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Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2017 - Chisholm Trail (Larry Patton, editor)

Crossing Lines: the Chisholm Trail, the Railroads, and the Flint Hills

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Christy (2017). "Crossing Lines: the Chisholm Trail, the Railroads, and the Flint Hills," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2017/east/2>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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OVER MANY FIELDS
Katie Twiss

CROSSING LINES: THE CHISHOLM TRAIL, THE RAILROADS, AND THE FLINT HILLS

The nineteenth century created the cattle business, but it also created cattle, or at least what we recognize as cattle today. Before then, bovines were products of their environments, giving each region a breed that had adapted to its local climate and vegetation. Then, in the spirit of “animal husbandry,” Victorians sought out and bred cattle that were built for one purpose: to produce beef.

Stockmen separated cattle from their native landscapes, shipping Herefords and Durhams all over the world to replace “barbaric” native breeds. At the dawn of this new cattle age, English shorthorns, Texas longhorns, and American bison met on the Kansas prairie.

By the time of the Chisholm Trail, Flint Hills farmers had been raising cattle for a decade. Elisha Mardin, who came to Kansas in 1859, was one of the first to bring breeding stock to the region, where he quickly earned a reputation as a fine stockman. In 1863 Mardin bought fifteen head of thoroughbred Durham cattle in Illinois, shipped them by train to Weston, Missouri, and drove them 130 miles overland to his ranch in Chase County. These were “high-class” cattle feasting on the tall grasses of the open range where buffalo still roamed. By 1865 Mardin had grown his herd to the point that he was ready to sell 130 head. Back then that meant shipping the cattle

East, which required driving them 130 miles overland back to the railhead at Weston, Missouri.

Mardin was a pioneer in a new age of American farming, when the railroad transformed agriculture into a commodities game. The railroad brought access to broad markets, but it also attracted a new supply of cattle. In the years after the Civil War, the East had the demand, Texas had the supply, and Kansas had the railroad. In the span of a few years, millions of longhorns would graze their way from Texas and change the cattle business for good.

The Texas cattle trade created challenges for Kansas stockmen that no amount of “good breeding” could conquer. In the 1860s, no one knew exactly how Texas fever was spread. What they did know was that a disease was killing Kansas stock, that Texas longhorns were immune, and that it appeared to spread through interaction between the two. In 1860 both Kansas and Missouri enacted herd laws to

keep Texas cattle out. But in 1867, as the railroad steamed west, Kansas lifted its ban on the Texas cattle trade, establishing a quarantine line along the Sixth Principal Meridian aimed at separating the Texas cattle trade from the more populated eastern third of the state.

For those who saw profit in the horizon, the lines were as hazy as the prairie fire sky. The Flint Hills community of Junction City fell east of the Sixth Principal Meridian, but that didn’t keep it out of the sights of a man who would go down in history as a cattle trading legend. Before he famously anointed Abilene, Joseph McCoy first laid plans for a stockyard on the Kansas Pacific tracks at Junction City. Although he had political backing, lukewarm local support left him unable to negotiate a fair deal. A persistent McCoy moved west in search of greener pastures. Over the next few years, thousands of Texas cattle were shipped out of Junction City, but Abilene, which welcomed McCoy with

open arms, dominated the trade along the Kansas Pacific line that stretched across the northern reaches of the Flint Hills. At Abilene, Joseph McCoy extended the straight line that would go down in history as the Chisholm Trail. As long as the Kansas Pacific Railroad’s stockyards were the closest outlets for drovers, the KP would control the lucrative Texas cattle trade. But there was room for competition in the 150 miles between the Kansas border and the KP tracks-enough for the Santa Fe Railroad that was steaming a second east-west path through the sunflower state. Before the Civil War, plans called for the line to follow the route of the Santa Fe Trail, which passed through Council Grove. By the time Joseph McCoy set up shop in Abilene, however, the route had changed and the Santa Fe was angling toward Emporia and points south and west in hopes of wresting the reins of the Texas cattle market.

For Flint Hills communities left behind by the Kansas Pacific, the

construction of the Santa Fe line offered a second chance at cowtown glory. Like Junction City, Emporia was well east of the quarantine line established in 1867. But that didn’t stop some from trying to get in on the action. A route to Emporia “would save from 150 to 200 miles of driving and freighting,” one booster argued. “If the business were left to itself,” i.e. if government obstructions were lifted, “it would naturally flow to Emporia ... Could the law be modified as to allow the trade to come hither...?”

