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(These selections are part of one chapter of a larger history of West Central Texas published in the 1990–1991 *Texas Almanac*. It explains how the convergence of railroads, windmills, and barbed wire in that region in the late 1800s forever changed the face of the Texas prairies and plains, as well as the complexion of the West Texas cattle industry.)

Selections from “Railroads, Windmills and Barbed Wire”

The cattle industry’s recovery from the financial Panic of 1873 was followed by an unprecedented boom that fueled a growing interest in Texas cattle ranching. Agents sold range rights to eager speculators from the East Coast and Great Britain. At least thirteen British companies were formed expressly to run cattle operations in Texas. Eventually the Scottish and English stake in Texas ranching was estimated to be \$25 million.

Several factors contributed to the ending of the era of cattle drives: the extension of railroads across the plains, the introduction of barbed wire and windmills in the Texas plains, and the demand from northern markets for improved beef quality.

Railroads Begin the End of Cattle Drives

The coming of the railroads caused a revolution in the cattle industry. As the rails stretched across the plains, the reason for cattle drives—to get the cattle to distant railheads for shipment—faded away. The passing of the cattle drive was beneficial to the better breeds of cattle that were being introduced into the Texas herds, because they were not as suited to the long drives as were the longhorns.

The first railroad to lay tracks across West Central Texas was Jay Gould’s Texas & Pacific Railway Company, the only railroad in Texas to operate under a federal charter. The T&P reached Abilene, Midland, Odessa, and Sierra Blanca in 1881, having started laying the Texas portion of its tracks west from Texarkana in 1873. From Sierra Blanca to El Paso, the T&P used the tracks of the Southern Pacific line in a “joint track” arrangement.

Wichita Falls received rail service from the Fort Worth and Denver City Railroad, which was building a line from Fort Worth to Colorado, in 1882, allowing Wichita Falls to develop into a major cattle-shipping point. The line was extended to Harrold in 1885 and to Chillicothe in 1886.

Face of Texas Changed by Railroads

Many communities that were too small to attract a transcontinental railroad faded away when the railroads bypassed them. Other towns picked themselves up and moved in order to be on the railroad. Still other communities offered incentives to get the railroad to come to them, usually in the form of free right-of-way. In some cases railroads demanded free right-of-way, tax abatement, and cash bonuses to build through a town. And many a new town sprang from the nucleus of a temporary railroad camp or from townsite speculation companies, some of which were owned by the railroad or by railroad personnel.

Wichita Falls

The year before the Fort Worth and Denver Railroad reached Wichita Falls, the town comprised eight families living in three small box houses and several dugout homes. Wichita Falls was named for five-foot waterfalls on the Wichita River, which were destroyed when a flood in 1886 washed out a dam.

Tradition holds that J. A. Scott won the site of Wichita Falls in a poker game in Mississippi in 1837. Tom Buntin and his family moved to the area in the late 1860s, and John Wheeler settled nearby in 1875. Scott's heirs sent M. W. Seeley to map the site and plan a town in 1876.

To persuade railroad officials to lay tracks to the town rather than bypassing it by several miles, Wichita Falls offered the railroad half the property along the right-of-way. The first train arrived in September 1882, spurring interest in the sale of town lots. Named the county seat of Wichita County in 1883, Wichita Falls soon became the terminus of a series of freight lines and the milling and supply center for Northwest Texas and Southern Oklahoma. By 1909, the town had thirty miles of sidewalks and more than one hundred businesses, of which twenty-one were saloons, earning it the nickname of "Whiskeytown Falls."

As the T&P moved west, laying track at the rate of about a mile a day, the company relocated its camps every thirty to sixty miles, and each camp was potentially a new town. The list of railroad-spawned towns includes Abilene, Big Spring, Colorado City, Eastland, Gordon, Midland, Monahans, Odessa, and Pecos, among others.

Abilene

In midsummer of 1880, the site of Abilene was a desolate prairie in Taylor County. By the following summer, it was a flourishing settlement, the offspring of the T&P Railway and several local cattlemen. Before the coming of the railroad, the population of Taylor County was concentrated around Buffalo Gap, about ten miles south of present-day Abilene. When the county was organized in 1878, Buffalo Gap was the logical choice for county seat. Then the T&P promoted an auction of lots in their new town, named for Abilene, Kansas, on March 15, 1881. Trainloads of immigrants and speculators flooded in for the event. A tent city sheltering about three hundred potential buyers sprang up on the prairie as they awaited the auction. About 1,000 people attended, and in two days, 317 lots were snapped up.

