TEXAS CATTLE TRAILS

CONTEXT. During the American Civil War, many herds of unattended Texas longhorn cattle from ranches in the Rio Grande Valley escaped into the Wild Horse Desert, the wasteland between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River, and multiplied. Their growth rate, estimated at 25% annually, left large herds of wild cattle on the plains.

The Texas Longhorn is ideally suited for the role it played in the development of the cattle trade. It has great endurance to hot temperatures and goes for long periods without drinking water. The cow is extremely fertile, and has a smaller than average calf which makes calving easier. Once born, the calves gain weight quickly. Good mothers produce a 90-100% calf crop annually, and they are fertile long after other cattle. Their resistance to organisms and parasites give hardiness and longevity. The only drawback is that the meat is leaner and not as tender compared to other cattle. (1)

Returning ranchers, whose resources had been depleted by five years of war, captured these wild cattle for sale to northern and eastern markets. Lacking any other means of transport, they drove the cattle overland to railheads at Abilene, Texas, or Dodge City, Kansas, from their ranches in the Rio Grande borderlands. Between 1876 and 1893, more than seven million cattle and one million horses moved north.

The trails had various names, such as Western, East Hidalgo, Shawnee, Chisholm, and others. Historically, there is no “Chisholm Trail” in Texas. The actual Chisholm Trail was a freight trail used from 1865 by trader Jesse Chisholm between the Washita River (present Chickasha, Oklahoma) and Wichita, Kansas. Cattle were later driven to market over this trail. Cowboys soon came to call any cattle trail a “Chisholm Trail.” Although
purist historians dispute exact nomenclature, generally the name was applied indiscriminately to any route cattle followed out of Texas. (2)

Numerous historical markers, some placed by the Texas Historical Commission and some by private entities, designate cattle trails across the 600 miles between the Rio Grande and the Texas northern border at Red River. Private markers at Brownsville and Donna mark trails in the Rio Grande Valley. The nearest state-sponsored cattle trail marker is at Cuero, fifty miles north of the roots of cattle trails in Texas. (3)

Historian Andres Tijerina writes that “few history books mention the Tejano ranches… where millions of those cattle were raised, and no Texas history textbook map yet has named the Tejano towns and ranches where the famous cattle trails actually originated.” (4)

A trailmarking project begun in the 1920s-1930s helped to bring recognition to early Rio Grande Valley ranches which were the source of many cattle which fed the Texas cattle trails.

II OVERVIEW

Memoirs of Rio Grande Valley ranchers contain numerous references to their participation in trail drives. Roberto Vela of the Laguna Seca (dry lake) Ranch north of Edinburg wrote “This ranch as well as all other ranches in the area drove its cattle to Dodge City, Kansas. According to my uncle Jesus [Vela], the first such drive from the Laguna Seca Ranch to Dodge City occurred in 1877.” (5)

The TR connected brand of County Judge Thaddeus Rhodes, registered in 1866, marked his herds built from the Texas longhorn cattle which had multiplied during the Civil War until there were 200,000 head of cattle south of the Nueces River in 1869.
Rhodes and other Hidalgo County ranchers drove thousands of cattle north to hide and
tallow factories at Rockport or up the East Hidalgo Trail to Abilene, Kansas. (6)

Cattle were bringing $25 a head, and cattle rustlers moved in. By 1872, the border
country was infested and law enforcement efforts were ineffective. Rancher Rhodes lost
1100 head of cattle from his Relampago (lightning) Ranch south of Mercedes. When he
assembled a posse and recovered some of his herd, his ranch was sacked. Rhodes was a
marked man, and he slept in the brush.

Juan Cavazos of La Noria Cardeneña (Cardenas well) Ranch, 18 miles north of
present Edinburg, while driving cattle up the Chisholm Trail, discovered his twin sister,
rescued from Indian captivity, living in Hood County. (7)

From Asadores (barbecue spits) Ranch south of Donna, rancher Dionisio Muñoz
sent cattle to market over the East Hidalgo Trail. Other ranchers, such as the brothers of
Hidalgo County Commissioner (1884) Celso Saenz, drove cattle from Granjeno
(hackberry shrub) Ranch south of present Sharyland to market by trail drive. (8)

In October of 1877, Rafael Vela, a new bridegroom, had to leave on a three-month-
long cattle drive immediately after the ceremony, while his bride remained at El Desierto
Ranch north of present Edinburg. (9)

In the 1870s and 1880s, smaller ranchers joined their livestock together in a single
herd to head for the Chisholm Trail. The Santa Anita Ranch played a significant role in
gathering cattle shipments from ranches along the lower Rio Grande. (10)

