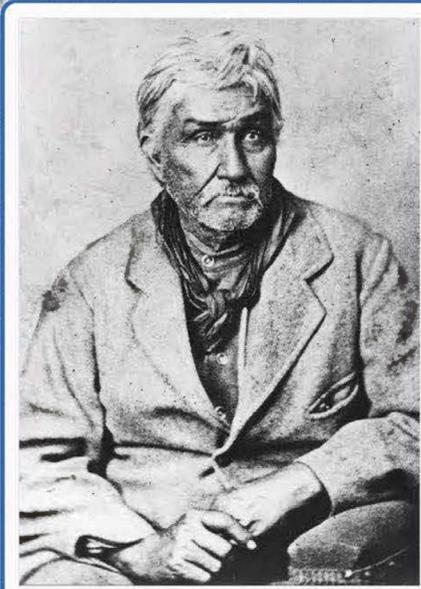


# ALONG THE CHISHOLM TRAIL

## A Western History Legend

Contrary to popular opinion, the Chisholm Trail was not named for the famous Texas and New Mexico rancher, John S. Chisum. It was named for Jesse Chisholm, a Cherokee fur trader and merchant. To transport goods to trading posts, Jesse established a trail that ran north from the Red River through the Indian Territory and up into central Kansas.



Jesse Chisholm. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society. Image available on the [Internet](#) and included in accordance with [Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107](#).

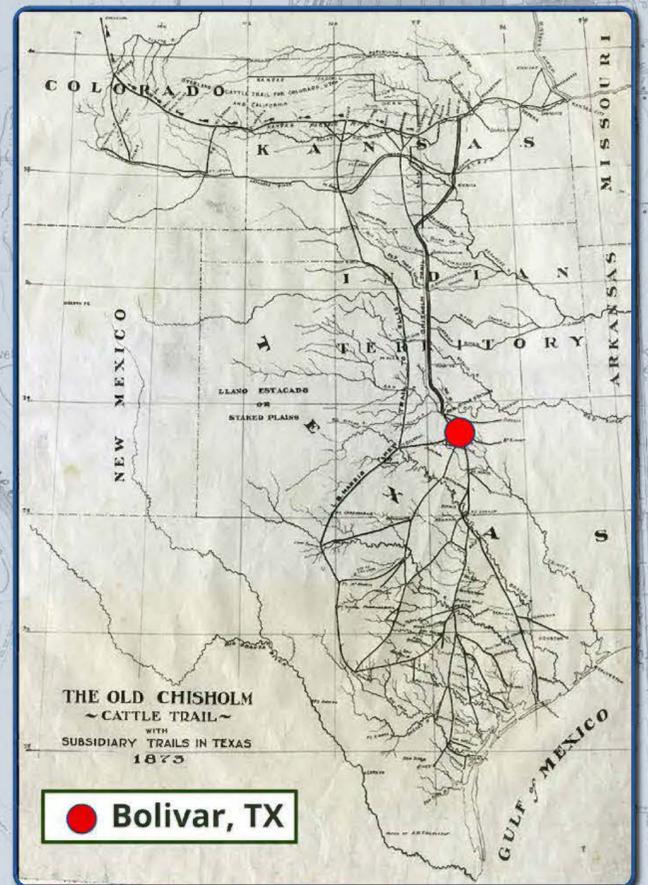
Jesse Chisholm was a Cherokee merchant who established a trail through the Oklahoma Indian Territory and into Kansas that became known as the Chisholm Trail. The name later got applied to the entire cattle trail from south Texas to Abilene, Kansas. Original image from the [Handbook of Texas](#) online.

In 1867, two things happened simultaneously to spur the creation of the Chisholm Trail. Joseph McCoy built the Kansas Pacific Railway that went east-to-west through central Kansas, establishing a railhead at Abilene. Colonel O. W. Wheeler then took the first cattle herd from San Antonio, Texas, northward through Fort Worth and Bolivar, crossing the Red River and following Jesse Chisholm's trail through Indian Territory until they reached Abilene.

