The Chisholm Trail in Geographic Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The Chisholm Trail has been subject to various types of studies but few, if any, have offered a geographic perspective. Most are accounts, almost invariably accentuated by the glamour and adventure, of a trail drive from Texas to a Kansas railhead. Any treatment of the cattle trail encounters difficulty in totally divorcing objectivity from subjectivity. If such a divorce were accomplished, as this paper intends, and the trail with its present day counterpart studied objectively, striking patterns emerge. These patterns of transportation and urban development in many cases may be historically attributable to the Chisholm Trail. This paper, then, will be an effort to extract some of these gross patterns and, because of its length, must rely heavily on generalization. In scope it is limited to that portion of the Chisholm Trail within Oklahoma, though access to research material would possibly allow expansion to include the entire Trail route.

PART I

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CHISHOLM TRAIL

Cattle raising in the South Texas plains did not begin at the time of the Chisholm Trail. As early as the fifteenth century, cattle were brought north by Spanish explorers. By the time Texas achieved independence, the original black and brown Spanish cattle introduced into the area by Spanish missions had blended with British cattle along the Gulf coast, resulting in a hardy breed called the Longhorn.

In the 1850's a market had developed for Texas cattle in New Orleans and by 1860, good beeves were valued at twenty dollars each in South Texas[1]. This, of course, stimulated ranching activity and encouraged the first efforts towards utilization of the wild herds inland from the Gulf. From the beginning of the large-scale cattle industry in Texas, the chief and only practical method of transportation to markets was the overland drive. In search of markets, relatively small numbers of cattle were driven from Texas to California, New Mexico, Missouri, and New Orleans. None of these places represented a large market for Texas cattle except New Orleans with its water transportation facilities. These early efforts at trail driving were ruled impractical for reasons other than small markets . The character of the land over which the early drives were made was less than ideal, even for the hardy Longhorns. One important route developed from the Brazos River in Texas to St. Louis and in the late 1850's to Kansas City. This route, the Shawnee Trail, was hampered by objections of Missouri farmers and severed completely with the outbreak of the Civil War.

After the War, Texas ranges were even more heavily stocked with cattle. This condition occurred chiefly without human encouragement. The rangy Longhorn breed had spread over central Texas grasslands and multiplied profusely while their tenders were engaged in more sanguinary activities.

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[1]Wayne Gard, The Chisholm Trail (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), p. 13.

The close of the War signalled the commencement of trail drives on a much larger scale. The success of the Shawnee Trail drives indicated to Texas cattlemen that the only feasible market for their surplus millions of livestock was the northeastern part of the United States. Several physical factors, particularly the terrain of the Ouachita Mountains and Ozark Plateau and the dense tree cover of Arkansas, Missouri, and eastern Oklahoma, made drives in this direction somewhat impractical. The cattlemen would undoubtedly have attempted this route, however, had it not been for Texas Fever, a cattle disease which the Longhorn breed carried and spread among the local, less hardy breeds along the route of the Shawnee Trail. This disease, to which the Longhorn was immune, prompted the legislatures of Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska, and Colorado to enact laws prohibiting or restricting Texas cattle from being trailed across their respective states. Kansas joined this group, but made the southwestern quarter of that state exempt from the law.[2] Further provision was made to allow drovers to trail cattle further north in Kansas if the owner posted a $10,000 bond for damages to locally owned stock.[3] This provision contained what now seem obvious implications. The same year in which it was drafted, the Union Pacific Railroad was extending a line west into central Kansas. At that time there was no plan for this road to be used to transport Texas cattle to northwestern markets. An Illinois cattle dealer, Joseph McCoy, was evidently the sole person to see opportunity in shipping Texas cattle from a point on the railroad. Through a personal crusade he managed to secure favorable rail rates for cattle shipping and established stock yards at the town of Abilene during the summer of 1867.

Only a few cattlemen in Texas received the news early enough to begin drives in 1867, but even with such short notice there were 35,000 cattle shipped from Abilene,[4] mainly to Chicago.

This was the beginning of the Chisholm Trail. The drovers of 1867 pointed their herds in the general direction of the Abilene railhead, picking their way across the prairies with no pre-established route. In 1868, the number of cattle driven north doubled, and in 1869 increased tenfold over the 1867 number.[5]

The cattle drives began settling more to a particular strip of land in crossing Indian Territory. Most historians attribute the original establishment of the Trail to a trader named Jesse Chisholm, who used the same route for his wagon trains in hauling goods south from Kansas a few years prior to the first drives. Mention is made, however, of the use of the same route by Indians before white men had pushed the frontier to this point west. This would indicate, perhaps, that certain natural conditions made this north-south trip advantageous to overland travel.

