

Teacher Development

Cattle Drives

By Walter Eskridge



The cattle drives took place between 1867 and 1893. After the Civil War, the large cities in the northeast United States wanted beef, but they didn't have cattle, so the cattle drives were done to satisfy eastern appetites for beef and for the cattle men to make money. A cattle drive was a journey of 600 miles from south Texas to Kansas. It took around fifteen men three months to move about 2,500 head of cattle to one of several possible destinations in southern Kansas. This was a long, hard job, and one may ask why they did it. The answer of course is money, but what was so important in Kansas? Why drive a herd 600 miles? The answer was the railroad.

The railroad could transport herds in cattle cars through areas where they could not be trailed. Between Kansas and the eastern cities, there were many roads, towns, fences, homes, farms and laws that would prohibit trailing 2,500 head of cattle. Since modern refrigeration did not yet exist, cattle were loaded onto the train on the hoof and not slaughtered until they arrived in the northeastern cities.

The Trail Riders

The job of the trail rider was to move a herd through half of Texas, all of Indian Territory, into Kansas, and sometimes further. Along the way, they fought exhaustion, loneliness, isolation, and grave dangers that could fell even the toughest.

Cowboys were usually young, white men, but some were African-American, Mexican, or Indian. Their average age was 24. They trailed cattle for a variety of reasons. Some were fleeing the devastation of the South after the Civil War. Others left home after their older brother inherited the farm. Some were working off a failed romance. Many of them wanted to have an adventure and to prove their mettle by taking on a herd of 800 pound beeves.



Their work was terribly hard and sometimes dangerous, so most of them did not work on trail drives for any more than seven years. However, most riders enjoyed the comradeship of the trail, and many of them took pride in being a trail rider. Typical pay for the whole journey was about \$100 plus food called "found" provided by the trail cook along the way. The cook and the trail boss got paid more, but the average hand worked all day every day and part of the night for about \$1 a day.

\$100



Cowboys usually wore a vest because it was difficult to get into his pants pockets when was in the saddle and wearing chaps.



This picture shows the cowboy's whole outfit including his chaps. Chaps are heavy leather pants that are worn over his regular pants. The chaps protect his pants and legs from horns and thorns.

Today a dollar a day does not sound like acceptable pay, but goods and services cost a lot less in the 1880s than they do today. A cowboy could buy a new set of work clothes for about \$2.75. That includes long underwear, socks, shirt, bandanna, vest and pants. Boots could cost as little as \$3.75. A serviceable hat could be had for \$3.00. Spurs would cost about 50¢. Chaps were expensive. They cost about \$8.00. However chaps, boots, spurs, and a hat would probably be good for several years. The total cost for an entire new outfit would have been about \$18.00. One could spend a great deal more on the boots and hat, and but it was not necessary. A saddle was expensive, about \$30, but it should last 30 years, so one saddle would be serviceable over most of a man's adult life.

Therefore \$100 for three month's work is better than what it sounds like today. At the end of a cattle drive, if a cowboy managed his money carefully, he could not only buy new

clothes, but also a horse and have some money left over. However many of the men spent most of their money quickly on recreational opportunities in Dodge City at trail's end.

His Own Horse

The person who owned the cattle herd provided the horses. Collectively they were called the remuda, and they were the mounts that the riders used. Over the course of a day, as his mount got tired, a rider would go to the remuda and get a fresh horse. When the herd reached its destination, a rider was paid \$100, and he was free to buy whatever he wanted including his own horse. Trail hands were not allowed to own their horse on a trail drive. There was a very good reason for that. A man who owned his horse could leave the drive whenever he wanted, and that would leave the crew shorthanded. If he left the drive and took a horse from the remuda, he was then a horse thief. This was a very serious offense at that time and could result in death by hanging if he were caught.



Spring Roundup

The starting point for a cattle drive was usually in south Texas. In the early years of the drives, the latter 1860s, cattle were in great abundance in south Texas. They were not fenced in, and were free to wander about. Beeves belonging to one owner mingled with those of another owner.



