



*Kansas Historical Marker for Ellsworth, "one of the wildest cowtowns."*

---

# “For the Future in the Distance”: Cattle Trailing, Social Conflict, and the Development of Ellsworth, Kansas

by Joshua Specht

**E**ighteen seventy-two was a good year for the town of Ellsworth, Kansas. It may have been hectic—more than 200,000 cattle passed through the town of fewer than 1,000 people—but this trade brought a great deal of money into the sleepy agricultural community. New residents and businesses were flocking to town. As one traveler explained, with only a hint of concern, Ellsworth had all types: “the tall, long-haired Texas herder, with his heavy kindling spurs and a pair of six shooters . . . the gamblers from all parts of the county . . . the honest emigrant in search of a homestead in the great free west; the keen stock buyers; the wealthy Texas drovers.”<sup>1</sup> Boosters were talking about Ellsworth as a future state capital and the next great western metropolis.

Despite these successes, a Kansas farmer penned an angry letter attacking the cattle trade and the merchants associated with it. Farmers were angry that ranchers made little effort to keep their cattle out of farmers’ fields, and worse yet, their herds could communicate the cattle disease known as Texas fever. In an attempt to ease the tension, the *Ellsworth Reporter*, an aggressive promoter of the cattle trade, argued that “safeguards” could be created to mitigate this conflict. For the letter writer, however, this proposal entirely missed the point, for “what safeguard is there that can be set up to protect the settler from the encroachments of men whose souls are wrapped up in the almighty dollar; men whose highest and only object is to increase their wealth even if it destroys the prospects of a whole community”? The author, identified only as J. W. L., alluded to a truth about Ellsworth’s cattle business: it served a particular set of businesspeople who had shallow roots in the area, many of whom had relocated to the town from Abilene, Kansas, the previous year’s “great cattle mart.” According to J. W. L., the cattle trade “brings no real wealth to our country; a few merchants may be enriched, but the bone and muscle of the country, the farmers, are impoverished.”<sup>2</sup>

---

Joshua Specht is a lecturer at Monash University. His first book, provisionally titled *Red Meat Republic*, is a study of the American meatpacking and ranching industries.

1. “Kansas,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, July 25, 1872

2. Letter to editor, *Ellsworth Reporter*, March 7, 1872.

Ellsworth's rapid rise sparked debate in the pages of the *Ellsworth Reporter* about what the town was, what it could be, and who would shape its future. It pitted farmers against a highly mobile set of businesspeople and journalists who moved from town to town, seeking to build the next Chicago. This article uses Ellsworth to understand how the emerging national market for cattle affected urban space as well as the politics and ideology of the people affected by these changes.

The cattle trade had its origins in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War. Southern cattle markets had been centered in New Orleans, but these collapsed following the Union occupation of the city in 1862. As a result, Texas cattle were largely ignored and proliferated in the state. Meanwhile, urban Americans, particularly in northern cities such as Chicago, New York, and Boston, had gained an appetite for fresh beef. The hungry people and the cattle were far apart, and there was a great deal of money to be made from connecting them; an animal that might sell for only a couple of dollars in Texas could be worth ten times that amount if it could reach Illinois.

Linking Texas and Chicago required a combination of rail and trail. In part as a consequence of the war, the rail network in Texas was underdeveloped. Therefore, for the cattle trade to take off, cattle would have to be driven to the nearest rail connections in central and southern Kansas. A livestock trader named Joseph McCoy was the first to promote this possibility, and he decided that the town of Abilene, Kansas, would be the key.<sup>3</sup> First, he organized the creation of stockyards on the Kansas Pacific Railway. Then he used his preexisting connections to the Texas ranching industry to attract cattlemen. Ranchers from as far south as San Antonio would travel northward, picking up the Chisholm Trail at the northern end of Texas and heading to Abilene. Hundreds of thousands of animals were soon making the journey each year, not only allowing Texas ranchers to supply Chicago's cattle markets but also allowing the distribution of Texas cattle across the West, supplying army forts and Indian reservations as well as seeding ranch herds in Colorado, Wyoming, and

elsewhere. This trade sparked fierce competition among Kansas towns to capture it.

Towns such as Abilene and Ellsworth were vital to connecting Texas ranches with the urban markets of the North and East. Yet the fact that there was a cattle trade to fight over, or that there was so much money to be made in cattle trailing, was a product of economic forces far beyond central Kansas. Rival towns were in an unusual position then, engaged in cutthroat competition but ultimately beholden to a revenue source that would prove short-lived and a reality that would fall far short of the imagined transformation to a metropolis that would rival Chicago. In the records of these towns, we see actors trying to come to terms with this reality and developing their own accounts of their town's successes and failures. These towns, and Ellsworth in particular, are perfect for understanding how the emerging national scale of nineteenth-century agricultural markets shaped western space and society.

Further, as the Kansas farmer's letter above suggests, the people of Kansas were not unified in their goals for or visions of the future. A highly mobile community of businesspeople circulated from Abilene to Ellsworth and beyond, talking in each instance about building a great metropolis but, as we will see, willing to leave any town at a moment's notice. Kansas farmers saw the cattle trade as a nuisance and (rightly) doubted the loyalty of merchants and boosters to the long-term interests of the community. These farmers did not imagine their towns as bustling metropolises but developed an ideology that emphasized the honesty, hard work, and respectability of humble farmers.

The best window into the world of Ellsworth is the *Ellsworth Reporter*, a local newspaper that was created in 1871. Its motto, "For the future in the distance, and the good that we can do," reflected the *Reporter's* important role in attracting business, advertising town facilities, and tracking local life. Lacking the resources to employ an army of journalists, the newspaper often republished stories from nearby newspapers and ran large numbers of letters, announcements, and stories by Ellsworth residents, travelers, and businesspeople. While the editorial biases of the paper must be kept in mind, this diversity of viewpoints revealed tensions in the rapidly growing town between the local farmers—who were often suspicious of Texas cattle herds—and the merchants and businesspeople who welcomed the cattle trade. During the boom years of the 1870s, these tensions simmered below the surface, but they would become acute as the cattle trade waned.

3. For McCoy's somewhat self-interested account of this story, see Joseph G McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (Kansas City: Ramsey, Millett & Hudson, 1874). For a historian's account, see Donald E. Worcester, *The Chisholm Trail: High Road of the Cattle Kingdom* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) or upcoming work by James E. Sherow, *Joseph McCoy and the Great Faro Game: An Environmental History of the Chisholm Trail* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, forthcoming)

Since the 1970s, scholarship on cattle towns and cattle trailing has contrasted the myths of the West with their reality, whether the development of Texas ranching or the violence of cattle towns. This literature has explored the nature of western business and the extension of financial and business institutions in the region.<sup>4</sup> On the whole, it has suggested that the American West was not simply a place of localism and isolation but was connected to national and global processes that mirrored the East Coast story of big business and an emerging regulatory state. This article draws from that literature to understand cattle trailing as part of an emerging national market and the towns of Kansas as part of a network of cities and towns stretching to Chicago, New York, and beyond. Yet it also emphasizes the interconnection between this larger story and local-level conflict in order to understand how a national story was ultimately rooted in the accumulation of small-scale events and processes in places such as Ellsworth.

