

OKLAHOMA STRETCH OF CHISHOLM TRAIL NOW ON NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The Chisholm Trail leaves nothing but memories as dusty as the trail itself, but a portion of a supporting road just east of the 19th-century cattle highway, preserved from development, is now officially recognized.

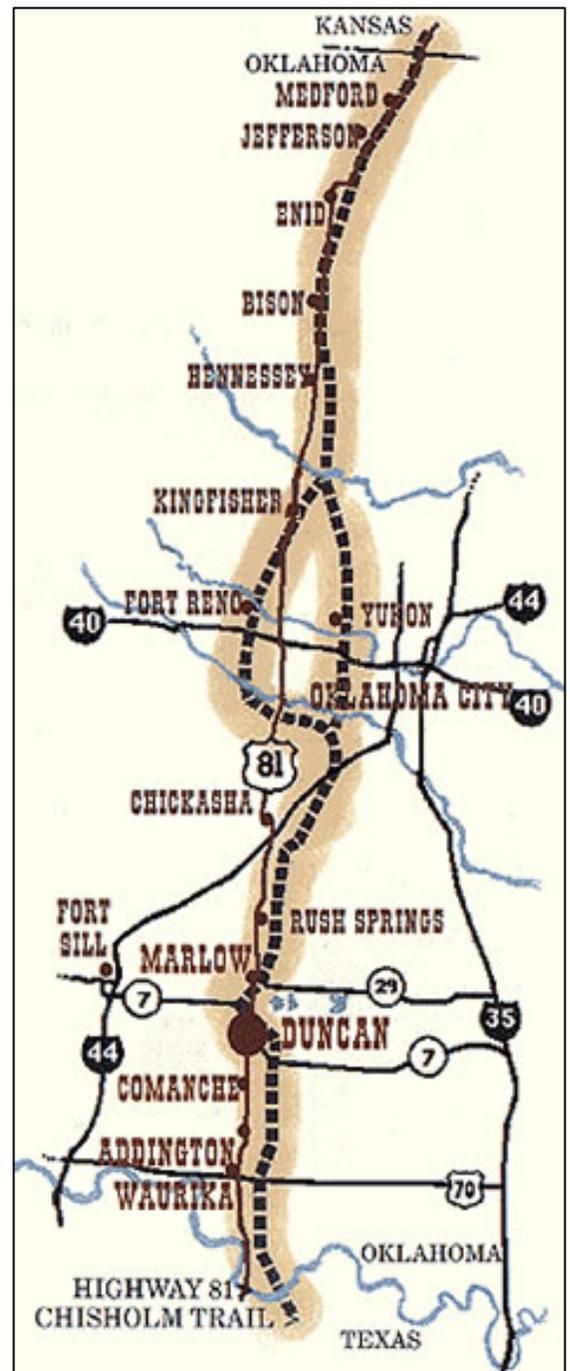
By RICHARD MIZE
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Reports of the Chisholm Trail's demise are as dead-on accurate as a Boot Hill tombstone. The famed cattle-driving trail from Texas to Kansas is long gone, thanks to settlement, development, weather and erosion.

But not forgotten. And that makes a recent addition to the National Register of Historic Places a sweet one for historians of the West, the cattle drives and Indian Territory.

The McGranahan Portion of the Chisholm Trail Roadbed, in a secure, undisclosed location in Canadian County, is new to the register. Thank you, descendants of James McGranahan, who bought the land including it in 1895, for preserving it, and thank you, consultant historian Mary Jane Warde, of Stillwater, who researched the roadbed and nominated it for listing.

The remnant is not from the cattle trail itself, but from a separate road 1½ miles or so east of where some 3 million head of wild Texas cattle — in droves of up to 10,000 head — were driven to Kansas railroad shipping points from 1867 to the mid 1880s. Think of it as a kind of service road. It



This map shows the Oklahoma portion of the Chisholm Trail. The newly protected section is somewhere east of Fort Reno.

“accommodated cattle-drive support vehicles, freighters, travelers and other traffic that paralleled the cattle trail but kept some distance from the herds,” according to the National Register registration form.

It is a rare artifact. Warde noted that no portions of the Chisholm Trail in Oklahoma are on the National Register because they didn't survive. She quotes a couple of dusty histories.

Grassy carpet

Wayne Gard wrote in his 1954 book, “The Chisholm Trail,” (University of Oklahoma Press) that after barbed wire closed the trail “wind and rain began to beat out the prints of millions of Longhorn hoofs. Soon a carpet of new grass spread over the battered path.”



H.H. Halsell retraced the trail in 1927 and wrote in the 1937 “Cowboys and Cattleland: Memories of a Frontier Cowboy” (Texas Christian University Press) that “only in a few places could I see any sign of that old trail. Now it is all gone and all that is left is a memory.”

Well, nowadays there are highway signs, historical markers and museums. And now there is a certified stretch, between two creek fords, of the “service road” to the cattle trail, 12 feet wide, carved 19 to 22 inches deep into the ground.

“The roadbed's width, depth and U-shaped profile are compatible with the design of documented nineteenth-century roadbeds. Its setting, protected as it has been by the McGranahan family's landownership, has changed little in more than a century,” Warde wrote. “It is still rural, wooded and fairly insulated from the sound and sight of recent development.

“Although gravel beds occur nearby, the material of the roadbed is earth as might be expected on the nineteenth-century Indian Territory frontier,” she said. “The workmanship was probably never more than some initial brush-cutting to allow the single-file passage of wagons between the two fords. The hard-packed earth has since minimized the re-emergence of undergrowth, helping to maintain the roadbed.”

The site remains undisclosed to keep it secure, said Lynda Ozan, architectural historian and National Register program coordinator for the State Historic Preservation Office.

Good. If not, I'd be out there to check it out — lots of others, too — and we'd probably mess it up.