Before the drive north could begin, the trail boss had to determine which cows were his responsibility. To do this, the hands gathered thousands of cattle together from a given area. Then the hands examined them to see if the cattle were branded, and separated them according to their brands. Cattle that were not branded were taken to the branding fire where branding irons were heated and used

to make a mark on the cow to identify ownership. Once the sorting and branding were finished, a herd could be put together for the drive.

Because one of the goals of a cattle drive was to have the beeves arrive with as much weight on them as possible, cattle drives began in the spring. By starting in the spring, it was likely that there would be plenty of water and grass to keep weight on the animals as they made their way north.

Hazards on the Trail

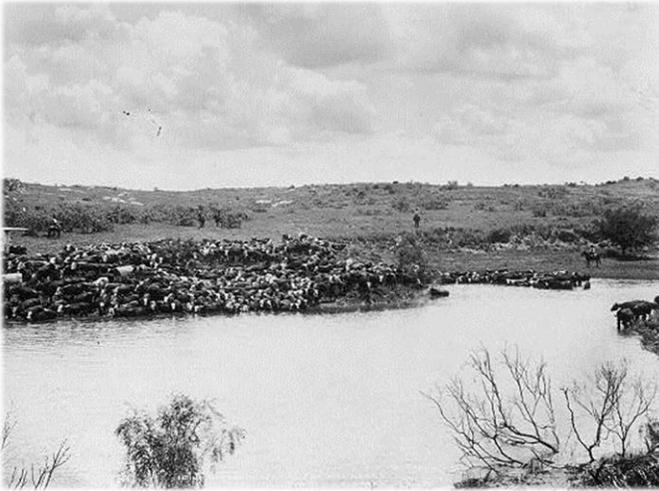
On a cattle drive, riding accidents were the most common form of death. If a rider fell from his horse with one boot still stuck in the stirrup, he could be dragged to death. If he fell from his mount when beeves were milling about after a stampede, they could trample him.

During long, hot, dry portions of the trail, there might not be any water for man or beast. Under those conditions a man might drink muddy water from a hoof print in the ground. If the cook had no salt, a rider may resort to licking horse sweat from his saddle. If men were caught in a hailstorm, the only shelter was to dismount, remove their saddles and hold them over their heads. Lightning can be lethal particularly if you are the tallest object in the field, and a man on a horse in a prairie, would likely be the tallest thing around. Also many riders rode with a pistol in their holster, and because the pistol was made of steel, it served as a natural path for lightning. Knowing this, a rider might get rid of his pistol till the lightning had passed. Being in a lightning storm in an exposed position could be a frightening experience. One man caught in a lightning storm was so frightened that he lay on the ground and tried to die but could not.



River Crossings

One of the most dangerous parts of the drive especially for the herd



was a river crossing. Cattle drives usually started in the spring which was good for the availability of grass and water but bad when it came to swollen rivers. A deep river that was wide and had a strong current presented three great hazards.

One was that the cattle could be swept downstream. That would result in their being in the water such a long time that they could get tired and drown. Another problem is that the beeves may get halfway across the river and change their minds about crossing and decide to go back. This would result in the herd getting tangled up in the river and possibly drowning. The river banks were the third hazard. As the beeves entered and exited the stream they needed ground that was firm enough to support their 800 pound weight. Sometimes what they found instead was quicksand that would suck the cow down where it would die.

If the river were too hazardous to cross, the trail crew waited for the water to recede. That presented two problems. The first was that the wait put them behind schedule. The other was that the trail typically had many herds headed to Kansas. Normally they would have been several miles apart, but when a river flooded out of its banks, one herd after another would arrive and have to stop. As long as the herds were well separated, they did not become mingled, but as the herds stopped at a wide river, the riders had to work particularly hard to keep the herds separate.

A Day on the Trail

At first light, the cook would start to get the men up for their breakfast. After getting dressed, they ate quickly, saddled up and went out to the herd. Each man would have an assigned position relative to the herd. After trailing a few hours, a rider would go to the remuda, the horse herd, and get a fresh horse.