A related literature has explored the social, political, and economic dynamics of nineteenth-century towns. Analyses comparing early American towns with emerging communities in the Midwest have studied how local elites create political stability even at times of rapid change. Broader work has used the proliferation of new communities to understand evolving social values and



*Connecting Texas cattle with urban markets required a combination of rail and trail. Due to initial efforts by Joseph McCoy, hundreds of thousands of animals, such as those seen here fording the Smoky Hill River at Ellsworth in 1867, were soon making the journey from Texas to Kansas each year. This allowed Texas ranchers to not only supply Chicago's cattle markets but also to distribute Texas cattle across the West, supplying army forts and Indian reservations. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*

institutions. Robert Dykstra has argued that towns in the West such as Ellsworth and Abilene, rather than being monolithic entities, featured a variety of perspectives and interest groups.<sup>5</sup> This work has largely focused on social values and community institutions. The present

4. Robert R. Dykstra, "Body Counts and Murder Rates: The Contested Statistics of Western Violence," *Reviews in American History* 31 (December 2003): 554–63; Worcester, *The Chisholm Trail*; R. Taylor Dennen, "Cattle Trailing in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 35 (June 1975): 458–60; Jimmy M. Skaggs, "Hip Pocket Businessmen: The Cattle-Trailing Contractors," *Great Plains Journal* 10 (Fall 1970): 1; Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Cattle-Trailing Industry: Between Supply and Demand, 1866–1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973).

5. Richard S. Alcorn, "Leadership and Stability in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America: A Case Study of an Illinois Town," *Journal of American History* 61 (December 1974): 685–702; Don Harrison Doyle, "Social Theory and New Communities in Nineteenth-Century America," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (April 1977): 151–65; Robert R. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Robert R. Dykstra, "Overdosing on Dodge City," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Winter 1996): 505–14.

article embraces diversity but tries to link this work to scholarship on economic development. Merchants and businesspeople circulated around western communities in ways that both supported the development of rural communities and created economic and political conflict with longer-term or less mobile residents. Understanding the life cycle of the Kansas cattle towns can help explain larger historiographic questions about capitalism, development, and space. How does the emergence of markets affect particular communities and spaces? How does it shape their development and life cycle? Why do industries come to a town, and what happens to a community after they leave?

The literature on these questions often emphasizes big cities such as Chicago, Detroit, or New York. To take one example, however, Thomas Sugrue's study of deindustrialization and unrest in Detroit has parallels in the story of Ellsworth after the decline of the cattle industry.<sup>6</sup> In Ellsworth, the town residents developed a contrast between the money-hungry advocates of the cattle trade and the well-intentioned farmers who remained. While the ultimate implications of this attitude are beyond the scope of the present study, a mind-set suspicious of large economic forces and celebrating local autonomy can help explain the emergence of large social movements such as Populism.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, William Cronon's landmark study of Chicago, *Nature's Metropolis*, considers how town and country shape each other, but because it focuses on the dominant metropolis, it is difficult to see how the evolution of markets drives competition between communities.<sup>8</sup> In the conflict between Abilene and Ellsworth, we see antecedents to today's struggles between cities and states to attract businesses, for example, in efforts to draw car producers to the American South or attempts to create new Silicon Valleys in cities around the country.

6. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

7. This account of Populism was more widely accepted in the past, though recent work that sees Populism as a modern movement could still fit this story. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Vintage, 2011); Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

8. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

Understanding the life cycle of the Kansas cattle towns contributes to our understanding of social conflict and capitalist development. In the competition among cattle towns, we see not only rivalry but evidence of a set of merchants and businesspeople circulating among these various towns, contributing to dynamics that both made them briefly successful and contributed to their instability. In studying how townspeople made sense of market changes far beyond their community, we can see how people understand their relationship to a larger economic system. Finally, by looking at the emergence and ultimate stagnation of a small town, we can see a distilled version of the dynamics present in much larger cities that are connected to a far larger number of industries.

Ellsworth, organized in 1867, had first looked west. Its founders had envisioned the town as a supply point for western Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico. However, these early ambitions did not pan out. A flood forced the town to relocate to higher ground, and a Cheyenne raid caused further chaos. Then Ellsworth faced an even worse fate for western towns: it lost the support of railroad executives. When boosters failed to persuade representatives of the Kansas Pacific Railway to expand the town's facilities, it appeared that Ellsworth's story was at an end.<sup>9</sup>

In 1869, however, town boosters developed an ambitious new plan. They would try to capture the Texas cattle trade that had expanded rapidly in nearby Abilene, Kansas. Taking advantage of quarantine laws meant to address Texas fever, Ellsworth's leaders lobbied the Kansas legislature for a state-sanctioned trail to Ellsworth that would be exempt from the Texas fever quarantine laws. Finding limited success, the boosters, with the help of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, wrote a bulletin "to cattle owners and dealers" advertising the "large and commodious" stockyards at Ellsworth, complete with quality pasturage and other amenities. Boosters also played up the thread of Texas fever quarantines, noting that their stockyards were in "strict conformity to law" and that trailing to Ellsworth would protect drovers from "unjust prosecutions." Meanwhile, the Kansas Pacific expanded the Ellsworth stockyards, making them the biggest in the state.<sup>10</sup>

9. Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 31–35.

10. W. M. Sigerson & Co., "To Cattle Owners and Dealers" (St. Louis, 1869), in Everett D. Graff Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago; Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 38.



Towns such as Ellsworth, shown here in an 1867 photograph by Alexander Gardner, were vital to connecting Texas ranches with the urban markets of the North and East. It and its neighboring rival towns, such as Abilene, were engaged in cutthroat competition but ultimately beholden to a revenue source that would prove short-lived and a reality that would fall short of the imagined transformation to a metropolis that would rival Chicago. Ellsworth town records show everyday people trying to come to terms with this reality, providing an excellent example as to how the emerging national scale of nineteenth-century agricultural markets shaped western space and society. Courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Next, the boosters took direct aim at Abilene, warning ranchers that the quarantine law threatened herds headed there. Joseph McCoy, the man largely responsible for building up the cattle trade in Abilene, railed against Ellsworth's boosters as "utterly unscrupulous as to means employed, destitute of honorable manhood and incapable of doing a legitimate business in an honest manner; full of low cunning and despicable motives, these ghouls resorted to every device their fertile brain could conceive."<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately for McCoy, this "low cunning" worked. Ellsworth appeared poised to quite literally replace Abilene, and "half of Abilene" was

predicted to be in Ellsworth within a couple of months. Train cars full of materials for new buildings poured into the town. A blacksmith and wagon shop was built as well as a number of supply stores. Contemporary observers claimed that "carpenters are as thick as spring chickens." The firm of Kellogg, Newman & Co. ran advertisements describing itself as "Formerly of Abilene" and announcing that it "will continue banking business at Ellsworth from and after April 1st [1872]." Almost overnight, Ellsworth became a bustling town with hotels, saloons, and supply stores. By late June, Ellsworth was readily identified as "the Abilene of last year."<sup>12</sup>

11. McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, 57; Wayne Gard, *The Chisholm Trail* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 100.

12. "Local Brevities," *Ellsworth Reporter*, March 21, 1872; "From Ellsworth" (letter), *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 27, 1872. The advertisement appears in several editions of the *Ellsworth Reporter*. For example, see March 28 and April 25, 1872.



Organized in 1867, Ellsworth first looked west. Its founders had envisioned the town as a supply point for western Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico, as illustrated in this 1867 photograph depicting Santa Fe Trail wagons ready and loaded for the journey west. These early ambitions did not pan out, however, as the town witnessed a flood, Cheyenne raid, and the lost support of railroad executives. Courtesy of the DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University, U.S. West: Photographs, Manuscripts, and Imprints.

