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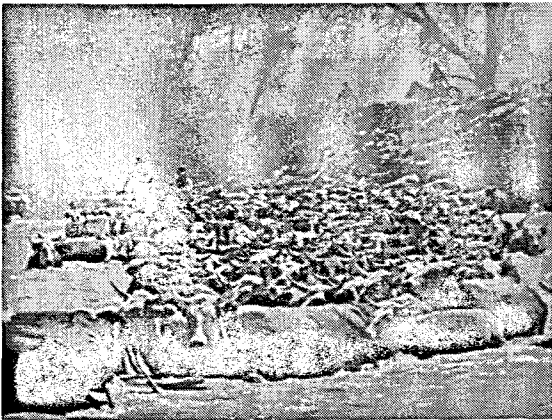
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# The Kansas Cattle Towns: Where Trail Meets Rail

Kenneth E. Hall

That land of the West has gone now, "gone, gone with lost Atlantis," gone to the isle of ghosts and of strange dead memories. It was a land of vast silent spaces, of lonely rivers, and of plains where wild game stared at the passing horseman. ... [w]e saw men die violent deaths as they worked among the horses and the cattle, or fought in evil feuds with one another; but we felt the best of hardy life in our veins, and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living. (Roosevelt 346, qtd. in Morris 267)

Thus did Theodore Roosevelt characterize the passing of the cattle empire period of the Old West. As any student of Western film knows, of course, the legend as filmed has long ago supplanted history. The Kansas cattle towns (the townspeople did not always call them "cow towns")<sup>24</sup> are mere shadows of their former selves, devolving either into small prairie towns, like Ellsworth, or into tourist magnets like Dodge City. As George L. Cushman noted in 1940, "What were formerly the lawless cow towns have grown into wholesome cities, and little of a physical nature remains to remind one of the Texas cattle era" (258).



The archetype of sound films about the cattle towns is the Howard Hawks masterwork *Red River*, based on the forging of the Chisholm Trail to bring cattle to the railhead at Abilene. The film emphasizes the conflicts on the drive and the test of wills between Tom Dunson

<sup>24</sup> Dykstra: "... the term 'cow town,' ... was never employed by self-respecting cattle town people themselves--to judge by their spokesmen. It was originally a mildly derogatory term that appeared in the mid-1880's" (Dykstra 5n3).

(John Wayne) and Matthew Garth (Montgomery Clift), Dunson's unofficially adopted son. The most important disagreement between the two is the decision about which route to take from Texas. Garth has heard that Abilene is a better place to deliver the cattle than the Missouri location preferred by Dunson. He is supported in this belief by an eyewitness account from a survivor of an attack who says that the Missouri route is too dangerous and that he has heard of a railhead at Abilene. Dunson refuses to change the route based on hearsay, an understandable position but less flexible than the younger, more modern Garth's. The survivor also mentions the newly established Chisholm Trail; in fact, he tells them that Jess Chisholm told him about the trail and about Abilene. The dispute leads to a mutiny, with Garth taking the cattle to Abilene and Dunson swearing vengeance (Hawks Chs. 12, 19, 20-24). Garth and his men meet up with the Kansas Pacific railroad near Abilene (Hawks Ch. 29), the cattle are sold, and the conflict is soon resolved.

*Red River* focuses only in passing on the town environment dealt with in other films such as *Abilene Town* and *Dodge City*. Nor does it fall into the gunfighter-marshal-outlaw category of films like *The Gunfight at Dodge City* or the sections of Wyatt Earp-Bat Masterson films like *Wyatt Earp* which portray the cattle town parts of those legendary stories. Only at its conclusion does the Hawks film concentrate on civilization versus barbarism in the manner of films like *Abilene Town* or range films depicting other locales like Wyoming (*Shane*, *Johnson County War*, *Chisum*), some of which additionally feature the historical conflict between cattlemen and sheepherders (*Ramrod*, *Johnson County War*).