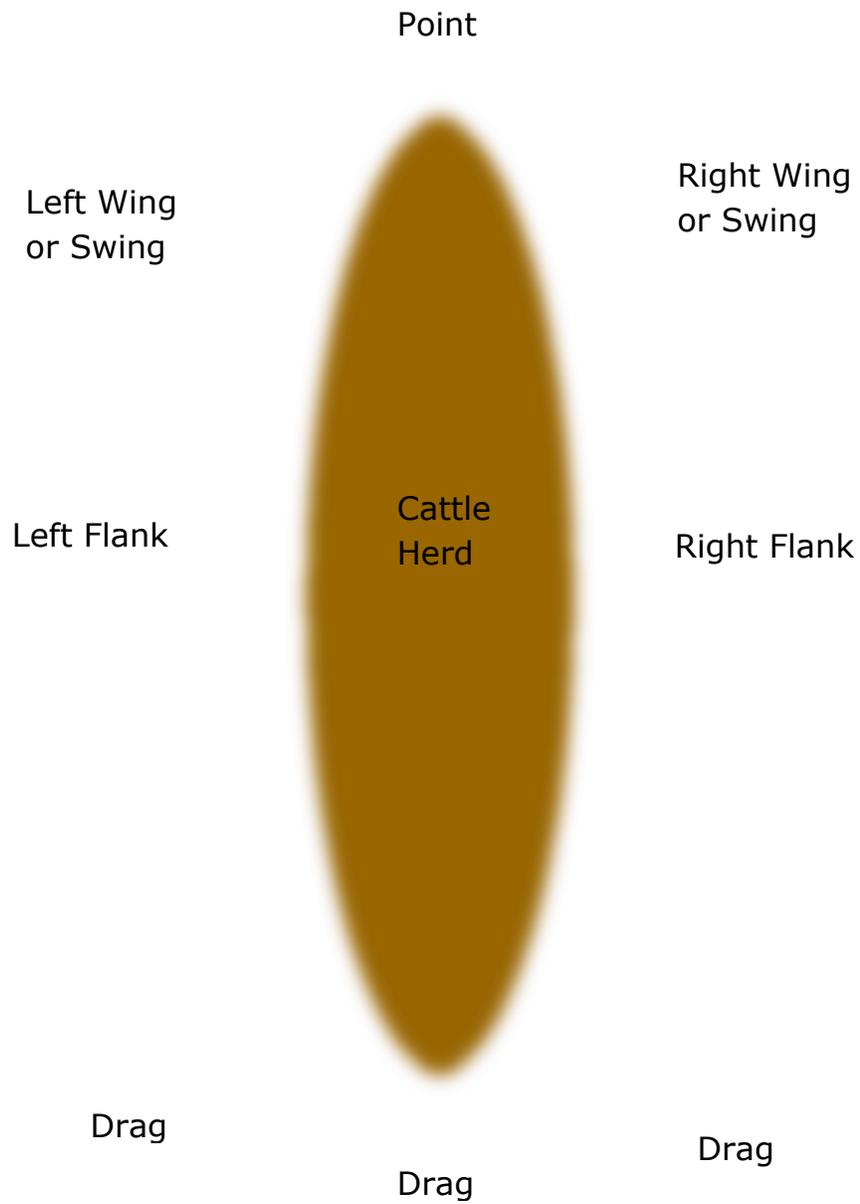
Around noon, they would stop the herd, and the riders would take turns going to the chuck wagon for their dinner. They would eat quickly and go back to the herd to give someone else a chance to eat.

By late afternoon, the herd would have gone about 12 to 15 miles, and the trail boss would have found a place for the herd to bed down. Under ideal circumstances, it would have been a place where there was plenty of grass for the beefs to eat and water to drink.

The riders would go into camp for supper. For the first time that day, they could eat in a leisurely manner. They could talk, play cards, and generally relax until it was time for their night ride.

All night, two riders would take turns riding around the herd to keep an eye on the cows. All the riders took turns with this duty. They would be on for two hours. Then they would go back to camp to wake the next pair who would do their two hours. During their shift, they would ride around the herd- one in clockwise direction, the other counterclockwise -and they would watch for rustlers, coyotes and anything else that could threaten the herd. Also, they would keep the cows calm. They could do this by talking to them, singing a soft song, or whistling a soft tune. When the next pair came on duty, the earlier pair would go back and get some more sleep.

