



# THE HISTORIC CHISHOLM TRAIL

BY RON WILSON, OFFICIAL "POET LARIAT" OF THE STATE OF KANSAS

In the annals of our nation  
Stands this immortal tale:  
The remarkable migration  
Known as the Chisholm Trail.

One hundred fifty years ago,  
War stopped, to our relief.  
But for our nation yet to grow,  
The people needed beef.

Then came a man named Joe McCoy  
Whose visionary plan  
Would bring alive the great cowboy  
And change our hist'ry's span.

He saw where railroads sent their trains.  
His vision was foreseen:  
Move Texas cattle through the plains,  
Clear up to Abilene.

The railroads built the stockyards here  
To take the herds of beasts,  
And ship them on from the frontier  
To markets in the east.

In Texas, longhorns ranging free  
Were worth four bucks a head,  
But in the cities they could be  
Ten times that, people said.

So Texas drovers heard those words,  
And chose to venture forth.  
They gathered up vast cattle herds,  
And bravely brought them north.

Then Jesse Chisholm traded goods  
To Indian tribes down south.  
His wagons rolled through plains and woods  
In times of rain and drouth.

The drovers learned to follow trails  
Where Chisholm's wagons passed.  
They led them through frontier travails,  
To journey's end at last.

With that, the Chisholm Trail was blazed  
Into our nation's story,  
And generations now have raised  
The legend into glory.

These cowboys tamed the wild, wild west,  
With bravery unsparing.  
They earned their place in hist'ry's quest,  
Through courage brave and daring.

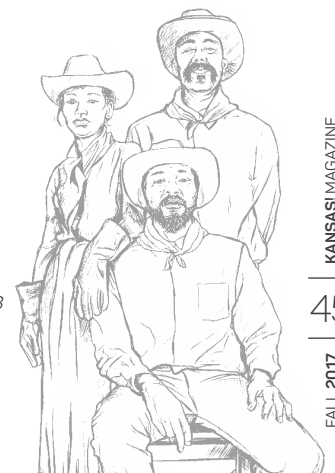
Today, in our mind's eye we see  
The spectacle they brought:  
Of cowboys ranging wild and free  
In spite of dangers fraught.

The bawl of steer, the neigh of horse,  
The sizzle of a brand,  
Would set the stage for this route's course  
On up to Kansas land.

The story of the Chisholm Trail  
Shows brave determination  
That helped these heroes to prevail  
And build a growing nation.

So now we pause to celebrate  
And honor without fail,  
The vision which they did create:  
The historic Chisholm Trail.

**NOTE:** A shorter version of this poem will be included in the official program of the 2017 Symphony on the Flint Hills. Author Ron Wilson was proclaimed the state's "Poet Lariat" by a 2003 gubernatorial proclamation. You can read more of his work inspired by rural life and Kansas ranching culture at [ronscowboypoetry.com](http://ronscowboypoetry.com)



## MODERN TRAIL RIDING

**DAY ONE** Arise at daybreak like a cowhand, round up yer pardners and start your trail ride near the state line two miles south of Caldwell at the Highway 81 roadside turnout for the Ghost Riders of the Chisholm Trail silhouette and marker. Mounted on top of a stony bluff, this life-size metal cutout of cattle, drovers and a chuck wagon on the original trail reflect the drives of yesteryear and mark a great viewing spot.

After this stop, mosey into Caldwell, branded the "Border Queen City" in its early days, and stop at the Trails, Rails and Scales Visitors Center. Here, you can ask for a downtown walking tour map of historical markers. The tour features true tales from the raucous cattle-town era after the railroad arrived, such as the story of a cowboy who survived 13 wounds in a gunfight only to be tried for murder. At high noon, graze on beef

at The Red Barn or The Shack, then take a selfie near the life-size longhorn steer replica in Heritage Park and admire the Chisholm Trail Outdoor Mural. After touring past trail artifacts at the Border Queen Museum, pay your respects at the Boot Hill tombstones in the City Cemetery. For dinner, consider Richard's Last Chance Bar and Grill to rustle up tasty steak. Up the road about 30 miles, lay out your bed roll or rent a cabin at the Wellington KOA where you can pitch horseshoes.



Caldwell's main street, 1900, a few years after it was a vital resting point along the Chisholm Trail. Photograph courtesy Kansas State Historical Society.

