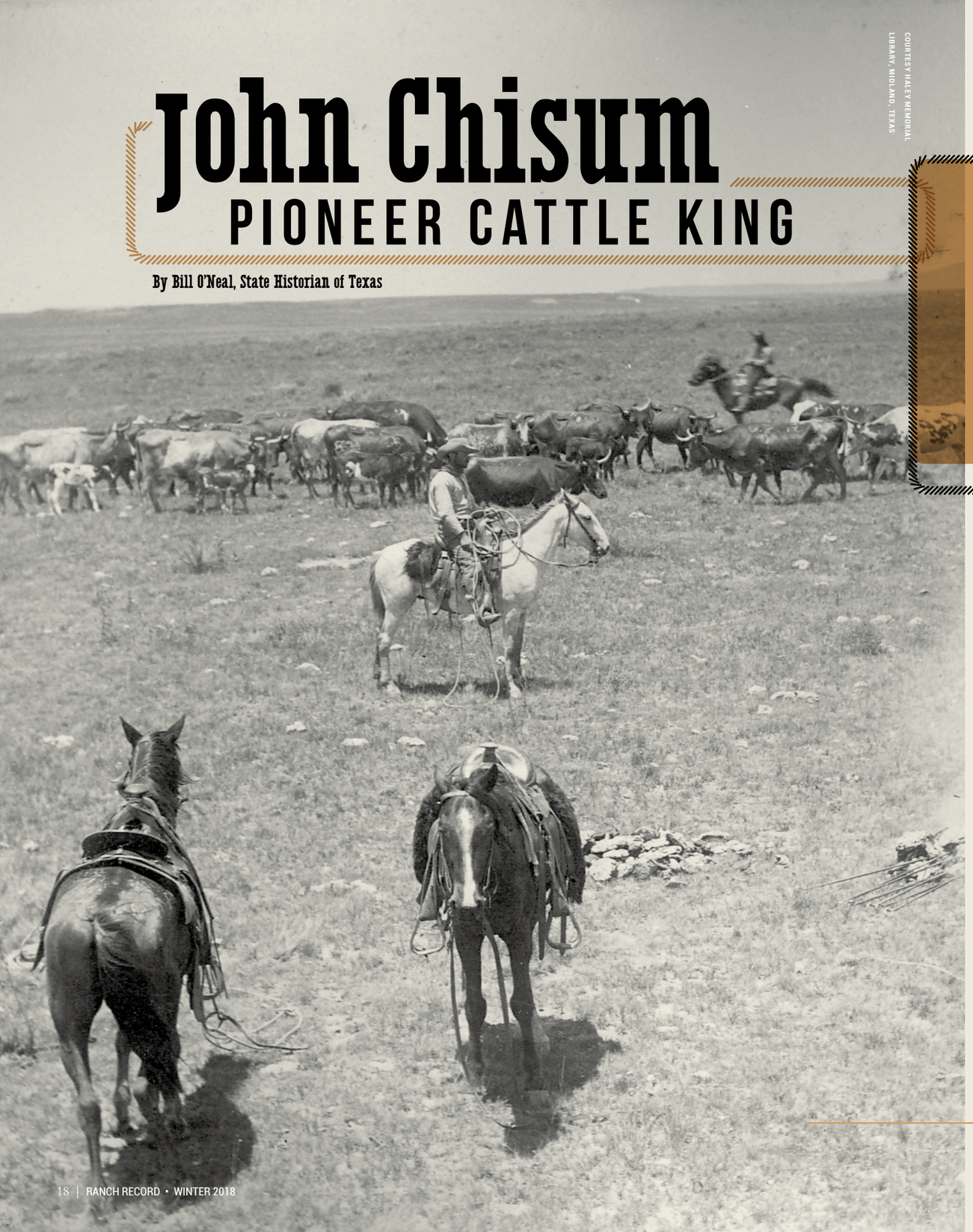
John Chisum

PIONEER CATTLE KING

By Bill O'Neal, State Historian of Texas



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Chisum conducted only one roundup a year. He used a Long Rail brand — a straight mark burned from shoulder to hip.

