



~ Part 14 ~

Reflections on a Common Theme
**Cattle Trails, Rodeos
& Livestock Stories**

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CLOUD COUNTY

Following the East-West Trail in the Solomon Valley

by Joan Nothern

In a bold move, the Kansas (Kaw) River was designated a National Water Trail by the U. S. Department of the Interior in July 2012. It is only the second river to earn this designation. The themed columns in this issue of the Solomon Valley Anthology are dedicated to "Trails," and I suggest we might consider the two forks of the Solomon and the Solomon River as a trail. It is a trail traced across maps since 1744, when it appeared as Salmon.

The river and valley, our alliance's namesake, are in fact our first trail, and the first to follow it were the magnificent bison herds, setting the stage for the cultural transition as Plains Indians yielded to European-American settlement.

In 2012, Douglas P. Brush, of Downs, Kansas, published a marvelous history: The Northern Kansas Division, Missouri Pacific Lines, originally the Central Branch Union Pacific Railroad. Brush meticulously documents the building process of the Central Branch of the Union Pacific, which by 1888 extended from Atchison to Stockton. This included the section from Beloit to Stockton, connecting the Solomon Valley communities of Beloit, Glen Elder, Downs, Osborne, Alton, Woodston, and Stockton.

Major William F. Downs, General Superintendent of the Central Branch UP from 1865 until January 1, 1880, was the spearhead for this expansion, but his declining health and early death in 1883 cut the expansion short of the goal, Denver.

The railroads facilitated travel and transport of goods essential for building new towns and carrying produce to markets. The Central Branch UP was owned and built by a New York firm with a board of directors and ample legal staff. Brush reports the CBUP used a funding method different from other railroads. They limited their liability by forming a new corporation for each segment of the railroad, which carried on all transactions until that segment was complete. It was then absorbed by CBUP.

We are able to learn about the railroad that linked the western Solomon Valley communities in a 1998 article by Mary Ridgway: "Artist Mike Boss: Remembering Union Pacific's Plainville Branch," accessed on the Graham County Historical Society website.

The Plainville Branch was built and operated by three independent companies: the Salina, Lincoln and Western Railway Company began construction between Salina and Plainville in 1886; the Oakley and Colby Railroad connected those two towns in 1886; and in 1888 the Lincoln and Colorado Railway Company connected those two lines with 96 miles of track from Plainville to Colby. These three lines operated into the 1890s, but when ten-year government loan notes were due the entire line became subject to foreclosure. Union Pacific assumed ownership of all three railroad lines in October 1898.

Ridgway writes the Plainville Branch was important to the economic development of central and northwestern Kansas, created for serving large Kansas farming and stockyard centers in remote areas, and fostering economic development by encouraging people to move to towns along the line. The Solomon Valley communities served by the Union Pacific Plainville Branch are Damar, Bogue, Hill City, Morland, Penokee, Tasco, Studley, and Hoxie. This line, between Plainville and Colby, was dismantled in 1998.

It was nearly a quarter century after the two separate railroad lines were in operations that Solomon Valley town boosters worked to create roads that would free auto drivers to travel when

they wanted., and to try to lure travelers to their towns. Their goal too was Denver. Until that time, no east-west land route between Glasco and Colby had been forged. The railroads served to connect each town to the rest of the country—but did not bind the Solomon Valley together. Then towns along the South Fork of the Solomon and the Solomon River thought it time to be connected by roads in order to accommodate commerce and travel. In 1912, the Solomon Valley Highway Association was established to pursue building such a road.

In 1914, the Midland Trail, one of the first transcontinental routes, was logged through the Solomon Valley. The Solomon Valley Highway 24 Heritage Alliance is now taking steps to recognize this historic landmark effort. The goal is to contact communities along the Midland Trail in order to promote observance of the Midland Trail's centennial. More information about this process will appear in future issues of the Solomon Valley Anthology.

ROOKS COUNTY

Get Back on the Horse and Ride

by Sherry Brown

This short article is from the Boot Hill Cowboy Hall of Fame Museum in Dodge City about Gail McComb.

