



0. AMERICAN COWBOYS and CATTLE DRIVES - Story Preface

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By 1867, cowboys were herding their Longhorns north on lengthy cattle drives. This illustration, depicting such a drive, initially appeared in an issue of *Harper's Weekly*, during 1867.

Cattle move slowly. Cowboys needed two-to-three months to get a herd of Longhorns from Texas to Kansas.

Grazing as they went, the cattle shuffled along at 10-12 miles per day. The terrain was difficult to manage, and cowboys had to move their herds across creeks, mountains, canyons and badlands. Then ... there were the rivers.

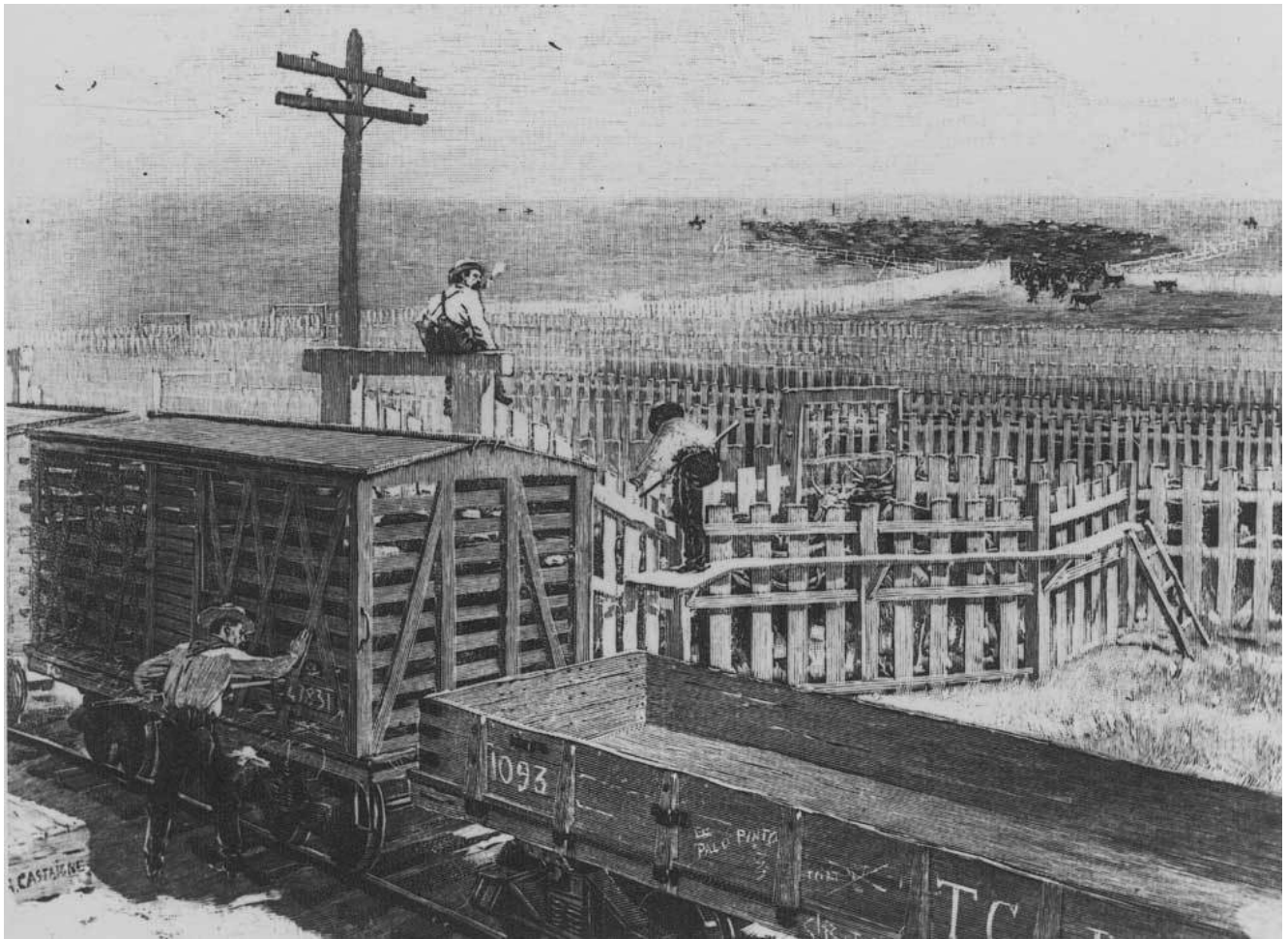
What would it be like, for example, to move a herd of 100,000 cattle across two major rivers—the Arkansas and the Red?

Beyond the natural problems imposed by geography and weather, there were all the man-made issues.

Cattle rustlers could disrupt events along the trail, and Native-Americans—who were living in “Indian Territory” with depleted meat supplies (since wild antelope and buffalo were nearly extinct by that time)—wanted bounty from the trail bosses.

On top of all those dangers, cowboys had to think about the ever-present risk of stampedes. It didn’t take much to “spook” the cattle who would then “run wild.”

Cowboys who could manage all these problems, and get their in-tact stock to the railhead in a timely manner, developed great reputations. An efficiently run cattle drive would cost the stock owners around 60-75 cents per head. That sum, at that time, was much cheaper than it would have cost to send the herd by rail for the whole distance.



Cowboys didn't just use the Chisholm Trail to drive their herds north. They also used the Great Western Cattle Trail (which ran roughly parallel to Chisholm but was further west).

Running from Bandera (Texas) to Dodge City (Kansas), the Great Western crossed the lands of "Indian Territory" (as the current state of Oklahoma was then known).

Doan's Crossing was the last supply post before the cowboys drove their herds through Native-American lands. The peak traffic, for that route, occurred in 1881 when around 301,000 head of cattle passed through.

It was a dangerous place.

Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes were confined to their reservations by the time of the Great Western Trail. Their "trail bounty" was a cost of doing business, for the cowboys, but that was the least of the cowboys' concerns. They wanted to be sure they made it through "Indian Territory" with their lives intact.

Giving-up some beef, to nearly starving Native Americans, was a payment made by the cowboys. The fact that it was necessary, however, raises a different question.

Why did the federal government relocate Native Americans to lands where wild antelope and buffalo were already extinct? Why was it up to cattle owners and cowboys to address the needs of these relocated, often-suffering Native Americans?

If trail bosses refused to pay the Cheyenne and Arapaho trail-bounty demands, they risked retaliation by the Indian braves. Among other things, the warriors could attack the drive or cause the cattle to stampede.

As the cattle moved northward, they grazed en route, but what about the cowboys? How were they able to prepare their food, in the middle of nowhere?

Enter ... the chuck wagon.

Credits:

In-text images:

A. Castaigne's illustration, "[Loading the Stock at the Railroad](#)," appeared in Scribner's Magazine during June of 1892. It is online via "Kansas Memory."

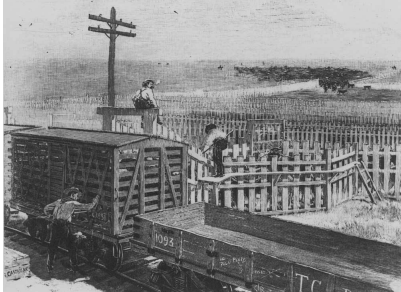
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Media Stream



Loading Longhorns at the Railhead

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