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EARLY CATTLE TRAILS
Wade Parsons

Early Day Cattle Drives

The big Texas-to-Kansas trail drives in the open-range era that followed the Civil War gave birth to the cowboy and helped to establish Kansas as one of the premier cattle-raising states in the nation. From 1866 to 1885, over six million longhorns made their way north.



Many thousands of these Texas cattle found their way into the Flint Hills and were being pastured there at least as early as 1868. By no later than the mid-1870s, Flint Hills cattlemen were going to Texas, buying cattle, and bringing them home to graze on the tallgrass prairie. Cattle drives from Texas, however, began long before the Civil War, and Flint Hills cattle were being marketed in eastern and Midwestern markets during the war itself.

Texas cattle were being transported to eastern cities by ship soon after Texans

had successfully rebelled against Mexico to establish their own nation. Probably the earliest overland movement of Texas cattle north occurred in 1846 when a man named Edward Piper bought a herd of cattle and trailed them to markets in Ohio. Within two years after that, the Shawnee Trail (known initially as the Kansas Trail) had been established. This trail started at the Rio Grande River near Brownsville, went north through the Fort Worth-Dallas area, then headed northeast to Baxter Springs, Kansas. From there, the trail split into

three branches heading toward Missouri railroads in Kansas City, Sedalia, and St. Louis. Thousands of cattle were driven north on the Shawnee Trail, but Missouri quarantine laws and the onset of the Civil War spelled its doom.

During the 1850s, a few intrepid Texans trailed their cattle across the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona in order to reach the forty-niners who had flocked to California following the gold strike at Sutter's Mill in 1848. This arduous and dangerous route was also closed by the Civil War when the Union turned back Confederate efforts to gain control of New Mexico Territory.

Once Kansas Territory was opened for settlement in 1854, both free-state and pro-slavery groups moved in, particularly in the eastern and northeastern part of the region. Within a few years, however, many settlers had reached the Flint Hills and many of those settlers recognized the cattle-raising potential of the bluestem grasses that covered the Hills. One of these settlers was Elisha Mardin, an

Illinois man who settled a few miles east of Cottonwood Falls in 1859. There he raised cattle on the uplands and farmed in the Cottonwood River bottoms.

Within half a dozen years, according to the 1865 Kansas agricultural census, Mardin owned the largest and most valuable farm in Chase County. His deeded property comprised 960 unimproved and 100 improved acres, 250 acres of which was under fence, for a total value of \$9,000. His livestock, mostly cattle with a few hogs and horses, was valued at \$5,605. Mardin's brand, the SJM, was the ninth one registered in the county. Like many Flint Hills ranchers today, Mardin both raised calves from a cow herd and also fattened steers on grass. He also burned the previous year's dead grass off his pastures in the spring.

Also like many contemporary Flint Hills ranchers, Mardin cared for other people's cattle, running them on the open-range uplands. In addition to his own holdings, Mardin bought cattle and looked after



CHISHOLM TRAIL
Clare McDonald Williamson
Roland P. Murdock Collection, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas



ELISHA MARDIN
Mardin Diaries Book
Center for Great Plains Studies, Emporia State University

them for a large livestock commission firm in Chicago, Dolby Brothers Drovers and Livestock. Periodically, when he had acquired sufficient Dolby cattle (usually 100 head or more), Mardin would hire local drovers and deliver the herd to a railroad in Missouri, where they would be shipped to Chicago. From there some of these Flint Hills cattle would be sent by boat on Lake Erie to markets as far east as New York City. On one such trip a storm forced the sailors to dump the cattle overboard in order to keep the boat from capsizing.

For the year 1863, Mardin kept a diary, in which he recorded three lengthy trail drives. In early January while on a visit to his wife's family in Illinois, Mardin bought some breeding stock in order to upgrade his Kansas herd. He and another Chase County man, Arch Miller, shipped these cattle by train from Mt. Pulaski, Illinois, to Weston, Missouri, and from there with the help of other cowhands drove them to Chase County.

In early August of that same year,

Mardin helped his hired drovers start a herd of Dolby cattle to the railroad in Missouri. After three days he returned home, leaving the cattle in charge of Arch Miller. On September 16, he started another herd to Chicago via the railroad in Missouri. This time a man named David Painter was his trail boss, and Mardin gave him \$125 in expense money before turning the herd over to him near Emporia. Undoubtedly during his nine years as a Chase County rancher (he quit the ranch in 1868 after he was elected sheriff), Mardin made many other cattle drives besides the three he recorded in 1863.

Thus during the Civil War, Kansas cattle from the Flint Hills were being trailed to railroads in Missouri for shipment back east, thereby prefiguring the big cattle drives from Texas to Kansas that would occur after the war.

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