

The 16-part "Dreams of a Barefoot Boy" originally appeared in the 2017 Kansas Newspapers in Education. Have fun reading stories, answering questions, and completing activities while learning about Dwight Eisenhower's childhood.



Presented by the
EISENHOWER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY,
MUSEUM, & BOYHOOD HOME

"Dreams of a Barefoot Boy"

Chapter 2:

ABILENE'S FRONTIER PAST



"Because no man is really a man who has lost out of himself all of the boy, I want to speak first of the dreams of a barefoot boy... Because today that dream of mine of 45 years or more ago has been realized beyond the wildest stretches of my own imagination, I come here, first, to thank you, to say the proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene."

Dwight D. Eisenhower June 22, 1945

By the time Dwight Eisenhower moved to Abilene, Kansas, in 1892, it was no longer a cow town at the end of the Chisholm Trail, but the stories of those frontier days fascinated him.

Founded in 1857, Abilene was named for a Bible passage and means "city on the plains." A decade later, the first Kansas Pacific train arrived at the new depot, and Joseph G. McCoy saw a business opportunity. Beef was in demand but in short supply in the east, while in Texas cattle were plentiful. Why not hire cowboys drive those cattle from Texas ranches north to Abilene, and then send them by train to eastern markets? For a few years, Abilene would earn the nickname "Cow Capital of the World."

After long, lonely days and nights on the trail, cowboys were ready to relax and have fun when they arrived in Abilene. Their wild behavior in the streets and saloons became notorious, and Abilene gained a reputation as "the toughest, meanest, most murderous town of the territory." The men who tried to maintain order in the town, became folk heroes to young Dwight. Thomas J. Smith became the first marshal of Abilene in 1869, hired by Mayor Theodore

Henry to bring law and order to the town. Smith implemented a "no guns in town limits" policy which was unpopular with the cowboys. He maintained order and was widely respected by Abilene's permanent residents.

On November 2, 1870, Smith tried to arrest two farmers, wanted for the murder of another man. A gunfight erupted and Smith was hit in the chest. He may have survived, but one of the farmers took an axe and decapitated him. Dwight was impressed with the story of a lawman who willingly put himself in danger to protect others and bring criminals to justice while using weapons as a last resort.

"Wild Bill" Hickok replaced Smith as marshal on April 15, 1871. Hickok enforced Smith's "no guns in town limits" rule, and his reputation as a sharp-shooter was often enough to keep the peace. Six months after his arrival, Marshal Hickok tried to stop a street fight, and ordered Phil Coe, a saloon owner, to be arrested for firing shots within the city limits. Coe turned his gun on Hickok, but Hickok's quick draw beat Coe's fire. Hearing the gunfire, Special Deputy Marshal Mike Williams came running. Hickok saw someone out of the corner of his eye and

turned to fire without waiting to see who it was. Williams was killed instantly, and Hickok was fired less than two months later.

Stories of these lawmen encouraged Dwight to read books and watch movies and television shows about the Wild West throughout his life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did Abilene get its nickname, "Cow Capital of the World?"
2. Why did Abilene need to hire a marshal?
3. Who were two of the city's early lawmen?
4. What lesson did Dwight learn from the stories he heard about Marshal Smith?

ACTIVITIES

1. Explore more about Abilene's early history.
2. The 150th anniversary of the Chisholm Trail was in 2017. Find out more about the history of the Trail on the Kansas State Historical Society's website at www.kshs.org.