



Episode 1, 2006: Chisholm Trail, Donna, Texas

Elyse Luray: In this first story, a mysterious marker in south Texas could be connected to the birth of the legendary American cowboy.

Song: Now come along, boys, and listen to my tale and I'll tell you of my troubles on the Chisholm Trail

Elyse: Fall 1867: Across the plains of Texas, clouds of dust and the thunder of hoof beats. A massive exodus begins as thousands of cattle are heading north. It's a scene made famous in the Hollywood epic "Red River". Over the next two decades, more than 6 million longhorns will be herded nearly 1,200 miles to stockyards in Kansas in the largest commercial migration of animals in U.S. history. This mass migration will generate \$25 million worth of cattle sales, enough to save Texas from post Civil War economic ruin. The Texas beef will find an eager market in northern cities, where post-War demand is high, and the 25,000 men who make the fearsome journey will become American icons—the cowboys of the West. The route these cowboys travel will become the stuff of legends and stories for decades to come: the Chisholm Trail. But where exactly did this famous trail run? In the small town of Donna, Texas, near the Mexican border, an historic maker claims the famed cattle drive passed through this area, but it's a claim that not everyone agrees with. One woman in Donna wants to know how her town got this marker and if they deserve it.

Laura Lincoln: I'm the director of the Donna Hooks Fletcher Historical Museum, and I've lived in this area all my life. I've always believed that the area was a significant part of the Chisholm Trail. Now I would like to know the truth.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray, and I'm in South Texas to track down the real Chisholm Trail and find out where America's cowboy legend was born. I'm meeting Laura Lincoln at the town square. I take a quick look. The signs stakes a pretty clear claim: "Going up the Chisholm Trail." Laura invites me back to the history museum to talk.

Elyse: So what exactly do you want to know?

Laura: Well, I'd like to know how the marker got here so that I can prove once and for all that we were a part of the Chisholm Trail.

Elyse: I asked Laura what all the controversy is about.

Laura: In 2001, we had a big celebration that rededicated the marker, and at that time—we're just a small South Texas town—there were some people that had made the comment that, "Why did your town get the marker and not ours?" And, "y'all shouldn't have one at all."

Elyse: And how long has this marker been here?

Laura: I'm not really sure, Elyse, but according to my board of directors, who are up in their 70s now, they remember the marker since they were children.

Elyse: Those critics might have a point. As an appraiser of Western memorabilia, I've studied Western history closely, and I've never heard of the Chisholm Trail running this far south, and historic markers are quite often inaccurate or outright fakes. It's time for a piece of pie and a crash course in cattle history. At the end of the Civil War, the U.S. economy is on its knees, and a divided nation is struggling to reunite. In the Northeast, there's fresh demand for food and items that have been in short supply during wartime. And in Texas, former Confederate soldiers are returning to find that human populations have declined and cattle herds have multiplied. There are six head of cattle for every human. Beef is nearly worthless. As one Texas rancher wrote, during this time period, a man's poverty was measured by the number of cattle he possessed. With no other market, ranchers dumped their cattle at slaughterhouses to be made into hides and tallow, fetching, at most, \$3 a head. But all of that would change with the arrival of the railroad. In August of 1867, Eastern Rail Lines reached Abilene, Kansas. Enterprising cattleman Joseph McCoy looks at the map and senses a fortune to be made. He opens massive stockyards and invites cattlemen to bring their herds northward. Now all a Texas rancher has to do is find a way

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to get there. Turns out a path has already been blazed. In the mid-1800s, an Indian trader named Jesse Chisholm had created a trade route from the Texas border at the Red River through Indian Territory north to Kansas. The route soon became known as the Chisholm Trail. As Texas cowboys begin rounding up wild longhorns that roam the range and herding them north, Abilene is transformed from a sleepy village to a cattle boom town. In the first season, over 35,000 cattle pass through McCoy's stockyards, and the Chisholm Trail becomes a vital artery linking the country. But was Donna, Texas, on this famous trail? It's time to hit the open range and find out. I'm meeting Tom Saunders at his ranch in the north Texas town of Weatherford. Tom's great-great uncle drove cattle up through Texas nine times back in the late 1800s. It was during this exact period beginning in 1883 that the cowboy was made famous by Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and later by Hollywood movies. But Tom's great-great uncle was the real thing. Tom tells me what it was like for his uncle on the Chisholm Trail.

