

BORDER QUEEN CALDWELL

Last Cowtown on the Chisholm Trail

BY BILL O'NEAL

As noon approached on Sept. 16, 1893, more than 15,000 land-hungry pioneers were poised south of Caldwell to rush onto the six-million-acre Cherokee Strip. About 100,000 settlers raced for land from different staging points on the Strip. (Courtesy Caldwell Historical Society)



A Kansas historical marker describes “the Caldwell of the past” as home to gunslingers, cowboys, prostitutes, saloonkeepers, and criminals.

Caldwell was a Kansas cowtown born amid a dusty parade of Longhorn cattle and trail-weary Texas cowboys. The presence of Lone Star State cattle and cowboys was so strong during the Chisholm Trail years that the Kansas railhead was almost a Texas cattle colony.

Longtime Texas rancher and trail boss H.H. Halsell recalled “there was nothing in the Indian Territory from Red River to Caldwell but cattle, Indians and wild game.” Even Caldwell didn’t exist when the Chisholm Trail first opened in 1867 and cowpunchers trailed Longhorns to Kansas railheads.

With no towns between Texas and Kansas and no federal law to prohibit liquor sales, frontier entrepreneurs began to realize that business opportunities existed on the border where the Chisholm Trail entered Kansas.

During the third year of the Chisholm Trail, former Army scout John “Curly” Marshall erected a double log house close to the trail crossing north of the Kansas border. He sold liquor, feed, and provisions to scores of crews as they emerged from weeks of trailing cattle through Indian Territory.

Today that territory is called Oklahoma and many towns exist along the Chisholm Trail, but those towns didn’t exist when two million Longhorns were being driven across the prairie on a bare trail that in some places was a quarter of a mile wide.

Marshall put up the famous “First Chance—Last Chance” sign: the “First Chance” cowboys had at liquor since leaving Texas and their “Last Chance” before the long ride home through Indian Territory.

Marshall had a busy summer in 1869 selling everything he could stock as hundreds of thousands of Longhorns rambled across Bluff Creek headed north to Abilene. Almost as much traffic went north the next summer when 300,000 Longhorns came up the Chisholm Trail.

A NEW COWTOWN ON THE TRAIL

Late that year Capt. Charles H. Stone, a cattle buyer and promoter, organized a town company with other frontier businessmen. They surveyed and filed a township claim on 116 acres one mile north of the Kansas border. In 1871 they named the new town after Alexander Caldwell, a U.S. senator from Kansas.

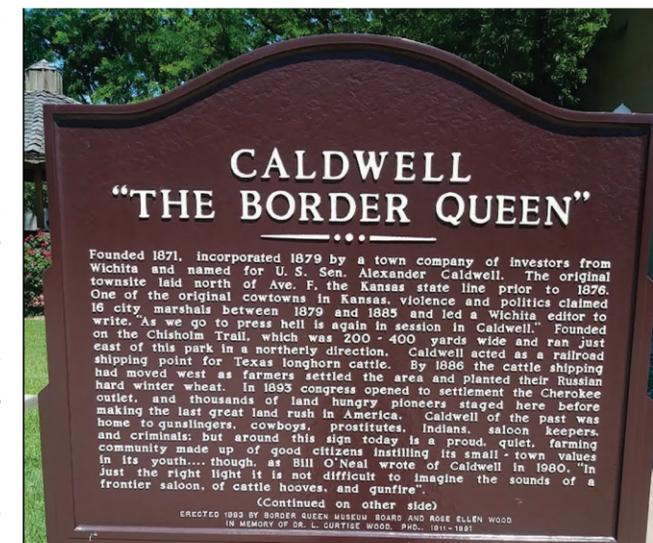
More than 600,000 head of cattle came up the trail that year—the biggest year ever for the Chisholm Trail. Caldwell’s Main Street was only one block west and uphill from the trail and ran parallel with Chisholm Street. Caldwell citizens dug a public well in the middle of Main Street and erected a commercial district of false-front frame buildings. Within one year Caldwell was a wild, ramshackle trail town.

Herds grazed nearby while Texas cowboys swaggered into saloons and dives. Drinking and gambling went deep into each night. Professional gamblers quickly gravitated to the growing frontier village, and so did prostitutes. Liquor and gambling and sporting women proved to be a dangerous mix.

