

## Stories From The Old Trails



Historic accounts of life along the Texas cattle trails.

By Ellen Humphries

*Author's Note: In keeping with the theme of the 2005 SRM Annual Meeting, "Rangeland Trails Under The Lone Star," Dan Caudle, program co-chair, suggested a useful and interesting article might be about what the old cattle trails have meant to Texas and Fort Worth. As managing editor of The Cattleman magazine, I have the good luck to have access to 90 years of tales of old Texas and the people who built the cattle industry here.*

*In early volumes, 1915 and 1917, I found two short stories and a letter from people who drove cattle from South Texas, up the Chisholm Trail to Fort Worth and then on to "wild and wooly" Ellsworth, Kansas. Their stories are in their own words, in the vernacular of the time. It is our pleasure to reprint these stories from the beginning of the last century for the world wide readership of Rangelands.*

### Stories of the Early Days By Those Who Blazed the Way

*The Cattleman, September 1915, Volume II, page 11.*

Among the first of the pioneer cattlemen to go over the old trails from South Texas to Ellsworth, Kansas, was F. Cornelius of Midfields, Texas. Mr. Cornelius is a native of Germany, and landed at Indianoly, Texas, in 1870.

"This was indeed a wonderful country then," says he, "with thousands of cattle and hundreds of deer roaming the prairies unmolested, and fences unknown to this section. Indianoly which was one of the nicest and richest little towns in Texas was wiped from the face of the earth by storms in 1875 and 1886.

"I made my first trip over the trail to Kansas, in the Spring of 1873, with Ged Guthrie, who was in charge of a herd of cattle belonging to a Mr. Bennett. We started from Spring Creek near

Victoria, and camped the first night out on the Chocalica prairie. That night we had one of the old time rain storms which stampeded the cattle and scattered them to the four winds. If you have ever been on that prairie, after a hard rain, you know that it is about the boggiest place a man ever ran across. We were delayed several days gathering the cattle, and then moved on.

"It was very cold and rainy during almost the entire trip, and I remember one night we camped near a grave yard and it was so cold that we took some rails from around the graves to build a fire to keep warm by. Our trail led through Fort Worth, which was then only a very small village with one brick store building, and there I bought a blue Yankee coat, which I wore for many years after returning home.

"Crossing into Indian Territory at Red River Station we came to a Black Jack thicket, which it took about a good day's journey to pass through, and the trail was lined with the carcasses of the horses of a crowd which had gone on about three weeks ahead of us. Arriving at Ellsworth, Kansas, we met these boys and learned of their terrible hardships and suffering from cold. Their horses had all died from the cold, leaving them with only one pack mule and forcing them to complete the trip driving the cattle on foot.

"Ellsworth was a regular 'cow-town' and certainly a tough place in those days. Many amusing things happened. I remember that Mr. Bennett could drink the hottest coffee of any man I ever saw, often drinking it right out of the boiling pot. I had traded for a bay pony in Victoria, which was hard to beat for a short distance, and Guthrie and I made quite a



little money running races. He would do the betting and I would act as jockey.

“Mr. Bennett sold his cattle soon after our arrival in Ellsworth, and then I went to work for Dilworth & Littlefield, driving a herd from Ellsworth to Lowell, Nebraska, on the Platte River. Lowell was a new town then and quite different from Ellsworth, being inhabited by an entirely different class of people. I worked for Dilworth & Littlefield until Fall when they sold a bunch of cattle to a man in Colorado and it fell to my lot to help take them to Colorado. We trailed along the valley of the Platte River and saw lots of buffalo and antelope. The valley seemed to be about two miles wide from the river bank to the Canyons and was covered with scrubby cedars. Passing Fort Carney we were forced to go over about two miles on account of the water giving out in the river, and several times we had to dig in the bottom of the river to get water to cook with.

“After delivering our cattle we went back to Lowell and settled up, and soon I was on my way back to Texas, where I am still living—thank the Lord.

“I lived then with a Mr. Newt Mitchell on the Carancahua Bay in Jackson County, and he gave me the first cow I ever owned. And let me tell you, the life of a cowboy today is a picnic compared to those old days. It certainly took a man with backbone to stick to the business then.”

**A True Story of Trail Days**  
The Cattleman, *January 1917, Volume III,*  
*pages 28–29.*

In the late '70s, when herd after herd of Texas cattle were driven North over the old Chisholm Trail, Ike Pryor's herd was a few weeks ahead of the herd driven by Bill Jackman.