Perhaps the most visible sign of Ellsworth's triumph was the fact that the owners of Abilene's most famous business, the Drover's Cottage, relocated to Ellsworth, taking actual pieces of the hotel with them. Town leaders had been talking for some time about the importance of a large hotel, and even the Lawrence, Kansas-based *Lawrence Journal* agreed that "what Ellsworth needs more than all things else is a good hotel."<sup>13</sup> The proprietors of the Drover's Cottage, "Major" George and James W. Gore, were well known to Texas cattlemen and would play a crucial role in attracting them to Ellsworth. By relatively early in the 1872 cattle season, there were rumors of as many as 100,000 cattle in the vicinity of the town, and the Drover's Cottage was "in full blast," with several hundred guests at all times. A number of other establishments, such as Beede's Hotel and the City Hotel, also attracted business. Delmonico's Saloon and Billiard Hall "spared

13. "Ellsworth," *Lawrence Journal*, republished in *Ellsworth Reporter*, February 8, 1872.

neither pains or expense in fitting up a first-class saloon, second to none in the state."<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, rail employees and Ellsworth boosters continued to promote the town in Texas. Local merchants and businesspeople organized an association to raise funds and distributed leaflets to attract ranchers from "across the country."<sup>15</sup> Recruiters distributed maps promoting "the best and shortest cattle routes from Texas" as well as elaborate pamphlets such as a guide complete with cost estimates; a mile-by-mile guide; and engravings of the pasturage, rail, and cattle-buying facilities in Ellsworth. Issues of the *Ellsworth Reporter* frequently featured announcements from the "Ellsworth Town Company" boasting that "[Ellsworth] will be the great shipping point of the Texas cattle trade for 1872 and those wishing town lots that are desirable will find this a good time to purchase." The

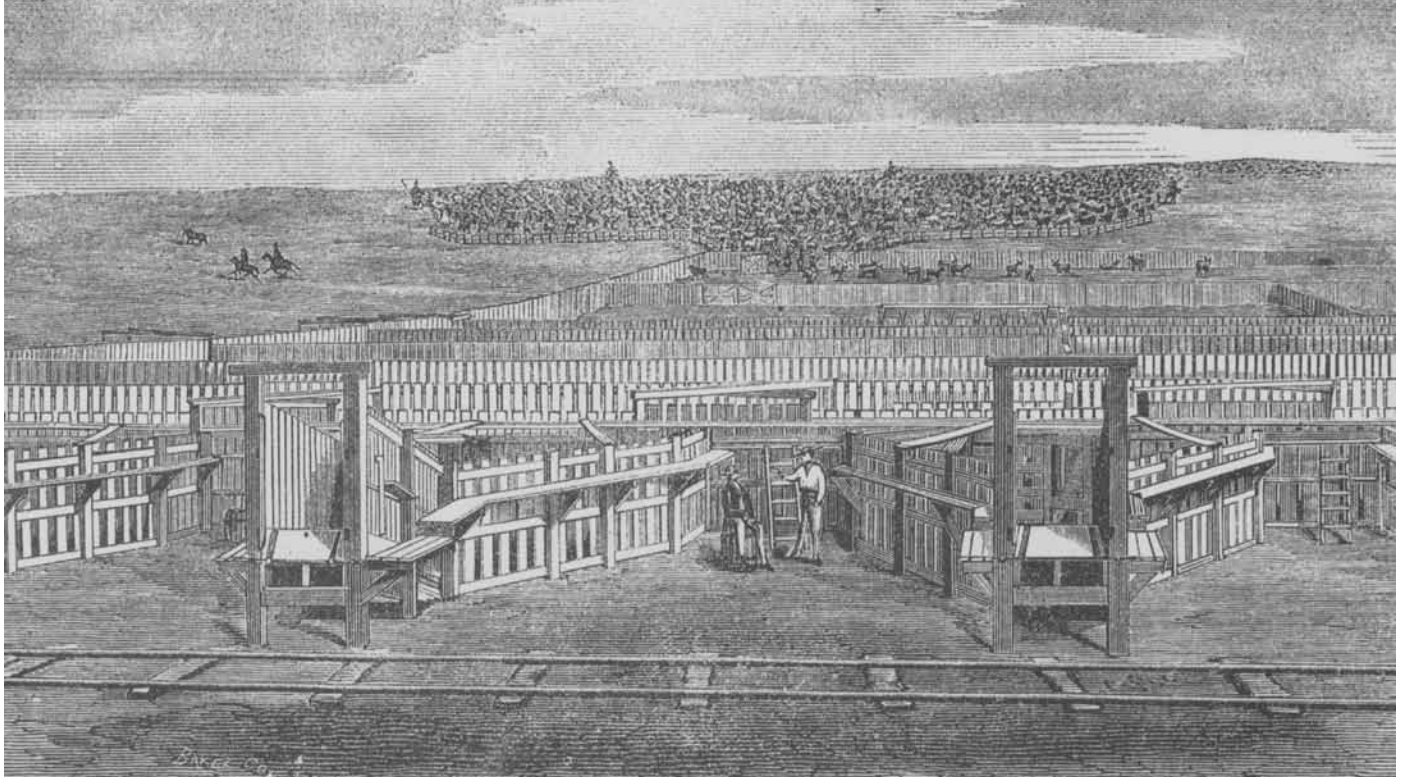
newspaper ran the exact same announcement for years, simply updating the year listed. An advertisement for Beede's Hotel bragged that "stock dealers make this house their headquarters."<sup>16</sup> Through these advertisements and announcements, Ellsworth's boosters took a dual approach of attracting Texas drovers to the town to bring in capital and attracting new residents to permanently settle in a rapidly growing town.

The *Reporter* was working hard to build up a readership and often published testimonials from distant newspapers celebrating the town and recommending the "able and

14. Advertisement, *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 6, 1872; see also letter from "Occasional," *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 16, 1872; "Letter from Ellsworth," *Manhattan Nationalist*, republished in *Ellsworth Reporter*, August 8, 1872.

15. "Proceedings of the Stock Men's Association," *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 21, 1871.

16. Advertisement, *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 21, 1871; the announcement mentioned above appeared in most issues, but for an example, see "Ellsworth Town Company" (announcement), *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 21, 1871.



After early failures, town boosters developed an ambitious new plan to get Ellsworth on the map: capture the Texas cattle trade that had expanded rapidly in nearby Abilene. As part of their efforts, boosters, with the help of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, wrote a bulletin to “cattle owners and dealers” advertising the “large and commodious” stockyards at Ellsworth, seen here in Joseph McCoy’s *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*. Almost overnight, Ellsworth became a bustling town with hotels, saloons, and supply stores, and readily identified as “the Abilene of last year.”

spicy” *Ellsworth Reporter*.<sup>17</sup> It was eager to position its fate alongside the future of the town, observing on January 23, 1872, that “again it is conceded by every one, that a live newspaper will accomplish more in building up a town and securing immigration than a regiment of men.” While this comment was self-serving, it was in a sense true. This attitude only intensified later in the year, when a new editor relocated from Iowa to bring “capital and experience.”<sup>18</sup> The *Reporter* circulated far and wide—as revealed by favorable quotations the paper republished from faraway cities—and served a readership of both townspeople and merchants. While the newspaper was clearly in favor of the cattle trade, it also reported on farmers’ activities and promoted local businesses as part of a bid to attract advertising revenue.

