

From the Civil War's end through the mid-1880s, more than seven million Texas cattle crossed the Indian Territory on their way to the famed cow towns of wild-and-wooly Kansas. Most started their journeys along any number of feeder trails that originated deep in the interior of Texas before converging into three main trails, all crossing central Oklahoma: the Shawnee, Chisholm, and Western (or Dodge City) trails.

The first closely followed the old Texas Road into eastern Indian Territory, but those who pioneered it, in 1866, quickly experienced its limitations. The timbered and mountainous landscape of eastern Indian Territory was anything but ideal for moving large herds of semiwild cattle. In addition, resistant American Indians usually demanded that the Texans pay to cross their lands. If refused, they often scattered herds and took cattle. Bands of white outlaws pretty much stuck to stealing both cattle and horses, without any pretense of negotiations. Cattle and cowboys that reached the Kansas and Missouri borders were often met by armed groups of farmers, fearful of Texas fever, a tick-borne illness that afflicted cattle. Not a few herds simply turned around and retraced their path southward. Hardly any cattlemen profited from the 1866 drives, and most had no taste whatsoever for trying it again.

In 1867, Illinois cattleman and farmer Joseph G. McCoy realized that markets in the East held undeveloped potential for sales of Texas cattle. To exploit that market, McCoy purchased an entire township on the new Kansas Pacific Railroad. Abilene, he called it, and there he built shipping pens, barns, stables, and a hotel, then sent representatives to Texas to urge cattlemen to drive their herds to this Abilene.

Probably because the only established portion of the route they blazed followed the wagon road that Jesse Chisholm had already opened, the entire length of the trail was known to Texas cattle ranchers as the Chisholm Trail. Far enough west to bypass the heavily wooded eastern Indian Ter-

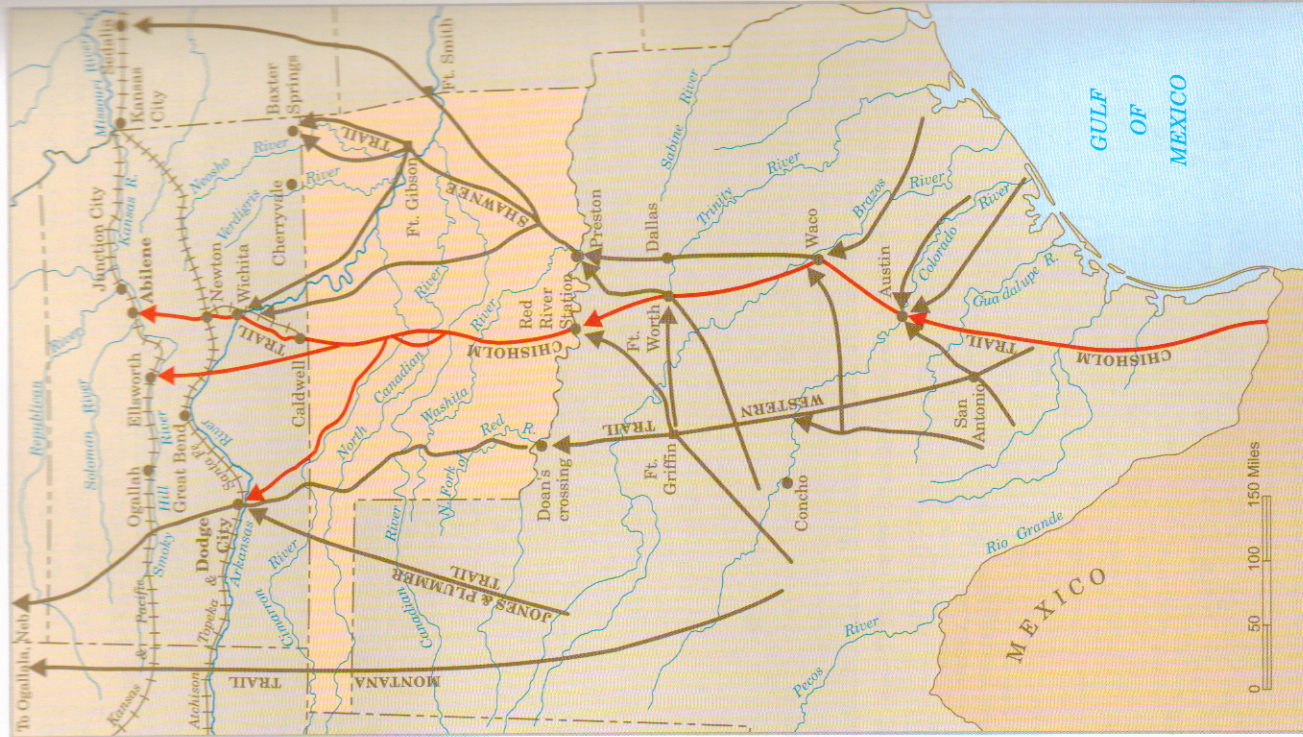
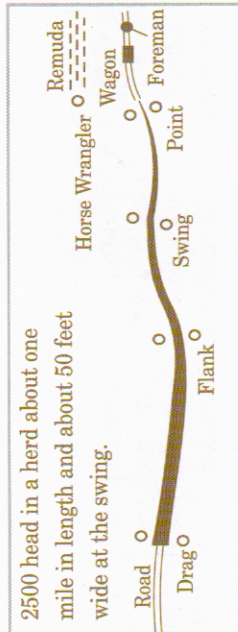
ritory, the route offered ample grazing along its entire way. Water was available from rivers and numerous streams, most of them fordable most of the year. The Chisholm Trail was also far enough west in Kansas that it avoided both farming areas and hostile Jayhawkers.

In the spring of 1871, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad reached Newton, Kansas, sixty-five miles south of Abilene. Newton thereupon usurped Abilene's place, and Texas herds coming up the Chisholm Trail began ending up in the shipping pens first of Newton and later of Wichita.

In 1872, Dodge City was founded on the Santa Fe railroad, some fifty miles north of the Indian Territory border and near the 100th meridian. Thereafter, the Western (or Dodge City) Trail became the route favored by Texas cattlemen. By 1876, Dodge City rightfully became known as the "queen" of the Kansas cow towns—although other titles associated with the female gender were occasionally attached to it. In the Western Trail's peak year (1881), over 300,000 head of Texas cattle used it to cross western Oklahoma, typically in herds of around 2,500 each.

By the mid-1880s, the number of Texas trail herds using the Chisholm and Western trails saw a dramatic drop. Factors that led to this decline include the 1884 act by which Kansas imposed a quarantine on entering herds, the rapid growth of ranching on the northern plains, and the expansion of railroads into Texas. By 1890, use of the great cattle highways across Oklahoma had ended, and the era of cattle drives passed into history.

Diagram of herd on trail (afternoon)



Cattle trails leading to railheads