Gail Leon McComb was born in Stockton, KS on Nov. 12, 1928 to Leon and Florence McComb. He built a rodeo arena at the age of 19 where rodeos were held in 1949-50. He began competing in 1948, but became ineligible for ranch rodeos when he joined the RCA in 1949. McComb & Sons stock contractors consisting of Gail, his father and brother Keith began producing amateur rodeos in 1951. Gail won the ACA saddle bronc championship in 1951 despite an injured knee. In May 1952, he married Donna Miller. They have three daughters, Kathy Rees, Michele Kee and Melanie Hoch. In August of 1952, he was kicked in the ribs by a bareback horse. Though he qualified for champion saddle bronc rider and all-around cowboy of the ACA, he was unable to compete in the finals and retired from competition due to his injuries. He continued producing rodeos with McComb & Sons for the next 21 years. They produced rodeos in 48 towns, 30 which were in Kansas. They turned out bucking horses of the year 1964-66 (Western States Rodeo Association) and 1969-70 (Nebraska State Rodeo Association), as well as bareback horse in 1970 (NSRA). Gail held memberships in the RCA, ACA, KACA, WSRA and NSRA. Many of those who participated with McComb & Sons became well known. In 1972, Gail sold his business interest to his brother Keith when he was elected Rooks County Sheriff. After serving two years, he was on the Stockton Police Dept. from 1975 to 1977. Gail was a Stockton City Commissioner 1993-98. He sold real estate and was a scales/weigh man for area sale barns for many years. In 1995, he sold his Hereford cow herd and retired. Since then he has written articles for Kansas Cowboy, Stockton Sentinel newspaper and Solomon Valley Anthology.

GRAHAM COUNTY

Davis Cattle

by Anita Davis

Any day you decide to visit the Davis farm, you won't find Cleon Davis in his rocking chair, even though he is old enough to retire. No, he is out taking care of the cattle he loves. He keeps a close eye on his Purebred Charolais herd of 170 cows. If you ride along with him in the pickup, he will tell you the history of the farm and point out landmarks and relate stories about them.

He will tell you about how his grandmother, Elizabeth McCarrel, as a single woman, came to Graham County Kansas and took out a homestead of 160 acres in 1881, northeast of Hill City. She first lived in a dugout until a sod house could be built and then a frame addition was added. She taught school to help with the expenses of the farm.

In 1892 she met and married Fremont Davis, a widower, who was a Free Methodist Preacher, who traveled the circuit in Kansas and Nebraska.

In 1912 Fremont and "Lizzie" adopted a son, Albert, from the Chicago Foundling Home, which was near her childhood home in Illinois. Two years later, a daughter, Ruth, was adopted. Fremont died in 1926 and "Lizzie" died in 1931.

Albert and wife, Margaret (Rohr) Davis, married in 1930, and took over the farm, which had a large debt, and made the farm prosper. The first cattle on the farm were milk cows and later Albert built up a herd of Angus cattle, selling steers and heifers by trucking them to the Kansas City Stockyards.

Albert and Margaret had two sons born on the homestead, Lavern and Cleon. In 1947 the family moved to Hill City to be closer to the school. Lavern chose teaching as his career and Cleon chose to be involved with the farm.

In 1959, Cleon married Anita Moore and they built a new home on the homestead and moved to the farm where Cleon was born. Six Davis children were born on the farm. Three of the six are also involved in agriculture in Graham County and ready to assist with the cattle when needed. Also the farmstead has greatly improved over the years and more land has been acquired.

Cleon had started his own herd of cattle by purchasing his first Angus heifer as a young 4-H member. In 1962, the cattle program changed with the purchase of a Charolais bull. The cattle were now providing more red meat at a faster rate of gain. Then in 1985, the Charolais cattle were put on the Redman Linear Measuring System, which proved to bring about a drastic change in the structure of the cattle. Cleon and Anita started selling yearling polled Charolais bulls and breeding heifers of excellent quality in 1987. Cattlemen began to appreciate the easy calving, moderate birth weight, thick muscling, easy fleshing and excellent disposition of the Davie cattle. Repeat customers are still coming to the farm to purchase stock.

Come visit the farm and you will find Cleon Davis and his cattle dog "Bruce" in his Kubota, checking cows and calves, fixing fence or putting mineral out in the pasture. He's doing what he loves.