Because of the rapid increase in northern drives, in 1871 the
legislature passed a law requiring all who purchased cattle for driving out of state to mark
each animal back of the left shoulder with a [temporary] road brand. John J. Young of
Santa Anita Ranch in northern Hidalgo County registered his road brand as an upside
down (J Y) in 1879. (11)

In 1878, Young headed a cattle drive of 2,400 head in March. Young continued
through the 1880s to drive cattle from the Santa Anita, with many other ranching outfits.
A contractor received between a dollar and a dollar fifty per head, less losses. A 3,000-
head herd could be driven to Kansas in two months for $1,000. (12)

The Santa Gertrudis Ranch had no need to combine herds. From 1869 to 1872,
Richard King sold at least 13,500 beeves, most driven up the long way to Kansas. In
1876, King trailed 30,000 head divided into 12 herds, each separated by about two miles
apart for the 1,100 mile journey to the railroad siding in Kansas. His partner Miflin
Kennedy sent 10,000 head from Los Laureles. Rancher Francisco Yturria of Punte del
Monte Ranch, south of King’s, often combined his cattle with King, Kenedy and Charles
Stillman for the trip to Dodge City. Many smaller ranchers joined their herds, and went
up the Chisholm Trail past the Kenedy and King Ranches through Beeville, Gonzales and
Lockhart to Austin or San Antonio. (13)

PETER ACKLEY AND THE “LONGHORN CHISHOLM TRAIL”

Since the 1930s, a cast-iron, hand-painted medallion-type marker reading “Going up
the Texas [head of a longhorn steer] Chisholm Trail 1867” has stood in Donna, Texas.
The only other such marker now existing in the Rio Grande Valley is in Brownsville.

In 2006, Laura Lincoln, director of the Donna Hooks Fletcher Museum in Donna,
Texas, questioned the origin of the marker. She wrote to the Oregon Public Broadcasting
Company, producers of “History detectives,” a nationally televised show, whose purpose
was to solve historical mysteries. Their response, broadcast on the Public Broadcasting
system in June 2006, credited retired oilman Peter P. Ackley with placing these markers along highways paralleling cattle trails from Texas to Canada. (14)

Peter Preston Ackley was born July 15, 1858, in Whiteside County, Illinois. He moved to Southwest Texas as a boy. In 1878, at the age of 19, Ackley set out riding bareback to become a cowboy. He helped drive a herd of Longhorn cattle from Henrietta, Texas, across the Red River at Doan’s Crossing, just north of Vernon, Texas, to the end of the railroad at Dodge City, Kansas. This was 11 years after the first Texas trail herds were driven north.

Ackley drove herds north from southwest Texas to Dodge City and south from Ogalalla, Nebraska and feeding grounds in Canada to Dodge City. He drove the first blooded shorthorn cattle into the Panhandle of Texas and into New Mexico. (15)

In 1881, Ackley moved to Cottonwood Station, in Vernon, Wilbarger County, on the Oklahoma-Texas border. In 1886, he married schoolteacher Martha Ella Foreman (1862-1928) in Missouri. After marriage, Ackley operated a stage stand at Medicine Mound near Herrold, Texas until 1896, when they moved to Wheeler County, close to Texola, Oklahoma, and not far from Elk City. At one time, he was a deputy trail brand inspector, and saw vast herds of cattle pass through. He had a life-long interest in cowboy lore. (16)

Ackley acquired gas wells in the Texas Panhandle, and owned a few oil and gas wells between Twitty and Wheeler, in Wheeler County, Texas, which made him fairly wealthy. (17)

About 1925, Ackley began working towards having the Chisholm Trail designated as a national highway. For the next eight years, he drove his automobile up and down the old cattle trails, visiting city officials and influential citizens, promoting his dream of
marking the highway. He spent the last ten years of his life erecting markers on the “Longhorn Chisholm Trail,” in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and North Dakota to Canada. His wife of 42 years died in 1928, and Ackley retired. (18)

Ackley prepared a strip map showing the route of his proposed “Longhorn Chisholm Trail” through six states between Mexico and Canada. His chosen route roughly followed the Western Trail, diverging at Bowie to go the last 85 miles through Wichita Falls and cross the Red River at Doan’s Crossing above Vernon, instead of at Red River Station above Nocona:

CANADA: Prince Albert, Ross, Yorktown
NORTH DAKOTA: Portal, Minot, Bismark, Ft. Yates
SOUTH DAKOTA: Mobridge, Pierre
NEBRASKA: Valentine, Ogalalla, Imperial, Trenton
KANSAS: Atwood, Colby, Abilene, Dodge City, Ashland
OKLAHOMA: Buffalo, Woodward, Leeds, Harmony, Elk City, Granite, Alton
TEXAS: Vernon, Wichita Falls, Henrietta, Bowie, Decatur, Fort Worth, Alvarado, Hillsboro, Waco, Temple, Georgetown, Austin, [side to] Lockhart, San Marcos, San Antonio Pleasanton, Three Rivers, George West, Alice, Falfurrias, Edinburg, Pharr, Harlingen, Brownsville
MEXICO: Matamoros, Victoria, Mexico City, Acapulco (19)

On May 19, 1930, the first meeting of the Chisholm Trail Highway Association convened in Austin, with J. Frank Dobie as president, George W. Saunders as vice-president and treasurer. The group undertook to mark the old Chisholm and Western Chisholm Trails through Texas, from Brownsville to Altus, Oklahoma. (20)
They selected two road markers with the words “Chisholm Trail 1867-1895” and “Western Chisholm Trail 1878-1895,” both differing slightly from Ackley’s design. They further resolved that P.P. Ackley of Elk City, Oklahoma, “who has done so much towards getting the Chisholm Trail marked,” be instructed to continue in his work of getting it marked in Oklahoma and other northern states clear to the Canada line.

Ackley organized the Texas Longhorn Chisholm Trail Association and secured permission from the Texas Highway Commission to put markers on a route Ackley designated. A similar association was formed in Oklahoma at Elk City. According to Ackley’s plans, two markers were to be placed in each of the 21 Texas county seats through which the trail passed. (21)

In 1931, a ten-foot-tall, granite monument “in honor of the trail drivers” was dedicated at Doan’s Crossing above Vernon on the Red River. P.P. Ackley was the largest subscriber, donating $1000 of the $2500 cost. The marker bore the words “The Longhorn Chisholm Trail and the Western Trail 1876-1895.” The misplaced wording “Chisholm Trail” angered many Texas trail drivers, especially George W. Saunders, president of the Old Time Trail Drivers’ Association, and general manager of the Union Stockyards in San Antonio, but Ackley’s money and persistence prevailed. (22)

In 1939, the $50,000 Ackley Park was named in his honor when he donated land in Elk City for a recreational ballpark and stadium, said to be one of the state’s finest. (23)

After retirement, Ackley spent spring and summer in north Texas and Oklahoma. When northerners began, he went to his winter home in Donna, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. He lived about five miles north of town on La Blanca Road (present FM 493) and Mile 13.5 North, where he had an orange grove. (24)
His next-door neighbor, Hazel Anderson, then a seven-year-old-child, used to walk past the Ackley home on her way to school. She recalled that Mr. Ackley had a handlebar mustache, and wore cowboy chaps and boots. He had longhorns mounted on his Chrysler coupe. The sign outside his house read “End of the Chisholm Trail.” His housekeeper, Marie Clifford Cooper, who lived on the property, often saw him painting and furbishing the cast iron markers, laid out in the yard. Mrs. Cooper herself painted 22 of the markers. (25)

Ackley died in Elk City, Oklahoma, on April 6, 1940. The retired rancher and frontiersman was buried in Texola, Oklahoma, beside his wife of 42 years. He was survived by his brother J. A. (Bert) Ackley of Canadian, Texas, his daughter Mrs. C. D. Horstman of Elk City, and grandchildren. (26)

III SIGNIFICANCE

Texas cattle trails in the Rio Grande Valley mark the local ranches from which Longhorn cattle started up the long trail to Abilene and Dodge City. They signify the important economic impact that ranching had on recovery of Texas after the Civil War, and the role that South Texas ranches played in development of the cattle trade. The Ackley trail markers identify the general route used to transport millions of wild Longhorn cattle to market in the late 1800s. Although only a few of them remain today, they help to preserve an important part of past Texas history and identify original locations of the trail as interpreted by old time trail drivers and historians. They are an attraction to travelers in our state and an educational tool for future generations.

IV ENDNOTES


19. Ackley, P. P. Strip map, Longhorn Chisholm Trail. Elk City, Oklahoma. n.d. Foreword states “This is the Dodge City Route or the Western Chisholm Trail.”

20. Minutes of the first meeting of the Chisholm Trail Association held at Austin, Texas, May 19, 1930.


22. Elk City Brown Sox.


24. Anderson, Hazel G. Telephone conversation, Donna, TX, August 18, 2008. (Mrs. Anderson is past president of the Donna Hooks Fletcher Museum Board.)

25. Court clerk, Sayre, Beckham County, OK. Will of P. P. Ackley, 20 March 1930. (Copy in Donna Museum.) and obituary in Elk City P______. “Last rites for Ackley are held. April 9, 1940. (Clipping from Elk City Library.)

ADDITIONAL SOURCES