Cattle Drive Positions



Point is the most enviable position as this person consumed the least amount of dust and dirt. He was one of the most experienced hands, and it

was his job to point the herd in the right direction and to set the pace. The pace was almost always a slow one because moving the beeves too fast would make them lose weight.

Wing or swing is a position that helps set the pace of the herd and follows the lead of the point man in steering the herd.

Flank is a position intended to prevent strays. If there were any strays, these riders went after them.

Drag is the least prestigious position. It is an entry level position that calls for the least amount of experience. Riders in the drag positions push the slow cattle forward and they round up strays. They also eat the most dust.

Trail Drive Cook

"There's bacon in the pan. There's coffee in the pot. Get up and get it! Get it while it's hot! Roll out fellers, and listen to the birdies sing their praises to God." The cook would use a chant similar to this each morning as he roused the riders from their beds.

A trail drive cook's job was to provide three hot meals a day for everyone. It was to be ready on time and served with abundance. It was usually nothing that anyone would consider fancy. A typical meal consisted of beans, biscuits, and bacon. That was breakfast, dinner, and supper. He usually served beans, biscuits, and bacon because they were quick and easy to prepare, they would not spoil, and they would keep the men strong. Also because the herd was on the move every day, there wasn't time or the opportunity for the cook to obtain other kinds of food.

Occasionally the trail boss might give a local farmer a newborn calf in exchange for vegetables and eggs. This may sound like an exceptionally

generous payment for eggs and vegetables, but the calf would have been shot soon anyway because a new calf was too weak to keep up with the herd.

The cook also had canned food called air tights. He often had canned tomatoes and peaches. Tomatoes were often added to the beans as they cooked. Also tomatoes were effective in quenching a man's thirst. The peaches could be used occasionally to make a pie. The cook also had raisins with which he could make a pie.



It was a good idea for a rider to stay on the cook's good side. The way to do that was to follow his rules while in camp. These are some examples of the cook's rules: never complain about the food, bring the cook good firewood, let the cook know if you come across some sweet water, dismount and walk your horse into camp, put your plate and fork into the crash pan to soak after you eat, and be ready to help the cook if the chuck wagon gets stuck or in need of repair.

There were several benefits to following the cook's rules. He may favor you with an extra helping of food, or he might make a pie just for you.



He may let you sleep under the chuck wagon on a rainy night. He could also take extra care when treating your injuries.

It may seem mysterious that the crew had a herd of cattle but did not eat beef. They generally did not eat beef because they were going to sell the beeves when they reached Kansas, and they could not sell beeves that they had already eaten. However there were exceptions. In the early years of the cattle drives, a new born calf would have been used to provide a feast for the men. Later, the price of beef got so high that they would haul the new calf in a wagon instead of eating it.

Sometimes they would eat beef because a cow had broken a leg on the trail. The animal would have been put down as it was of no further use. This left an 800 pound cow that could provide many sumptuous meals. The problem is that the cook did not have any way to keep the meat cool, and even fifteen hungry men cannot eat an 800 pound cow in three days, so the cook would cut off a leg, wrap it in cowhide to keep the flies off it, and cook from that for two or three days.



Frequently, the trail cook was also the cook at a Texas ranch in the winter where life was a lot easier, but on the trail the job was hard. The cook was up and cooking before sunrise. As soon as the hands had eaten, the cook and his Little

Mary, his helper, would get pots, pans, and dishes cleaned and stowed into the chuck wagon. After the horses were hitched to the wagon, the cook drove it out ahead of the herd. Dinner had to be ready at noon, so the cook found a place up the trail where the riders would be at about that time of day. He got his fire going, unpacked what was needed for dinner, and got the meal prepared. At noon, the riders came in quickly, ate, and went back to the herd.

