

# Cattle drives the history of Kansas' heritage, economy

By **Patty Decker**  
Free Press Editor

Early settlers in Thomas County had many stories to tell about their dealings with cowboys and cattle drives in the 1860s and how life on the Great Plains wasn't always conducive to both lifestyles.

Needless to say, the cattlemen were bitter against any homesteaders settling on the Great Plains since the cattle drives did take place through what is now Gem, located about 10 miles northeast of Colby.

One such recollection involved F.S. See, who settled on public land nine miles north of Gem. See moved his family to Thomas County in June 1880 from Republic County, which was about 160 miles east.

One story in particular that his daughter, Anna See Kiefer, remembered was how her father handled a situation involving some cowboys no sooner than they had arrived.

"The very first thing that happened after we had taken our horses off the wagon," Anna wrote, "was that a band of cowboys rode up at breakneck speed, and drew up so quickly their horses were thrown back on their haunches."

The lead cowboy, she wrote in the "Land of the Windmills," asked her father if he had come to settle on that quarter of land.

"I have come to settle on this land and make a home for myself and family," F.S. See told the cowboy.

As the story goes, the cowboy then asked Anna's father if he had heard about other who had come to settle and finding notes urging them to make themselves scarce in that vicinity.

Unshaken, Anna's father told the cowboy that he had not seen any notes, but if someone were to bring him such a notice, the first cowboy he saw on the range would "simply forget to live."

A major resentment for the cowboys was that 20 years prior to the settlers locating in much of the Great Plains the ranges were wide open.

Vast grasslands served as pastures for the cattle and it was the time of "Cow Country" — all but free from farmers with barbed wire fences and grass-eating sheep.

Public domain lands spanned across Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana with more than five million cattle calling the land their home.

**Seven-year-old drover**  
John Hubbard, another early settler in Thomas County, also remembered in "Land of the Windmills," wrote that he arrived here in August of 1881.

"I was in my seventh year, which was pretty young to ride a roan Indian pony and drive 40 to 50 head of Durham cattle from Homer, Neb. to Thomas County."

He remembered how in the late 1880s that the country was still in the hands of the cattlemen and

ranchers, who let their stock wander all over the country.

"We had to herd in order that every passing bunch of cattle would not run through our little herd and take our cattle along with them to some draw or ravine a few miles away where the cowboy would slap the brand of his employer on our cattle and mix them through bunches of range cattle."

Yet prior to the population and settlements across northwest Kansas and the Great Plains of the American West, cowboys enjoyed nearly 25 years of open country.

Roundups and trail drives meant that cowboys slept outdoors for weeks at a time and only when the cattle were sold to the nearest railroad town, which in Kansas would have been either Dodge City or Atchison depending on the route the drive took.

Only then would cowboys enjoy a brief period of relaxation before returning home to begin the routine of another year.

The life of the cowboy was one of few luxuries. For example, the bedroll (a pair of blankets rolled in a piece of oiled, waterproof canvas) was a cowboy's bedroom. Inside the bedroll were his extra clothes, letters and personal items.

Along with driving the herds, the cowboy upon rising in the morning would also make his bed and load it on the chuck wagon before eating breakfast.

## The route in 1867

In 1867, a cattle trail was established from the Red River in northern Texas, across the Indian Territory, now known as Oklahoma, to Abilene and the new railroad line to the east. This route became known as the Chisolm Trail. Later, another route from West Texas to Denver, Colo. became known as the Goodnight-Loving Trail. The meaning was that Texas cattle needed to be driven or walked 1,000 miles or more to market. Because cattle can move no more than ten miles per day without losing weight, an average cattle drive from Texas to Abilene, Wichita or Dodge City in Kansas lasted nearly four months, according to information provided by the Great American Cattle Drive of 1995 organizers.

## The Great American Cattle Drive

For those in Thomas County and around the area, the Great American Cattle Drive of 1995 was one of those "once in a lifetime" opportu-

nities to witness firsthand what it was like for cowboys in the late 1800s.

Just as was probably the case with cattle drives in the 1800s, the Great American Cattle Drive of 1995 has found that it was hard to improvise with regard to the route it chooses to travel, said Mary-Mike McKenzie, one of the spokespersons for the event 11 years ago.

