

## Joseph McCoy

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“The real McCoy.” That’s a phrase which means the genuine article or the actual thing – something we can count on. Where did this phrase originate? There are various accounts, and we will probably never know the actual source. But one version credits this phrase to a man who played a pivotal role in the history of rural Kansas and the American West. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Joseph G. McCoy was an Illinois cattle buyer. After the Civil War, McCoy saw high demand for beef on the east coast while herds of longhorns were running free in Texas, having been abandoned by soldiers who had gone off to war. McCoy wanted to get that beef to the markets back east.

In his later years, McCoy wrote a book titled “Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest.” The book describes how McCoy looked for a place where Texas cattle could be brought to a railroad and shipped east, but his visionary idea was not well received. When McCoy took his idea to the president of the Missouri Pacific railroad in St. Louis, he was essentially thrown out of the man’s office. So McCoy went further west and followed the route of the Kansas Pacific railroad, looking for a site to receive Texas cattle.

Joseph McCoy finally settled on the rural community of Abilene. His book described the town at the time: “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.”

According to one account, Abilene at the time had a population of about 300 people. Now, that’s rural.

But as Kansas cowboy historian Jim Gray wrote: “Joseph McCoy would change all that with his vision of a great cattle "depot" on the plains. In 1867, McCoy's Great Western Stockyards welcomed (the Texans) eagerly with open arms. With the first drives of Texas cattle to Abilene, the sleepy little town became the first of the "end of trail" cattletowns in Kansas.”

Jeff Sheets, director of the Heritage Museum in Dickinson County, nominated Joseph McCoy as one of the Kansas Sampler Foundation’s 8 Wonders of Kansas People. The nomination says, in part: “In 1867, 35,000 head of cattle were driven to Abilene. The drovers were so impressed with the new market that the word spread across Texas, bringing more herds up the trail. During the next four years over 1.3 million head of cattle were driven up ... the Chisholm Trail.”

Abilene became a boomtown virtually overnight. Here the Wild West truly came to life. When Texas drovers came in off the trail, they got paid and were ready for a spree.

Jim Gray wrote, “Gallopings horses and frantic gunplay were commonplace on Abilene's streets. The cowboy would often "imbibe too much poison whiskey and straightway go on the warpath.” The Topeka Commonwealth declared, "Hell is now in session in Abilene." For the next couple of years, the Texan and the merchants of sin reigned supreme.” Eventually the lawlessness was stopped, due to brave marshals like Tom Smith and Wild Bill Hickok.

The cattle trade moved on and had an indelible impact on the history and development of Kansas and the west. Joseph McCoy would be hailed nationally as a cattle baron and founder of the Kansas cattle trade. Abilene became known world-wide as the End of the Chisholm Trail. Today, it is a beautiful, modern community which attracts travelers from all over.

"Abilene would not have been the End of the Chisholm Trail, if not for Joe McCoy," said Glenda Purkis, director of the Abilene Convention and Visitors' Bureau. "His creation of the trail creates a demand for western heritage history from travelers of today."

Joseph McCoy was said to have told Chicago cattle buyers he would bring them 200,000 head in 10 years. When he made good on that boast and far exceeded it, it inspired the phrase "the Real McCoy." We salute Joseph McCoy and the modern day leaders of Abilene for making a difference and making this heritage real.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.