Tom Saunders: Of course, it was pretty rough, by golly. They were going over unknown country and herding—driving 2,500 head of cattle and only 14 men to do the job. So it was a tough way to serve the lord, I tell you.

Elyse: He tells me that most of the cowboys who made the trip were between 14 and 18 years old. Over a third of them were either Latino, Native American, or African American. Their three months of hard labor would earn them \$100, not a bad wage for the day, but not nearly enough for how hard the trail really was.

Tom: Most of those boys didn't make but one trip, and once they got home alive, they were so tickled to be back that they didn't want to risk it again.

Elyse: What was the biggest danger?

Tom: The biggest danger was the stampede. That was the most dreaded thing of any of the drovers because it was uncontrollable, and it'd take them days to gather these cattle back up.

Elyse: Tom, I'm investigating a marker in the small town of Donna, Texas, near the Mexican border, and I was wondering if you thought the Chisholm Trail went through there.

Tom: No, ma'am, it didn't. In fact, the Chisholm Trail never entered Texas.

Elyse: Turns out that Tom's done a lot of research on his cowboy ancestors. He's even got letters from some cowboys who rode the Chisholm Trail.

Tom: It states right here in pretty plain words, "I have statements from the following parties stating emphatically that the Chisholm Trail ran from the Red River north to Abilene, Kansas." So I don't have a problem with saying no, the Chisholm Trail was not in deep South Texas or anywhere else in Texas.

Elyse: Tom's just shot a pretty big hole in our story. It looks like our historic marker may be a mistake, but how'd it get put there in the first place?

Elyse (on phone): Hi I'm hoping you can help me... I'm wondering if you have any information...Yes, it's a historic marker in Donna, Texas. I'm wondering...
in Donna, Texas...Donna, Texas, regarding the Chisholm Trail.

Elyse: I'm calling historical societies all over Texas to see if they have information about our marker.

Elyse (on phone): Any information would be great....Nothing?...All right, well, thank you very much.

Elyse: I don't find any records for how our marker was placed in Donna, but I did get a lead on someone who knows a lot about marking trails. Sylvia Mahoney is heading up a project to mark Texas cattle trails. She's working with Rotary Clubs in 20 counties across the state to honor the drovers who rode these trails.

Elyse: Sylvia, I'm trying to find out some information on this marker. Have you ever seen anything like this before?



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Sylvia Mahoney: Yes, I have, and there are a lot of them around. They were put up in the 1930s...

Elyse: Finally, someone who recognizes our marker, and it turns out our marker has a typically Texan tale behind it. Can you tell me who put them up?

Sylvia: A man named P.P. Ackley was a wealthy oil man, and he took it upon himself to mark the Chisholm Trail.

Elyse: Sylvia tells me that at age 19, P.P. Ackley had been a cowboy, driving longhorns north. In his later years, he was zealous about marking what he believed to be the Chisholm Trail. Ackley created his own trail-marking mobile and hit the road on a 12,000-mile crusade to erect Chisholm Trail markers. Was he right?

Sylvia: No, he was not right, because he marked a lot of things as the Chisholm Trail that was not the Chisholm Trail. And there's something else that you should know. P.P. Ackley had a winter home at Donna, Texas, and that's probably why that marker is down there.

Elyse: Was Ackley just putting his hometown on the map? Or did he maybe have it right about the route of the Chisholm Trail? I'm headed to the McCallen Ranch. It's one of the oldest working ranches in Texas and only 35 miles from downtown Donna. The cattle drive is a thing of the past on most Texas ranches, but Jim McCallen still moves his cattle the old-fashioned way: with cowboys on horseback.

Elyse: Hi, Jim.

Jim: Hey, hi, Elyse. Glad you could join us.

Elyse: I asked Jim why someone would be putting up Chisholm Trail markers way down in south Texas.