IN SOME WAYS, THESE TRAILS AREN'T COMPLETELY DEAD. THE CHISHOLM TRAIL IN KANSAS, THOUGH NOT AS WELL MARKED OR CELEBRATED AS, SAY, THE OREGON OR SANTA FE TRAILS, IS STILL THERE.

The trail enters Kansas down by the Oklahoma border, just south of Caldwell, which was established in 1871, grew up along the trail, and really became an honest-to-goodness cowtown later on. It embraces that cowboy heritage, with an annual festival celebrating the Chisholm Trail's founding. Today, about where the trail entered Kansas from Oklahoma, a stand of wind turbines cranks slowly away in the wind.

From Caldwell, the trail heads generally north and a little east. Back in the old days, this would have been mixed-grass prairie, a combination of the grasses from the tallgrass prairie to the east and the shortgrass prairie to the west. Today, it's mostly wheat (Sumner County often leads the state in wheat production) and some cotton. The land here is strikingly flat, as you might expect. Cattle trails, like most routes, take the path of least resistance, and here the trail passes through the Wellington/McPherson Lowlands and the Arkansas River Lowlands, areas where time and erosion have flattened out the land, something Jesse Chisholm took advantage of.

But there were obstacles. Many rivers to cross. Today, those streams, like the Chikaskia River and Slate Creek, north of Caldwell, are barely noticeable from the road. But in the old days they must have been a challenge, especially when they were in flood. As it continues north, the trail drops into bottom ground near today's town of Clearwater, crosses the Ninnescah, then angles north and east to Wichita. Most of the physical evidence of the trail is lost in the city, but place names of natural features serve as reminders. Cowskin Creek, which runs by the southwest edge of Wichita, close to the airport, probably earned its name because the hides of cattle that died along the trail and were stretched out here. Northeast of Wichita, the trail goes across branches of Chisholm Creek, named after the man himself.

From Wichita, after crossing the Arkansas River, the trail heads generally north, up to Newton. In fact, the trail, though it is nothing more than a road, seems to have a northward drive to it—a directional urging rare in a state where the lanes generally take us east and west. So it heads north, inexorably north, at times with an angle a little to the east, through more wheat fields and hedgerows. But in Marion County, north of the town of Goessel (a place better known for its Mennonite heritage than any cow trail), the land opens up,



**DAY TWO** Ride into Wellington and pick up supplies—Western-themed handmade jewelry, photographs and paintings—at Huckleberry's Handmade Gear and Cowboy Collectibles.

After shopping, you can lunch on a cheesesteak sandwich at No. 7 Coffee House. Tour the Chisholm Trail Museum where you'll find a coffee pot, pistol and other items cowboys used on the cattle drives passing west of the city. You can also ask directions to a monument that sits directly on the trail. Steer toward Clearwater, founded in 1869 as a trading post for the Texas cattlemen heading to Abilene. Don't miss the Clearwater Historical Society Museum and a stone monument and metal silhouettes standing on the trail route. After Clearwater, you can head 'em up and move 'em out to the Historic Delano District in Wichita. Weary drovers looked for a mulberry tree, which still stands on West Maple Street, as a sign they were nearing the end of the trail. Herds were brought through what was then

the frontier town of Delano. Today, a stone monument in Delano Park marks the spot where cattle crossed the Arkansas River to enter Wichita for shipment. Further east on Douglas Street, a plaque near Union Station in Wichita's Old Town indicates where the cattle pens and loading chutes once stood. With guns outlawed in Wichita at the time, the trail-riding and gun-toting cowboys often chose to spend their pay and keep pistols close to hand in Delano's gambling halls and saloons. You can quench your thirst at local watering holes here as well. Throw down a Dove Runner Red Wheat at Aero Plains Brewing, or order bourbon at The Monarch, named after a Wichita saloon from the 1870s. You can also lasso a cowboy hat at Hatman Jack's, one of the largest hat stores in the country. Steer east of the trail to the Prairie Rose Chuckwagon near Benton, to spend the rest of the day riding in a horse-drawn wagon; shopping the mercantile; watching an old Western movie; visiting the Hopalong Cassidy and the Silver Screen Cowboys museums; dining on smoked brisket, cowboy baked beans and hot apple cobbler; and listening as the Prairie Rose Rangers perform cowboy ballads and western tunes. Return to Wichita's historic Hotel at Old Town to bed down for the night.



begins to undulate. The trail moves into an eastern outpost of what is, in effect, the Smoky Hills. The bedrock here is sandstone, deposited during the Cretaceous Period of geologic history, 100 million years ago. This landscape is more rolling, some still in pastures of native grass, the same grass the old cowherds would have encountered. This landscape is less altered by human activity, easier to identify with horses and cattle.

