

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Frontier Tales

Caldwell, Kansas – Cattle Town

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The cowboys who arrived nicknamed her, the *Border Queen*, though her border was with the Oklahoma Indian territory not Mexico or Canada. She was Caldwell, Kansas, a Cowntown who saw her fair share of bloodshed and mayhem. Situated along the Chisholm Trail, the town founders recognized an opportunity to serve the many cowboys passing through, and the small settlement quickly became a popular stopping off point on their way north to Abilene and Wichita.

The town started with a simple log cabin that served as a store and post office. Other businesses and a hotel soon followed. An enterprising saloonkeeper named Curley Marshall established the First Chance Saloon to greet the Texas drovers just as they crossed the line from Indian Territory into Kansas and again as they rode back home to Texas. It was the first chance for a drink and the last chance for a drink since liquor was prohibited in Indian Territory.

Caldwell soon took on the attributes of a lawless frontier town. On July 2, 1871, George Peas found his place in history as the first person shot to death in the fledging town. Other shootings and gun fights soon followed. Caldwell's reputation as a rowdy trail town was solidified with a spectacular gunfight in 1879. Barging into the Moreland House hotel with guns drawn, George Flatt confronted two Texas cowboys, Jake Adams and George Wood. Upon seeing the armed and enraged Flatt, Adams and Wood drew their own guns and began firing. When the smoke cleared, Adams and Wood were dead. Flatt's triumph was short-lived as he was found assassinated the following year.

Trouble abounded with the establishment of the Red Light Saloon. The two-story wood frame building was a gambling hall, saloon, and brothel. It quickly became known as one of the most disreputable saloons on the frontier. Even the law was not safe in the Red Light. In 1880, a deputy was shot to death and just two years later, Marshall George Brown was brutally murdered there. The owner himself was killed by gunfire in 1881.

The unruly Cowtown was on its way to become a boom town in 1881 when the Kansas state legislature outlawed cattle on the Chisholm Trail from being driven past Caldwell. To move the cattle, the Santa Fe Railroad extended their line south for fifty miles from Wichita to Caldwell. Stockyards were built to house the cattle before they were moved north by rail. The wood frame buildings of downtown Caldwell were quickly replaced by brick buildings as the town's fortunes increased. An impressive brick Opera House was built, opening with a traveling troupe's rendition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The newly built Southwestern Hotel featured a second-floor ladies' parlor, a nod to the respectability the town was now trying to cultivate.

The railroads would eventually close down the Chisholm Trail and other cattle trails like the Western and the Goodnight-Loving Trails. Today, Caldwell is far removed from the rough and tumble days of being an integral part of the cattle driving era, though a number of the old buildings still stand. If you go, listen carefully, you may still hear the thunder of cattle hooves and gunfire.