

3.2 The Growing West

Who benefited from the second wave of westward expansion in the United States?

Explore

Cattle Drives

How did ranching develop in the West?

During the Civil War, many ranchers in Texas left their land and served in the military. After the war, they returned to their ranches and found that their cattle had become much more numerous. Many ranchers had thousands of head of cattle wandering across the range. This oversupply presented a problem. The price of beef in their region was low. To make a profit, the ranchers had to find a way to transport their cattle to eastern markets, where consumers were willing to pay higher prices for beef.

The Kansas Pacific railroad reached Abilene, Kansas, in 1867. If the ranchers could reach Abilene with their cattle, then the cattle could be shipped east on the railroad. To achieve this goal, ambitious cattlemen began to lead cattle drives north 700 miles or more from Texas to Abilene. This drive came to be called the Chisholm Trail.

Other cattle drives developed from Texas to the west, such as the Goodnight-Loving Trail to New Mexico and Colorado, and many ranchers made huge profits. The prosperity of cattle towns soared as well. For example, in 1867, 35,000 cattle entered Abilene. Four years later, 600,000 cattle arrived in the town. Before long, cattle ranching spread north from Texas across much of the West, including states such as Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana.

The increased number of cattle created new environmental risks, however. When ranchers allowed their livestock to overgraze, or eat all of vegetation in an area, the topsoil often could not support new grass. As a result, there was more erosion and dust storms became more severe.