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Birth of the Cowboy as American Icon

Nathan Bartel

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PLAYING COWBOYS
Jeremiah Ariaz Collection

BIRTH OF THE COWBOY AS AMERICAN ICON

Of all the archetypes and folk heroes that populate American culture, none looms larger than the cowboy. And as Flint Hills historian Jim Hoy suggests, “The American cowboy...was born in the dust of the Old Chisholm Trail.”

All across the world men on horseback for centuries had been looking after livestock, but not until the great Texas-to-Kansas trail drives did the cowboy, with his distinctive high-crowned felt hat and his high-heeled boots, emerge from obscurity to become America’s great folk hero.

The first and perhaps most familiar cultural artifact from the days of the cattle drive was the song “The Old Chisholm Trail.” Unlike other depictions of trail life that were crafted after the fact, “The Old Chisholm Trail” was created by cowboys themselves as they drove their herds north. Inventive drovers contributed their own verses to the song, and those verses were passed from one cowboy to another. Over the years the number of verses of “The Old Chisholm Trail” grew. Some say there are more than a hundred known verses of the song. “The Old Chisholm Trail” has been recorded by artists such as Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Michael Martin Murphey, Randy Travis, and Woody Guthrie.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, popular entertainments such as dime novels and wild west shows cemented the cowboy as a folk hero and mythic figure in American minds. Buffalo Bill Cody started his traveling show, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, in 1873, using techniques honed by the circus industry to

tell the story of the American frontier. Cody's shows included dramatic reenactments of buffalo hunts, famous battles, and feats of agility and skill, including riding, roping, and shooting.

The wild west show would eventually lose its audience to the movies; western films and television shows accounted for almost a quarter of entertainment produced by Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century.

As a genre, the western has dominated movie screens since motion pictures first became popular. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), with its depiction of an untamed American West and famous climactic gunfight, was arguably the first narrative film. The American public proved hungry for more depictions of the frontier, and film studios readily obliged.

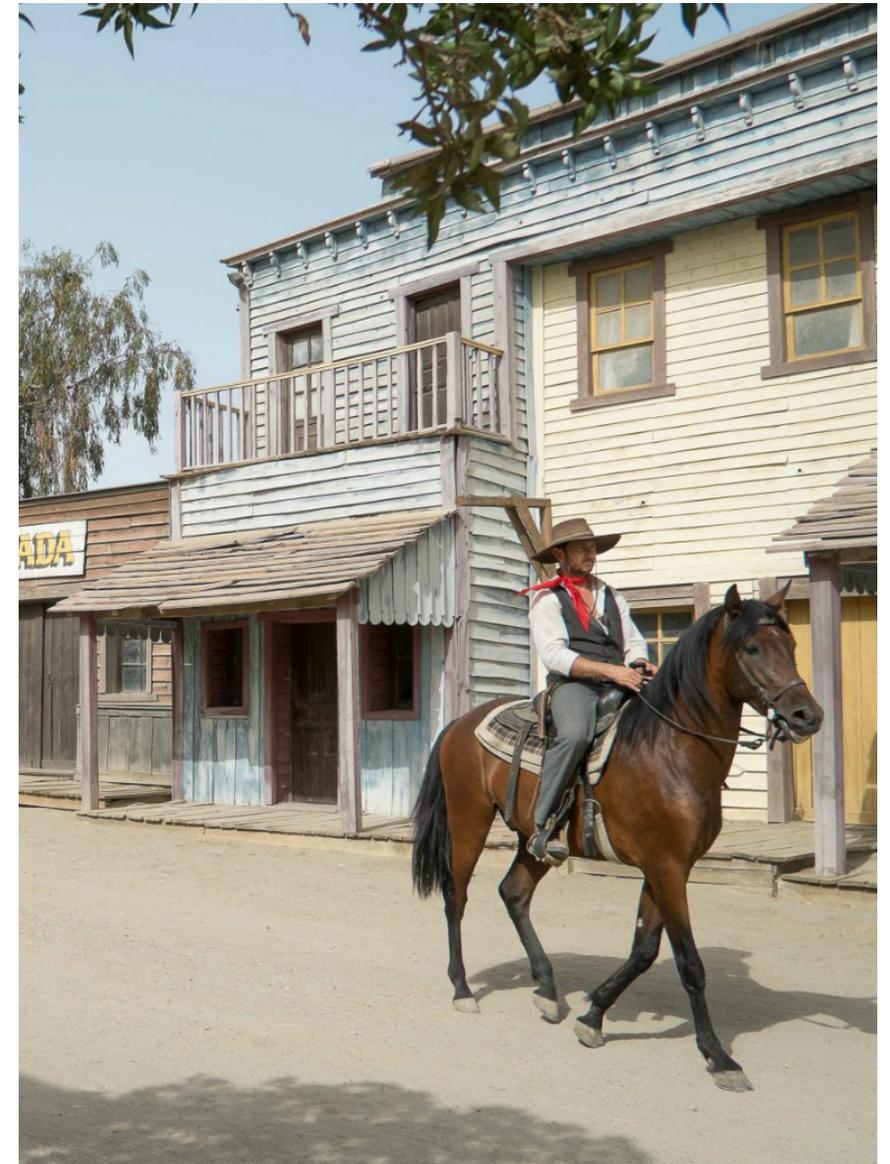
So it was only natural that the Chisholm Trail story would make its way to Hollywood. Many films depict the Chisholm Trail, including *The Texans* (1938) and *Abilene Town* (1946). The most famous and critically acclaimed

depiction of the Chisholm Trail was *Red River* (1948), starring John Wayne as a trail boss bent on taking his herd to Missouri, and Montgomery Clift as his son, who believes their fortunes lie in a Kansas rail town called Abilene.

The Chisholm Trail played a less direct role on television, where shows like *Centennial* (1978) and *Bonanza* (1959–1973) bore the trail's influence.

By the 1980s, it seemed the western and the cowboy had faded from prominence in the American mind, but the new millennium saw a renewed interest in the western genre. From Hollywood remakes of *True Grit* and *The Magnificent Seven* to HBO original productions like *Deadwood* and *Westworld*, the folk hero that got his start on the Chisholm Trail in 1867 has been reimagined and made relevant again.

Excerpt from The Chisholm Trail: Driving the American West, a traveling exhibit that is a joint project of Symphony in the Flint Hills and Flint Hills Design.
Nathan Bartel



STAGING THE WEST (GERMANY)