It was a time of great ambition. Ellsworth was “fast putting on city airs in its extensive and fine hotels.” At the end of December 1871, the *Reporter* boasted that “many are the plans suggested to build up here a prominent inland city.” One report claimed—with only a slight hint of irony—that the Kansas state capital would someday be in the center of the state, at Ellsworth.<sup>19</sup> By 1872, Ellsworth was the new end of the Chisholm Trail and was indeed the largest market in Kansas that year.

Yet there were signs of tension. Farmers such as the aforementioned J. W. L. cast their struggle in both democratic and civilizational terms, worrying that poorly chosen town policies would “give this country into the hands of the herdsman, and make it a half civilized or barbarous country without school or churches—and

17. “Mentions of the Press,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 21, 1871.

18. “Valedictory,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 23, 1872; “Our Business Men,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, January 23, 1872.

19. *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 6, 1872; “From Ellsworth,” *Topeka Commonwealth*, republished in *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 6, 1872; “What Will Build Up a City,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 28, 1871.



controlled by a few large stock men having many poor illiterate men dependent upon them for support." This language echoed the rhetoric of the free-soil movement and alluded to the war of just a decade earlier. Texas cattle ranching, in which wealthy ranchers controlled tens of thousands of acres and employed cowboys as wage laborers, had its roots in the Confederacy and the bygone plantation system. The author contrasted this system with the virtues of small-scale farming, "which is the life blood of every country or community, and the germ of civilization."<sup>20</sup> This suspicion of dependency and celebration of independent and virtuous landowners echoed the ideology of the Free Soil Party, an important part of Union ideology during the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> Farmers in Kansas were still fighting what they saw as a battle for the soul of their community, and the cattle trade represented a threat.

Though these kinds of stories as well as discussion of Farmers' Protective Associations appeared from time to time in the *Reporter*, the newspaper avoided direct conflict over the issue, simply reporting on the farmers' politics and celebrating the cattle trade elsewhere. In 1872, the cattle industry dominated the town, and though the *Reporter* tried to appeal to farmers, its interests were with the Texas trade. More broadly, the amount of money being made shipping cattle meant that town leaders were able to keep Ellsworth's farmers at bay.

Although there was tension over the cattle trade, almost everyone was united in the belief that railroads were the key to the town's future. Ellsworth's success was rooted in the fact that the town was, initially at least, the extreme end of the Kansas and Pacific Railway. Abilene had once been the line's terminus, and Ellsworth stole its traffic by luring the railway farther west and south.<sup>22</sup> Yet this also meant Ellsworth was vulnerable to exactly the same development; if the rail lines stretched any closer to Texas, the town would not make sense as a trailing destination.

The only way to avoid this situation was for Ellsworth to attract more rail lines. With multiple railroads, it would be a valuable junction, irreplaceably linking traffic along two axes.

Though townspeople celebrated Ellsworth as a fantastic business location or "enterprising-go-ahead-town" thanks to the "great" or "peculiarly well situated" Kansas Pacific Railroad, many recognized that their fate was too bound to the policies of one particular line.<sup>23</sup> The plan then was to attract another railway, particularly the Memphis & Northern Railroad. It was an ambitious dream, one that an editorial writer acknowledged would never have occurred to anyone a mere eighteen months before but would allow the town to become "the great thoroughfare for the rich products of Kansas and the northwest seeking the fine markets, ever furnished by the great cotton growing states of the south." Ellsworth could become "the largest inland city in the state." The same edition featured a lengthy overview of the city of Memphis and its key industries.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, this plan led to few concrete proposals, and frustration soon became evident. Rival towns such as Salina and Abilene were apparently actively courting the Memphis & Northern's leadership. One report asked whether Ellsworth "expect[s] she is of so much importance that new railroads will come unasked?" A few weeks later, another editorial warned that Ellsworth would not be the terminus of the Memphis line "unless Ellsworth makes it so, for other towns are working on it." Whether through inaction or decisions outside its control, the town could not acquire the rail line.<sup>25</sup>

In light of the difficulties of attracting a second railroad, it is not surprising that even in the boom time of 1872, there was trouble on the horizon. Boosters in Wichita, Kansas, began to angle for a share of the Texas trade. An issue of the *Wichita Eagle* featured a lengthy discussion of Ellsworth's advantages before suggesting that Wichita

20. "The Texas Cattle Question," *Ellsworth Reporter*, March 14, 1872.

21. In *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, Joseph McCoy notes that Civil War tensions lingered into the early days of the cattle trade in the late 1860s and credits the trade with muting these tensions. That said, one should be careful about taking all of McCoy's claims at face value.

22. The general tendency of the railroads in this period was to push westward, so in this sense, Ellsworth did not have to make a great effort to lure the railroad westward. That said, boosters in towns such as Ellsworth greatly accelerated a westward trend in railroad building, so in this sense, they lured the lines and traffic to leave Abilene more quickly than they would have without such efforts.

23. "From Ellsworth," *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 6, 1872; letter to the editor, *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 20, 1872; "The Kansas Pacific R.R.," *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 27, 1872.

24. "Memphis & Northern R.R." *Ellsworth Reporter*, April 25, 1872; "The City of Memphis," *Ellsworth Reporter*, April 25, 1872.

25. *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 19, 1872; "The Future of Ellsworth," *Ellsworth Reporter*, October 17, 1872. The line would ultimately reach the town, but long after the town had already entered serious decline, when little could revive Ellsworth's fortunes.

should “bestir herself in this matter and by all means to get the first talk with drovers, even if we have to send men all the way to the Red River.”<sup>26</sup> Editors in Wichita and Ellsworth began publishing articles promoting their town and denigrating their rival. To mislead Texas ranchers, Wichita ran misleading reports about sluggish markets in Ellsworth, promoting the *Reporter* to announce on June 20, 1872, that “Ellsworth is ready to count horns with Wichita.” Soon both towns were sending people into cattle country to recruit ranchers.<sup>27</sup>

Although Wichita got a later start in the race for the cattle trade, it had several advantages. It was located south of Ellsworth, outside the cattle quarantine line, and at a river junction. It was also larger, making it easier to attract capital and visitors. Ellsworth’s residents knew their town would have to grow rapidly in order to defeat its rival. In response to negative coverage in the *Wichita Eagle*, the *Reporter* threatened, “Wait ‘till Ellsworth swells to 20,000 and the *Reporter* is born every morning, we will make [the *Eagle*’s editor] sorry for his bad manners.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, this attitude was betrayed by the fact that Ellsworth was still smaller than 1,000 people. It appeared that the key was for Ellsworth to “make itself a city that can live with or without the cattle trade.”<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, during the winter of 1872–1873, the town’s focus turned to the long-term future, and tensions between farmers and ranchers revived. While “most of the Texas Drovers were gentlemen,” the *Reporter* lamented the drover who “insists on feeding his cattle on settlers’ corn-fields.” The *Reporter* tried to take a conciliatory tone, suggesting that farming and stock raising were equally important parts of a healthy foundation for the town.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it appeared that friction between the various groups was inevitable, and farmers continued to meet to discuss the problems brought by Texas cattle.

