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UDP Focus: On the trail

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On the trail

Professor's passion for history leads him down the Chisholm Trail

By Taylor Provine

To James Sherow, historians are like detectives.

“We have a mystery — what happened — and we go out looking for the clues, and then we put the clues together to form a story of what happened,” said Sherow, Kansas State University distinguished professor of history.

For Sherow, now in his 26th year at the university, one of the mysteries that he wanted to solve was why one man gambled on the Chisholm Trail and Texas cattle drives more than 150 years ago. His new book, “The Chisholm Trail: Joseph McCoy’s Great Gamble,” tells the story of McCoy, an entrepreneur who organized the town of Abilene, Kansas, as a cattle outlet for markets in New York and other urban areas across the globe. The book documents the hardships McCoy encountered along the way.

Sherow’s “detective” work included research on the ecological and environmental aspects of trail driving.

“There’s a lot to it,” he said. “Everything from climate, grasses, water systems, transportation used to deliver cattle to markets and Texas cattle fever — a disease spread by ticks — had an influence and shaped the economy and ecology of the trail.”


During Sherow’s 15-year journey on his own trail toward the book, he researched records of temperatures, cloud conditions, wind directions and speeds, rainfalls, storms and sunspot activity to document how weather patterns had a positive or negative effect on the trail.

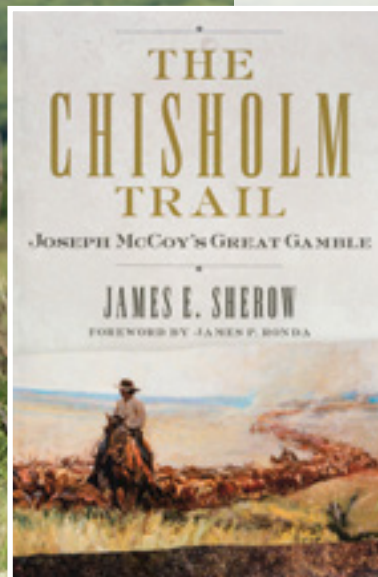
Sherow found that these ecological factors ultimately affected the outcome of the cattle trade. One example he details in the book is how rainfall frequency affected the nutritional value of the grasslands, which then affected cattle’s condition at markets. Another example he explains is the winters of 1871 and 1872, which were especially tough on the trail. Temperatures seldom made it above freezing and thousands of cattle died.

“Studying the weather records really gave me a feeling for the reality of the trail and told me exactly how tough it was,” Sherow said.

Sherow’s accomplished career in history also has led him down several other paths.

A fourth-generation Kansan, he is passionate about public history and historic preservation in the state and in Manhattan. He was selected for the governor-appointed Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review and served on the Manhattan City Commission for six years. He served as mayor from 2011-2012. Sherow also is the author of five other books, several book chapters and scholarly articles, and he is managing editor of *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains*.

“For me, being a historian gives insights on what it means to be human and tells us how we got to this point in time,” Sherow said. “History is ecological and ecology is historical.” 



James Sherow, university distinguished professor of history, explores the connections between entrepreneur Joseph McCoy and the Chisholm Trail in his latest book.