In the original plans, the drive was to follow farm-to-market roads and county roads, but as the herd made its way across Texas and Oklahoma; however the group realized it made better time sticking to main highways — particularly with the uncertain spring weather of the Great Plains.

Many residents even took part in that cattle drive. Audy Hopper, a lifelong resident at that time, said it was something novel and "quite a lark."

Hopper said in the early 1940s he recalled a similar experience when he, along with others drove about 100 head of cattle to the river south of old U.S. Highway 40 near Winona.

"I was in the chuckwagon," he said in an interview in 1995, "and the trip took about two or three nights."

"In those days we didn't keep records, but I remember we picked up part of the herd from a ranch south of the old Foster Elevator near Britton and then stopped at the sale barn in Colby for the remaining cattle."

Lon Sowers at the Bar S Ranch in Gem even offered his place for about 100 cattle and 100 horses to stop for the night.

"I offered to let the horses and cattle pasture on 40 acres, but I was concerned about having enough water for the animals."

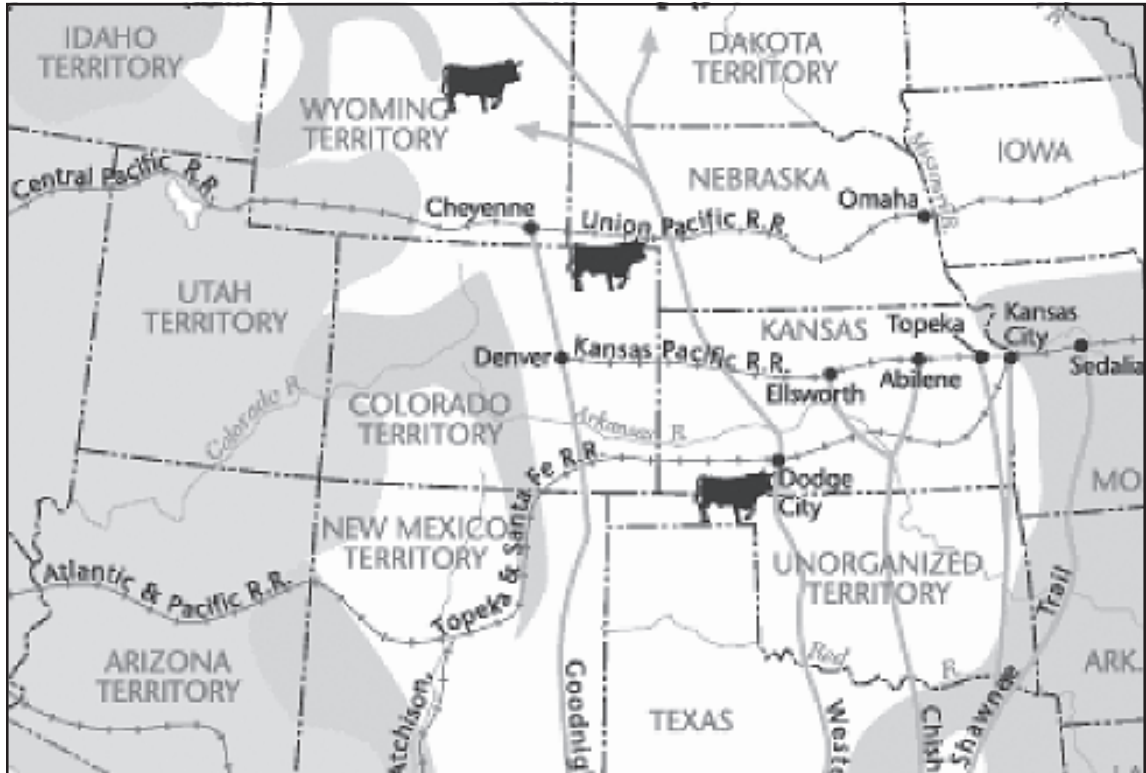
For Sowers, it was the only time in his memory that he recalls seeing torrential-type rains prior to the drive's arrival.

"Nearly the entire 40 acres was under water," he said. "No need to worry about water after that downpour."

J.W. Beeson, one of the 17 cowboys who signed up for the Great American Cattle Drive in 1995, said the journey had been a lot harder than he anticipated.

"In some ways, I think the drive was harder than the old-timers had it," he said.

Beeson was referring to the many obstacles that the old cattle drives



wouldn't have coped with.

