

Summary: Cattle Drivers

Texas Cattle

In the 1860s, millions of longhorn cattle lived in Texas. They were strong animals that were first brought to North America by Spanish settlers. They ate grass and did not need a lot of water. Cowhands made sure the cows did not run away. They herded the cattle.

Cattle ranchers could not make much money selling their cattle in Texas because there were so few people. There was a big supply of cattle, but not a big demand. So the price of cattle was low. In the eastern and northern parts of the United States, people wanted to buy cattle products. So cattle prices were high.

The Cattle Drives

The cattle ranchers wanted to sell their cattle in the East and North. They could get better prices because the demand was high and the supply was low. Cattle ranchers needed to get their cattle to railroads that were often hundreds of miles from the cattle ranches. Ranchers hired cowhands to take their cattle on cattle drives to the railheads. In a cattle drive, cowhands rode on horseback next to the herd of cattle to make them move. They stayed near rivers so that the cattle had water to drink. The work was dirty, hard, and dangerous.

The cattle drives ended in the late 1880s for several reasons. First, there was the invention of barbed wire. This wire had sharp points on it. Settlers used barbed wire to make fences on their property. The fences blocked the cattle trails. Second, more railroads were built. Railheads were closer to the ranches. Third, too many cattle grazed on crowded ranges, and there was not enough grass to feed all the cattle. Finally, the terrible winter of 1886–1887 killed thousands of cattle.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

supply *noun*, the amount of something that people want to sell at certain prices

demand *noun*, the amount of something that people want to buy at certain prices

railhead *noun*, a town where railroad tracks begin or end

barbed wire *noun*, twisted wire with a sharp barb, or point, every few inches



After You Read

REVIEW Why did Texas cattle ranchers want to sell their animals in the East and North? Highlight the sentence that answers the question.

REVIEW Why did big cattle drives end? Circle the reasons why cattle drives ended.