Abilene was one of the first and the most important of the famed cattle towns.<sup>25</sup> Now a rather typical small Midwestern town, it nevertheless features a Dickinson County museum which includes 19th-century cattle town history. Abilene is distinguished as well by its status as the birthplace of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose Presidential Library is located in the town. Abilene began its career as

<sup>25</sup> Abilene was founded in 1860. One of its founding fathers was Timothy F. Hersey. The Kansas Historical Society provides the following account of its naming: It has been recorded that he [C. H. Thompson] then asked his neighbor, Tim Hersey, to give the new town a name, and Mr. Hersey referred the matter to his wife. Mrs. Hersey found a reference in the first verse of the third chapter of Luke in the Holy Bible which spoke of the tetrarch of Abilene, and decided that "Abilene," which meant "city of the plains," would be appropriate, and it was so named. (Cushman 242)

a cattle town in 1867, with the impetus provided by Joseph McCoy and a small group of investors. Among other challenges to the viability of Abilene and other cattle towns was an 1867 statute which prohibited importation of Texas longhorns because they were disease carriers, of a fever to which they had immunity but other types of cattle did not (Dykstra 16). During 1867, however, this obstacle was largely circumvented, and the Kansas Pacific was extended to Abilene, and the town began to take on the shape familiar to Western storytelling: "Around [the] intersection of Texas and Cedar streets was built the ... Abilene that has been made the theme of many a Western 'thriller'" (Cushman 243). Other notable features of the town were the Drovers Cottage, the Great Western stockyards, and the big Alamo saloon (Cushman 243).

Among the other important cattle towns was Wichita, which came to prominence after a land dispute with the original inhabitants (the Osage tribe) and among some boosters was finally resolved. The new cattle town lay on a crucial point on the Chisholm trail (Dykstra 42).<sup>26</sup> The railroad (a Santa Fe railroad spinoff) reached Wichita in May 1872 (Dykstra 51, 55). Wichita would soon yield to Dodge City as the railroad continued its progress. The Santa Fe railroad contributed materially to the upcoming success of Dodge City (Dykstra 60).

Dodge City is the cattle town most often chosen as the setting for Western law and order stories. Aside from its television fame as the setting for *Gunsmoke*, it has appeared in numerous films about the Earps, the Mastersons, and other lawmen/outlaws like Doc Holliday. Sometimes the town appears as a way station in a larger story, as in Kasdan's *Wyatt Earp*. In this epic biography of the legendary gunman, Dodge City serves as the culmination of his initiation into the guild of lawmen. The film shows him learning his craft, and becoming its toughest and most effective practitioner in Dodge, before being fired because of those tough methods (Kasdan Chs. 21-24). As he works in Fort Griffin, Texas, and meets Doc Holliday, he receives a telegram from Dodge City asking him to return: "Marshal Ed Masterson murdered. Lawlessness near riot proportions. Request you return immediately" (Kasdan Ch. 28). The romanticizing but effective film

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<sup>26</sup> "Named for Jesse Chisholm, an Indian trader, the Chisholm Trail was so named because because a portion of it followed Chisholm's trade routes. Chisholm built a number of trading posts in Oklahoma Territory and became known as a trader, guide, and interpreter, but not a cattle drover" (Gaylord).

shows him as a larger-than-life figure pacifying the incredibly unruly Dodge City. Accompanied by his brothers Virgil and Morgan as well as Bat Masterson, Earp pushes open the swinging doors of a chaotic saloon, fires his double-barrelled shotgun at the ceiling, and shouts, "My name is Wyatt Earp. It all ends now!" (Kasdan Ch. 28).

The Kasdan film echoes the now-classic treatment of the Earps directed by John Sturges and scripted by Leon Uris, *The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, with Burt Lancaster and (especially) Kirk Douglas dominating their scenes as Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. The Dodge City scenes of this film show Earp as a highly ethical, totally competent lawman who courageously faces down cowboy rowdies like those led by Shanghai Pierce (Ted De Corsia). (Masterson [Kenneth Tobey] appears only very briefly as he takes deputies out on a job.) Earp's reputation in other cattle towns like Wichita is also mentioned, bolstering his image of rock-solid integrity. Earp is so straight-laced that the sarcastic Doc calls him "preacher" and protests about his "sermons."