The first of many fatal gunfights in Caldwell exploded in 1871. A drunken group of riders galloped up and down Main Street when cowboy George Peay bullied a smaller man named O’ Bannon. O’ Bannon borrowed a gun and drilled his antagonist. “God, boys, I’m shot,” gasped the dying Peay.

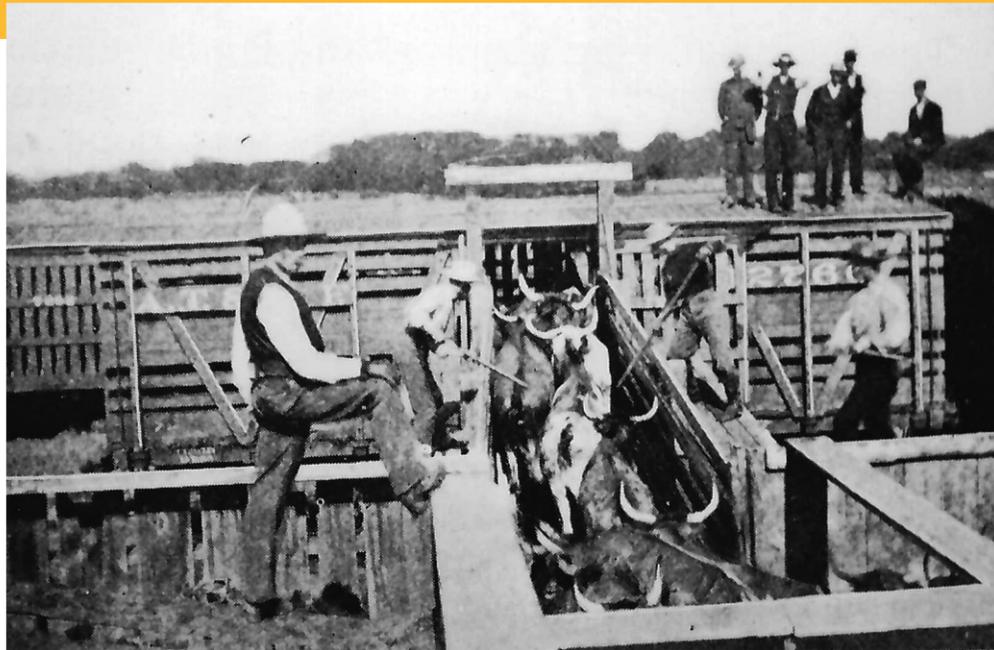
“Gentlemen,” announced O’ Bannon, “I have killed Peay and now if there’s anyone here that wants to take it up, they have the privilege of doing so, for I am in good shooting order.”

No one wanted to take it up, so O’ Bannon rode out of town. Peay’s friends carried his body inside a building and then resumed drinking, riding around the street and shooting their six-guns. Now and then they would dismount, talk to their dead buddy “and beg him to get up and take a drink,” according to the local newspaper.



Kansas state historical marker

Right: This 1882 photo shows cattle being loaded from the Caldwell shipping pens. The men prodding them along demonstrate the origin of the word "cowpoke." (Courtesy Caldwell Historical Society)



Below: Although the Chisholm Trail originally extended as far north as Abilene, Kan., the border town of Caldwell became the last cattle town on the trail in 1880 when it gained a railroad and became the closest northern railhead for Texas cattle.



Not only were hundreds of Texas cowboys roistering along the streets of the new town, but owners of large Texas ranches also frequented the town to line up cattle buyers and arrange for holding pastures. Legendary Texas cattle baron Shanghai Pierce rode his big mount, Old Prince, in constant search of deals.

Pierce liked to use his booming voice to announce his arrival: "I am Shanghai Pierce, Webster on cattle, by God, sir." On one occasion the editor of the *Caldwell Post* reported being visited by the 6-foot-4-inch cattleman. "Shanghai has dwindled away to a mere skeleton," the editor facetiously observed, "and his gentle voice can scarcely be heard in the adjoining county."

David T. Beals, co-owner of the big LX Ranch in the Texas Panhandle, came to Caldwell to await the arrival of 5,000 head of cattle being trailed in from the home ranch. Beals acquired a holding spread a few miles south of Caldwell, and he started an LX horse ranch four miles east of town.

Other prominent cattlemen who did business in Caldwell included brothers Dudley and John Snyder; Col. B.H. Campbell (commonly called "Barbeque" Campbell because of his brand: BQ); Print Olive, sometimes known as "Man Burner" because of a lynching incident; and Texas rancher-gunman-trail boss Pink Higgins. Dozens of other ambitious Texas ranchers and trail drivers were in and out of Caldwell.