As Lyon County’s population grew, so did fears about Texas fever. Technically, the herd law protected the county’s crops and shorthorn cattle, but it meant nothing if even the Governor was unwilling to enforce it. Before the first locomotive steamed into Emporia, farmers were already beginning to organize to keep Texas cattle out. They took their case to the newspapers, setting the stage for a conflict that would play out on the sprawling

pastures of native grass.

For the anxious farmers and stockmen of the Flint Hills, one man became an easy target. Chase County pioneer Samuel N. Wood was an abolitionist, feminist, journalist, Santa Fe Railroad executive, politician, and opportunist whose strong opinions had made him a lightning rod since territorial days. Wood's cattle trading practices had raised ire during the Civil War, when he was accused of raiding the herds of Union-loyal Indian tribes. In August 1865, the *Daily Kansas Tribune* reported that Wood had "been arrested, and is now a prisoner at Fort Scott, charged with complicity in the Cherokee cattle-stealing business."

And now, the man who was known as the "Fighting Quaker" would crusade on behalf of Texas cattle. In 1867, when the Kansas Legislature struck the deal that created the Chisholm Trail, Sam Wood was at the head of the table. As proposed by the Kansas House, the quarantine line would have been one hundred miles

farther west, at the "ninety-ninth degree of longitude." It was Wood's Senate committee that amended the legislation to place the line at the Sixth Principal Meridian, a move that would benefit the railroads and place Cottonwood Falls in the middle of a straight line connecting the state capital to an existing trail running south from Jesse Chisholm's trading post at Wichita.

If Wood's legislative wrangling wasn't enough to turn the farmers against him, his next move was. In 1869 he sold his Cottonwood Falls newspaper, purchased a Texas cattle ranch, and commenced driving longhorns north to Kansas. This left many fighting mad: "Sam. Wood recently attempted to drive a lot of Texas cattle through Lyon county to Kansas City. L. G. Anderson and others on Dow creek pursued and stopped him on the border of Osage, and compelled him to drive the cattle back ... There is a strong feeling against Texas cattle all through the country,



MAPPING SILENCE
Anna Patricia Keller



LONGHORNS GRAZING
Matt Regier

and the man that ignores the feeling must expect to endure the 'wrath and indignation' of the people."

Neither the quarantine line nor "wrath and indignation" kept cattlemen from driving their herds to Emporia. And the railroad was happy to oblige. According to one account, Wood shipped as many as 850 Texas cattle out of Emporia in 1870. But he wasn't the only one. As many as 3,000 Texas cattle were shipped from Emporia in the two months after the Santa Fe arrived.

For years Wood worked to position Cottonwood Falls as key to the Santa Fe's snatching the cattle trade from the Kansas Pacific. If he could convince the Santa Fe to build to Cottonwood Falls, he could draw trade away from Emporia, ensure a close outlet for his Texas cattle, and raise the value of his hundreds of town lots. In July 1869 Wood urged "Gentlemen of the railroad company, push the road along! The trade of Chase, Butler, Sedgwick, and Marion counties awaits you," he said, "The great

Texas cattle trade will be your prize."

Wood didn't need to look as far as Abilene to see what rail access could mean for a Flint Hills town. After the Missouri, Kansas Texas Railroad (KATY) arrived in 1869, drovers began finding their way to Council Grove. In July 1870 the local paper reported that "Between fifteen and twenty car loads of Texas cattle have been shipped from this point in the past three weeks ... The drovers give us the praise of having undoubted advantage of grazing, cheapness of goods, shortening of route..." By November, 25,000 Texas cattle had been shipped from Council Grove.

In 1870 Sam Wood and the Santa Fe agreed on one thing: all that stood between the Santa Fe railroad and the lucrative cattle trade was Chase County. After visiting Cottonwood Falls in April 1870, Santa Fe railroad superintendent H. J. Peters urged progress, stating that "if Chase County will vote the necessary bonds the road will be running through [the] county

in a year.” Three months later, when the county finally held an election, the bonds were narrowly defeated. They finally passed the \$125,000 bonds on August 13, under the condition that the Santa Fe would build its station within a half mile of Cottonwood Falls.

