

The Long Drive: Will You Re-Up Next Year?

The glory days of the American cowboy were like a shooting star – bright, fast-moving, and short-lived. They began at the end of the Civil War in 1865 and ended, in part, with the introduction of barbed-wire fencing, which closed down the open range in the late 1880s.

At the heart of these glory days was an event known as the long drive. During the Civil War, many cattle ranches in south and central Texas went untended. With the young men away at war, domesticated **longhorn cattle** drifted into brush country, joined wild cattle, and got down to the business of making calves. By the end of the war, there were about five million longhorns, many unbranded and unclaimed. Texans returning from the war saw an opportunity. So, too, did a few thousand others – ex-soldiers from the South and North, ex-slaves, Mexican *vaqueros*, a few Englishmen, and some Native Americans. Ranchers with money hired **brushpoppers** who chased down the cattle and branded them. Herds were created and walked north to railroad towns in Kansas or to northern ranges for breeding and fattening. From the railroad towns, most cattle were shipped off to **packing houses** in Chicago, where they were slaughtered and butchered. Beef soon replaced pork as America's favorite meat dish.

To walk cattle from south Texas to Kansas or Wyoming generally took three to four months. A drive might have 2,000 longhorn cattle, ten cowboys, a wrangler to tend the horses, a cook, and a trail boss. The first day of the drive was usually a hard push. The cattle were

nervous about leaving familiar ground and were more likely to stray or be spooked into a stampede. After a day or two, the herd would settle and a rhythm could be established. At the head was a lead bull, often a veteran of earlier drives who, with guidance from the trail boss, marched slowly but dependably north. By 1870, the Chisholm and other trails had been walked by hundreds of thousands of cattle, and the paths were well-worn and easy to follow.

The end of the trail for many Texas cowboys was a Kansas **cow town** like Abilene, Ellsworth,

or Dodge City. There, the saloon business bustled and a number of painted ladies with names like Big Nose Kate and Squirrel Tooth Alice were ready to help celebrate an evening. Gunfights were few, but cautious trail bosses often allowed cowboys only a couple of hours in town to get a shower and a shave. Then it was back to the cows.

The documents in this Mini-Q give us a glimpse of the long-drive experience. It should be said at

the outset that the long drive did not become a regular event in the lives of most cowboys. For many, one trip was enough. Some found work on northern ranges and stayed there; others moved on to new adventures. In fact, only about a third of long-drive cowboys returned to Texas to do it all over again the next year. But this Mini-Q concerns you, a cowboy fresh from the trail. Examine the documents that follow and then answer the question: *The long drive: Will you re-up next year?*



Background Essay Questions

1. About how many years did the glory days of the cowboy period last?
2. Explain how barbed wire could have ended the days of the long drive.
3. What part of what state was the original home of most of the longhorn cattle?
4. Why did many of the long drives end in Kansas?
5. Why was the first day of a cattle drive often the longest and the hardest?
6. About what fraction of trail cowboys signed up for a second long drive?

7. Define or explain each of these terms:

longhorn cattle

vaquero

brushpopper

packing house

cow town

Timeline

1865 – Civil War ends.

1867 – First large Texas longhorn herds arrive in Abilene, Kansas.

1868 – Ice cream soda is invented and first sold in San Antonio.

1873 – American Buffalo Soldiers first serve in Texas.

1876 – First large panhandle cattle ranch is established by Charles Goodnight.

1883 – Texas panhandle cowboys go on strike.

1890 – Days of the long drive are about over.