After everything was cleaned and packed, the cook went further up the trail to a point where the herd would be by late afternoon. When the herd stopped in the afternoon, the trail boss stopped them a mile or two from camp to keep the dust from the herd from getting into their food and

covering everything. This also kept some distance between the two in case of a stampede, which would destroy the camp.

It was here that the cook prepared supper and got the beans cooking for tomorrow's meal. Before going to bed, he would point the wagon tongue to the North Star so that if it were overcast the next morning, the trail boss would know which way north was. He also left a lantern burning so that men coming back from their night ride would be able to find the camp. As soon as he could, he would get to bed to start again before first light.

The cook needed firewood every day. As long as they were in an area with adequate wood, that was not a problem. However when the herd got into an area without trees, the cook had to use another type of fuel. This was usually cow chips also known as prairie coal or compressed hay. Dry cow chips were carefully gathered. Care was taken to be sure that they were dry, but also because there were frequently scorpions lurking beneath the cow chips. The cook could light prairie coal with a piece of bacon rind. The fat in the rind provided a good blaze that would get it burning. Prairie coal was such a common fuel that farmers along the trail would trade vegetables or eggs in exchange for the chips that the herd would leave behind.



Stampede

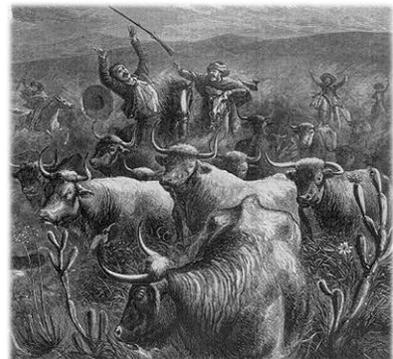


A cowboy's worst nightmare was a stampede. A stampede is when the herd suddenly and mysteriously took off running. Though the herd would generally run in the same direction, some of the cows would go in other directions. Even if no one got trampled to the death in the melee, there was a tremendous amount of dangerous work involved in stopping a stampede. It was dangerous because it usually happened at night with all the hazards of running in the dark.

Herds usually have certain animals that lead the way. These leaders were important to the strategy to stop a stampede. Riders would catch up to the leaders and try to turn them. If they could turn the leaders, the rest would probably follow. However the leaders were probably hungry, thirsty, frightened, or all three, so they would not be open to suggestion. To get the leaders' attention, a rider would shoot his pistol into the ground next to the leaders' hooves. Once he had their attention, he would proceed to turn them. If the riders could keep turning the herd, the stampede would lose momentum and stop.

There were various reasons why a herd would stampede. Sometimes the reasons were known but many times they would mysteriously take off. Sometimes the riders could identify certain cattle that were likely to start a stampede. One way to deal with them was to sew their eyes shut. After that, they did not stampede, and two weeks later when the thread had rotted off, they were much better behaved.

