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## Sidesaddles and Sunbonnets: Women on the Cattle Trail

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JANE KOGER  
*Dave Leiker*

## SIDESADDLES AND SUNBONNETS: WOMEN ON THE CATTLE TRAIL

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When you think of cattle drives up the Chisholm Trail, most likely you think of longhorns, cowboys, chuck wagons, and dust.

Better add to that petticoats, sidesaddles, sunbonnets, and dolls—because sometimes, Texas women and children came along too.

Most of the women were married, but one was widowed, accompanying her own herd to Kansas. All were counting on the prospect of money to be made when the cattle were sold at railheads including Abilene, Newton, and Wichita.

Here are a few tales about five of them.

### MRS. ADARE

One woman who traveled part of the Chisholm Trail was Mrs. Adare (first name unknown), wife of the trail boss of a herd driven to Abilene in 1868, three years after the Civil War ended and one year after Abilene became a railhead cowtown.

Today, we get a glimpse of Mrs. Adare because Jack Bailey, a cowboy on the drive, kept a day-to-day journal.

Like most Chisholm Trail cattle drives, Bailey's drive probably crossed from Texas into Indian Territory (which later became Oklahoma) just north of Red River Station. However, the most direct route to Abilene that became the Chisholm Trail had not yet been marked. Bailey's drive traveled somewhat east of that route, entering Kansas east of Arkansas City on the western edge of the Flint Hills.

According to Bailey, other women and children were on the drive in addition to Mrs. Adare, all traveling in wagons. Unlike later cattle drives, this one had no hired cook. The women did some cooking; cowboys did the rest.

Bailey often called Mrs. Adare the “old lady,” considering her loud and temperamental. One day, Mrs. Adare and a man named Martin had “the biggest quarel I ever heard,” Bailey wrote. “Old lady beat him easy.”

Another day, he wrote about a “general singing in camp last night” with every cowboy carrying his own tune. “Old Lady didnt like it a bit,” Bailey wrote. “She holered at us several time but the more she holered the louder we sung.”

According to Bailey, Mrs. Adare’s kindness to two black cowboys created a furor among the other cowboys. She invited one black cowboy to supper at her table, and he accepted. “It made some of the boys mad of course...,” Bailey wrote. “The boys swore they would quit next morning if it was not explained.”

But the next morning, she made matters worse by sending a plate of milk gravy over to the other black cowboy—something that was “quite a luxury to any of us,” Bailey wrote. In the end, he wrote, “We patched it over so the boys were a little satisfied but didnt like. ... I did not like such political differences myself but I knew how it was before.” (Bailey likely meant life in Texas before the Civil War.)

*(For more about Bailey’s journal, see Jack Bailey: A Texas Cowboy’s Journal: Up the Trail to Kansas in 1868, page 39.)*

#### ESTELLE AMANDA NITE BURKS

If their history was any indication, Amanda Burks’ husband, William Burks, urged her to come on his cattle drive up the Chisholm Trail for one compelling reason: He couldn’t stand to be away from her.

William drove stock to Louisiana several times without Amanda along. But when he started his Chisholm Trail drive in April 1871, after just one day



ARNDT-GIRL  
Dave Leiker

he sent back a message urging Amanda to join him. So join him she did, driving a buggy with a servant along to take care of her.

In her memoir about the drive, Amanda described a stampede of their herd and the herd following it, supposedly caused by Indians. “It was a horrible yet fascinating sight,” she wrote. “Frantic cowboys did all in their power to stop the wild flight, but nothing but

exhaustion could check it. By working almost constantly the men gathered the cattle in about a week’s time.

“They were all thrown into one big herd, and the roar of hoof beats of two thousand milling cattle was almost deafening. The herd was divided in two, then worked back and forth until every cow was in her rightful bunch.”

