



# John Simpson Chisum, The Cattle King of the Pecos Revisited

*Clifford R. Caldwell*

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John Simpson Chisum left a trail across the American West so wide that a blind scout could follow it. Although his track can be picked up effortlessly, the gaps and sketchy information about the man leave us with but half of the story. John Chisum's life story seems to have been defined by his association with Billy the Kid and a singular, epic cattle drive across the barren expanses of West Texas to New Mexico. Ask anyone on the street about John Chisum and they are apt to bring up The Chisholm Trail. In an unlucky twist of historical circumstance the totally unrelated Chisholm Trail which covered roughly the same path as the Kansas Trail, the Abilene Trail, or McCoy's Trail and was named for Jesse Chisholm would be forever confused with John Chisum's Western Trail.

Perhaps the noted historian Harwood P. Hinton, Jr. said it best over a half century ago when he penned "A definitive biography of John Chisum may never be written, for there is quite a paucity of information not only concerning his life but also his stock dealings, which spanned the Southwest for thirty years." Not at all unlike the saga of legendary personalities of the American West such as Billy the Kid the story of the life and times of John Chisum has become "so contaminated with hypothesis and folklore that what remains of his story is little more than a blurred picture of a misrepresented and uninterpreted individual ... living in the shadows of a bygone era."

John Chisum did nothing in a small way. He rarely missed an opportunity to advance his own purposes. He built a cattle empire in New Mexico that was, at the time, second to none. To shamelessly borrow a line from Walter Noble Burns' book *The Saga of Billy the Kid*, John Chisum knew cows.

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