It was the custom for the man following to pick up lost cattle and drive them on until the herd they were lost from was reached. Bill Jackman's herd picked up a steer lost by Ike Pryor and was taking him along for Ike, with good intentions. Red River was crossed and Bill's herd had now gone a few days drive into the Indian Nation. One afternoon a band of about forty Indian warriors including their squaws, rode up to Bill Jackman's herd and the Chief handed him a letter, which reads as follows:

“To all trail bosses:

“This man is a good Indian; I know him personally. Treat him well, give him a beef and you will have no trouble in driving through his country.”

(Signed) IKE T. PRYOR.

After reading the letter, Bill rode into the herd, and cut out Ike's steer for the Chief. They killed the steer then and there and had a big feast. Then Bill went on North with his herd, in peace, thanking Ike for his good advice. – Contributed.

## A Woman Trail Driver

The Cattleman, *May 1917, Volume III, page 17.*

One of the many interesting visitors in Fort Worth during the 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Cattle Raisers Association of Texas, was Mrs. Amanda Burk of La Motta ranch in La Salle County, Texas. Mrs. Burk is one of the very few women who ever went up the trail with a herd of cattle, and though more than forty-five years ago she remembers clearly the journey. Her husband, W.F. Burk was one of the pioneer ranchmen of Texas and made many trips over the trail. It was in 1871 that Mrs. Burk decided to accompany him with a herd from Banquette, Texas, to Ellsworth, Kansas. As may be imagined, Texas was then sparsely settled, and even Kansas was considered as the Eastern edge of the "wild and wooly West." Ellsworth was one of the toughest towns of the West, but the cowboys, she says, were not responsible for this. The West was then a circus and gamblers, thieves and bad men generally flocked to the "New Eldorado," where the Texas cattlemen found a market for their cattle.



*Mrs. Amanda Burk*

"My trip to Kansas was full of episodes which impress me more now than at that time," said Mrs. Burk to a representative of THE CATTLEMAN during her visit to the city. "I did not do the work of a cowboy, but rode in a buggy all the way. I did not even do the cooking on the way up the trail. Yes, there were many inconveniences, and I remember distinctly one night up in Coryell County when a storm came up and I was by myself until one o'clock in the morning, while Mr. Burk went out with the hands to keep the cattle from getting away after they had stampeded several times. The worst thing we had to contend with in 1871 was prairie fires. I accidentally started one myself one day which burned off several hundred square miles of territory. Of course, the men with the herd had very limited facilities for fire fighting. We drove about

fifteen miles that day and the next day the fire overtook us again, as the wind had changed its course. The cowboys attached a rope to my buggy and hauled me to safety. After reaching Ellsworth we had a tent and camped near there until Mr. Burk made satisfactory disposition of the cattle. Camp life in Kansas in those days had many comforts as well as inconveniences. We had plenty of Mexican help and while I knew how to cook, my only work in that line was confined to making pies, which the boys seemed to appreciate very much. That winter we returned by rail via New Orleans.

"That trite old saying that half of the world does not know how the other half is living was as true in the early days as it is today. The high cost of living did not bother us much in Texas then for the reason that our wardrobes were not so exquisite as those of today. We raised our own meat, of course, but our coffee, shoes and other supplies were hauled from Corpus Christi, 125 miles away. Mr. Butterick with his fashion plates did not do a very thriving business in Texan then, but we were well, happy and fairly prosperous. We had very few luxuries, but did not miss them, for we were not raised up under such conditions as prevail today, where 'us' women would have a nervous breakdown if we didn't get to attend the Style Show and buy the finest creations in hats, 'gowns,' etc.

La Motta ranch now contains 40,000 acres and the ranch house, Mrs. Burk's home, is fitted up with all modern conveniences. The ranch is managed by Mrs. Burk's nephew, J.W. (Jack) Baylor.

Mrs. Burk is a charter member of the Old Time Trail Drivers Association and there is a movement on foot among those who are not opposed to "Woman Suffrage," to elect her president of the organization at their next annual meeting. She is not seeking the honor, but the old trail men seem intent on thus honoring a woman member who has been so faithful in assisting in preserving the traditions of the trail.

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*The 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management will be held in Fort Worth, Texas, February 5-11, 2005. For more information visit [www.rangelands.org](http://www.rangelands.org).*

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