The cowboys were almost exhausted afterward, she wrote. “I felt so sorry



BOBBI GODFREY  
*Dave Leiker*

for one of them, Branch Isbell, a young tenderfoot, that I persuaded Mr. Burks to let him rest. The boy lay down and was soon sleeping so soundly that he did not hear us breaking camp, and we forgot him when we left. I wanted someone to go back and wake him, but Mr. Burks said that it would be only a little while till he appeared again.”

After reaching Kansas, William

summered the herd near Newton because cattle prices were low. When prices remained low, he decided to winter the cattle near the Smoky Hill River.

It took only one severe Kansas snowstorm to convince him to sell the herd and head to Texas. “Nine horses were lost in this snowstorm,” Amanda wrote. “Many of the young cattle lost their horns from the cold.” Amanda

was glad to leave, “for never had I endured such cold.”

The young tenderfoot that Amanda had helped never forgot her kindness. Years later, Branch Isbell saluted her in his own memoir, written after William Burks had died and Amanda Burks had run their ranching business successfully for many years. “Being a ‘tenderfoot,’ I was started in at the rear end of the herd and Mrs. Burks took me under her protecting wing,” Branch Isbell wrote. “I verily believe that her business success since her widowhood began, has been given her as a reward for her unflinching kindness to myself and others. ... My prayer for her is that her shadow may never grow less, and may she ‘live to eat the hen that scratches above her grave.’”

MARGARET HEFFERNAN  
DUNBAR HARDY BORLAND

Margaret Borland faced much tragedy before going up the Chisholm Trail. She was widowed three times, and she lost three daughters, a son, and a grandson to yellow fever. In all, she

lost four of her seven children.

In the spring of 1873, Margaret turned her eyes north to Kansas and started a herd up the Chisholm Trail, hoping for a profitable outcome. Unlike most women who went up the trail, she was the organizer and trail boss of her cattle drive, and she did it with her eight-year-old daughter and six-year-old granddaughter in tow. Two teenage sons worked as trail hands, with her twenty-five-year-old nephew supervising the trail hands. A black cook also went along.

Some two months later, the drive ended in the booming cowtown of Wichita. *The Wichita Beacon* reported Margaret’s arrival: “She is the happy possessor of about one thousand head of cattle, and accompanied the herd all the way from its starting point to this place, giving evidence of a pluck and business tact far superior to many of the ‘lords.’”

But tragedy struck again. About a month after she arrived, Margaret

Borland died in Wichita at age forty-nine. It's not clear what illness killed her. Her son-in-law, Victor Rose, said he believed the journey and its responsibilities had been too much for her mental and physical resources. Her body was returned to Texas for burial.

Victor Rose wrote this tribute to her: "Educated in the school of adversity, and an intimate acquaintance of trials, Mrs. Borland was a woman of resolute will and self-reliance; yet she was one of the kindest mothers."

The herd she had trailed to Kansas produced no profit for the family. The cattle market crashed in the fall of 1873, a financial disaster for almost every drover who trailed cattle to Kansas that year.

ELIZABETH (LIZZIE)  
JOHNSON WILLIAMS

When Lizzie Johnson Williams went up the Chisholm Trail with her husband, she wasn't just along for the ride. She drove her own cattle, marked with her own brand—the only woman known to have done so—while he drove his.

Truth be told, she was better at the cattle business than he was.

Smart, educated, flamboyant, and a great financial dealmaker, Lizzie worked as a teacher, teaching subjects including math and bookkeeping. To fight boredom, she began writing pulp fiction under a pseudonym, selling stories to *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

Lizzie used her math and bookkeeping skills to keep books for local cattlemen. She began learning about the cattle business and investing her savings in cattle and land, registering her own brand in 1871. By 1879 Lizzie was sending cattle up the trail to boost her income.

An independent businesswoman, she relished her involvement in the cattle business long before she met tall, handsome Hezekiah George Williams, a widower with four sons. She encouraged him to get into the cattle business, and he did. They married in 1879 when she was thirty-nine years old.

