

Closing the Western Frontier

The Cattle Frontier

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

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The development of the railroad made it profitable to raise cattle on the Great Plains. In 1860, some five-million longhorn cattle grazed in the Lone Star state. Cattle that could be bought for \$3 to \$5 a head in Texas could be sold for \$30 to \$50 at railroad shipping points in Abilene or Dodge City in Kansas. Cowboys had to drive their cattle a thousand miles northward to reach the Kansas railheads.

Although the popular image of the cowboy is of John Wayne or Roy Rodgers, many of the cowboys were African Americans or Mexican Americans. About one in five cowboys was a Mexican American and one in seven was black.

By the 1880s, the cattle boom was over. An increase in the number of cattle led to overgrazing and destruction of the fragile Plains grasses. Sheep ranchers competed for scarce water, and the sheep ate the grass so close to the ground that cattle could no longer feed on it. Bitter range wars erupted when cattle ranchers, sheep ranchers, and farmers fenced in their land using barbed wire. The romantic era of the long drive and the cowboy came to an end when two harsh winters in 1885-1886 and 1886-1887, followed by two dry summers, killed 80 to 90 percent of the cattle on the Plains. As a result, corporate-owned ranches replaced individually owned ranches.

After the terrible winters, many ranchers decided to fence in their cattle rather than letting them roam freely. The invention of barbed wire made it possible to build fences without lumber and protect railroad tracks from stampeding animals. The first barbed wire was produced in 1868 and early barbed wire had to be manufactured by hand. Two strands of wire were wound together and barbs were then threaded through the wires.

A salesman, John "Bet a Million" Gates, helped convince ranchers to adopt barbed wire. (He received his nickname because he reportedly lost \$1 million when he bet about which raindrop would slide down a train window the fastest). In San Antonio, Texas, Gates bet local ranchers that they could not drive steers out of a corral made up of eight strands of barbed wire.