The process had delayed rail construction long enough to make it possible for the Santa Fe to reach Cottonwood Falls in time for the 1871 cattle season, but impossible to reach any existing trading centers along the Chisholm Trail, including Wichita, which had been caught up in a dispute over Osage Indian lands. In October 1870 a confident Sam Wood boasted to the *Leavenworth Times* that Cottonwood Falls would “undoubtedly be the great shipping point for cattle,” estimating that 250,000 longhorns would descend on the community in 1871.

By November 1870, however, Wood’s hopes had been dashed. Although the Santa Fe had agreed to the conditions of the bonds, its plans now called for a

route that would bypass Cottonwood Falls altogether. Accusing the railroad of an “attempt to place the road as far from the Falls as possible,” Wood penned a diatribe:

We voted them \$125,000; they accepted the conditions, completed the contract, signed up the papers, filed them with our county clerk, and now Mr. Peters attempts to avoid his contract, and is enjoined, and the road delayed indefinitely. As this road is being built with the proceeds of county bonds, and proceeds of public lands, is it not possible to control the location of the road for the benefit of the people by legislation? And cannot we compel them to build from Topeka to Atchison, giving us a northern connection? Or are we at the mercy of a lot of speculators, who would suck our very life blood to enrich themselves?

-In haste. S. N. WOOD.

Topeka Commonwealth, 11 November 1870.

By the time of Wood’s tirade, the Santa Fe had found an easier way to gain access to the cattle trade. In July



COUNTRYSIDE
Shin-hee Chin

Congress authorized the purchase of Osage lands, expanding the possibilities for Wichita. In August fewer than two weeks after Chase County passed its railroad bonds, the Santa Fe sent land agents to identify a location for a new town west of Florence. The fastest way through the Flint Hills was along the Cottonwood River. To save time and expense, the Santa Fe would locate a station more than two miles north of Cottonwood Falls, creating the town that would later be named Strong City.

When the Santa Fe line reached Strong City in March 1871, it announced its plans for the upcoming cattle shipping season. The “terminus of their road for the coming year [would be] a new town called Newton,” and it would “build cattle yards near the trail, one mile west of town.” Replete with stockyards designed by Joseph McCoy, Newton became the Santa Fe’s answer to Abilene.

In 1871 Cottonwood Falls may not have been the “great shipping point for cattle” that Sam Wood had hoped for;

but it got its share of the Texas cattle trade, all while escaping some of the vices that plagued “trail’s end” towns. In 1871 40,000 cattle were shipped out of Newton, where an infamous August gunfight left six cowboys dead. On August 25, 1871, the same day the *Chase County Leader* gave a wrenching account of the Newton Massacre, the paper reported that “30,000 cattle are in the Falls neighborhood awaiting shipment.”

The 1871 season marked the end of the great Texas cattle trade for both Newton and Cottonwood Falls. In September 1871 the *Chase County Leader* reported that Sam Wood had sold his Texas cattle ranch. “He says it don’t pay to drive cattle from Texas, that there is more money in raising cattle in Chase county than in importing Texas cattle, and has made up his mind to stay here.”

The Chisholm Trail had brought Texas fever, competition, and bad blood to the Flint Hills. But it also brought a new appreciation for the tallgrass prairie as prime grazeland. Over thousands of



WIRE (1)
Don Wolfe

years, the American Indians had created a landscape that sustained bison. It was the grass that attracted the cattlemen who fattened their longhorns in the cattle trail days, and it was the grass that created the enduring annual ritual of shipping cattle to the Flint Hills for finishing each spring.

In 1871 the Kansas Supreme Court declared the herd law unconstitutional, authorizing counties to adopt their own regulations. Sam Wood, the Flint Hills lightning rod who drew the original quarantine line but proceeded to defy it, supported such regulation. By then, however, cattle operations, especially the large ones that had purchased thousands of acres of grasslands from the railroads, relied on open grazing, and Chase County never adopted a herd law. To maintain the grass, ranchers continued the practice of pasture burning that had passed from

Plains Indians to Elisha Mardin.

Although no Flint Hills community would go down in history as a Chisholm Trail cowtown, one could argue that the Flint Hills was the region where the Chisholm Trail had its most enduring impact. In the border war between the farmer and the cowman, the Flint Hills stood on the front lines. By century’s end, the bison and Texas longhorns were nearly extinct, and farming had come to dominate west of the Sixth Principal Meridian. But on the east side of the line, in the Kansas Flint Hills, the large expanses of grass and cowboy culture live on.

Christy Davis, Executive Director of Symphony in the Flint Hills, is a fifth-generation Kansan who is passionate about the history, landscape, and culture of her home state.