NEVER A DULL MOMENT

Caldwell's saloons, restaurants, hotels, and streets teemed with cowboys visiting their first town since Texas. According to the local newspaper, a cowboy known as Texas Bill "went on a bender" brandishing a revolver and guiding his horse onto the boardwalk in front of the Haines Hotel. When Mrs. Haines angrily charged outside, Texas Bill dismounted and the redoubtable woman seized his firearm and ordered his arms tied. Since Caldwell did not yet have a jail, Texas Bill was tossed into a vacant room "where he took a good sleep."

In 1879 a wild shootout exploded inside the Occidental Saloon when two Texas cowboys, Jake Adams and George Wood, were on a drunken spree and turned their guns on the saloon customers. Suddenly an angry citizen named George Flatt stepped in front of the doorway and drew two revolvers. Adams and Wood ordered him to step aside. "I'll die first," growled Flatt.

Everyone began shooting. Flatt gunned down both cowboys and winged a couple of bystanders. Caldwell appointed Flatt its first city marshal and erected a stone jail in the center of the commercial district. A year later someone assassinated George Flatt while he walked down a darkened street. The town had a turnover of 16 city marshals in seven years.

The year Flatt died was also the year Caldwell became the last railhead on the famous Chisholm Trail. Until that time herds passed through Caldwell on their way to railheads in Abilene, Newton, and Wichita. Abilene's time in the spotlight only lasted for five years, but Wichita was the last railhead from 1872 to 1879.

Kansas farmers despised Longhorn cattle because they carried ticks. The hardy Longhorns were immune to "tick fever," otherwise known as "Texas fever," but the ticks dropped off as herds passed through Kansas and infected and killed farm cows. Incoming settlers in Kansas began fencing off the land, and Texas Longhorns were quarantined from eastern Kansas by the legislature.

Trail traffic picked up for Caldwell in 1880 when Santa Fe built railroad tracks south from Wichita to the stockyards below Caldwell. This made it possible for Texas cattle to be driven through gates that opened in Indian Territory and loaded directly onto stock cars in Kansas. Texas cattle no longer had to cross Kansas farmland.

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Pink Higgins (seated right) was a trail boss pictured here with one of the crews he regularly led up the Chisholm Trail from Lampasas County, Texas. One of his frequent drovers was Jess Standard (seated second from left), the great-grandfather of author Bill O'Neal. (Photo from author's collection)

LARGER THAN DODGE CITY

When the railroad came to Caldwell, the town became the final railhead on the Chisholm Trail and began to be referred to as the “Border Queen.” The trail town’s population of a few hundred boomed to 2,000, which made it larger than Dodge City, the railhead of the Western Trail. Two banks opened to handle the anticipated business. Two three-story brick hotels, the Leland and the Southwestern, were built on Main Street, and an impressive brick opera house dominated the south end of the commercial district.



Built in 1883, the Southwestern Hotel boasted 38 rooms and a second floor ladies parlor. When the trail drive days ended and the town had few visitors, Caldwell citizens painted the hotel white and transformed it into a hospital. (Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society)

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The Grand Opera House opened in 1885 and could seat 1,200 in the auditorium and balcony. The basement contained a roller skating rink. (Courtesy Caldwell Historical Society)

Two-story brick or stone buildings soon lined Main Street, and Caldwell gained a school, restaurants, barbershops, livery stables, lumberyards, a bookstore, a Chinese laundry—and 12 saloons.

The most notorious dive was the Red Light Saloon and Dance Hall built on Chisholm Street by George and Maggie Woods, who—like the cattle and cowboys—came up from Texas. George and Maggie built the Red Light in 1880 as a two-story entertainment center complete with a row of cribs. George operated a saloon in the front of the ground floor, Maggie ran a dance hall in the rear, and eight upstairs bedrooms supplemented the cribs.

The Caldwell *Post* soon reported the Red Light as a “hotbed of vice and the favorite place for murders, assault, and drunken revelry.” Deputy Marshal Frank Hunt was shot dead in 1880 through a window of the Red Light. The next year city marshal George Brown was fatally wounded in the Red Light while scuffling with a drunken troublemaker. Proprietor George Wood was killed during an altercation at his own Red Light Saloon.

