

Kansas & Mexico—Tied Together by Trails

Mexican Vaqueros—The First Cowboys



The Spanish word for cow is vaca (BAH-kah), and the men who first herded cows in North America called themselves vaqueros (bah-KAIR-ohs). Hundreds of years ago in Mexico, vaqueros were the earliest cowboys. These expert workers invented tools and techniques that American cowboys would use in Kansas years later!

Cows and horses first came to the Americas on Christopher Columbus' ships. Spanish settlers in the 1500s brought even more livestock to their new homes on the wide-open, grassy plains of Mexico. Cattle owners moved to settle other areas of Mexico, taking their cow herders with them.

By the early 1800s Mexican vaqueros worked on vast *ranchos* in present-day Mexico, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Vaqueros took responsibility for thousands of head of cattle spread over many miles on the ranch. ●

Corrido De Kansas

*Cuando salimos pa' Kansas
Con una grande partida,
Nos decía el caporal:
—No cuento ni con mi vida.—*

*Qinientos novillos eran
Pero todos my livianos.
No los podíamos reparar
Siendo treinta mexicanos...*

*Cuando dimos visto a Kansas
Era puritita correr,
Eran los caminos largos,
Y pensaba yo en volver.*

When we left for Kansas
With a large party (of cattle)
The foreman said to us:
"I don't count on even my own life."

There were 1500 steers
And they were all very wild,
We could not keep them herded
Being only thirty Mexicans...

When we came in sight of Kansas
It was nothing but (cattle) running,
The roads were long,
And I thought about turning back.

Vaqueros and the Great Cattle Drives

Mexicans owned nearly all of the ranches in North America until the 1820s. Then people from Great Britain and the United States began settling on



Approximately one-third of the trail drive cowboys were Mexican American, African American, or Native American.

ranches in Spanish territory. Mexican vaqueros taught these newcomers (called *Anglos*) how to ride safely in herds of fast-moving cattle, how to break wild horses for riding, and other important cattle herding skills.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, there was a demand for beef in the eastern United

States. This meant Texas ranchers could make money driving millions of longhorn steers up to market. Vaqueros worked with Anglos to drive large herds of cattle north to Kansas cattle towns on railroad lines. Cattle walked hundreds of miles up the Chisholm Trail and Western Trail to Ellsworth, Abilene, and Dodge City.

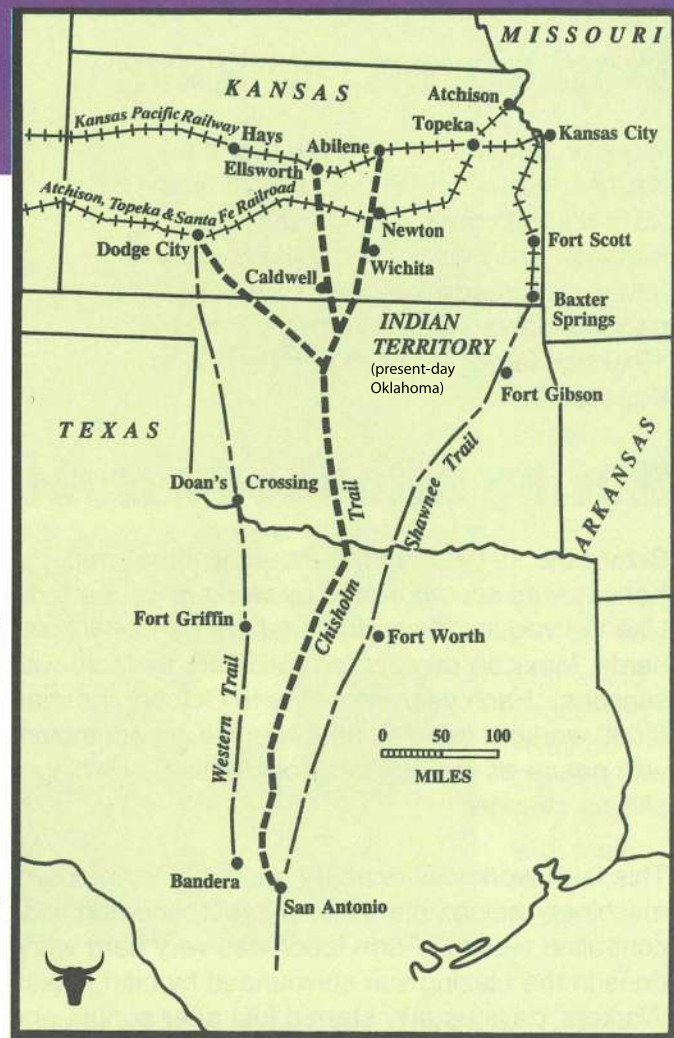
Behind them, herders on horseback made sure the steers had enough grass and water on the long journey. The trail drive was hard on these cowboys as well. Vaqueros in the 1860s-80s sang this song about the dangerous Kansas cattle drives. ●



Kaleidoscope • Challenge •

During the 1860s-80s the Chisholm Trail served as a major route to many Kansas cowtowns. Use this map and the vaquero stories to answer these questions.

1. Name three major Kansas cowtowns on the Chisholm Trail. _____,
2. What were two main railroads across Kansas in the 1860s-80s? _____,
3. What three present-day states did the Chisholm Trail go through? _____,
4. What was Oklahoma called in the 1860s? _____
5. Besides the Chisholm Trail, name two other cattle drive trails. _____,
6. About how many miles were the cattle driven from San Antonio to Abilene? _____
7. What is the Spanish word for cow? _____



Inventors on Horseback

Vaqueros were very creative. They developed new clothes, tools, and techniques that would make their jobs herding cattle easier and safer. American cowboys first learned the words and skills of their jobs from Mexican vaqueros. Because vaqueros spoke Spanish, many cowboy words we know today—such as rodeo, lasso, chaps, ranch—come from the Spanish language.

Vaqueros were experts at catching runaway steers with just a length of rope, called a *lazos* (lasso). In the spring, vaqueros rounded up cattle for branding. The



Spanish word for rounding up or "to surround or encircle" is *rodear* (ro-DAY-ar). Cattle roundups, known as *rodeos*, began in Mexico during the 1520s. A very large rodeo might have involved 300 vaqueros from neighboring *ranchos*, working together to round 30,000 or more head of cattle.

Today the term rodeo refers to a competition among cowboys. The events, such as calf roping, bronc riding, and steer wrestling developed from the daily skills vaqueros and cowboys needed to do their jobs.

Wide-brimmed hats are a cowboy trademark. The earliest "cowboy hats" were called *sombreros*, from the Spanish word *sombrear*, meaning "to shade." Cowboys needed hats to shield their faces from the blistering sun.

Heavy protective leggings used by cowboys are called chaps (SHAPS), short for chaparreras. Leather chaps provided protection against rope burns, horse bites, and thorny thickets. ●

Did you know? The cowboy word "buckeroo" is **vaquero** mispronounced