Frustration with Texas cattle also focused on crime brought by the cattle trade. Ellsworth did not have a great reputation, and periodic reports about the town putting its criminal days behind it suggested that things were not entirely orderly. Cowboys were transient, and when they were in town, they were often looking to celebrate after

Success did not halt the promotion of Ellsworth. Rail employees and town boosters continued to promote Ellsworth in Texas. One such method was the creation of guide books, such as the Guide Map of the Great Texas Cattle Trail, the back cover of which is pictured here. These promoted “the best and shortest cattle routes from Texas” as well as cost estimates and engravings of the pasturage, rail, and cattle-buying facilities in Ellsworth. Through these advertisements and announcements, Ellsworth’s boosters took a dual approach of attracting Texas drovers and new, permanent residents to a rapidly growing town.

weeks on the trail. The *Reporter* tried to argue that the periodic shootings in the town were the work of a “few desperadoes,” but farmers had their own concerns. The paper eventually tried to make an effort to address the violence; a warning “to Texans” explained that “you were

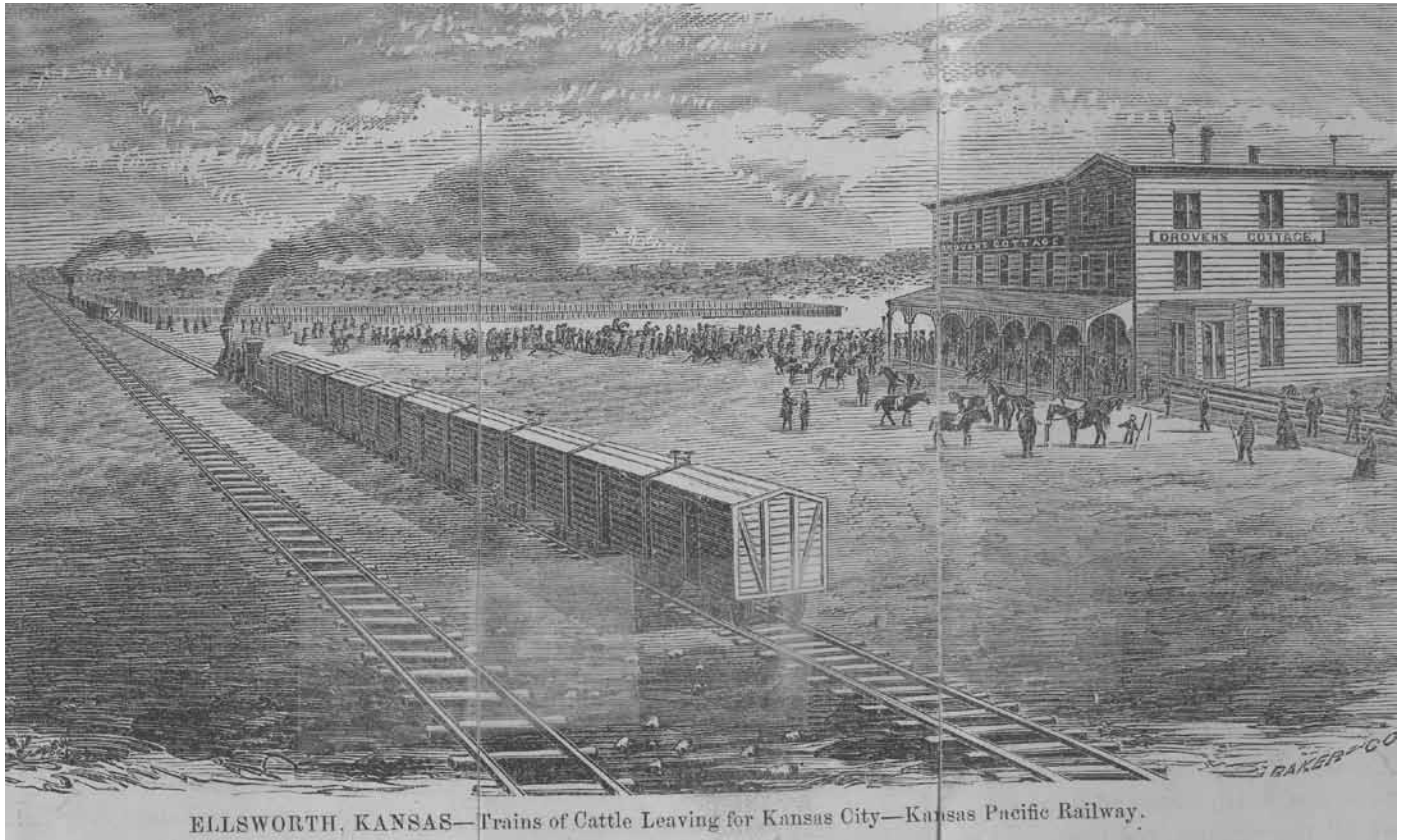
26. *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 13, 1872.

27. *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 20, 1872; Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns*, 163–68.

28. “Local Matter,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 2, 1872.

29. “The Future of Ellsworth,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, October 17, 1872.

30. *Ellsworth Reporter*, August 14, 1873; “Farming or Stock-Raising,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, August 14, 1873.



*In this engraving, included as part of the Guide Map of the Great Texas Cattle Trail, trains of cattle leave a bustling Ellsworth bound for Kansas City. Although tensions appeared between farmers and cattlemen, almost everyone was united in the belief that railroads were the key to the town's future. Ellsworth's success was rooted in the fact that the town was, initially at least, the extreme end of the Kansas Pacific Railway, having stolen traffic from Abilene. Yet this also meant that Ellsworth was vulnerable to the same development, thus necessitating the need to attract another railway—a plan that led to few concrete proposals and ultimate failure.*

invited to our country; we sent out men to guide you here, with your cattle, and when you arrived you were warmly welcomed—every facility that the town and county could offer was and is yours. . . . We trust that there will be no more scenes of violence in Ellsworth; that none us will defend or excuse crime."<sup>31</sup> Though the violence and unrest were largely overlooked when the cattle trade was thriving, condemnations of the trade sparked a perception that would become more and more important as the cattle trade declined: that of the decent, hardworking, and moral farmers as opposed to the merchants and cattle drovers.

As the cattle-shipping season began in 1873, it became apparent that though the trade would remain substantial,

it was slowing down. The town continued to work hard for customers, sending boosters to Texas to attract business and provide guidance along the trail.<sup>32</sup> Estimates of 1873 cattle shipments from Ellsworth were roughly 300,000, a decline from the previous year but still substantial for a town with fewer than 1,000 people. Business was good, but town boosters were less and less confident. Though they had been talking just a year before about the town as a future state capital, a new story set a less ambitious goal: "We can make Ellsworth not the most populous perhaps, but the richest county in Western Kansas."<sup>33</sup>

31. "To Texans," *Ellsworth Reporter*, August 28, 1873; "Law and Order," *Ellsworth Reporter*, August 21, 1873.

32. "The Texas Cattle Trade," *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 4, 1873.  
 33. *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 11, 1873; "Untitled," *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 4, 1873. Numbers are self-reported, so they should be taken with a grain of salt, though the story admits that there were fewer cattle than the previous year.

By 1874, the cattle trade had slowed dramatically. The *Reporter* still ran reports with announcements such as “The cattle trade is sure to center at Ellsworth this season,” published on April 23, but this seemed more an attempt to reassure nervous subscribers than an objective statement of the town’s business prospects. For the first time, the newspaper spent energy writing articles about the cattle trade that read more as advertisements than merely optimistic stories. A short piece on the “cattle trade,” for example, included a seven-point overview of the advantages of doing business in Ellsworth. The same story ran in multiple issues of the *Reporter*.<sup>34</sup>

For the first time, truly ominous signs appeared in Ellsworth. A paid advertisement announcing “For sale or rent—Veatch’s hotel” suggested that local businesspeople who depended on drovers were trying to leave town.<sup>35</sup> In July 1874, the editor of the *Ellsworth Reporter* left town and sold the newspaper to a new publisher when it became apparent that the cattle trade was ending. A frustrated announcement in the *Reporter* in May had to explain that the rumors of the Drover’s Cottage moving to nearby Russell were unfounded. But half as many cattle passed through Ellsworth in 1874 as in the previous year.<sup>36</sup> The reasons cited ranged from a bad winter—likely exaggerated—to upstart rivals—true—and the spread of railroads to Texas—the long-term issue.