> "He was a great trail man. No one had any advantage of him as an old-fashioned cowman, and he was the best counter I ever knew. He could count three grades of cattle at once, and count them accurately even if they were going at a trot."
>
> - CHARLES GOODNIGHT

HIS NAME WAS JOHN SIMPSON CHISUM, BUT WHEN HE WAS A BOY HE WAS CALLED "COW JOHN" BECAUSE OF HIS AFFINITY FOR THE CATTLE ON HIS GRANDFATHER'S TENNESSEE PLANTATION. After becoming an open range rancher, Chisum was plagued by rustlers and developed a distinctive and recognizable earmark known as "Jinglebob." Chisum soon was being called "Jinglebob John" and "Jinglebob Chisum." As his herds grew to vast numbers, the boy with an affinity for cattle became known as the "Jinglebob King."

A genial and prominent man, Chisum often was affectionately called "Uncle John," as well as "Old Chisum" — but probably not to his face. With his great New Mexico ranch stretching 200 miles along the Pecos River and his cattle holdings numbering 60,000 to 80,000 head, Chisum became known as the "Cattle King of the Pecos," the "Stock King of New Mexico," the "Cattle King of the West," and most regal of all, the "Cattle King of America."

John Chisum was destined to become cow country royalty. He began ranching at the dawn of the range cattle industry in Texas. Within a few years his cattle numbered in the tens of thousands, and within a few more years Chisum owned more cattle than any other individual in America. His Jinglebob herds were the only cattle in the West known by an earmark rather than a famous brand.

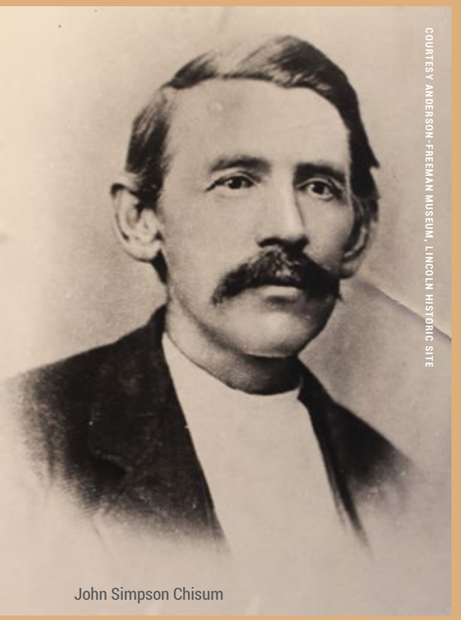
Chisum was a true pioneer seeking open range grass farther and farther and still farther west. His last ranch was the biggest, and he built a headquarters complex worthy of a frontier cattle king. Chisum relished the role of cattle baron, serving as a gracious and generous host to one and all.

During three decades on a succession of frontier ranches, Chisum endured Indian raids, stock thievery, drought, financial reverses and the murderous conflict known as the Lincoln County War. He met every challenge head-on: hanging rustlers, taking in stride losses of money and even entire herds, and then forging ahead without complaint. Once, according to legend, Chisum faced down a lethal threat from Billy the Kid. Chisum had courage, a taste for adventure and a shrewd head for business. He confidently operated his risky frontier profession on an enormous scale. After 30 spectacular years as a Western rancher, Chisum died at 60, just as his beloved open range was being enclosed by barbed wire. But John Chisum has never been forgotten in the world of ranching.

This future cattle king was born Aug. 16, 1824, in Hardeman County in western Tennessee. His parents were Claiborne and Lucinda Chisum, and he was greeted by a 2-year-old sister, Nancy. Nancy and John were joined by three brothers, all born in Hardeman County. James was born in 1827, Jeff in 1829, and Pitser in 1834.

Claiborne Chisum and his father, James, a former state senator, ventured into western Tennessee as surveyors. As Claiborne's sons grew, they were expected to help with the countless chores at their father's farm and their grandfather's plantation. From a young age, John Chisum worked as well as played outdoors. He developed a deep love and need for outdoor life, as well as a feel for the rhythms of agriculture and an understanding of livestock that produced the nickname "Cow John."

