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## End of the Trail, End of the Line: Kansas Cownowns

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TWO STEPS (63)(70) (INSTALLATION DETAIL)  
Amanda Maciuba

## END OF THE TRAIL, END OF THE LINE: KANSAS COWTOWNS

During the eighteen years that Texas cattle were driven north on the Chisholm Trail, a progression of Kansas towns acted as trail's end. What bound those cowtowns together was circumstance, geography, ambition, and a place on the rails. For each town, the riches, riders, and rowdy behavior poured in with astonishing speed and, in many cases, dried up just as quickly.

The first Chisholm Trail cowtown was also the longest lasting. When Joseph McCoy chose Abilene as the location for his stockyards, he put the sleepy prairie town on the map. The town's population and infrastructure grew quickly to meet the demands of drovers fresh off the trail. Saloons, dance halls, and boarding houses lined Texas Street, and with the money and booze came trouble. Lawmen such as Thomas "Bear River" Smith and J. B. "Wild Bill" Hickok strove to keep the peace, enforcing ordinances that forbade the wearing of guns in town. But as Abilene grew up, it also grew tired of the cowboys and their violent behavior. Between the chaos in town and the cost to local herds and crops, Abilene closed its doors to the cattle business in 1872, and cattlemen looked elsewhere for railheads to ship their stock.



TWO STEPS (10) (INSTALLATION DETAIL)  
Amanda Maciuba

A literal transplanting took place in 1872. Parts of the Drovers Cottage in Abilene were shipped down the line and reassembled for use in Ellsworth, a new railhead established by the Kansas Pacific Railway some seventy miles to the west of Kansas' former cattle capital. The people of Ellsworth attempted to head off bad behavior in their town by sequestering drinking, gambling, and other extralegal activity to an area outside of town known as "Nauchville." Those efforts proved

futile. Ellsworth was trail's end for 1872 and 1873 only.

During that same period, the city of Newton, some sixty miles south of Abilene, also welcomed Texas cattlemen and their bounty to town. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway used Newton as a loading point for longhorns. This was a short-lived and violent period; the same month the first shipment of cattle left Newton for Kansas City, eight men died in the infamous Gunfight at Hyde Park,

giving Newton the reputation as "the wickedest city in the West."

In 1873 the cattle trade again moved south, this time to Wichita. From the saloons and dance halls of Delano (established to keep crime away from Wichita) to the Douglas Avenue toll bridge that spanned the Arkansas River, Wichita embraced the cattle trade, issuing \$200,000 in bonds to build a railroad spur from Newton. Some 400,000 head of cattle passed through Wichita's stockyards on their way east. Wichita remained the predominant place to ship Texas cattle until 1876 when encroaching farms and fences made reaching the railroad impossible.

Some drovers pointed their herds to the Western Trail and Dodge City. The town quickly grew in stature and notoriety. While Boot Hill helped make Dodge City famous, historical accounts suggest that on the whole Dodge City was a friendly place during its cowtown days. The town had already established itself as a center for trade, as thousands upon

thousands of buffalo hides were shipped from Dodge City railyards. Dodge City would act as a trail's end for ten years until Kansas quarantine laws put a stop to cattle drives entering the state.

Perched on the line between Kansas and Indian Territory, the final Chisholm Trail cowtown, Caldwell, called itself the "Border Queen." From 1880 to 1885 Caldwell kept the dream of the Chisholm Trail alive in Kansas. Caldwell was so violent that one Wichita paper wrote, "As we go to press hell is again in session in Caldwell." Caldwell played host to a series of altercations, including the Talbot gang gunfight. In 1889 the former cowtown became a launching point for Oklahoma boomers looking to stake out property in the newly opened Oklahoma Unassigned Land.

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*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