Though Kansas’s cattle towns were seeing fewer shipments overall, it did appear that rival towns, such as Russell and particularly Wichita, were capturing more and more of the cattle trade.<sup>37</sup> An angry announcement in the May 14 *Reporter* explained, “Drovers should pay no attention to any of the stories circulated by parties interested in towns on the AT&SF RR. Drive on to Ellsworth where you will find the best market, the best range and the best accommodations in the state.” Similarly, “drovers on the trail may expect to hear all sorts of stories unfavorable to Ellsworth. We understand that it is reported by parties who are interested in getting the trade to other points that the drovers are shut out here.” The *Reporter* was particularly self-righteous about these reports, explaining that “we have never said anything

against other shipping points, nor has Ellsworth as a city taken any unfair means to secure the cattle trade.”<sup>38</sup> This, however, was predictably disingenuous. Just two years before, boosters from Abilene had made the exact same claim and railed against the “low cunning” Ellsworth had used to capture the cattle trade.

Over time, Wichita did indeed gain an edge. The town was slightly closer to Texas, and Wichita’s boosters were running a better ground game there. In 1873, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad became a major cattle shipper as its line extended to Wichita. Wichita also developed amenities—hotels, groceries, stockyards—that were functionally identical to those in Ellsworth. For Texas ranchers, Wichita and Ellsworth were essentially the same except that the former was significantly closer. Ellsworth ultimately fell prey to the same practices that had brought about its brief dominance. As cattle historian Donald Worcester observed, “When the Wichita market opened, some of the merchants who had deserted Abilene for Ellsworth loaded their wagons once more and headed for the new cattle center.”<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, other railroads began building into Texas, taking even more of Ellsworth’s business.

As the cattle season approached in 1875, Ellsworth merchants tried to revive the dying trade. As usual, the *Reporter* ran advertisements directed specifically “to Texas cattle drovers.” Town leaders again sent representatives south into Texas to convince ranchers to “make Ellsworth their point this year, and endeavor thereby to restore the prestige of ‘the trade’ by concentration at the best market in the West.”<sup>40</sup> While many of these measures were similar to those taken in previous years, there was a creeping sense of desperation.

On the whole, the people of Ellsworth were preparing for a post-cattle-trailing future. A regular newspaper feature on “Ellsworth County” emphasized the attractions of the county to farmers. Rather than appealing to Texas ranchers, the feature’s section on “stock” was intended to highlight stock raising within Ellsworth County and focused on “sheep raising and wool growing.”<sup>41</sup> Gone were

34. For example, see “The Cattle Trade,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 14 and May 21, 1874; *Ellsworth Reporter*, April 23, 1874.

35. Advertisement, *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 4, 1874

36. “Good-Bye,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, July 30, 1874; *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 14, 1874; “The Cattle Trade,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 11, 1874.

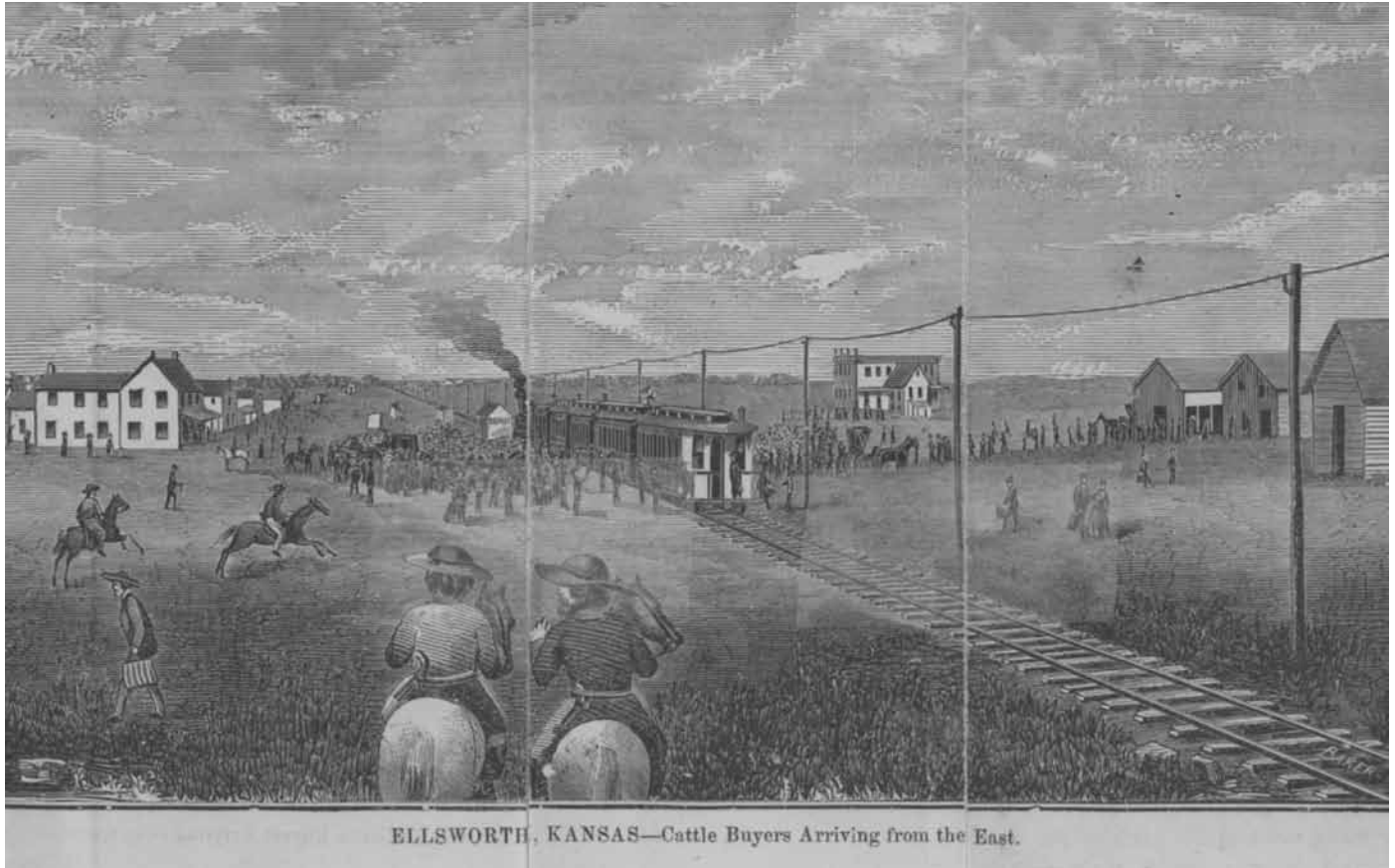
37. *Ellsworth Reporter*, March 19, 1874

38. “The Cattle Trade,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 11, 1874; “A Denial,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 14, 1874.

39. Worcester, *The Chisholm Trail*, 127.

40. “To Texas Cattle Drovers,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, April 22, 1875; Advertisement, *Ellsworth Reporter*, April 15, 1875.