Before they married, Lizzie had



MORGAN PUDDEN  
*Dave Leiker*

Hezekiah sign what today would be called a prenuptial contract, acknowledging that her property and all of her future financial gains belonged to her—a good move on her part, for Hezekiah gambled and drank. Lizzie enjoyed competing with him in the cattle business throughout their thirty-five-year marriage, but she often had to pay his debts.

They drove their herds up the Chisholm Trail together several times, riding in a buggy behind the chuck wagon. Usually arrayed in silks and

satins, on the trail Lizzie wore calicos and cottons with many petticoats, a bonnet, and a shawl. She counted her cattle every morning and kept track of each trail hand's hours. At trail's end she sold her cattle, paid the cowboys, and figured the profits in her books.

And then Lizzie and Hezekiah rewarded themselves. They traveled and stayed in fine hotels. Lizzie bought beautiful clothes and jewelry.

When Hezekiah died in 1914, Lizzie buried him in an Austin cemetery. She

wrote this note across the undertaker's bill: "I loved this old buzzard this much." She then retreated into solitude, living an eccentric, miserly existence in a cold and dark room in an Austin building she owned. She continued managing her investments. Eventually, as senility set in, Lizzie moved in with her niece, dying at age eighty-four in 1924. She was buried next to Hezekiah.

After her death, her relatives learned that Lizzie had accumulated a fortune. It was a secret that she never chose to share.

#### MARY (MOLLIE) TAYLOR BUNTON

Born into a wealthy Austin family, Mollie Bunton was educated back East, then came home to be courted by Austin's elite young men. She shocked her family by falling in love with a cowboy, James Howell Bunton, and marrying him in 1885.

She moved to Howell's ranch soon after their honeymoon—and subsequently shocked her family again,

telegraphing them that she would accompany her husband as he took three herds up the Chisholm Trail. The trail boss for the drive had developed an excruciating eye problem, so Howell had to take over.

Going along was "most reluctantly granted by my indulgent husband, because, at that time the trip ... was considered entirely too dangerous to be undertaken by a woman," said Mollie in the book she later wrote about the trip. Neighbors tried unsuccessfully to dissuade her. She waited until the last moment to telegram her family so they couldn't stop her.

She borrowed clothes appropriate for the trip but also packed an evening gown, sure that she would make it to social affairs at the end of the trail.

Howell moved the cattle north along what he believed to be the Chisholm Trail, but in reality they were traveling further west, on a route that later came to be called the Western Trail.

Mollie made the journey in a buggy

and on horseback, riding sidesaddle. She traveled with the lead herd, which consisted of red Durham cattle, not longhorns. "Riding ahead of the herd I would turn in my saddle and look back, and it would look as if the entire face of the earth was just a moving mass of heads and horns," she wrote.

For entertainment, Mollie decorated her buggy and herself with wildflowers, fished, listened to the cook tell stories, and marveled at the beauty of birds and their songs.

But her trip had its scary moments. One morning she came upon a shack where a man, his wife, and their child had been killed and scalped by Indians.

In Kansas they encountered a terrifying electrical storm. The air was so charged with electricity that the cowboys took off their pistols and spurs and had Mollie remove her steel hairpins and rings. "Sometimes the lightning would fall from the sky in fiery darts of flame; again, there would be a flash and it would look as if

millions of fairies in glittering robes of fire were dancing in mad glee over the backs of the cattle and jumping from the horns of one steer to another," she wrote. The cattle didn't stampede.

When at last they reached Coolidge, Kansas, they recognized men from home on the sidewalk. "As soon as they saw us, they came rushing out to meet us with open arms..." Mollie wrote. "I was carried and safely installed inside of the hotel. Every step of the way, those gallant cattlemen in loud voices were proclaiming me as the 'Queen of the Old Chisholm Trail.'"

That night, Mollie was wined, dined, toasted, and made to feel like a heroine. And yes, she got to wear her evening gown.

They sold their cattle, too.

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*Paula Haas is a retired journalist living in Matfield Green who occasionally works as a freelance writer for clients in Kansas and beyond. She loves the Flint Hills.*