

The Chisholm Trail Story in Verse

IT'S too bad, in a way, that the old Chisholm Trail came to an end. The 20 years (1867-1887) that long-horn cattle were herded up from Texas to railheads in Kansas produced as much literature as beef.

The risks involved in rounding up wild cattle in Texas for small bands of cowboys to drive overland several hundred miles were real. They had to ford swollen rivers during rainy seasons and scout for water during dry spells. They fought with each other, with outlaws and with Indians who wanted "toll" for crossing their lands.

Celebrations and debauchery at the end of the trail provide substance for many of the legends, but quite a few hard-working cowboys got started in ranching from what they made on the drives.

The hard realities of the trail were many but do not compare with the number of fictional yarns that have been written, sung, painted or made into movies and reruns for theaters and TV. The "acting" numbers of cattle used in movie scenes usually amounted to scores com-

pared to thousands in actual herds. Fiction shows cowboys dying by gunshots, but hardships and accidents were bigger hazards.

Just when you think you may have read, seen and heard all that could be produced about the old Chisholm Trail along comes another production that makes you want to jump into the saddle, tall 'em up and head 'em out again.

Latest in this long-running adventure series is "Beside the Chisholm Trail," an epic poem in easy-to-read verse by Welborn Hope. It was published as a 151-page paperback by the Oklahoma Historical Society, with a foreword by its president, Jack T. Coffin.

The hero is John Eddings, introduced to the public in Hope's 1982 book, "The Prairie Ocean," as a well-educated young man who had fled New England after jealously shooting the banker's son.

He joined thousands of others on the Santa Fe Trail and found adventure and some success in the west. He returned to Westport, Mo., then hired out as a cowboy on a ranch

between Wichita, Kan., and Indian Territory.

From there Eddings rode down the Chisholm Trail to Texas to work his way back several times as a herder. The story is told in the words of a 92-year-old rancher in his mansion "beside the Chisholm Trail" in 1928. Hope is the son of one of Ada's first bankers and as a boy he heard early settlers tell many tales of adventure.

Wapanucka, an important settlement in the Chickasaw Nation, figures prominently in the story. Most of the action takes place in localities that Oklahomans may recognize.

Running through the poem are strong elements of romance and religion, with a happy ending. The dedication is "to Jesus of Nazareth, that Great Frontiersman who lived (and still lives) in America and the world."

"Beside the Chisholm Trail" is one of the books to be featured at the Oklahoma Heritage Association's annual Oklahoma authors' party on Sunday, Dec. 4.