41. The feature ran in many issues throughout 1875. For examples, see “Ellsworth County,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, January 21, January 28, and February 4, 1875.



ELLSWORTH, KANSAS—Cattle Buyers Arriving from the East.

By 1874, the boom years of 1871–1872, as illustrated in this engraving from the *Guide Map of the Great Texas Cattle Trail*, had faded. The cattle trade had slowed dramatically, and local “For rent” advertisements in the *Ellsworth Reporter* suggested that local businesspeople dependent on drovers were trying to leave town. Though Kansas’s cattle towns were seeing fewer shipments overall, it did appear that rival towns, such as Russell and particularly Wichita, were capturing more and more of the cattle trade. By 1875, the people of Ellsworth were preparing for a post-cattle-trailing future.

the ambitions to be a state capital or western metropolis; instead, stories talked of Ellsworth as a small but thriving agricultural community. Each year from 1871 to 1875, the town company’s announcements had featured a reference to Ellsworth as the key “cattle shipping point.” In 1875, the notice was removed and replaced with a simple advertisement for Ellsworth County land.<sup>42</sup>

To understand the shift in town power from the cattle trade to farming, it is worth looking at the *Ellsworth Reporter*’s shifting position on what was known as the “herd law.” This was a measure created to protect farmers from wandering herds of cattle that could eat or trample crops and, more problematically, communicate the deadly cattle disease Texas fever. Ellsworth had originally

built its reputation as a town free from the effects of the herd law—a note “to cattle owners and dealers” explained that drovers to Ellsworth would “avoid all the annoyances to which Drovers have been subjected”—but farmers resented foreign cattle and campaigned for the enforcement and expansion of the herd law.<sup>43</sup> Though the *Reporter* noted farmers’ objections to the herd law as early as 1871, early editions of the paper clearly supported the interests of cattle drovers.

Tensions over the herd law would only grow as the cattle trade expanded. In October 1872, farmers were organizing “for the purpose of securing passage of the herd law.”<sup>44</sup> It initially came to little, but in 1873, as the

42. “Ellsworth County,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, March 4, 1875.

43. W. M. Sigerson & Co., “To Cattle Owners and Dealers.”  
44. “Farmers Meeting,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, October 10, 1872.

Texas cattle trade was flowing unimpeded, conflict with farmers actually resulted in a shooting. There was even talk that Texas drovers would not be welcome in the town. The *Reporter*, which counted both cattlemen and farmers as subscribers, tried to appease both sides, affirming “the unanimous sentiment of the city, that Ellsworth is open to the drovers another year,” though emphasizing its support of “law and order.”<sup>45</sup> By 1874, the paper was not willing to openly support the herd law but ran readers’ letters in favor of the measure. One reader argued that without a herd law, Ellsworth would never attract the kind of farmers who would help the town and county thrive. The *Reporter*, however, did not take a clear position. There was too much business to be done with the cattle trade.

As the Texas cattle trade declined, attitudes about it shifted, particularly in the pages of the *Reporter*. In 1874, the *Reporter* was sold to an editor who was friendlier to farmers and more suspicious of the cattle trade. From then onward, the paper held an increasingly pro-herd-law position. In October of that year, the *Reporter* ran a letter cautiously in favor of the herd law, though it advocated a version that would protect the interest of the county’s farmers as well as stock raisers. No mention was made of cattle from outside Kansas, indicating the newspaper’s focus on local issues. However, when discussing the issue a few months later, the *Reporter* expressed relief that “at last a majority of the people of Ellsworth county, including our leading merchants, have opened their eyes to the fact that the basis of our wealth and prosperity, lies in the proper advancement of our agricultural interests.” By late 1875, the paper expressed total support for the law as a “veritable bonanza” for local residents.<sup>46</sup>



HERD OF TEXAS CATTLE EN ROUTE FOR ELLSWORTH—Kansas Pacific Railway.

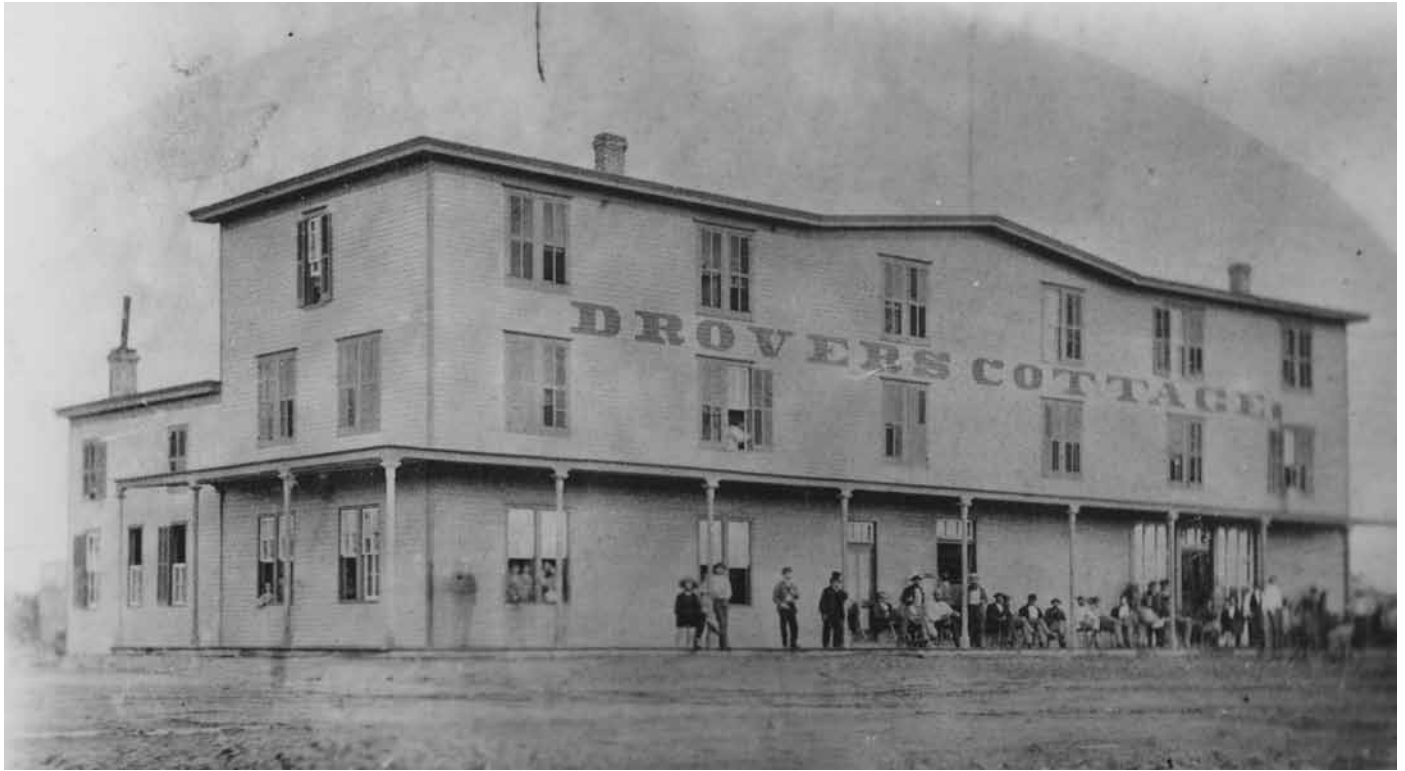
*Understanding shifting positions on the “herd law” helps explain the shift in power from the cattle trade to farming. The measure was created to protect farmers from wandering herds of cattle, like those seen here, that could eat or trample crops and communicate the deadly Texas fever. Although Ellsworth had originally built its reputation as a town free from the effects of the herd law, tensions grew as the cattle trade expanded. Once that trade declined, attitudes about the law shifted profoundly, with the Ellsworth Reporter expressing total support for the law by 1875.*