Terrain features might logically be the first choice as an influencing factor, but no topographic barriers existed to north-south travel in this section of Indian Territory with the dubious exception of the Wichita Mountains. Vegetative patterns, however, contributed to the ease or difficulty of travel when roads were non-existent. In central Oklahoma, a large area of post oak, blackjack forest stretched from the Red River to the Kansas border. Travelling on horseback through this dense, scrubby

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[2]Gard, op. cit., p. 55.
[3]Ibid.

[4]Carlos Morrison Montandon, A History of Jefferson County, Oklahoma, Master's Degree Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1939, p. 15.
[5]Ibid.

woodland was difficult; driving a herd of five thousand Texas Longhorns through it was unthinkable. To avoid the scrubby wooded area, known then and now as the Cross Timbers, the trail made a slight arc to the west after leaving Fort Worth, thereby generally skirting the western edge of the timber. Entering Indian Territory in what is now central Jefferson County, the Trail continued due north through Stephens, Grady, Canadian, Kingfisher, Garfield, and Grant Counties. In Grant County, the Trail swung northeast into Kansas. On occasion, the trail was forced to cross prongs of the Cross Timbers extending west from the main body of woodland on the basis of an edaphic relationship.

The avoidance of the Cross Timbers was completely logical for ease of travel, but in doing so, drovers were also able to follow a narrow band of tallgrass prairie paralleling the western edge of the timber. A few miles to the west of the trail route, the shortgrass prairie began. The nutritional quality of the tallgrass was of immense value to the drives and the Longhorns usually gained weight on that portion of the Chisholm Trail within Indian Territory.

Vegetative patterns, then, suggested a trail route between the western margin of the Cross Timbers and the eastern margin of the shortgrass country. The tallgrass prairie formed a natural pathway to the north. An examination of terrain within the limits of this pathway should show the most feasible route for the Trail. It should be injected at this point that the Trail route can never be defined in the manner of a modern-day highway. Herds ranged over a wide area in search of ungrazed grass. The Oklahoma Highway Commission in establishing the Trail route in 1933, settled on a one-mile wide strip from Red River to Kansas.[6] The Trail generally followed wide interfluves existing between north or south flowing tributaries to the main river systems, which run east to west. Rough country and isolated patches of woodland were avoided.

Crossings of the large rivers were hazardous only in times of high water. The crossings of the Canadian, the North Canadian, the Cimarron, and the Salt Fork were usually made wherever access to river bottoms was most favorable.

The physical advantages of the Chisholm Trail route, which are today rarely pointed out, were well recognized during the time of the Trail's use. Joseph McCoy pointed out these advantages in 1868 in this enticement to trail drovers:

> It is more direct. It has more prairie, less timber, more small streams and fewer large ones, altogether better grass and fewer flies—no civilized Indian tax or wild Indian disturbances—than any other route yet driven over. It is also much shorter because direct from the Red River to Kansas.[7]

Year after year cattle surged north over the Trail to various Kansas shipping points. By 1884, an estimated 1,800,000 cattle had been shipped from Abilene, Wichita, Ellsworth and Caldwell.[8]

In this year, ranchers in the Cherokee outlet area of northwestern Indian Territory built barbed wire fences across the trail at many points. This brought the overland cattle drives to and end on the original Chisholm Trail route. During its eighteen functional years, however, the Trail provided a basis for various cultural establishments which continue in existence and operation today.

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[6]Oklahoma Highway Commission, "Map of a Portion of Oklahoma Showing the Location of the Chisholm Trail," Oklahoma City, 1933.
[7]Gard, op. cit., p. 71.
[8]Montandon, op. cit., p. 15.

PART II

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS ALONG THE CHISHOLM TRAIL ROUTE

The often inferred picture of cattle being driven over totally uninhabited prairies from Texas to Kansas is valid only with reference to the earliest years of the trail drives. Various cultural establishments grew along the Trail in Indian Territory, some in direct response to the Trail and other obviously influenced by it.

The Darlington Indian Agency, administrative seat of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation, was located about nine miles north of the present city of El Reno. Built in 1870, the Agency became a common stopping place on the Trail. Five years later Fort Reno, a military post, was established seven miles south of Darlington. These two small population clusters prompted the establishment of a regular stage route south from Kansas. The Southern Stage Company organized in 1874 began regular service under a mail contract. The stage route south from Kansas coincided closely with the cattle trail until reaching the north bank of the Cimarron River. Here was located the headquarters of the Red Fork Ranch. The cattle trail split into two branches at Red Fork, most of the herds arriving over the eastern branch which ran through what is now the city of Yukon in eastern Canadian County. The drovers wishing to stop at Fort Reno or Darlington, however, followed a more western route. The stage route followed the western branch directly to Darlington and the Fort. As far as can be determined, the stage route ended at Fort Reno.

