

Schertz and the Historic Chisholm/Shawnee Trail

The year 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of the Chisholm Trail, or as known along its Texas route, the “Shawnee Trail.” For discussion purposes in this article the trail will hereafter be referred to as the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail. This anniversary gives no apparent cause for celebration among Schertz leaders or residents. Could this local disinterest be due to: 1) a lack of understanding of the Trail’s importance to the Texas economy during the pre and post-Civil War period? or, 2) absence of the knowledge that the Trail’s pathway likely led directly through what is today Schertz City boundaries?

The period 1840 to the early 1890s was a remarkably historic period in the Trail’s history. It was this period that produced what was to become a defining image of the State – the Texas cowboy. This was the period when Texas cowboys herded hundreds of thousands of Longhorn cattle and mavericks northward from Texas to railheads for transshipment to Eastern markets. Subsequent to the Texas cowboy’s heyday, the American motion picture industry created a romanticized version of the cowboy in its western motion picture films and made the Texas cowboy an enduring American folk hero.

Texas cowboys used the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail as early as the 1840s for cattle drives from its origin in San Antonio to locations in the states of Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri and Ohio.¹ The path forged by these trail drives was along the same general landscapes as had been traversed by earlier Native American tribes, Spanish explorers, missionaries and southbound frontier settlers arriving in Texas from the Mid-West.² The Trail ran from San Antonio to Austin and on to Waco, where it split to different destinations. The path from San Antonio to Austin took it along what was to become Highway 81 (today’s Interstate Highway 35 going north and south).³

For nearly three centuries, cattle ranching has been an important Texas industry.⁴ The economy of the state, in its early years, depended upon the revenues produced by shipment and sale of Texas beef. Never was the need for cattle revenue more important to Texas than after the American Civil War. The Texas economy was in shambles following the War and cattle

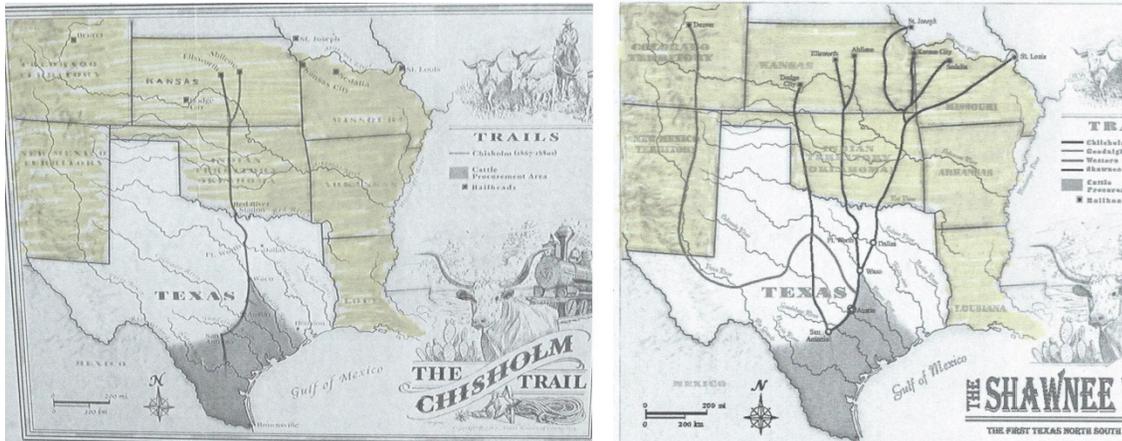
¹ Skaggs, Jimmy M., *The Portable Handbook of Texas*, Editors Roy R. Barkley and Mark F. Ordintz, Texas State Historical Association, p. 214.

² Gard, Wayne, *Ibid.*, p. 771.

³ Worcester, Donald E., *Ibid.*, p. 222

⁴ Richardson, T.C and Hinton, Harwood P., *Ibid.*, p. 696.

prices in the state were depressed to the point that cattle were selling for as low as six to ten dollars per head in the state. Prices in the north at the time however were as high as \$40 per head, making the trail drives along the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail, a profitable endeavor despite the danger of moving through Indian territories along the route.



It was in the mid-1850s that Texas experienced an outbreak among its longhorn herds of what became known as “Texas Fever”. The “Fever” was actually caused by disease transferred to animals in neighboring states as Texas cattle passed through those locations. Texas cattle were immune to the disease. The threat posed to non-Texas cattle caused the state Legislatures of Missouri and Kansas to place quarantine orders upon all southern cattle entering their territories. Additional states including Colorado, Nebraska, Illinois, and Kentucky followed with restrictions on Texas cattle crossing their borders.⁵

There was a real threat of a collapse of postwar cattle trailing for Texas cattlemen due to the restrictive precautions imposed by the above states. However, an Illinois cattle buyer, Joseph G. McCoy established a marketplace in Abilene, Kansas which allowed unrestricted importation of Texas longhorn cattle. McCoy’s efforts kept Texas cattle moving along the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail at record rates. Consequently, the Trail became the most important cow path from Texas to Abilene between the end of the Civil War and 1873.⁶

By 1876, most northern cattle drives shifted westward from the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail to the Western (Dodge City) Trail. By then the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail crossed more settled territory and farmers objected to cattle being driven through their fields. Civilized Native American tribes began demanding grazing fees from the cattle owners whose herds crossed their reservations. Legally erected barbed wire fencing further contributed to curtailing cattle

⁵ Skaggs, Jimmy M. The Portable Handbook of Texas, Ibid., p. 214

⁶ Worchester, Donald E. The Portable Handbook of Texas, Ibid., p. 222.

trailing along the Chisholm/Shawnee Trail.⁷ Railroad construction westward into the frontier was the final development that forced the closing of the Trail.

The Chisholm/Shawnee Trail's route through the northern sector of Schertz is essentially the same as that followed today by the Southern Pacific Railroad (previously the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (KATY) Railroad). The trail cowboys forged a Texan legacy of an abundance of courage, grit and determination to succeed under difficult and dangerous circumstances. These men and their achievements deserve our recognition and praise. The trail they forged through our city is unquestionably an important historic landmark worth celebrating.

⁷ Gard, Wayne, *Ibid.*, p. 771.