

WITTE
MUSEUM
San Antonio, Texas



Alamo Heights, Texas

[The Great Western Cattle Trail Project](#)

This historic cattle trail is an important part of our nation's history and heritage. It was a major factor in the recovery of the economy in Texas and the establishment of ranching and the livestock industry in Texas after the Civil War.

As the dust and sounds of 7 million head of cattle and horses that went up the Great Western Cattle Trail faded into obscurity, the knowledge of the trail itself faded into the shadow of its famous, but smaller, cousin the Chisholm Trail. However, the Vernon, Texas Rotary Club with accepted the challenge to lead the way in reviving and marking the cattle trail across Texas from the Red River to the Rio Grande, 620 miles.

The first marker in Texas was placed on May 1, 2004, where the trail crossed the Red River at Doan's Crossing in conjunction with the Doan's May Day Picnic, one of the oldest continuous celebrations in Texas. In 1884, the drovers crossed their herds going north at the low-water crossing at Doan's, and the drovers' wives, who were left behind, had a May Day Picnic.

Starting from as far away as Matamoros, Mexico, the drovers headed through Texas to destinations along the trail in eight other states - Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota – and Saskatchewan, Canada.

On May 16, 2005, the Texas State Legislature presented a Resolution in the House by Rep. Rick Hardcastle and in the Senate by the late Sen. Frank Madla, recognizing the importance of the Western Trail to the recovery of the economy in Texas after the Civil War and to the potential that it has to promote heritage tourism along the trail today.

This may once again serve to help boost the economy of small, rural communities that are seeking ways to keep their towns alive through heritage tourism. The opportunities for heritage tourism are endless, and the opportunity to make friends along the trail today linked by a common bond has already created endless enthusiasm and opportunities for economic growth as it did for the trail drivers when they went up the trail together from Mexico across nine US states and into Canada.

The Alamo Heights Rotary Club and the Witte Museum are proud to be partners in this important historical project that links three countries and eight states to preserve and promote the history of the Great Western Trail and to build good will and better friendships.

WESTERN TRAIL. The Western Trail, also known as the Dodge City Trail and the Fort Griffin Trail, was blazed in 1874 by cattle-drover John T. Lytle,^{qv} who herded 3,500 longhorn cattle^{qv} along the leading edge of the frontier from South Texas to the Red Cloud Indian Agency at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. Following the defeat of the Plains Indians in the Red River War,^{qv} Lytle's route supplanted the famer-laden Chisholm Trail^{qv} to the east. By 1879 the Western Trail was the principal thoroughfare

for Texas cattle bound for northern markets. Feeder routes such as the Matamoros Trail from Brownsville, which ran northward through Santa Rosa, George West, Three Rivers, San Antonio, Beckman, Leon Springs, Boerne, and Comfort, and the Old Trail from Castroville, which ran northward through Bandera and Camp Verde, converged in Kerrville to form the Western Trail. The trail proceeded northward, crossing the James River near the site of present Noxville, the Llano at Beef Trail Crossing, the San Saba at Pegleg Crossing,^{qv} and Brady Creek west of Brady. The trail left the Hill Country^{qv} through Cow Gap, where minor feeder trails from Mason, San Saba, and Lampasas counties converged. It crossed the Colorado River at Waldrip and passed through Coleman, where a trail from Trickham and one of two feeders from Tom Green County merged with the trunk route. Beyond Coleman, the Western Trail fanned out to take advantage of grassy prairies; branches passed through the sites of present Baird, Clyde, and Putnam and reunited at Albany, where the Potter and Bacon Trail (or Potter-Blocker Trail^{qv}) diverged toward the Llano Estacado^{qv} and Colorado pastures. The Western Trail crossed the Clear Fork of the Brazos near Fort Griffin at the Butterfield-Military Road crossing, where the second feeder trail from Tom Green County, which ran through Buffalo Gap, joined the trunk route. Thence the Western Trail proceeded through Throckmorton, crossed the Brazos at Seymour and the Pease at the site of Vernon, and veered northeastward to leave Texas at what later became known as Doan's Crossing, on the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River. Several alternative routes crossed Indian Territory to Dodge City, Kansas, on the Santa Fe Railroad, the first and most important terminus of the trail; to Ogallala, Nebraska, on the Union Pacific, the principal alternative for rail shipment; and to northern ranges. Some herds were delivered to Indian reservations on the northern plains.

Several factors such as barbed wire,^{qv} the introduction of beefier cattle breeds, and the settlement of the frontier contributed to the demise of the Western Trail, but a principal cause was the Texas fever^{qv} controversy. Carried northward by longhorns, the disease decimated northern herds, giving rise by 1885 to quarantines in many northern states and territories which banned the importation of Texas cattle during warm months. In an attempt to circumvent state legislation, Texas congressman James Francis Miller,^{qv} Lytle's brother-in-law, introduced legislation that would have plotted a National Trail^{qv} north of Texas under federal supervision, but the proposal did not pass. The last reported drive on the Western Trail was made in 1893 by John Rufus Blocker^{qv} to Deadwood, South Dakota. By then, three to five million cattle had been driven to northern pastures and markets along the route.

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