"In the old days, there weren't any fences, pavement or traffic to contend with," he said. "In fact, we are averaging about 15 miles each day, which is about the same amount of miles the old-timers travelled."

The drive, which stopped in Colby and Gem in Thomas County, started at San Antonio, Texas, in March and ended in Montana toward the end of the summer 1995.

## End of an era

In the height of the cattle drive era, the northern branch of the trail went through Gove, Thomas, Sheridan and Rawlins counties then merging into Nebraska in Hitchcock County.

However, by the end of the 18th century, the railroads penetrated most of the more inaccessible parts of the southwest making it unnecessary to drive cattle long distances

**Hypnosis**  
**1x2**  
**place 85%**  
**ad in box**

**Dealing with Alcohol or Drug Addiction?**  
**There is help.**  
**Give us a call.**

Thomas County Alcohol & Drug Abuse Council  
ADAC  
785-462-6111

to market.

The era of the great cattle drives had come to a conclusion.

Today, trucks as well as railroads

transport cattle, but some ranches in the west still host old-fashioned cattle drives in remembrance of these great old days.

## TUBBS & SONS FORD SALES

Colby, KS • [www.fordcarsofcolby.com](http://www.fordcarsofcolby.com)



800-369-3673 • 460-6746



**2004 F150 Super 4x4**, Green w/ Black Leather, 5.4L V-8, 30K Miles  
**\$26,500**



**2000 Ram 1500 Ext. Cab 4x4**, Blue & Silver w/Flint Cloth, 5.9L V-8, 65K Miles  
**\$12,995**



**2004 F350 Crewcab 4x4**, Green w/ Tan Leather, Powerstroke Diesel  
**\$32,850**



**1998 Chev Reg Cab 4x4 Flat Bed**, 1Ton, Blue w/Blue Cloth, V-8, 5 Speed, 47K Miles  
**\$11,500**



**1997 F150 XL 4x4**, White w/Brown Cloth, 6 Cyl.  
**\$4,995**



**2003 Sable G5**, Gold w/Tan Cloth V-6, 34K Miles  
**\$9,995**



**1999 Silverado Supercab LS**, Pewter w/Gray Cloth, V-8, PL, PW, C/D Cruise, 67K Miles  
**\$10,500**



**2006 Five Hundred SEL**, Green w/ Gray Leather, V-6, 6K Miles  
**\$20,850**



**1997 Town Car Signature**, Blue w/ Gray Leather, 4.6L V-8  
**\$2,995**



**1999 Intrepid**, Red w/Flint Cloth, 6 Cyl., 66K Miles  
**\$5,850**

**got gas?**

**Stop 2 Shop East**  
E. Hwy 24, Colby  
460-7879

**NO! better yet....**

**E10**  
(ethanol)

**Helping the Midwest instead of the Middle East!**

**RAWLINS SPECIALTY CLINICS**

707 GRANT ST. - ATWOOD, KS 67730 - (785)626-3211

*Rawlins Specialty Clinics*

**Bringing Specialized Healthcare To Your Community**

August 2006						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9 Dr. Frankum General Surgeon Colonoscopies/ EGDs	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17 Dr. Reeves Podiatry	18 Dr. Reeves Podiatry	19
20	21	22 Dr. Miller Cardiology Clinic	23	24	25	26
27	28 Dr. Rubinowitz Hematology/Oncology	29	30	31		

**TO SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT, PLEASE CALL (785)626-3211**

**Cheryl Banister, RN - Specialty Clinic Director**

*Thank you for allowing us to assist in your healthcare.*

**Living with Vision Loss Seminar**

**Wednesday, Aug. 16 • 10 a.m. - noon**

Colby Community Building • 285 E. 5th St. • COLBY

Get the facts on macular degeneration, diabetic eye disease, glaucoma, vision loss from stroke and other vision barriers at this free educational seminar. Also learn how you can live more independently through vision rehabilitation.

featuring  
**Larry Washburn, OD**

The seminar is free, but registration is encouraged. Please call:  
**Toll-Free (866) 319- 4646**  
**Wichita (316) 682- 4646**

Co-sponsored by Northwest Kansas Area Agency on Aging

2301 South Water  
Wichita, KS 67213  
[www.envisionus.com](http://www.envisionus.com)

**Envision**  
Rehabilitation Center