For changing teams and offering meals to passengers, a series of stage stations was established at regular intervals. Several of these were influential in a later selection of townsites. From north to south, they were Polecat Creek, at the present town of Renfrow; Pond Creek, at the present town of Jefferson; Skeleton Creek, at the present site of Enid; Buffalo Springs, one mile north of the present town of Bison[9]; Red Fork, at the present town of Dover; and Bull Foot, at the present Hennessey, and a station at the present town of Kingfisher operated by a man named King Fisher.[10]

Two small trading centers grew as supply points on the Trail south of Fort Reno. Fleetwood, on the north side of Red River crossing began as a store in the 1870's and grew into a small community. On the south bank of the Canadian River, a community called Silver City grew. Consisting of a large store and several other buildings, Silver City marked the point where the Trail divided into the Western (Fort Reno) branch and the eastern branch.

In 1883, one year before the Trail fell into disuse, post offices were established at Silver City and Fleetwood. Duncan Store was established near the present city of Duncan in the same year. Although not pointed out in reference material, these three occurrences probably meant the extension of a regular stage route south of Fort Reno along the Trail.

After the cattle trail fell into disuse in 1884, the stage route continued to use the same tracks which the Longhorns had followed. The stage

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[9]Floyd W. Pratt, A History of Garfield County, M. A. Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1929.

[10]Sam P. Ridings, The Chisholm Trail (Guthrie: The Co-operative Publishing Company, 1936), p. 35.

line, however, had a very short lease on life. On 2 March 1887, the United States Congress granted a charter to the Chicago, Kansas, and Nebraska Railway Company, a subsidiary of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific, granting authority to extend a line south from Caldwell, Kansas, across Indian Territory to Galveston, Texas.[11]

The Rock Island system had been poised in central Kansas awaiting authorization to build southward to the Gulf of Mexico. The line was extended south from Caldwell very quickly. By the summer of 1887, it was virtually complete to Hennessey, a prospective townsite south of Skeleton, now Enid. The rail line was built over a surveyed route which coincided almost exactly with the cattle and stage trails, indicating, perhaps, that either the cattle herds followed the most level land suitable to railroad construction or that the surveyors went to great pains to follow the cattle trail. The rail line, however, did not extend far enough south to enter the Oklahoma land opening in 1889. Townsites were laid out along the anticipated route of the railway.

In 1890, the rail line built south through all the pre-determined townsites except Reno City, which refused to pay the bonus asked by the railroad. The line established its own townsite at El Reno across the North Canadian River south of Reno City. At the end of the track just south of the original Oklahoma land opening, the railroad established the town of Minco.

In 1892, the railway built south from Minco following the Trail route very closely. Instead of using the old trail crossing of Red River, however, the rail bridge was constructed south of the present town of Terral. This left the small town of Fleetwood without rail service. South of Red River, the rail line was extended to Fort Worth and Dallas, and eventually to Houston.

The immediate effect of the rail line was not great in any part of Indian Territory except the Oklahoma lands which had been opened to settlement in 1889. Townsites were selected and plotted all along the road, however. The only economic planning which went into the establishment of towns along the route was for the benefit of the railroad. Townsites were laid out as close together as seemed feasible in order to provide freight and passenger business for the future of the line. Often, the townsites were placed at some local feature. Ranch headquarters, stores, or stage stations often became towns. If no local features such as these existed, the railroad picked an arbitrary spot and established a telegraph station.

The railroad in southern Oklahoma ran just inside the western boundary of the Chickasaw Nation except for a dogleg curve into the Kiowa, Comanche and Apache lands to a breaking point and roundhouse which soon became known as Waurika.

In 1893, the Cherokee outlet was opened for settlement and the pre-established towns in that section grew in a single day. Almost every town in this opening had a stage stop predecessor. Railroad officials feared undesirable consequences from the names Polecat Creek and Skeleton so these were changed to Renfrow and Enid, respectively.

By 1893, then, all the present towns along the Chisholm Trail route had been established. They were, without exception, laid out by the rail-

[11]William Edward Hayes, Iron Road to Empire (H. Wolff Book Manufacturing Co. Inc., 1953), p. 117.

road in conjunction with townsite companies or private individuals. Those which were established in response to stage stations, stores, or ranch headquarters on the Trail are from north to south, Renfrow, Jefferson, Enid, Bison, Dover, Hennessey, Kingfisher, Chickasha, Marlow, Duncan, and Addington. To say that these towns are directly attributable to the Trail is somewhat inaccurate since the railroad used the old Trail features more as excuses for locating townsites than concrete reasons. Other towns established along the line include Pond Creek, Kremlin, Waukomis, Okarche, El Reno, Union City, Minco, Rush Springs, Comanche, Waurika, Ryan, and Terral. The railroad did not build through Silver City or Fleetwood, two trading centers on the old trail. As a result, Silver City vanished leaving only a cemetery as a reminder of its existence. Fleetwood, however, has managed to remain as a trading center for an agricultural area. Its functions today include a post office, store, cotton gin, and church.