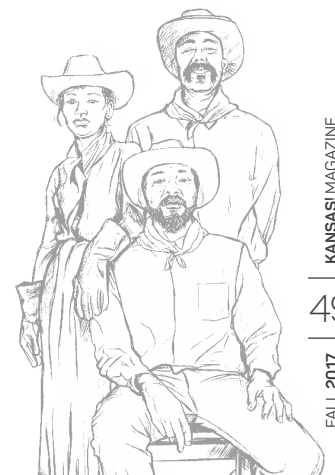
Continuing north, ever north, between the little towns of Lehigh and Canton, the Chisholm Trail encounters the Santa Fe Trail. Two great lines of commerce intersect here. The Santa Fe Trail, busy long before the Chisholm Trail got started, was, of course, mainly a freight trail for goods going to New Mexico. It seems like the meeting place of these trails should be celebrated as a vortex of the Old West. Instead it's a place of pastures and wheat fields, railroad tracks and meadowlarks. Oddly quiet, considering all the history it must have seen.

From this historic location, the Chisholm Trail continues north, through these sandstone hills, across the Smoky Hill River and on into Abilene. Even now, it's easy to imagine cattle herds grazing in the Smoky Hills pastures, maybe putting on a few more pounds as they slowly cover the last few miles into the railhead.

It's just as easy to look at this land in our own times, say, on an early spring day when the grass begins to green up and cattle dot the hillsides, and think back on how much that old trail, its cowboys, and, yes, Jesse Chisholm still influence us. Kansas still produces lots of beef. Kansans still go to rodeos and listen to country music and alternately embrace and deny the designation of their cities as "cowtowns."

And much of that because of an old trail that still wants to head north, a trail that has receded into history, but still leads us to who we are. **KM**

EVEN NOW, IT'S EASY TO IMAGINE CATTLE HERDS GRAZING IN THE SMOKY HILLS PASTURES, MAYBE PUTTING ON A FEW MORE POUNDS AS THEY SLOWLY COVER THE LAST FEW MILES TO THE RAILHEAD.



## MODERN TRAIL RIDING

**DAY THREE** Shoot over to Wichita's Old Cowtown Museum to talk with a blacksmith, gunfighters, drovers, and other historical interpreters while touring the more than 50 original and re-created structures that include a saddle and harness shop, city marshal's office, jail, saloon and dry goods store. For lunch, order a Cowboy Ribeye at the River City Brewing Company, then stop at the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum to see the Chisholm Trail pictorial exhibit.

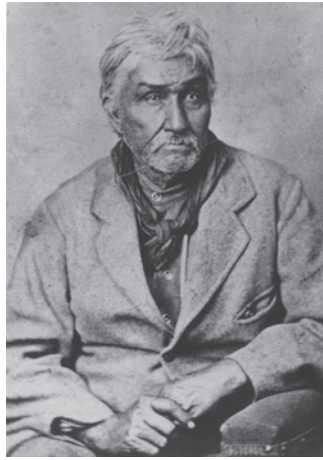
Keep them dogies movin' as you follow Interstate 135 north to Newton. Stop at the Harvey County Historical Museum for a Historical Marker Driving Tour brochure and to learn about the infamous Gunfight at Hide Park in 1871. The shootout occurred inside Tuttle's Dance Hall, which stood a little more than a block away at the corner of West Second Street and Old Mill Road. Over yonder in North Newton, visible swales

from the cattle still can be seen in Chisholm Trail Park near the Kauffman Museum, which is surrounded by native tallgrass prairie.

You can arrive at Abilene in time to order a Chisholm Trail Steak at Joe Snuffy's Old Fashioned Grill for dinner. It's just a short ride to the Windmill Inn Bed and Breakfast for a cowboy's view of the stars over the prairie before turning in for the night, or stay at Abilene's Victorian Inn Bed and Breakfast, an 1887 physician's home that reflected the opulent era ushered in by the cattle drive's financial boom.



Actors at Wichita's Old Cowtown Museum portray life and the professions that would be encountered along the Chisholm Trail in the mid- to late-1800s.