Caldwell’s total casualty list grew larger than that of Abilene or Wichita or Dodge City. But such unrestrained violence was certain to drive away Eastern cattle buyers, so the city fathers hired two formidable peace officers. A two-fisted lawman from Texas, Bat Carr, was employed as city marshal, while a two-gun deputy named Henry Brown was hired to help. Marshal Carr and deputy Brown immediately went after the troublemakers, and Carr was given a handsome badge by grateful citizens.

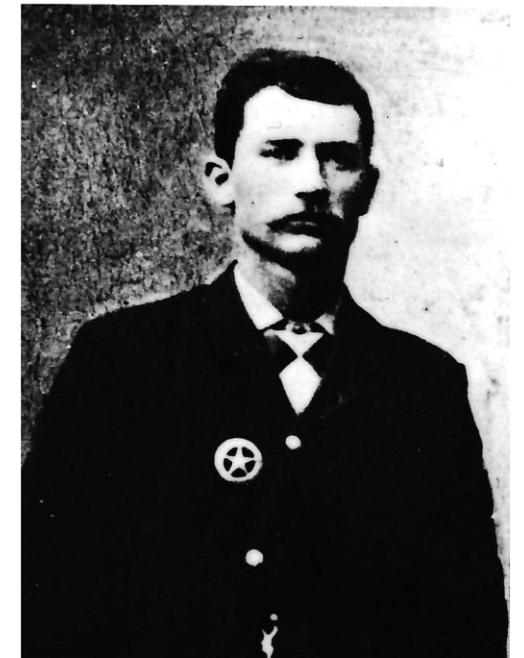
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But Carr soon returned to Texas, amid rumors that the deadly Henry Brown had intimidated Bat to vacate the marshal’s office. Brown had killed his first man at age 18, pumping three slugs into a fellow cowboy in a Texas Panhandle cow camp. Brown fled west into New Mexico Territory, where he hired his guns at different times to *both* sides in the murderous Lincoln County War. As a member of Billy the Kid’s gang of horse thieves, Brown helped drive a stolen herd to Tascosa in the Panhandle. When the Kid returned to New Mexico (and a bullet from Pat Garrett), Brown stayed in Texas and pinned on a deputy’s badge in Tascosa.

Now, a couple of years later, he was marshal of a major cattle town. He hired a deputy with a criminal past in Texas, Ben Wheeler, and Brown and Wheeler tamed Caldwell.

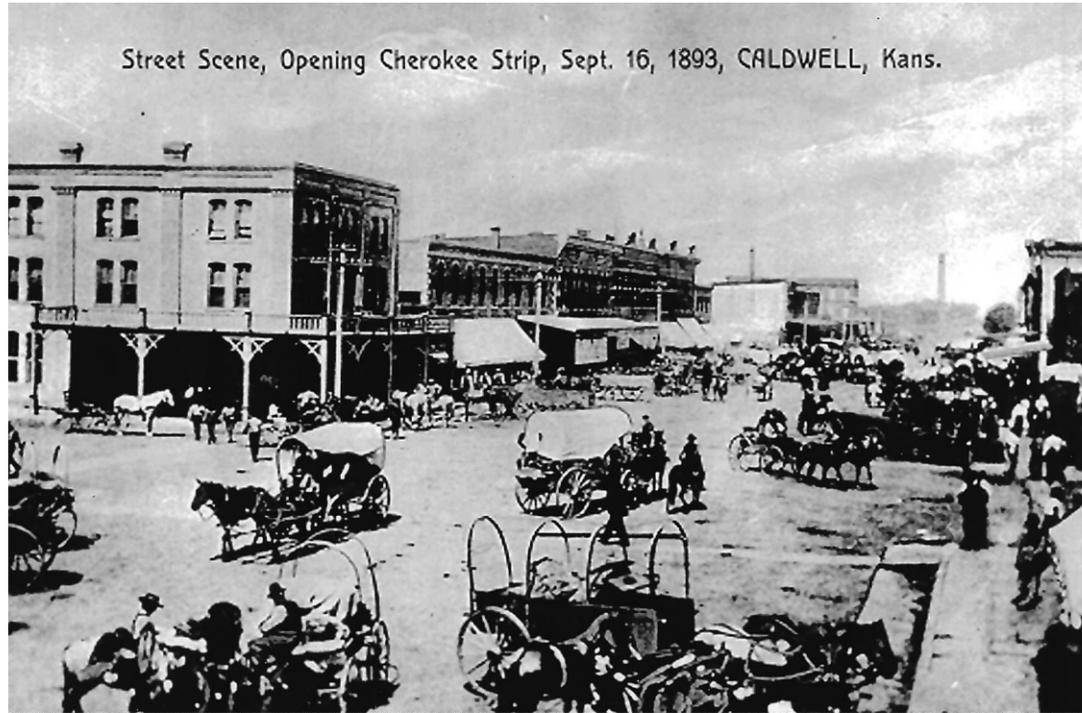
Marshal Brown stalked a drunken Pawnee named Spotter Horse through town and shot him dead in a store. Later, threatened by Texas gambler Newt Boyce, Marshal Brown traded shots with Boyce across Main Street and killed him. Marshal Brown was presented an engraved Winchester and a pay raise to \$125 per month.