During the first year of the Texas Republic in 1837, Claiborne Chisum joined a parade of fellow Tennesseans migrating to the



COURTESY ANDERSON-FREEMAN MUSEUM, LINCOLN HISTORIC SITE

John Simpson Chisum

Chisum or Chisholm:
A Common Misconception

Jesse Chisholm (c. 1805 – 1868) was a mixed-blood Cherokee fur trader. His name is most famous because of the namesake cattle trail he originally scouted and developed to supply his various trading posts among the Plains Indians in what is now western Oklahoma. Although Chisholm died before the heyday of the Texas-to-Kansas cattle drives, he was nevertheless a participant in several important events in Texas and Oklahoma history.

John Simpson Chisum (1824 – 1884) was a wealthy cattle baron with ranches in both Texas and New Mexico. He was one of the first to send his herds to the New Mexico Territory and obtained land along the Pecos River by right of occupancy, eventually becoming owner of a large ranch in the Bosque Grande about 40 miles south of Fort Sumner.

Lone Star Republic. Indeed, famed Tennessean Sam Houston, hero of the Battle of San Jacinto, was serving as President of the Lone Star Republic. John Chisum was 13 during the family trek to Texas, and he never forgot the adventure of moving to a new frontier.

Settling in what soon became Lamar County in northeast Texas, Claiborne Chisum rode with volunteers against Indian raiders. He developed a large farm and helped to build the first brick courthouse in Paris. John Chisum worked on his father's farm and on the courthouse. He clerked in stores, although wages were low and so were profit margins. But while he did not see his future in running a store, Chisum applied what he learned as a clerk to a series of ranch supply stores throughout his career as a frontier cattleman. He won election as county clerk when he was 28, but he quickly decided that office work was "bad for his health."

Chisum began buying steers during these years and selling them to butchers in Paris and other new communities in the area. This business was profitable, and as Chisum began to see possibilities in an occupation that was congenial to his nature, he met Stephen K. Fowler from New Orleans in 1854. Fowler had money to invest in the fledgling range cattle industry, and by now Chisum had learned where he could purchase animals cheaply and where he could graze a herd. With Fowler's capital, Chisum bought stock cattle at $6 per head, with calves thrown in. Chisum and a crew of hired drovers trailed the herd of 1,200 animals north to open range in Denton and Tarrant counties, where his father had ridden during Indian troubles.

Chisum reasoned that the most profitable approach to frontier ranching was grazing on open range. There would be no financial expenditure for land, except for a small plot for ranch headquarters. Cattle were cheap, grazing was free and drovers were paid only about $13 a month. Reproduction on the range would provide herd increase at no expense. If attractive markets were found, the profits would be immense.

There were risks, of course, and Chisum would experience all of them during his career. But he was confident of his prospects, and he was ready to accept risks. He found himself to be a risk-taking entrepreneur during a wide-open entrepreneurial age in America. The basic economic policy of the government was *laissez faire* — to leave alone — and the free enterprise system was given full rein. Businessmen were unregulated and taxes were low. As a cattleman/entrepreneur at just the right place and time, John Chisum would thrive.

The 220 acres he acquired for his headquarters in Denton County featured a hill overlooking a stream to the east called Clear Creek. Chisum erected a comfortable frame house atop the hill in 1854 and painted it white. The "Great White House" on its commanding location attracted attention, and the sociable Chisum responded to the role of host. For the rest of his life, Chisum's ranch homes — in Denton County and two locations in New Mexico Territory — would provide meals to travelers and other guests regularly. The final ranch home that he built in New Mexico featured an outsized dining table and a nearby building for dances.

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This group of cowboys standing in front of a chuck wagon were among more than 90 riders Chisum employed, including about 40 men at 20 cow camps established at strategic points across a vast range extending about 200 miles along the Pecos River and 40 to 60 miles on either side of the river.

