The cattle drives greatly influenced today’s image of the American cowhand. Why It Matters Now

TERMS & NAMES
stockyard; packinghouse; cow town; Abilene, Kansas; Chisholm Trail; Western Trail; Goodnight-Loving Trail; roundup; wrangler; chuck wagon

OBJECTIVES
1. Analyze the impact of national markets on the cattle industry in Texas.
2. Identify the significance of the cattle drive.
3. Describe life along the cattle trail.

MAIN IDEA
As railroads expanded westward across the United States, markets for beef opened. Texas cattle owners drove their herds along cattle trails to the railroads.

A REAL-LIFE STORY
Cattle drives made up an important part of the cattle industry. Cowhands led the herds over miles of terrain to railroads where they could be shipped east. Life on the trail required hard work and long days. One cowhand described the cattle drive experience.

I believe the worst hardship we had on the trail was loss of sleep. . . . Our day wouldn’t end till about nine o’clock, when we grazed the herd onto the bed ground. And after that every man in the outfit except the boss and the horse wrangler and cook would have to stand two hours’ night guard. . . . I would get maybe five hours’ sleep when the weather was nice and everything was smooth and pretty. . . . If it wasn’t so nice, you’d be lucky to sleep an hour. But the wagon rolled on in the morning just the same.

E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbot, We Pointed Them North

A Market for Beef
After the Civil War the demand for beef increased. The westward expansion of the railroads allowed beef to be shipped to markets in the North and East. Stockyards and packinghouses sprang up near Chicago and St. Louis. A longhorn that was worth about $4 in Texas brought close to $40 in the packinghouses. Cattle owners searched for a way to transport their cattle safely to the stockyards.

Joseph G. McCoy, a Chicago business leader, came up with a solution. McCoy built the first cow town in Kansas at Abilene, on the southern branch of the Union Pacific Railroad. Abilene featured holding pens...
The Development of Cattle Trails

The Chisholm Trail was the first of the great cattle trails. Herds were started up the Chisholm Trail soon after the war. As many as 35,000 head of cattle reached Abilene, Kansas, in 1867, and the number increased to 350,000 by 1869. Over the next 20 years, more than 6 million longhorns were driven from Texas to Abilene and other Kansas cow towns.

As more railroads were built, more trails developed. The Western Trail, also known as the Dodge City Trail, became popular in the 1870s. The trail extended north from San Antonio, crossed the Red River at Doan's Crossing, and then headed to Dodge City in western Kansas. Other ranchers headed west into Colorado along the Pecos Trail, also known as the Goodnight-Loving Trail. This trail went up the Pecos River into New Mexico. It was later extended into Wyoming.

McCoy also attracted buyers from eastern packinghouses to bid on the herds. McCoy sent word south through Indian Territory, today known as Oklahoma, to alert Texans that a rail connection could be reached by driving their herds to Kansas. This route avoided the difficulties posed by trails that crossed settled areas of Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Cattle owners knew they might still experience conflicts with Native Americans while crossing Indian Territory, but the need to sell their cattle made the risk worthwhile. The trail opened by Cherokee trader Jesse Chisholm in 1867 was called the Chisholm Trail.

Cattle need water to survive. The great cattle trails had to go where water was available. East and Central Texas had many rivers for cattle to drink from. The Goodnight-Loving Trail followed the Pecos River, which provided water for a large part of the way. But the Llano Estacado had few permanent water sources. As a result, no trails crossed this vast area. In addition to plentiful water, what other factors do you think determined the location of a trail?
The Chisholm Trail, named for Jesse Chisholm, created a path for Texas herds to reach the railroads in the North. ● What dangers might cowhands have faced along the trail?

roundup the process of herding together cattle that are scattered

wrangler a ranch hand who cares for saddle horses

chuck wagon a wagon that carries cooking equipment and food for the cowhands

Life on the Trail

A trail drive began with a roundup, during which unbranded cattle were marked to prove ownership. The roundup often took several weeks and involved hundreds of cowhands from neighboring ranches. Once the cattle were herded together and branded, the cowhands separated them into herds. At first, the cattle owners drove the herds themselves. Later, the owners hired agents to drive the cattle to market for a fee, usually $1 per head delivered to market. Large herds of more than 2,500 head of cattle went up the trail to Abilene, though many smaller herds made the journey as well.

Scouts rode in front of the herd to select the best route. The path would vary depending on the availability of water and grass. It also depended on the season of the year and how many herds had passed over the ground that year. Despite minor changes in the course, the herd always traveled north. Scouts also alerted the trail boss to dangers such as bad weather, hostile Native Americans, and outlaws. The trail boss had complete authority over all the cowhands and other employees on the trail.

The cowhands had specific duties. Several highly skilled cowhands, known as pointers, rode at the side of the lead cattle to direct the herd. Flankers, who rode beside the herd, kept the cattle from straying too far. Other cowhands rode in the rear, or drag position, to keep cattle from straying behind. Wranglers took care of the extra horses. Each cowhand took along several horses. The men would switch horses a few times a day to keep the horses from tiring.

The camp cook rose early to prepare breakfast, usually coffee, sourdough biscuits, beef, and beans—the same as most other meals. Then the cook would ride ahead in the chuck wagon to the next campsite and have dinner ready for the cowhands.

Often the cowhands would gather around the campfire at night and sing songs. One of these songs tells of life on the Chisholm Trail.
TEXAS VOICES

Come along, boys, and listen to my tale,
And I’ll tell you all my troubles on the old Chisholm Trail.
(chorus)
Come a ti yi yippy yippy yay, yippy yay
Come a ti yi yippy yippy yay
I started up the trail October twenty-third,
I started up the trail with a Two-Bar herd.
On a ten-dollar horse and a forty-dollar saddle,
I started up the trail, punchin’ Texas cattle.
I woke up one morning on the old Chisholm Trail,
With a rope in my hand and a cow by the tail.
Oh, it’s bacon and beans most every day—
I’d as soon be eatin’ prairie hay. . . .

“The Old Chisholm Trail,” song of the cattle trail

An Expanding Cattle Range

For a while, cattle were driven each year to the railroad and sold, with those arriving earliest in the spring or summer bringing the highest prices. Eventually, the cattle owners who arrived late in the fall began to keep their herds on government land during the winter so they would be first at the market the next year. They lost some cattle during the harsh winter, but the higher prices made up for the losses.

These winter herds resulted in the spread of the cattle kingdom into western areas of the United States. Most cattle were still born in Texas and then brought north as young calves. They grazed for a year or two on the rich meadows of Wyoming and Montana before being shipped to meatpacking plants.

SECTION ASSESSMENT

Terms & Names
Identify:
• stockyard
• packinghouse
• cow town
• Abilene, Kansas
• Chisholm Trail
• roundup
• wrangler
• chuck wagon

Organizing Information
Use a chart like the one shown to describe the various jobs of the cowhands on a cattle drive. Explain why each job was important.

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Critical Thinking
1. How did the demand for beef affect the cattle industry in Texas?
2. Why were cattle drives important to ranchers in Texas?
3. How did the cowhands work together to maintain control of the herd along the trail?

A Real-Life Story
Review A Real-Life Story on page 366. Summarize the conditions of life on the trail.

Go to www.celebratingtexas.com to research the Activity topic.

ACTIVITY

Culture
Charro Days is an annual festival celebrated in Brownsville to honor the charros. Research this festival or another event that celebrates cowhand culture. Report your findings to the class.

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