

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Seven

## Cattle Drives

### LESSON IDEA

To show the courage and determination required to drive a thousand herd of cattle from Texas, through badlands and Indian territory, to rail lines in the Kansas cowtowns.

### PREPARATION

We recommend obtaining a copy of *The Cowboys* (published by Time-Life Books, Inc.) from your local library, for an excellent pictorial history of the Texas cattle drives.

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**P**ITY POOR OLD Jesse Chisholm. He ate some bad bear grease in 1868 and died not long afterwards. He never knew that the trail he blazed from San Antonio, Texas to Abilene, Kansas would become one of the most famous cattle trails in American history. Or that between 1867 and 1884, millions of cattle would be prodded along his trail, destined for the slaughter houses of Kansas City and Chicago, to help feed a hungry and growing nation.

There were other trails leading from Texas to the cowtowns of the Great Plains: the Dodge City Trail, the Goodnight Trail, the Abilene Trail, and the Western Trail. Up these trails cowboys drove the longhorn steers to reach cattle pens squatting near newly laid railroad spurs. The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 had opened up vast new opportunities for Texas cattlemen to get their meat to market quickly. From the cattleman's point of view, the longhorn steer was an ideal product. By the hundreds of thousands, these wild and woolly cattle roamed throughout Texas and Mexico. They were well-adapted to their sur-

roundings, feeding on the scrubby prairie grass, and capable of withstanding violent changes in temperature. What is more, they were free for the taking. Descendants of cattle that first arrived in Mexico on Spanish galleons, these longhorns had grown to be independent mavericks that became rip-snorting mad when corralled.

The first cattlemen acquired their herds by hiring some men to round up a few thousand strays then pushing them northward, letting them graze on the hundreds of miles of grasslands between Texas and Kansas. On a three-month drive up the Chisholm Trail, a steer would often gain as much as 400 pounds before it reached the railroad siding. What an ideal product for any businessman! The longhorn took care of itself, cost nothing to feed, and increased its weight along the trail — thereby increasing its selling price. At the start of the great cattle boom it cost little or nothing to get beef to market, but as open prairie land became more scarce, cattlemen were forced to both feed and breed cattle for market.

A cattleman usually had little difficulty finding enough men to drive a herd up north. Plenty of youngsters barely out of their teens willingly strapped on a six-gun and mounted a horse for a drive that would take them through badlands and Indian territory.

A typical drive would include at least ten men, including the trail boss and the cook. The cowboy's day began at 4 a.m., with the cook rousting them out of their bedrolls for a breakfast of steaming

sourdough biscuits, juicy steaks, and black coffee. By sun-up the cook had carefully repacked his chuckwagon and was bouncing off down the rutted trail to get set up at the noonday site.

When the trail boss was satisfied that each man was in his proper position, trailing behind or alongside the herd, he'd give the word to move out. A thousand head of cattle would begin moving north. There was plenty to worry about on a drive; cowboys faced threats ranging from bears to rattlesnakes, and from blizzards to flash floods to cattle rustlers. But what they probably feared most of all was a thunderstorm during the night.

**O**NE COWBOY described what happened to him on a fearful and violent night in June of 1874, when shafts of lightning ripped holes in the earth around him and stampeded the entire herd. Galloping through the drenching darkness, Robert T. Hill remembers: "I found myself and another rider chasing a small bunch of cattle close upon their heels. Never before nor since has thunder sounded to me so loud as on that run or have lightning crashes come so rapidly and so near.

"At a crash that was the climax, my horse stopped dead in his tracks, almost throwing me over the saddle horn. The lightning showed that he was planted hardly a foot from the edge of a steep-cliffed chasm."

During that chaotic night, a lightning bolt killed the lead steer and another bolt knocked a fellow rider unconscious. It took several days for the men to locate all of the 2,500 head that had been scattered by the storm.

When the nights were fair and the sky was so clear a man could count each star in the Milky Way, the

cowboys on guard duty hummed or sang to the herd. Some of the most popular tunes were hymns, not because the cowboys were especially religious, but because the tunes seemed to have a calming effect on the steers. Often the cowboys made up their own songs, such as this one:

*Oh say, little dogies, when are  
you goin' to lay down  
And quit this forever siftin' around?  
My horse is leg-weary and I'm  
awful tired,  
But if you git away I'm sure to  
get fired –  
Lay down, little dogies, lay down.*

Guard duty generally lasted two hours each night. By keeping an eye on the movement of the Big Dipper, the cowboy on duty usually knew when his two hours were up and he could climb back in his bedroll. To keep awake and alert on those nighttime vigils, the cowboys would drink bitter black coffee, or even smear tobacco juice inside their eyelids.

Back in the camp, the cook usually waited until the men were bedded down before performing his last chore of the evening. He'd find the North Star, then point the wagon tongue in that direction, so they'd know which way to travel in the morning.

**O**NCE THE COWBOYS reached the Red River with their herd, they began to get a bit edgy. This was the border between Texas and Indian territory – a stretch of land 300 miles wide. Once they crossed this treacherous river, they were no longer under the protection of Texas law.

At Red River Station, the crossing for the Chisholm Trail, dozens of graves along the banks were grim reminders that not every man had survived the Red River. A trail boss named Old Man Todd describes what happened at Red River Station in June of 1871. Midstream, the lead steer panicked, started swimming in circles and bawling like a baby. His sudden loss of courage left the rest of the steers behind him leaderless and confused. Todd yelled to his young sidekick, Foster, to get into the water and help the frightened steer. Foster relates what happened next: "I stripped to my underclothes, mount-

#### FOR THE SERIOUS STUDENT

Several valuable books are available on cowboys and cattle drives. We recommend: *Charles Goodnight: Cowman And Plainsman* and *Life On The Texas Range*, both by historian J. Evetts Haley; *The American Cowboy In Life And Legend* by Bart McDowell, published by the National Geographic Society; *The Cowboys*, a Time-Life book; and *The Longhorns* by J. Frank Dobie.