## WHY “CHISHOLM”?

THE HISTORIC CATTLE TRAIL TAKES ITS NAME NOT FROM A COWBOY OR CATTLE BARON, BUT FROM A SAVVY TRADER WHO KNEW THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE WHO WOULD TRAVEL ACROSS IT

Sometime in 1865, a half-Cherokee by the name of Jesse Chisholm sought to expand the reach of his trading post at the mouth of the Arkansas River by scouting a trail from Wichita and south into Indian Territory. By the next year, he had made several runs on this trail, sometimes with cattle and other times with supplies, and his route became known as “Chisholm’s Trail,” changing to “The Chisholm Trail” as other cattlemen began to use it over the next few years.

The trail that Chisholm laid out would expand to Abilene and, in 1867, down into Texas when the Kansas legislature lifted a law to allow Texas cattle to be driven into the state west of the sixth meridian—roughly near McPherson, and west to Colorado.

A year later, Chisholm died, and the trail’s name outlived its founder.

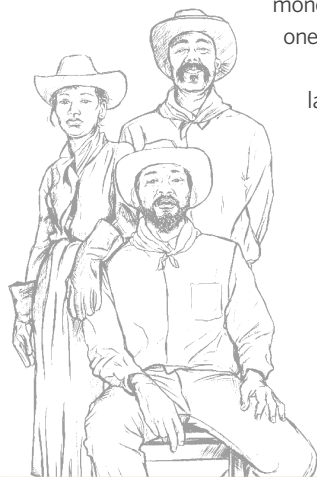
According to Kerry Wynn, associate professor with Washburn University’s history department, Chisholm was part of the early trail development “when there was money to be made and adventure to be had.” But he wasn’t a political leader or large-scale businessman who created the route through heavy trading. What Chisholm did bring was knowledge of the land. Wynn says Chisholm had been in the American West with his mother before the Cherokee were forcibly removed to that area in the late 1830s. Years in the region allowed him to become familiar with traditional animal migration and trading trails that had been used for centuries.

“An important aspect of this region is that it is a meeting ground and a trading ground for many groups of people, a crossroad between major Native-American nations that trade, such as the Comanche coming up from the west and south, long before Europeans came,” says Wynn. Chisholm, who had worked as an interpreter and guide, would have known these routes well. And because he set up a trading post, Chisholm also would have known the people along those routes.

“Chisholm’s distinctiveness is in his interactions with many different groups of people,” says Wynn. “He was a trader and a negotiator; he moved between the two worlds, which allowed him to make a lot of money for himself and for people like him.” James Mead, one of the founders of Wichita, was just one of the people who worked with, and prospered along with, Chisholm.

The trail that took Chisholm’s name ran into difficulties in 1885 when Kansas lawmakers once again banned driving cattle from Texas to Kansas to try to stop the spread of Spanish fever and hoof-and-mouth disease. By this time, however, the railroads had expanded into Texas and were replacing open-range cattle drives. But the trail remained, if not in active use, then certainly in historical memory, always bearing the name of the man who was believed to speak some fourteen different languages and guided tribes, traders and cattle trains across the lands he knew so well.

—Christine Steinkuehler



Jacque Karl owns and manages Ritttel’s Western Wear in Abilene.

**DAY FOUR** Watch can-can dancers kick up their heels in the Alamo Saloon as you sip a sarsaparilla before stepping outside the swinging doors at the sound of a gunfight in the dusty street in Old Abilene Town. Sink your teeth into a Wild Bill Burger at the Hitching Post, then corral the kids and hop aboard the Abilene and Smoky Valley Railroad’s excursion train pulled through the prairie by a steam locomotive. Mosey to the Heritage Center to spur your knowledge of this, the first wild and wooly cattle town,

where Wild Bill Hickok shot his own deputy and Marshal Tom Smith ruled with his fists. Be sure to see the six-shooter Hickok took off a rowdy cowboy, then head over to the city’s CVB to rein in a Texas Street guide identifying the 1860s saloons, gambling houses and mercantiles in the original business district. Also at the CVB, you can pick up a driving tour brochure of historic sites such as the Drovers Cottage, the stockyards, and Smith’s gravestone in the Abilene Cemetery. Outfit yourself in a cowboy hat, boots and jeans at Ritttel’s Western Wear before riding off into the sunset toward home.

OUTFIT YOURSELF  
IN A COWBOY HAT,  
BOOTS AND JEANS . . .