Cowboys and Cattle Trails

After the Civil War, Texas cattle farmers returned home to find that their cattle herds had grown tremendously while they were away. The good news was that **demand** for beef was growing in the East. Most of the **cattle** there had been **consumed** by Union and Confederate armies. This high demand in the East allowed cattle farmers to be able to charge a higher price for their cattle. But there was one problem-how do you **transport** cattle to markets so far away?

demand = the need or desire for something

cattle = cows and bulls

consumed = eaten

transport = system of carrying goods from one place to another

herd = to move animals as a group from one place to another

The solution came from Joseph McCoy, a young cattle shipper from Illinois. McCoy came up with an idea to **herd** cattle north through Texas and the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) and meet up with the railroads in Kansas. There, cattle would be loaded into railroad cars and transported east. McCoy chose Abilene, Kansas for his shipping point.

In 1867, the first cattle trail was **blazed** from the Red River in northern Texas to Abilene. It was called the Chisholm Trail after Jesse Chisholm, a part-Cherokee Indian trader who had made a wagon trail along that route. Over the years, many feeder trails led into the main route. Historians estimate that six million cattle made their way up the Chisholm Trail from 1867 to the mid-1880s!

blazed = To blaze a trail is to make a new path or to be the first travel the path.

Other trails were established to take cattle to additional railroad loading points or to stock ranches in the northern plains. The Great Western Cattle Trail took a more westerly route through Texas up to Nebraska and northern territories. It became the main road for cattle heading to northern markets.
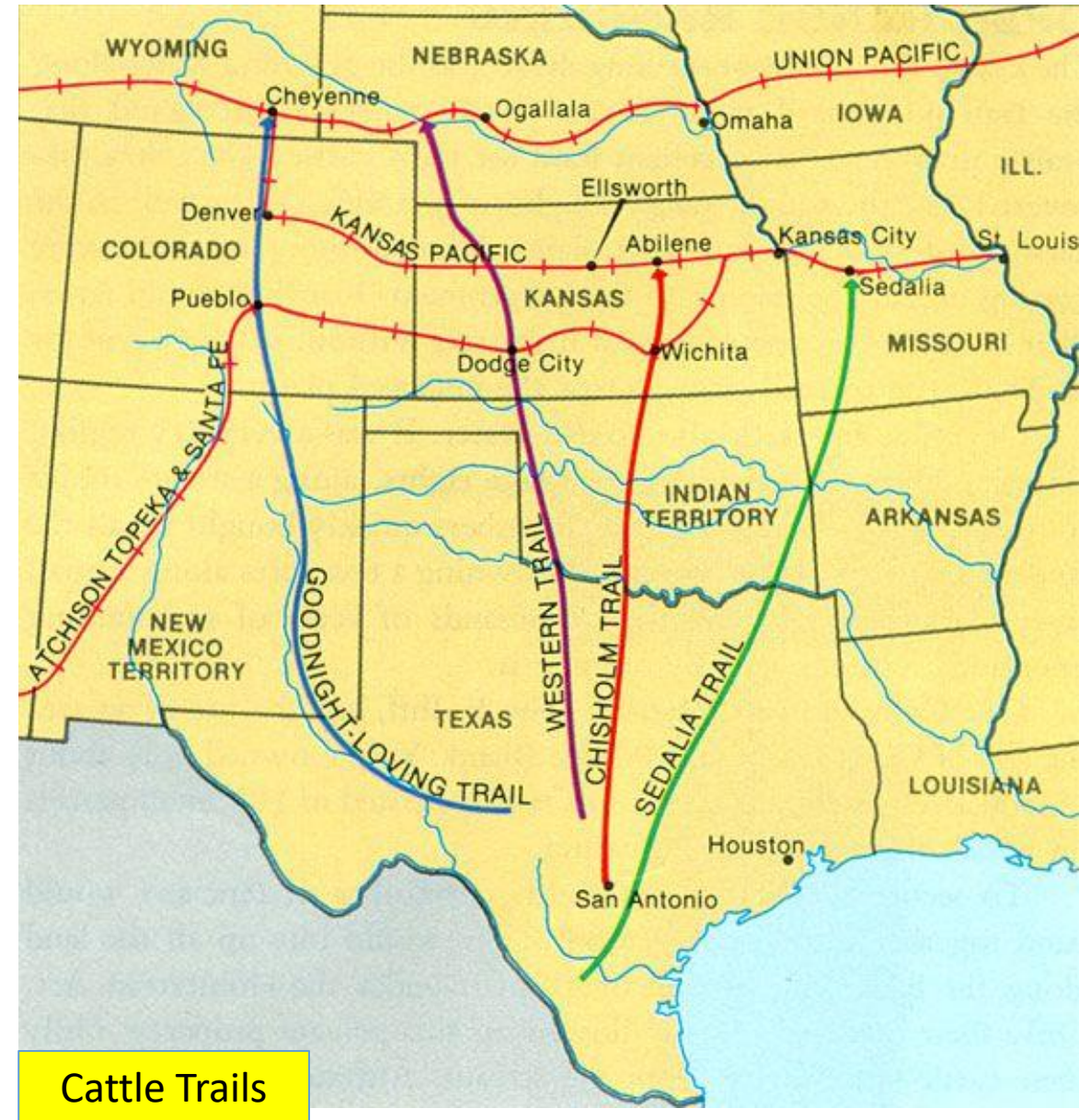
Cattle Trails

All those cattle trails needed **cowboys** who would help herd the cattle along the trails. Historians estimate that 35,000 cowboys were on the trails in the second half of the 19thcentury. About 9,000 of them were black cowboys. After the slaves were freed, many moved out west to work on Texas ranches. Others had already lived in Texas and herded cattle for their masters.

Cowboy =
Cowboys were men who rode horses and cared for cattle.

Black and white cowboys worked, ate, and slept in the same places along the trail. Though racial **discrimination** still existed, the black cowboys of Texas were treated much better on the range than anywhere else. Skills mattered to the ranch bosses, and the black cowboys proved their value on the ranch. They also showed off their skills in local rodeos by riding bulls and **bucking broncos!**

Black Cowboys

Discrimination = the practice of treating a person or group less fairly than others

Cowboy riding a bucking bronco

One famous black cowboy was Bill Pickett. He was born in Texas. After acquiring a fifth-grade education, Bill Pickett went to work on a ranch. He soon learned to control a **steer** by grasping it by the horns, twisting its neck, biting its nose or its upper lip, and making it fall on its side. This became known as "bulldogging". In the off seasons, when Bill wasn't herding cattle, he would participate in rodeo shows. He earned the nickname Bulldogger and Dusky Demon for his feats. He is remembered today as one of the most famous cowboys.

Bill Pickett

a steer

By the end of the 1800s, railroads had expanded throughout the west and eliminated the need for long cattle drives. Another reason cattle drives ended was because of the invention of **barbed wire**. This barbed wire was put along the trail and blocked the way for the cattle. Although the era of cowboys and cattle trails had lasted for only about 20 years, the "Old West" is one of the most colorful times in American History!

barbed wire

A barb is a sharp point.

Barbed wire was used for fences.