located hundreds of miles from the nearest railhead, but Texas cattlemen—and the Mexican vaqueros before them—had been moving cattle across open country for decades. The problem was that the longhorns were outlawed in eastern Kansas and the entirety of Missouri where the most promising railheads were located. The longhorn carried “Texas fever,” a disease to which the rangy animals were immune, but

which struck other types of cattle with devastating effect.

McCoy’s solution was to identify the easternmost point on the Union Pacific line that would accept the Texas cattle and build a stockyard at that location. After exploring possibilities in other Kansas towns, McCoy settled on the tiny town of Abilene, which at that time was no more than a dozen small houses located next to the rail

line. Though Abilene lay within the Texas fever quarantine zone, McCoy convinced the governor of Kansas to relax the law and allow longhorns passage to his stockyard.

Excerpt from The Chisholm Trail: Driving the American West, a traveling exhibit that is a joint project of Symphony in the Flint Hills and Flint Hills Design.
Nathan Bartel



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