A less hyperbolic treatment of the Earp-Masterson legend is *The Gunfight at Dodge City*, with Joel McCrea in a rather unusual portrayal of Bat Masterson. Several of the characters and the facts about them line up with historical accounts, including the death of Bat's brother Ed — also treated in *Wyatt Earp* — and the rather uncommon focus on Austin, Texas native gunman and gambler Ben Thompson and his unstable brother Billy in Ellsworth, a nearby cattle town (see Moore). Unlike some treatments of Bat Masterson, *The Gunfight at Dodge City* highlights his gambling activities and his ownership of a saloon. A loner who is at first suspected of nefarious deeds, the Bat Masterson of this film — as played by the straightforward, unpretentious McCrea, a less dapper figure than often depicted — is gradually accepted into middle-class Dodge City society as he removes the criminal element from the town.

McCrea also portrayed Wyatt Earp in *Wichita* (1953), directed by the accomplished Jacques Tourneur. This film is rather of a prequel to the events normally related in the Dodge City films and stories about Earp. As in the Kasdan film, which likely echoes Tourneur's narrative, Earp is shown at the end of his buffalo-hunting career, looking for a business to set up, and attempting to settle down in Wichita. Circumstances force him to put on the badge as he allies himself with

the bibulous newspaper editor Whiteside (Wallace Ford) and his assistant Bat Masterson (Keith Larsen). Although the town's business leaders gradually oppose him because of their fear of losing cattle money, he finds support from the mayor (Carl Benton Reid) and finally from Mr. McCoy (whose surname at least recalls the historical Joseph McCoy), Earp's putative father-in-law. Among the cattlemen fighting against the town forces is notorious Ben Thompson — an example among many in Western films of the positioning of a historical figure in a storyline of less than historical accuracy, with a view toward giving the plot more weight.

Respectable society also has its way in one of the bedrock films of the cattle town genre, *Dodge City* (1939), directed by the often underrated Michael Curtiz and starring Errol Flynn as a fictionalized Wyatt Earp-Bat Masterson hybrid. In this cattle town film, Wade Hatton (Flynn) is importuned by the city fathers, led by Dr. Irving (Henry Travers) — the relative of Abbie (Olivia De Havilland), Hatton's future wife, to sign on as Sheriff to "clean up" Dodge City. As Dr. Irving puts it, "We're inviting peaceful immigration here, family men, with women and children, and we meet them with what's come to be called 'Hell Street'" (Curtiz Ch. 15). (Earlier, Dr. Irving had complained to his wife that according to "the New York newspapers," "There's no law west of Chicago, and west of Dodge City, no God" [Curtiz Ch. 7].)

The plot focuses on the crooked practices of Jeff Surrett (Bruce Cabot), who cheats cattle sellers at the town auction out of their cattle and their money, usually with violence perpetrated by his henchman Yancey (Victor Jory). Surrett's cheating contrasts vividly with the Abilene cattle buyer Mr. Melville (Harry Carey Sr.) of Greenwood Trading Company from Illinois, who makes a very fair deal in *Red River* with Matt Garth for the cattle he has brought in the first cattle drive to reach the railhead there (August 14, 1865) (Hawks Ch. 30). Hatton, a transplanted Irishman with military experience, is reluctant to get involved — a reflection no doubt of American isolationist feeling at the time — until the death of a little boy as a result of cowboy hurrahing leads him to put on the sheriff's badge. An economical transition shows the imitation sheriff badge on the boy's shirt and then Hatton pinning a real sheriff's badge on his own clothing. The laws established by Hatton, acting for the town council,

are familiar in Dodge City lore: no firearms on Front Street, limits on gambling hours, and so forth. (Similar elements, including the death of a boy as the catalyst for the hero's decision to become a lawman, appear in *Wichita*.)