Jim: Well, we're fixing to move some cattle right now, and maybe we can answer some of the questions on our way to the headquarters.

Elyse: Okay, I guess I should saddle up. Jim's family has been in the area for over 200 years. The border town of McCallen, Texas, was named after his great-grandfather. Jim wants to show me something from this settler's past he thinks might help answer our question.

Jim: This is a water trough of Spanish design. It was probably built in the very early 1800s.

Elyse: And he's got one more thing to show me. Though they're barely perceptible today, Jim's ranch still bears some historical markers of its own: the imprints from thousands of head of cattle that crossed through this area more than a century ago. And the cattle trails would meander up these roads from ranch to ranch, water to water, and left a visible outline of where they went. So there were so many cattle that they actually made ruts in the road?

Jim: Not necessarily, but the chuck wagons and the supply wagons, they're the ones that made the ruts.

Elyse: And he tells me that the thousands of cattle that crossed this land were all heading north. Jim says that the original longhorns were brought to Mexico by Spanish explorers in the 1600s. They evolved over many decades into a long-legged and powerful animal that could eat almost anything and defend itself against predators with its massive horns. It was the perfect animal for a long trek north. Were these the same longhorn cattle that travelled up the Chisholm Trail? Jim's got his own ideas about the controversy but says his daughter has written widely on Texas' cowboy past.

Jim: I think it's best you talk to my daughter about that.

Elyse: Mary Margaret Amberson is the author of two books on South Texas. This family takes their history seriously.

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Mary Margaret shows me that there were two major trails that carried cattle north out of Texas, one heading west, the other east to Abilene.

Mary Margaret Amberson: This is the western trail that would have led from San Antonio up to Dodge City. This is the eastern trail that would have led by way of Fort Worth, crossing the Red River, terminating at Abilene, Kansas. Because this eastern trail connects to the Chisholm Trail, some people have begun to call the eastern the Chisholm, and that's led to some of the confusion.

Elyse: But even if the eastern trail came to be known as the Chisholm Trail, there was still a big problem. But Donna's down here, which is probably about 300 miles south. Did Mary think Donna had any claim to the Chisholm Trail?

Mary: Well, I can show you another map if you're interested.

Elyse: What she showed me next helped put the puzzle together.

Laura: What did you find in relation to the marker?

Elyse: Your marker was put up by a man named P.P. Ackley who was passionate about honoring cattle drovers but was frequently off course when he was marking the trail. I showed Laura an example of how P.P. Ackley had gotten it wrong. We even found this marker, which is identical to yours. It was found in Elk City, Oklahoma, on the western trail, not on the Chisholm Trail.

Laura: Wow, that's pretty disappointing.

Elyse: But we found out something else you need to know. I explained that Mary had shown me a turn-of-the-century map from the Texas General Land Office showing cattle trails dating from the 1800s, and one of them runs right through Donna. This is a map of the lower portion of south Texas dating from 1908. It shows the modern towns along with the old trails headed north. These would have been feeder trails that would have led from watering well to watering well. Each trail was like a tributary to a mighty river of cattle, which eventually became known as the Chisholm Trail. Were you literally on the Chisholm Trail? No, but the massive migration of cattle started in places just like this and others all over Texas. I tell Laura that her town is linked to a crucial moment in American history. Donna is a small south Texas town, but it was the cowboys and ranchers from this area who helped reunite and rebuild a country torn apart by war. And without the longhorn cattle from this area, there would have been no Chisholm Trail. So will you keep your marker?

Laura: Oh, absolutely. Mr. Ackley initiated the markers, and if he went to that trouble, then, uh... it's here to stay.

Elyse: The sign says "going up the Chisholm Trail," so we're lacking the word "to."

Laura: We've got it. It stays.

Elyse: The era of the long cattle drive came to an end as homesteaders began settling the once-open range land, and with the dawn of a new invention: barbed wire. As ranchers realized three strands of wire could hold back cattle, the seemingly endless prairies were quickly replaced by individual fenced-in ranches. At the same time, railroad lines began heading south into Texas until the open ranch slowly faded into the past. Though the era of the Chisholm Trail drives lasted only two decades, the legend of the cowboy lives on.

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