Brown took a bride, and he bought a house and furniture and a milk cow. All of this put him in debt, a problem he tried to solve at the new brick bank about 70 miles to the west in Medicine Lodge. Deputy Wheeler was a willing accomplice, and the two officers slipped out of town and tried to rob the bank with two other accomplices. Brown shot the bank president, Wheeler killed the teller, and angry citizens chased the gang as they tried to escape into Indian Territory. That night a mob broke into the Medicine Lodge jail and lynched Brown and his gang. The 1884 Medicine Lodge bank holdup and lynching resulted in six men dying.



Henry Brown had once been a member of Billy the Kid’s gang of horse thieves before becoming a cowtown marshal. He killed two troublemakers in Caldwell in 1883 and excelled as a frontier peace officer until he tried to rob a bank in another town and died at the hands of a lynch mob. (Courtesy Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka)

Street Scene, Opening Cherokee Strip, Sept. 16, 1893, CALDWELL, Kans.



The Leland Hotel at left commanded the corner of Main and Sixth Streets in 1893 as wagons gathered for the last great land rush in America on land that once belonged to the Cherokee Nation. (Courtesy Caldwell Historical Society)

TRAIL ENDS, LAND RUSH BEGINS

Before 1884 ended, Caldwell experienced a couple of other fatal gunfights and another lynching the next year. When railroads penetrated Texas in 1885, the trail drives ended and the Chisholm Trail closed.

Although the Border Queen entered a more subdued existence, it remained a busy town. Just below Caldwell the six-million-acre "Cherokee Strip" teemed with ranches and cowboys. As many as 250,000 cattle grazed on ranges leased from the Cherokee tribe.

The famous Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association became a corporation in 1883 with a suite of offices above a Caldwell bank. The Grand Opera House held annual conventions and as many as 100,000 cattle shipped out from the stockyards south of town.

By 1891 settlers clamored for access to the Cherokee Strip. Pressured by the federal government to sell the Strip, the Cherokee Nation sold its land for \$8.6 million in December 1891. The Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association ceased to exist, and Caldwell was no longer a cattle town.

The Border Queen experienced one final frontier adventure. The Cherokee Strip opened to homesteaders on Sept. 16, 1893. Caldwell was one of several designated staging areas, and 15,000 settlers crowded into town for the famous Noon Run, a race for land. An estimated 100,000 men and women in every imaginable type of vehicle participated in the unforgettable explosion of horsemen.

Caldwell settled into a quiet rural existence with an economy based on the rich wheat fields surrounding the Border Queen. Today the population has dipped below 1,000, but local historians have preserved numerous historic sites and the excellent Border Queen Museum. The famous cowboy ballad, *The Old Chisholm Trail*, contains a verse about Caldwell:

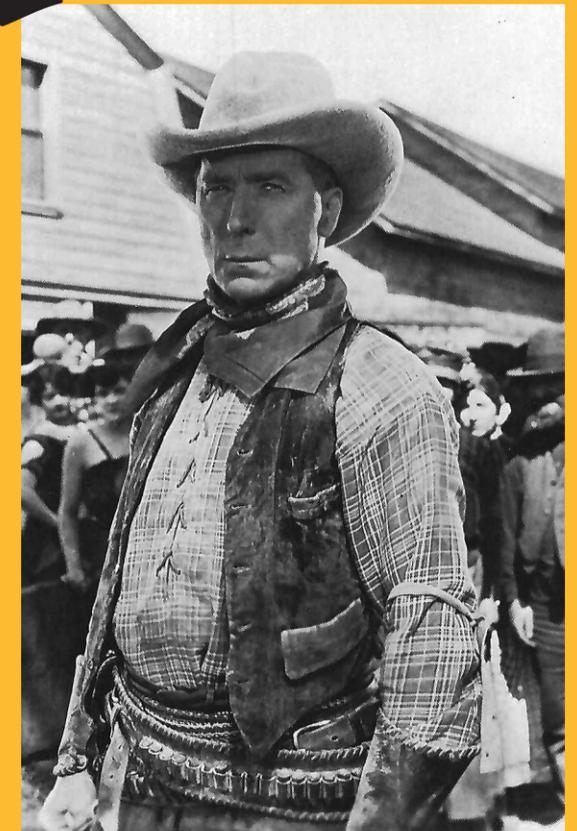
We hit Caldwell and we hit her on the fly.
We bedded down the cattle on the hills close by.
Come a Ti-Yi Yippee Yippee Yay Yippee Yay.... ★

BILL O'NEAL is the author of more than 40 books, including Border Queen Caldwell, Toughest Town on the Chisholm Trail, published by Eakin Press. O'Neal recently concluded a six-year tenure as State Historian of Texas. He represented Texas in 2017 as keynote speaker at the 150th celebration of the Chisholm Trail in Caldwell, Kan.

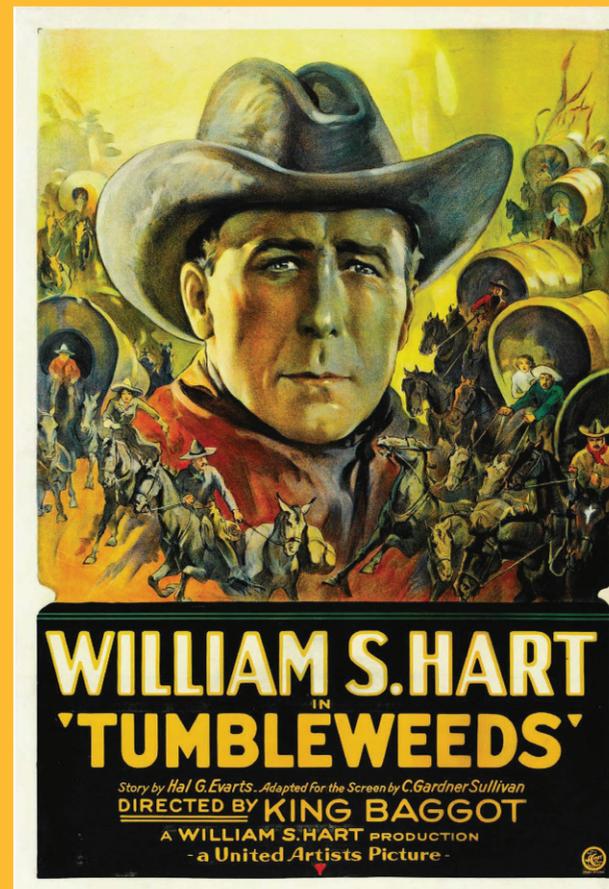
"OH, THE THRILL OF IT ALL"

Western movies and TV shows often used Kansas cattle towns—Dodge City, Abilene, and Wichita—as sites for frontier adventure stories, but Caldwell never received title billing for a Western movie or a TV series except for one notable exception.

William S. Hart was a popular star of silent Western films from 1914 until his retirement from the screen in 1925. He spent part of his boyhood in the Dakota Territory during the 1870s and always tried to achieve authenticity in his movies.



Western movie pioneer William S. Hart stands in front of the movie set used to represent Caldwell, Kan., in the 1925 movie *Tumbleweeds*.



In 1925 he filmed his final motion picture, *Tumbleweeds*, a film about the Cherokee Strip Land Rush. The film included many elements involving the town of Caldwell. Cattle were cleared out of the Strip and driven into the ramshackle movie set that represented Caldwell, and homesteaders guided their wagons in front of the set to race for land. The film re-enactment of the nation's last land rush was a magnificent, sweeping scene.

Tumbleweeds was released again in 1939 with a musical soundtrack and an eight-minute prologue by William S. Hart, the only sound film he ever did. The old Western star described the cattle frontier, the Cherokee Strip, and "the mad rush for destiny" of the homesteaders. Speaking with deep emotion, he exclaimed, "O, the thrill of it all!"

—Bill O'Neal