Chisum began using a Long Rail brand, a straight mark burned on the left flank from shoulder to hip. The Long Rail became one of the most famous brands in the West. Even more famous was the earmark that Chisum devised while ranching in Denton County. Inserting a knife just above the root of the ear, he cut upward, splitting the outer ear into two segments. One segment flopped downward, suggesting two separate ears. Cowboys often liked to attach a set of trinkets to their spurs that jingled with every step. These trinkets were called "Jinglebobs." For his distinctive — and less than humane — earmarks, Chisum used the term "Jinglebob," and his cattle became known throughout cow country as "Jinglebobs." With both ears altered, Jinglebobs could be spotted at any roundup herd or crowded corral. These were the only cattle known primarily by their earmark.

When the War Between the States erupted in 1861, John Chisum had one of the largest cattle herds in Texas. State officials designated him a supplier of beef for Confederate troops, and in October 1862 he was appointed Regimental Quartermaster and Commissary 21st Brigade of State Troops. This role suited Chisum perfectly. He had no interest in fighting a war, but he had a great deal of beef to sell to soldiers. From 1861 to 1863, Chisum drove cattle to Vicksburg, Little Rock, and Shreveport and was paid $40 a head in Confederate currency. He promptly put this money to work, purchasing more cattle or parcels of land.

But settlers — as well as Confederate deserters — began moving onto the rich farmlands of Denton and Tarrant counties, and by 1864 Chisum started driving his herds onto the empty ranges of Coleman and Concho counties. In that same year Chisum's 10-year partnership with Stephen K. Fowler expired. Fowler was no cattleman, and Chisum paid him off with parcels of land he had acquired in Denton County.

Chisum's Coleman County range was 180 miles from Fort Worth, so he acquired a store in the village of Trickham, near his ranch dugouts and corrals. His ranch supply store was surrounded by a picket fence, and the store building was loopholed. Chisum's new range was raided by Comanche warriors as well as Confederate deserters. Chisum said these outlaws "commenced stealing everything they could find, and as cattle were numerous . . . the thieves turned their attention to stock and ran them off or slaughtered them for their hides, which were then worth more than the carcass."

Palo Pinto County ranchers Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving made an epic cattle drive in 1866 that passed just north of John Chisum's new range. Trailing 2,000 steers, cows, and calves along the Middle Concho River, Goodnight and Loving shoved their herd across 90 waterless miles to the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos River. They followed the Pecos north to Fort Sumner and the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation, where they were paid $12,000 in gold. They launched another herd up the Goodnight-Loving Trail in 1867 and were soon followed by John Chisum. Texas cattlemen were driving herds north to Kansas by 1867 and then up the Chisholm Trail. But John Chisum saw his ranching future to the west, along the twisting, alkaline Pecos River.

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Chisum built the "Long House" as the headquarters for his New Mexico ranch with a 144-foot long porch that ran the length of the house. His frontier home was christened with a Christmas feast and all-night dance in 1880.

With vehemence, Charles Goodnight recalled the Pecos as "the graveyard of the cowman's hopes." "I hated it!" But alongside this treacherous river, which featured quicksand and rattlesnakes, John Chisum built the West's greatest open range ranch.

After Oliver Loving was slain by a war party in 1867, Goodnight partnered with Chisum for the next three years. Chisum brought herd after herd from Texas, and Goodnight used them to satisfy one government contract after another. Chisum established his ranch headquarters and a supply store at a rendezvous point called Bosque Grande. Chisum realized at this point that he could build a cattle operation of truly gigantic proportions. He had access to an enormous, vacant range, along with the prospects of multiple contracts.

Chisum grazed tens of thousands of cattle from just south of Fort Sumner, now abandoned by the army, almost to the Texas border. His range extended about 200 miles along the Pecos River and 40 to 60 miles on either side of the river. He established 20 cow camps at strategic points across this vast range. Chisum moved his ranch headquarters from Bosque Grande in the north to a more central location at South Spring River, an artesian stream that flowed into the Pecos River a few miles south of the village of Roswell.