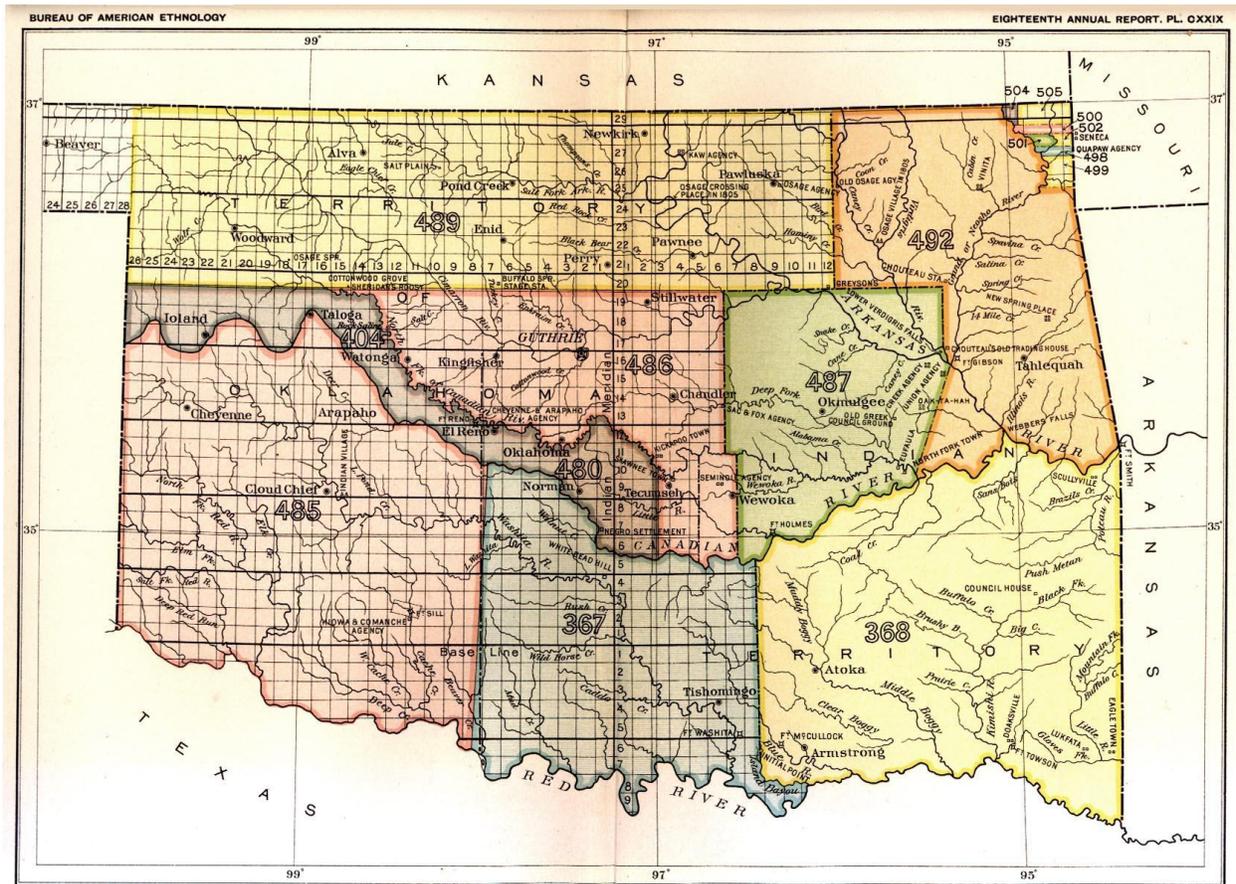
Some stampedes were started intentionally by rustlers. During the night, they would startle the herd and in the confusion that followed they would leave with as many beeves as they could handle. There were always two riders riding around the herd all night to guard against



stampedes, but they could not be everywhere at once.

The herd might have to go for days without water which the cows could smell ten miles away, and that increased the risk of a stampede. The riders were particularly vigilant under those conditions because the cows were very irritable. Also some cows would go blind after days without water. In spite of the dangers of a stampede, one trail boss intentionally had the riders start a stampede because the river that they were approaching had alkali water that would make the beeves sick if they were allowed to drink it. They ran the herd over the river, but then the animals realized that they had just passed what they craved, so they tried to turn around. With great effort, the riders were able to keep the herd from turning back to the river.

Indian Territory



Almost all cattle drives went through Indian Territory. Whether they were destined for the rail heads in Kansas or for points further north, they crossed through the Indian nations. Depending on which nation's land was being traversed determined whether there would be trouble in the process. In some cases, the trail boss had to pay a cash toll for each head of cattle. In other cases, the toll was paid by giving the Indians an agreed on number of beeves. When everyone agreed how this was to be done, things went smoothly. However, sometimes the negotiations broke down. When that happened, the tribe might come back at night and get what they were after by starting a stampede and taking what they wanted.

Points North

Not all cattle drives ended in Kansas. Although most herds were destined for the rails that would take them east, some went as far north as Montana or even Canada, a journey of 1,400 miles from south Texas.

That is a very long cattle drive. The reason they undertook such a long ordeal was that there were no railroads that far north, and herds that were driven that far north stayed there when they arrived. They were driven north to start new ranches where there was a great deal of cheap or free land available. These herds stocked new ranches to serve the northern portions of the nation.