This shifting attitude toward the herd law also reflected a turn inward for a town built on looking outward. In October 1874, a letter to the editor of the *Reporter* argued, “Evidently a new chapter is commencing in the history of our country. We shall have to depend more upon our own resources after this.” Another account in December referred to a “new era” dawning in Ellsworth and said the townspeople were realizing “that lies dormant within our own geographical limits, greater possibilities than were heretofore dreamed.” Further, there was a sense that outsiders had hurt the town and that local people with community ties were the key to a more stable future. When it came time in 1875 to choose new managers of the Ellsworth stockyards, town leaders were relieved that the yards entered the control of two men who were “residents and will cater to the interests of the trade in a far more satisfactory matter than if the matter were left to strangers who have no local relations to sustain.”<sup>47</sup> This

45. “The Texas Cattle Trade,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 4, 1873.

46. “The Herd Law,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 10, 1874; letter to the editor, *Ellsworth Reporter*, October 29, 1874; “Under the Herd Law,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 16, 1875.

47. “Local News,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, April 8, 1875; letter to the editor, *Ellsworth Reporter*, October 29, 1874; “The Herd Law,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, December 10, 1874.



*In September 1875, at the end of a long and lackluster cattle-shipping season, a concerned citizen wrote an editorial on Ellsworth's future. He observed that the town's citizens had once raised "three or four thousand dollars toward building the Drover's Cottage," pictured here after its board-by-board dismantling in Abilene and reconstruction in Ellsworth. Yet just a few years later, the citizen continued, "the cottage stands like a body without soul, stripped of all its furniture and appointments." For the editorialist, the cottage—the victim of "diabolical attempts" at arson—was a monument to the town's mistaken path. Ellsworth's new path would be that of agriculture, and construction of a grain warehouse would serve as the foundation of a new economy.*

emphasis on local relations was particularly key, as there was a sense that Ellsworth's future depended no longer on attracting outsiders but rather on mutual support and long-term relationships.

**A**t a time when businesses were fleeing Ellsworth, perhaps the most scandalous development was a "diabolical attempt" to destroy the town's most recognizable landmark, the Drover's Cottage. With business slow from the fall of 1874 onward, the building had been largely empty. One night in May 1875, however, a local watchman noticed a small light coming from inside the largely abandoned building. Reaching a small blaze just in time, he was able to extinguish the fire despite finding the fire extinguisher inoperable. It immediately became evident that the fire was no accident. Mattresses, some of which were soaked in kerosene, were piled high in a back room. A hole had been cut into the wall to connect it with another room, which had a hole cut in the ceiling. The

effect was to create a strong draft that would "insure perfect combustion."<sup>48</sup> There had been a similar unsolved attempt the year before, but this time, suspicion quickly fell on the cottage's proprietor, J. W. Gore, who had once been widely celebrated in the town. He was briefly arrested before being run out of town. It was a precipitous collapse of what had once been the most celebrated business in town and one that had been brought, board by board, from Ellsworth's onetime rival Abilene.

Throughout Ellsworth's spectacular rise and precipitous fall, the *Reporter* emphasized that the town's fate was in the hands of its citizens. Farmers, boosters, and merchants just needed to work together. Political differences or economic disagreement had to be put aside, for "every man should do his duty. Ellsworth is now in an embryo state, when it may live or die, according to the

48. "Diabolical Attempt to Burn the Drover's Cottage," *Ellsworth Reporter*, May 6, 1875.

will of her citizens.”<sup>49</sup> Another critique of social conflict from Ellsworth’s heyday urged, “Citizens of Ellsworth, let us keep free. Let us become proselytes to not party, sect or creed, but to the Truth only.”<sup>50</sup> Or, put in terms of a “motto”: “Ellsworth county first. The rest of Kansas next, and our whole country all the time.”<sup>51</sup> While these comments were often deployed as a rhetorical strategy to express the *Reporter’s* (initially) pro-cattle-trade interest, they emphasized that the people of Ellsworth could control the town’s future.

Ultimately, however, Ellsworth’s fate was a story much bigger than that of the town—the story of the emergence of a national cattle market, of railroad building, and of the maturing cattle industry of Texas. Business acumen and hard work seized the cattle trade from Abilene, but the trade was there to take only because of a particular historical moment that was more about Texas cattle and western railroads than Kansas politics or local boosterism. Similarly, the decline of the cattle trade in Ellsworth was as much about state-level politics around cattle quarantines and the overbuilding of railroads across the United States.

Key advocates of the idea that Ellsworth’s fate was in its own hands were the highly mobile businesspeople, merchants, and newspaper editors who promoted the town. These prophets of the cattle trade had relocated from Abilene in 1871–1872 and were headed out of Ellsworth, presumably to greener pastures, by 1875. The changes in ownership of the *Ellsworth Reporter* reflect this reality; it was founded in 1871 by a businessman who was seeking take advantage of the cattle trade and then sold in 1872 to a richer editor from Iowa, who left as soon as the town’s fortunes turned a few years later. Though this class of highly mobile merchants and boosters pushed a clearly inaccurate view of town development, they were ultimately crucial to creating a national market. A national cattle market and the frenzy of western railroad building could not have occurred without individual people all over the American West believing that their town could be the next Chicago.

The presence of these traveling boosters and merchants created social and economic conflict in the towns through which they circulated. Farmers, many of whom were new arrivals in Kansas but who were much more rooted in their ambitions and plans, had resented the cattle trade for years. As the industry declined, these farmers gained more political sway. It was no coincidence that the *Reporter’s* final owner was a community member who self-consciously turned the paper inward, appealing to a smaller and less ambitious community of farmers. Resentful of the long-gone town boosters, these farmers emphasized the honesty and integrity of their lifestyle. This attitude, which contrasted the genuine and local intentions of Ellsworth residents with the forces of capital, business, and government larger than any single town, would create distrust and perhaps contribute to later political movements.

In September 1875, at the end of a long and lackluster cattle-shipping season, a concerned citizen wrote an editorial on Ellsworth’s future. He observed that the town’s citizens had once raised “three or four thousand dollars toward building the Drover’s Cottage” and that the town’s residents had celebrated the cottage’s owner as a “lion.” Yet just a few years later, “the cottage stands today like a body without a soul, stripped of all its furniture and appointments.” For the editorialist, the cottage was a monument to the town’s mistaken path. Ellsworth’s new path would be that of agriculture, and the town should erect a grain warehouse to serve as the foundation of a new economy. He explained, “While the Texas cattle trade drove farmers from the country, and threw the burden of taxation upon the city, the grain warehouse will be the medium indirectly, if not directly, of bringing hundreds of farmers to the country.”<sup>52</sup> The author, F. J. Conway, was part of a broader project to tell a new story about what Ellsworth was and what it could be. Whether it would bring any more control to the town or its residents was an open question. KH

49. “The Future of Ellsworth,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, October 17, 1872.

50. “Ellsworth Communism,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 6, 1872.

51. *Ellsworth Reporter*, June 6, 1872.

52. “The Grain Warehouse vs. Drovers Cottage,” *Ellsworth Reporter*, September 30, 1875.