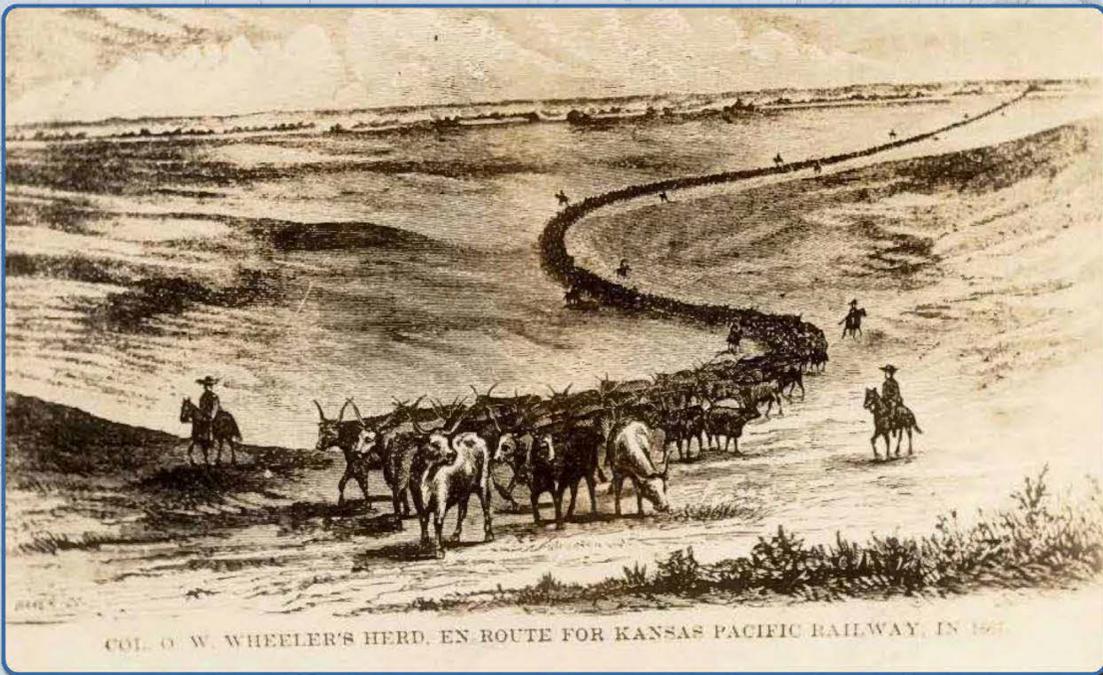
Col. Wheeler only took 2,400 head on that first trip, but it proved the economic viability of driving Texas longhorn cattle to Kansas where they were sold for much higher prices. Many others followed Wheeler's lead, taking their cattle northward following the same route. While different sections had different names at different times, the entire route became known as the Chisholm Trail.

The Chisholm Trail was used for less than two-decades, from 1867 to ca. 1886. It suddenly became obsolete when railroads came to various places in Oklahoma and Texas. Despite its relatively short lifespan, the economic impact of the Chisholm Trail on the Texas cattle business was astounding. It is estimated that perhaps 10 million Texas longhorn cattle traveled along the Chisholm Trail.

The Chisholm Trail was not the longest, the oldest, or the most travelled of the western cattle drive trails. But it is certainly the most famous. The Chisholm Trail was made famous by the many tales told by old cowboys. Its legendary status was memorialized in paintings, songs, and movies.

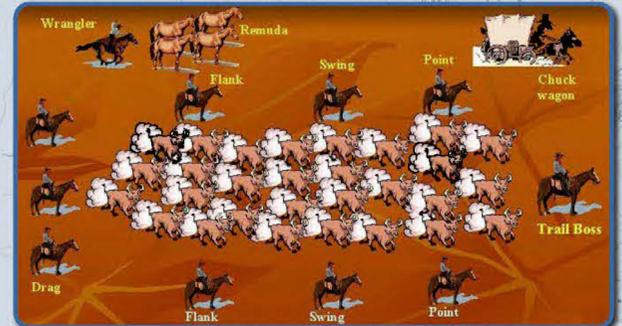


This famous 1873 map shows the various routes of the "Old Chisholm Trail" across some 800 miles from south Texas to central Kansas. These cattle drives were business enterprises, and ranchers needed to move their cattle northward to the closest railheads. No matter which route one took, there were dozens of potentially dangerous river crossings. Original image from the Kansas Historical Society.