Abilene was incorporated in 1883 and soon wrested the honor of being county seat away from Buffalo Gap. By 1885, Abilene was the second-largest wool-shipping center in the Southwest, but that industry soon waned. Farmers among the early settlers in Taylor County raised wheat, corn, oats, sorghum, and cotton. In 1886, the *New Orleans Picayune* was quoted in the *Taylor County News* as saying, "Farmers are pouring into Western Texas so fast that ranchmen have just time enough to move their cattle out and prevent their tails being chopped off by the advancing hoe."

By 1890, Abilene's population had reached 3,194, and the Abilene Electric Light and Power Company began operating in 1891. After a group of private citizens built an earthen dam on Lytle Creek in 1897, assuring a stable water supply, Abilene's appeal to potential immigrants was greatly enhanced.

Barbed Wire Leads to Better Beef

Any improvement in the quality of Texas cattle depended on fencing the Texas plains to separate blooded animals from common range stock.

Cattle raisers in the Cross Timbers and farther east had easy access to fencing materials in the wooded lands around them. They generally kept relatively small herds on stock farms and managed easily with rail or stone fences. But on the plains, the amount of land required to maintain each animal was much greater, and water was much scarcer. Traditional fencing materials were not readily available, and even when they were obtainable, buying enough to enclose the enormous tracts of range lands on the plains was prohibitively expensive. Barbed wire made fencing these

vast expanses feasible.

Barbed wire was first patented in November 1874 by Illinois farmer Joseph Farwell Glidden, who invented it, some say, to keep dogs out of his wife's flower garden. Soon Glidden was manufacturing the stickery stuff in a factory in DeKalb, Illinois. Called by some "the devil's hatband," barbed wire first appeared in Texas in the late 1870s. In an effort to encourage customers to try the unfamiliar fencing material, one enterprising hardware-store owner offered to replace his customers' rail fences with barbed-wire fences and sell the fence rails thus replaced for firewood. In some cases, the sale of the rails it replaced more than paid for the wire fence. There were eventually more than a thousand different designs of barbed wire patented.

The Fence and Sheep Wars

The cattlemen who were determined to improve the quality of their herds soon strung miles of barbed wire. In fact, they often fenced not only land that they owned or leased, but also public land that was supposed to be open to all. When asked how much land he claimed, one cattleman replied, "Everything from Fort McKavett to Coleman," a distance of some 80 miles encompassing untold thousands of acres. In their desperate grab for range land, some cattle raisers even fenced off small farms and ranches belonging to others. In some places, fences blocked public roads. Farmers, pushing ranchers' cattle before them onto the plains, fenced their land to keep the cattle out of their crops and away from their precious water sources. Meanwhile, ranchers who still believed in free grasslands were infuriated to find fences blocking their access to pasturage and water for their animals.

In addition, sheep became a factor in the range wars. Sheep were brought into the German colonies in the southern part of West Central Texas in the 1850s, and their range soon extended west into the Trans-Pecos region. Because sheep crop the grass too short for cattle to eat, cattle ranchers despised them, prompting a Texas law that made it illegal to drive sheep across private lands. No such prohibition was applied to cattle.

Fencing disputes pitted not only cattlemen against farmers and sheepmen, but also free-grass ranchers against fenced-range cattle raisers. The conflicts were exacerbated by droughts. Fence-cutting became common, in some areas reaching the dimensions of a full-scale war. The *Comanche Chief* reported in 1883 that no fewer than seventy-five miles of fence had been destroyed in Comanche, Brown, and Coleman counties in a single night. By late 1883, more than half of all Texas counties had reported incidents of cutting and wrecking of fences and burning of pasture lands. Damages from fence-cutting were an estimated \$20 million, with at least \$7 million of that in Brown County alone. But damage to property was not the most serious result of the fencing conflict: In some areas, tempers ran so hot that gunfire erupted and lives were lost.

Although politicians generally tried to ignore the problem, Gov. John Ireland called a special session of the legislature in January 1884, and after much controversy and debate, fence-cutting was made a felony, punishable by a sentence of one to five years in prison. Fencing of public lands or other owners' lands was declared a misdemeanor. Existing fences were ordered removed within six months. Wholesale fence-cutting stopped, but the problem continued on a small scale, especially during droughts.

Windmills Bring Water Relief

Improvement of beef herds began in earnest when windmills came to West Central Texas. The transcontinental railroads first brought windmills to the Texas plains to provide water for their engines and crews in the early 1870s. When ranchers were able to fence and cross-fence their lands into different pastures, they were able to control breeding, the first requirement for improving herd quality. With a well and a windmill in each pasture, they no

longer needed direct access to a stream to provide water for their cattle. Ranchers could have separate summer and winter pastures, bull pastures, and pastures restricted to blooded stock.

With the protection of the land with wire and exploitation of the underground water supply with windmills, more high-quality animals were imported. By the 1890s, shorthorns and Herefords were dominant.