

Joseph G. McCoy

Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest (1874)

In 1867 Joseph McCoy organized cattle drives out of Texas to Abilene, Kansas. Over the next decade hundreds of thousands of cattle traveled along various trails and were then shipped eastward to slaughter, mostly in Chicago. This is McCoy's account of setting up that first arrangement of what became one of the best known western episodes of its time. He writes of himself in the third person. He is the youngest of the three "sanguine, impetuous, speculative" brothers noted in the second paragraph below.

The close of the year 1866, left the business of driving Texan cattle prostrate, and the entire driving fraternity both North and South, in an utterly discouraged condition. And such was the effect of the experiences of 1866, but in 1867 events took a change for the better, and just how that change was brought about we propose to note.

At that time there lived in Central Illinois three brothers doing a large live stock shipping business as one company or firm. One thousand head of native cattle costing from \$80 to \$140 per head, was not an unusual week's shipment. When it is remembered that three shipments were on the road at the same time during all the season, it will be seen that their resources, financially, were not limited. All three of the brothers were of that sanguine, impetuous, speculative temperament; just such dispositions as always look most upon the bright side of the picture and never feel inclined to look at the dangers or hazards of a venture, but take it for granted that all will end well that looks well in the beginning. If the above could have been said of the brothers collectively, it could be said with particular truthfulness of the younger one of them...

This young man conceived the idea of opening up an outlet for Texan cattle. Being impressed with a knowledge of the number of cattle in Texas and the difficulties of getting them to market by the routes and means then in use, and realizing the great disparity of Texas values and Northern prices of cattle, he set himself to thinking and studying to hit upon some plan whereby these great extremes would be equalized. The plan was to establish at some accessible point a depot or market to which a Texan drover could bring his stock unmolested, and there, failing to find a buyer, he could go upon the public highways to any market in the country he wished. In short, it was to establish a market whereat the Southern drover and Northern buyer would meet upon an equal footing, and both be undisturbed by mobs or swindling thieves...

It was not long after the project had taken crude shape in the mind of the projector, before he was casting his eye over the map of the Western States, studying the situation and trying to determine whether the Western prairies or the Southern rivers would be the better place to establish the proposed depot. Before he had fully decided in his own mind a trip to Kansas City was taken, and soon after arriving there he met with certain residents who were interested in a large herd of cattle coming up from Texas and expected to arrive somewhere in Kansas, but just where was not known, as no particular place had been designated. After repeated conversations with these parties a trip up the Kansas Pacific, then called the Union Pacific, East Division, was determined upon. The road was completed and operated, at that time, as far west as Salina, Kansas. Junction City was visited and a proposition made to one of the leading business men to purchase of him a

tract of land sufficiently large to build a stock yard and such other facilities as were necessary for cattle shipping but an exorbitant price was asked, in fact a flat refusal to sell at any price was the final answer of the wide-awake Junctionite. So by that one act of donkey stupidity and avarice Junction City drove from her a trade which soon developed to many millions....

Visiting the general offices of the Kansas Pacific and introducing himself to the President and Executive Committee there, stating fully his project and the reasons for the confident belief in him, giving a moderate estimate of the probable number of cars of live stock freight that would be sent over the road, offering as a reason the great number of cattle in Texas, and the utter lack of an outlet, and the urgent necessity of such a shipping depot. He closed with an appeal for such consideration as the importance of the proposed enterprise deserved. After hearing patiently the statement of the cattle shipper, the President, a pert, lively, courteous little gentleman, but evidently not a practical railroad man, and one that knew absolutely nothing about freighting live stock, replied, smiling incredulously, "That they knew no reason why such a thing might not be done, that freight going East was just what they wanted, and if any one would risk their money in the enterprise the railroad company would stand by them, and afford such switches, cars, etc., as would be needed, and if it proved a success the projector should be liberally paid, but they having no faith in it were not willing to risk a dollar in the enterprise."...

The office of the Missouri Pacific was visited to ascertain what rates of freight would be granted from the State Line to St. Louis. Here was the first really great man engaged in the contemptible occupation of managing a railroad, that the Illinoisan ever beheld...He timidly stated his business in modest terms, and asked what rates of freight would be charged on the stock coming to St. Louis. When he had made his statement and propounded his question, the railroad official tipping his cigar up at right angles with his nose, and striking the attitude of indescribable greatness, when stooping to notice an infinitesimal object, and with an air bordering on immensity, said:

"It occurs to me that you haven't any cattle to ship, and never did have any, and I, sir, have no evidence that you ever will have any, and I think you are talking about rates of freight for speculative purposes, therefore, you get out of this office, and let me not be troubled with any more of your style."...

But in less than twelve hours the General Freight Agent of the Hannibal & St. Joe Railroad had closed a contract, giving very satisfactory rates of freight from the Missouri River to Quincy, thence to Chicago. St. Louis never has, and, perhaps, never will gain the prestige she might have had as live stock market.

Central Kansas was revisited for the purpose of selecting a point at which the facilities for holding, handling and shipping cattle could be made. From Junction City, the track of the Kansas Pacific Railway was closely followed, and various points inspected with regard to their adaptability to a cattle business, until Solomon City was reached, near which a fine site for stock yards was found; but after one or two conferences with some of the leading citizens, it became evident that they regarded such a thing as a cattle trade with stupid horror, and from all that could be learned upon thorough inquiry, the citizens of Salina were much in the same mood. The person making such propositions was apparently regarded as a monster threatening calamity and

pestilence. After spending a few days investigating, Abilene, then as now, the county seat of Dickinson county, was selected as the point of location for the coming enterprise. Abilene in 1867 was a very small, dead place, consisting of about one dozen log huts, low, small, rude affairs, four-fifths of which were covered with dirt for roofing; indeed, but one shingle roof could be seen in the whole city. The business of the burg was conducted in two small rooms, mere log huts, and of course the inevitable saloon also in a log hut, was to be found.

The proprietor of the saloon was a corpulent, jolly, goodsouled, congenial old man of the backwoods pattern, who, in his younger days, loved to fish and hunt, and enjoyed the life of the frontiersman. For his amusement a colony of pet prairie dogs were located on his lots, and often the old gentleman might be seen feeding his pets. Tourists and others often purchased one or more of these dogs, and took them East as curiosities....

A tract of land adjoining the town was purchased for the location of the stock yards, hotel, offices, etc...From Hannibal, Missouri, came the pine lumber, and from Lenape, Kansas, came the hard wood, and work began in earnest and with energy. In sixty days from July 1st a shipping yard, that would accommodate three thousand cattle, a large pair of Fairbank's scales, a barn and an office were completed, and a good three story hotel well on the way toward completion....

When the point at which to locate the shipping yards was determined upon, a man well versed in the geography of the country and accustomed to life on the prairie, was sent into Southern Kansas and the Indian Territory with instructions to hunt up every straggling drove possible, (and every drove was straggling, for they had not where to go,) and tell them of Abilene, and what was being done there toward making a market and outlet for Texan cattle...

About 35,000 head of cattle arrived at Abilene in 1867. In 1860 we believe that the United States Census gave Texas 3,500,000 head of cattle. We are not sure that this is correct, but believe it is...Notwithstanding all the impediments enumerated, the shipments of '67 reached almost 1,000 cars, all of which, except seventeen, went over the Hannibal & St. Joe Railroad to Chicago...