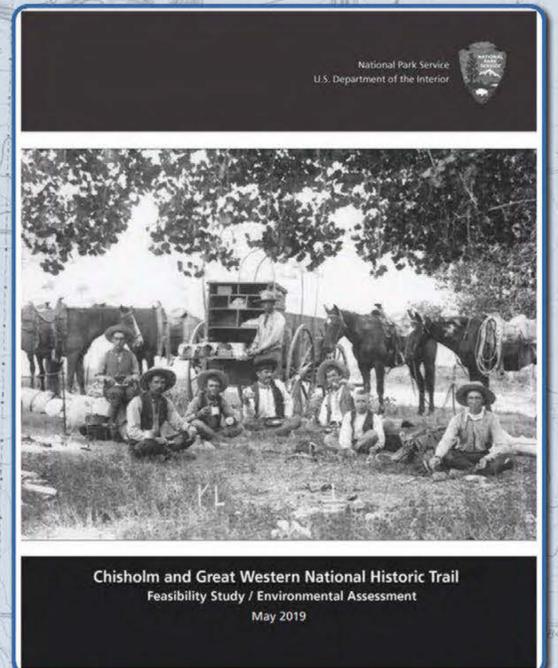


COL. O. W. WHEELER'S HERD, EN ROUTE FOR KANSAS PACIFIC RAILWAY, IN 1867

In 1867, Colonel O. W. Wheeler took the first cattle herd northward from San Antonio, Texas, crossed the Red River and hit Jesse Chisholm's trail, and then went up through Indian Territory to the Kansas Pacific Railroad terminal at Abilene, Kansas. Original image from the National Cowboy Museum.



While cattle were the most important element in a "cattle drive," the event also involved a trail boss, cowboys, horses, and a chuck wagon. A typical drive might have 2,500 head of cattle, 50 horses and a horse wrangler, and between 10 to 14 cowboys. These large caravans moved slowly, covering about 8 to 10 miles a day for 2 to 3 months. Image from <http://slidetodoc.com>.



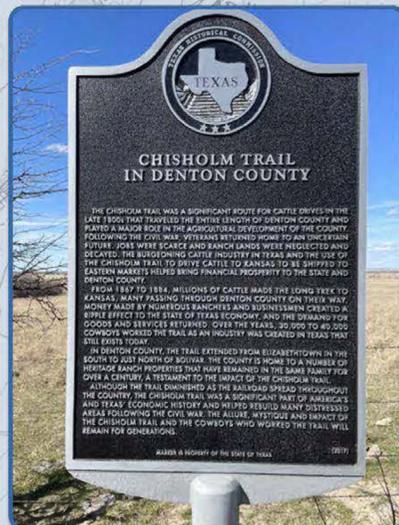
Chisholm and Great Western National Historic Trail Feasibility Study / Environmental Assessment May 2019

This photo is called "Cowboys gathered around a chuck wagon at mealtime" and it appeared on the cover of the National Park Service's 2019 feasibility study. The NPS recommends that the Chisholm Trail and Great Western Trails be designated as National Historic Trails. Image from National Park Service.



Oh come along, boys, and listen to my tale, I'll tell you all my troubles on the ol' Chisholm trail.

Even before the end of the nineteenth century, the Chisholm Trail folklore spread far and wide due to stories and pictures that appeared in Western books, magazines, and newspapers. In the twentieth century, recorded songs and movies further enhanced the legendary status of the Chisholm Trail.



Along FM 455 about four miles west of Bolivar is one of dozens of historical markers commemorating different parts of the Chisholm Trail. Photo by J. Frye on [The Historical Marker Database](#) online.

