

Michael Hook/Jim Gray – Chisholm Trail 150

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

“The Chisholm Trail.” This name evokes cattle and cowboys, independence and daring, the frontier and the wild, wild West. All those things are part of the history of the Chisholm Trail, which will honor its 150th anniversary beginning with a celebration in the town where it really all began: Abilene. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Michael Hook is an events coordinator for the city of Abilene. He is from Kansas City but grew up in Texas where he became a western history buff. “Davy Crockett was my hero,” Michael said. A business career took him around the Midwest but he became interested in possibly teaching history.

“I stumbled upon Abilene, and it's everything you would ever want,” Michael said. He moved to Abilene, met his wife, studied local history and became the coordinator for a landmark series of events marking the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Chisholm Trail.

“Abilene has amazing history,” Michael said. As we have previously profiled, an Illinois cattle buyer named Joseph McCoy saw an opportunity to supply Texas beef to the cities back east after the Civil War. He traveled along the railroad line across Kansas until he came to a community which could receive the longhorn cattle from Texas. That community was Abilene.

According to one account, Abilene at the time had a population of about 300 people. Other accounts suggest a population closer to 30. Now, that's rural.

The sleepy frontier community was literally transformed in a single season. McCoy built stockyards and a hotel and recruited the Texas longhorns. They came by the thousands. The influx of money inevitably attracted merchants, gamblers, saloonkeepers and loose women, seeking to separate the cowboys from their wages. Shootings and killings became commonplace. The wild west came to life on the streets of Abilene.

From Wichita, a half-Cherokee trader named Jesse Chisholm sent wagonloads of goods south to be sold in Indian territory. The Texas drovers learned that they could follow the tracks of those wagon wheels north. The route became known as the Chisholm Trail.

The first rail shipment of cattle from Abilene took place on September 5, 1867. Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas have gotten together to plan a series of celebrations of the 150th anniversary. Abilene will kick off the fun with a big show on Labor Day weekend in 2016, culminating in an even bigger show a year later. Western performer Red Steagall will headline the 2016 show along with Kansas cowboy musicians and poets. Full disclosure: those will include me. The celebration will include a parade, reenactors, vendors, car show, fireworks and much more.

Kansas cowboy historian Jim Gray has been part of this planning. He was at a meeting in Texas in February 2016 when the unlikely idea surfaced of an actual, modern day cattle drive up the Chisholm Trail. Jim had been part of a smaller version of a cattle drive for the Kansas sesquicentennial, and he said it would be possible. His friend Fontella Knowlton said, “Let's do it!”

Plans now call for driving up to 400 Texas longhorns from San Antonio, Texas to Abilene, Kansas from April 1 to July 1, 2017. Jim and Fontella are planning the route as

close to the original trail as possible. They're organizing campgrounds and logistical support.

People can apply to participate in this cattle drive for a fee. Participants must provide their own horse and wear authentic looking clothing. Jim Gray and Fontella Knowlton will be trail bosses. Six to eight drovers will go the entire trip along with two chuckwagons, while participants can sign up for weekly segments. A big celebration will be held in Abilene around the Fourth of July to mark the end of the cattle drive.

For more information about these events, go to www.chisholmtrt.com and www.chisholmtrail17cattledrive.com.

The Chisholm Trail. It evokes history, adventure, and fun, all of which can found at Abilene's celebration of this historic landmark. We commend Michael Hook, Jim Gray, Fontella Knowlton and all those involved for making a difference by bringing this history to life. Cowboys and cattle will once again be roaming across the plains of Kansas.

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