An examination of the development of each town along the Trail route would be a study in itself. All function as commercial centers for agricultural areas. Enid, Kingfisher, and Duncan have prospered from petroleum production or refining. One of the towns in every county serves as a county seat.

The populations of Enid, El Reno, Marlow, and Duncan have increased during recent years, but the smaller towns have generally declined with rural population (Table I).

The coming of the railroad did not end the use of the stage trail for overland travel. The trail in fact developed directly into a modern highway.

The U. S. Geological Survey mapped central Jefferson County in 1898 and published the Addington topographic sheet. This map shows a north-south road followed exactly the route of the cattle trail. It may be traced on another sheet through Fleetwood to the exact spot where the Longhorns crossed Red River. It is likely that this road existed from Kansas to Texas, since in 1913 it was maintained by the State Highway Department as the Chisholm Trail Highway.[12] In 1924, State Highway Two followed approximately the same route.[13] In the early 1930's U. S. highway plans called for a north-south road to extend from Canada to Mexico generally along the ninety-eighth meridian. This highway was routed through all the towns along the Trail route in Oklahoma and, in most places, followed the rail line and the old cattle trail route. Now designated as U. S. Highway Eighty-One, this road like the railway, carries goods and people over the same route followed by cattle herds one hundred years ago. Using data from a traffic recorder station two miles from Duncan, a study was made by the State Highway Department of the types of vehicles using the highway. For the year 1959, it shows seventy-three percent of the vehicles as being passenger cars and twenty-seven percent as commercial vehicles or pick-up trucks. Of the passenger cars, sixteen percent were from outside Oklahoma.[14] In 1960, an average of 6,290 vehicles passed the point on the highway each day. At a station three miles north of Enid, the average number of vehicles per day was 3,339.

[12]Montandon, op. cit., p. 69.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Oklahoma State Highway Department, Planning Division, Composite Traffic Statistics, 1959, unpublished.

An analysis of the traffic at the Enid station states, "The large number of foreign passenger vehicles and the presence of numerous heavier commercial vehicles on this route lend a definite interstate character to the traffic pattern at this station."[15]

Highway Eighty-One is a main north-south trucking route from the Houston and Fort Worth area to the northern plains states. Along the route where Longhorns were once driven to Kansas, large double-level cattle trucks speed Herefords and Angus north to Oklahoma City or Kansas City and south to Fort Worth. Wheat is convoyed from the mammoth Enid storage elevators to Houston for shipment abroad. Regular bus service is maintained along the highway where buses make stops at towns which carry the names of former stagecoach stations.

To attribute this entire complex of towns and transportation facilities to the Chisholm Trail would be erroneous, but to deny that the Chisholm Trail provided the original impetus for the use of the route as a transportation artery would, perhaps, be just as erroneous. In a sense, then, the Trail has been superceded by a modern day, functional counterpart.

TABLE I. POPULATION OF TOWNS AND CITIES ALONG THE CHISHOLM TRAIL ROUTE IN OKLAHOMA[16]

Towns and Cities (North to South)	1940	1950	1960
Renfrow	115	68	38
Jefferson	229	179	119
Pond Creek	1,019	1,066	935
Kremlin	146	143	128
North Enid	166	219	286
Enid	26,081	36,017	38,859
Waukomis	397	537	516
Bison	NA	NA	NA
Hennessey	1,342	1,264	1,228
Dover	NA	NA	NA
Kingfisher	3,352	3,345	3,249
Okarche	453	532	584
El Reno	10,078	10,991	11,015
Union City	NA	301	329
Minco	921	978	1,021
Pocasset	NA	NA	NA
Chickasha	14,111	15,842	14,866
Ninnekah	NA	NA	NA
Agawan	NA	NA	NA
Rush Springs	1,422	1,402	1,303
Marlow	2,899	3,399	4,027
Duncan	9,027	15,325	20,009
Comanche	1,533	2,083	2,082
Addington	250	174	144
Waurika	2,458	2,327	1,933
Ryan	1,115	1,019	978
Terral	521	616	585

[15]Federal Census, 1960. U.S. Department of Commerce, Government Printing Office, Washington, 1960.
[16]Ibid.