Eventually, the town is tamed to the point of near-boredom for Hatton and his friends, so they cast an eye at the end of the film towards wide-open Virginia City.<sup>27</sup> This film differs from examples like *Johnson County War* and *Shane*, in which Wyoming cattlemen are vilified as enemies of progress. In fact its ideology is rather closer to a late John Wayne film, *Chisum* (based loosely on the Lincoln County War of New Mexico), in which John Chisum, an old-line rancher, opposes the unethical rancher and would-be tycoon Murphy (Forrest Tucker). Although Chisum is less urbane and perhaps less feminized than Wade Hatton, also a cattleman though of lower rank, he too decides to help the law-abiding townspeople against an unlawful, tyrannical threat.<sup>28</sup> Chisum's attack on the town, besieged by Murphy's men, is actually spearheaded by his own cattle, which he drives in a stampede through the barricades erected by the gunmen.<sup>29</sup>

A less splashy film than *Dodge City*, *Abilene Town* concentrates on the attempts of town lawman Dan Mitchell (Randolph Scott) to enforce ordinances which may hamper some of the town's financial interests from profiting from the vice and violence purveyed in the big saloon run by ironically named, and well-cast, Charlie Fair (Richard Hale). Added to the saloon-law conflict is yet another fault line between homesteaders staking out claims and cattlemen trying to evict them violently, in an echo of the fierce struggle in William

<sup>27</sup> This film echoes another Curtiz-directed project, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), with obvious parallels between the heroic Robin and the reluctant hero Hatton. The casting is even parallel in some respects, as both films star Flynn, De Havilland, and Hale; of course Robin Hood has his Merry Men of Sherwood Forest as Hatton has his merry deputies. Both films are also pleas for involvement by the United States in the current crisis in Europe.

<sup>28</sup> Although similar language is applied to Chisum and to Ryker (Emile Meyer), the ranch owner of *Shane*, both being characterized as having tamed the territory which had only Indians when they arrived and as being hard men who did what was necessary, Chisum's activities are excused or glossed over, while Ryker's protests fall on deaf ears. Chisum accepts a rather grandfatherly role at film's end with no mention of retirement, while Ryker is killed in the climactic and iconic gunfight with *Shane*.

<sup>29</sup> The aggrieved Arapahos employ a similar tactic, more ruthlessly, against the settlement growing up around the Union Pacific railroad, as they stampede a herd of buffalo in *How the West Was Won*. As disaffected ex-Army Lieutenant Zeb Rawlings (George Peppard) tells the unsympathetic UP official Mike King (Richard Widmark), "They just sent a bunch of animals to kill an animal they call the Iron Horse" (Hathaway, Ford and Marshall Ch. 31).



Wyler's *The Westerner*. An opening voice-over brands the town as the last house on the block: "Abilene was the end of the trail." Seemingly not much besides vice and corruption is to be found in the town — other than the preachy sanctimoniousness of some of the town's leaders. Sheriff Trimble, played in trademark fashion by Edgar Buchanan, is an engaging rogue but a scoundrel nonetheless. But Mitchell perseveres, and the most antisocial elements, the rogue cattlemen leader and Charlie Fair, are eliminated while the homesteaders are allowed to stay.<sup>30</sup> The screenplay is rather more nuanced and complex than the straightforward *Dodge City*. For example, the crooked but amiable sheriff is not very courageous ("Trimble" reminds us of this) but is not a heartless killer either. He is left in his position even after his double-dealing is clear to Mitchell. As town marshal, Mitchell technically cannot arrest the murderer Jet Younger (Jack Lambert) because his crime occurred outside town limits. So he captures Younger and appeals to Trimble's greed for votes. Trimble takes credit as the county authority for the arrest, but it is the hidden hand of Mitchell that has enforced the law in this important instance (Marin Ch. 4). When Younger escapes, however, Mitchell must pursue and kill him. Mitchell must negotiate a tricky path between cattlemen, businessmen, homesteaders, and criminal organizations like Charlie Fair's. Eventually, he allows the cattlemen to run wild, destroying the saloons and gambling establishments, but only after he has arranged for the homesteaders to ready themselves to force the cattlemen to leave the now pacified town. The anarchical forces of Abilene are now in the past, as the shopowner's daughter Sherry (Rhonda Fleming) will marry Henry (Lloyd Bridges), leader of the homesteaders, and Dan Mitchell will marry Rita (Ann Dvorak), erstwhile dancehall girl and co-owner with Charlie Fair of the defunct saloon where she worked. Thus the cattle era passed into the more peaceful realm of the homesteader.

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