Chisum's Jinglebob cattle multiplied exponentially on the New Mexico range. His herd soon totaled 80,000, despite frequent sales. Chisum employed more than 90 riders, including about 40 men at a score of cow camps. There were constant cattle drives, including some along the same trail only a day or two apart to allow for proper grazing and watering. Chisum launched so many cattle drives that he did not employ trail driving outfits but preferred to utilize his own crews, led by himself, his brother Pitser or experienced foremen.

Records for the period July 1875 to May 1876 indicate monthly cattle deliveries to Fort Bowie, Ariz., as well as larger herds regularly sent to the San Carlos Reservation. These aggregate deliveries produced a gross income of $221,722. Late in 1875 Chisum sold 60,000 head of cattle to the livestock commission firm of Hunter & Evans, which paid him $5,000 to superintend the extended roundup and delivery of these herds.

During roundups and trail drives, Chisum often was on the range with his men, astride a big roan called Old Steady and carrying binoculars. He also carried a revolver, wrapping the gunbelt and holster around his saddle horn. Chisum often brought along his fiddle, playing for impromptu cowboy dances around the campfire. He sometimes delighted a crew by breaking out a keg of whiskey.

The unfenced Jinglebob range was a wide-open target for rustlers, but Chisum often supervised lynchings. Once when no trees were nearby, a wagon tongue was propped up and a rope was threaded through the iron ring to strangle the rustler. Indeed, Chisum's men sometimes called him "Judge Lynch." During the violent Lincoln County War, Chisum's ranch

The Jinglebob Ranch became the largest open range operation under a single rancher in the West, and Chisum for a time owned more cattle than any other man in America.

became a target of the Murphy-Dolan faction. Chisum was a partner in the Tunstall-McSween store in Lincoln, and the cattle king opened a bank in the establishment. Both his partners were murdered, and Chisum reportedly clashed with Billy the Kid, who claimed that he was owed $500 in gunman's wages. Chisum supported sheriff Pat Garrett, who killed the Kid in 1881.

By this time Chisum had erected a ranch house befitting a cattle king. The new "Long House" faced west and was 144 feet long with a porch that ran the length of the building. Chisum's room was a combination office and bedroom. There was a heavy bedstead, a walnut desk, a safe, a big dictionary on an upright stand, chairs and a carpet. The dining room table seated 20 or more. A separate building in the rear was used as a dance hall for parties and dances.

Chisum imported hundreds of rose bushes, as well as shrubs and other flowers for the irrigated grounds. He had two ponds scraped out, complete with an island that was named the "Isle of Patmos." Chisum directed the ranch carpenter to fashion two rowboats, and he enjoyed touring visitors in person. His splendid frontier home was christened with a Christmas feast and all-night dance in 1880.

Unfortunately, a large tumor grew on Chisum's neck within a few years. He traveled to Kansas City for surgery, but the cancer grew back almost immediately. Doctors sent him to Eureka Springs, Ark., to take the waters, but he died at the age of 60 on Dec. 22, 1884. He was buried beside his parents in Paris.

The career of John Chisum spanned the era of open range ranching. His temperament and talents suited him ideally for the frontier world of free grazing, and he put together three open range ranches, two in Texas and a massive spread in New Mexico. The Jinglebob Ranch became the largest open range operation under a single rancher in the West, and Chisum for a time owned more cattle than any other man in America. There were those who envied Chisum, and those who were outright enemies, but he earned the respect and admiration of most of his peers. He was widely known as the Jinglebob King and the Cattle King of the Pecos and even the Cattle King of the West. In cow country, he certainly could have been dubbed the King of the Open Range. ★

This article was adapted by author Bill O'Neal from his new book entitled John Chisum, Frontier Cattle King, *published by Eakin Press, a subsidiary of the Wild Horse Media Group of Fort Worth. This new biography of the famous cattleman can be obtained from the author or at* www.wildhorsemedia.com.

A large and massive gravestone dominates the old family cemetery on a hillside in Paris, Texas, where "Cow John" was buried next to his parents after dying of cancer in 1884. The gravesite has a marker designating it as a Texas Historical Site.