KENTUCKY'S OVERLAND TRADE WITH THE ANTE-BELLUM SOUTH*

In ante-bellum days great droves of cattle, hogs, or sheep, and wagon-loads of bacon, salt, or gunpowder directed toward southern markets were frequent sights along the badly made roads and trails of Kentucky. Of the two kinds of trade that comprised Kentucky's overland traffic—the livestock and the wagon trade—the livestock trade was the first to begin and the last to cease.

Although Kentucky very early became interested in manufacturing, she developed first and fastest in agriculture and stock-raising. This was due in a large measure to lack of transportation facilities. Michaux said that there was not a single Kentucky product except ginseng that would bear the expense of transportation by land to Philadelphia, as twenty-five pounds transported that way would cost more than a thousand taken by water. Whiskey, into which Kentucky's grain was converted, could carry, as F. J. Turner says, "the crop in a small bulk with high value, while the livestock could walk to a market."

Just when the first livestock was driven from Kentucky to the South is not known. The first statistics I have found concerning the stock that passed Cumberland Gap date from 1821. However, it is certain that the trade began very much earlier than that, for F. A. Michaux, writing in 1802, speaks of the great droves of cattle and horses being sent to the southern states at that time. It is not likely that much stock was sent from the state before 1782 (the year of the last big Indian raid into Kentucky), because of the sparsity of population and of the danger from Indian attacks. In 1792 we find Kentucky making an effort to improve the Wilderness Trail, the transmontane path over which she had intercourse with the southern states. Undoubtedly this action was taken in order to facilitate trade in

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livestock, as well as to encourage settlers to enter the state. It seems safe to say, therefore, that by 1800, in which year Kentucky had a population of 220,959, the livestock trade was well under way.

Before 1802 the Wilderness Trail, which led from Crab Orchard through Rockcastle, Laurel, Knox, and Bell counties to the Holston River in Virginia, was the road over which most of the Kentucky stock left the state. Previous to 1797 the trail had been a mere bridle path, but by that year both the road from Crab Orchard to Cumberland Gap, and the branch from Hazel Patch to the vicinity of Richmond, Kentucky, had been opened as wagon roads. In the same year a toll-gate was erected on the Crab Orchard branch near Cumberland Ford. Here the droves were halted, the stock enumerated, and the tolls collected. It is from the statistics collected at the toll-gate that we gain some idea of the amount and value of the livestock driven to the southern markets.

To reach the markets in Philadelphia or Baltimore, Kentucky drovers followed a road which connected with the Wilderness Road on the Holston River, and ran through western Virginia and Maryland to Philadelphia. A branch of the Virginia road led to Richmond, where Kentuckians found a market for their stock. After 1802 several roads were built across eastern Kentucky to meet a West Virginia road which connected with the Virginia road leading to Richmond.

Besides having markets in Maryland and Virginia, Kentucky found a demand for her produce in the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and, according to the Kentucky senator Robert Wickliffe, even in Florida. Knoxville was the center from which roads radiated to the Carolinas and to Georgia. After traversing a road from Cumberland Gap to Knoxville, drovers could easily follow the French Broad valley into North Carolina. Having crossed the western part of that state, they could enter South Carolina via Saluda Gap. From Saluda Gap the route was via Reedy River, a tributary of Saluda River, and Columbia to Charleston. The distance from Lexington to Charleston by this circuitous route was 553 miles, according to Melish. Michaux said that this route was 700 miles long, and that it took a drove of horses eighteen or twenty days to traverse it. The route into Georgia was also via Knoxville.

By way of Nashville drovers took their stock into Alabama and Mississippi. The Kentucky road from Maysville to Nashville made up the northern link of the old Natchez Trace, the road which was followed into Mississippi. These tedious and roundabout routes to the southern markets involved a tariff on the labor of the country, because they necessitated a loss of time and labor to the livestock producer.

A description of the manner in which livestock was driven over these old roads affords one of the most interesting features in the study of the livestock trade. A number of early western travelers have left accounts of the droves of stock which they met on the road to market. We can picture a drove of thirty-odd horses, attended by five or six drovers, as they travel over the narrow and mountainous path called the Wilderness Road, stop at the various farmhouses along the road for corn, halt at the Cumberland toll-gate to be enumerated, and having climbed the mountain at Cumberland Gap, turn toward the southland.

Michaux said that horses were driven to market in troops of fifteen, twenty, or thirty together. Cattle, however, were herded in even larger groups: usually two or three hundred together. As for hogs, the numbers in a single group were astounding. Travelers in the old days were astonished to see on the road droves of as many as five thousand hogs. An old letter, dated November 28, 1823, describes a scene familiar to Kentuckians of that period. It said:

"We have encountered immense droves of hogs going into your part of Virginia. At Squire Goodsons's . . . . were two droves of seven hundred or eight hundred each; and yesterday we met two others as numerous. . . . . We have a band of hog-drivers from Kentucky for our messmates tonight bound eastwardly with I don't know how many hundreds."[1] Cumings, who traveled in Maryland in 1807, wrote that he passed "a drove of one hundred and thirty cows and oxen, which one Johnston was driving from the neighborhood of Lexington in Kentucky, to Baltimore."

Of course such droves of stock gave employment to a large number of Kentucky drovers. It is evident that the drover was usually some other than the farmer or producer, because the marketing of the stock required more time than a man might readily spare from his farm, and furthermore a drove of stock required more than one man to attend it. Cumings said that the man Johnston had six assistants to help him with his drove of one hundred and twenty cattle.[2] During the agitation for a railroad across Kentucky to Charleston, South Carolina, Robert Y. Hayne said that "the apprehended danger to the drover, tavern-keeper, and small farmer" was "altogether imaginary." Thus it seems that the drover belonged to a professional class, the members of which contracted to drive to market the stock belonging to one or more farmers.

Drovers usually chose fall or early winter as the season for marketing their stock. The farmers bought their hogs in the spring, fattened them, and then sent them to market in the fall. According to Michaux, horses were driven into South Carolina "at the beginning of winter, the time when business is briskest in Carolina, and when the conductors are not apprehensive of the yellow fever."

As the drovers took their herds down through Kentucky toward Cumberland Gap, they stopped at the various farmhouses along the way to procure food for their stock. "Farmers living along the mountain roads exhausted their lands in efforts to furnish a supply of food and forage sufficient for the journey. In the Teays valley in Virginia, farmers raised nothing but corn, which they sold to Kentucky drovers at a sacrifice in the effort to get ready cash."[3] Part of the way the livestock could procure food for itself. Hogs were allowed to forage on the acorn lands, while horses and cattle were permitted to graze among the Kentucky cane brakes. One traveler said that oxen "only travel mornings and evenings, often stopping to graze, and going but a short distance in a day."

By the time the drover had stopped so often along the way, he had not only gone to a great deal of expense, but had also lost much time. The Hon. Robert Wickliffe of Lexington in an address to the people sums up the disadvantages of the method of marketing just described. He said that "the method involved too great a tax upon producer, trader, and consumer . . . . From the slow travel of the hog, it takes the drover from thirty to sixty days to take a drove of hogs to market—the hands from ten to twenty days to return after sales are affected. . . . Besides each hog averages a clear loss of twenty pounds in weight before he is sold; then add to this, also, that the average cost of taking a hog to market is four dollars, so that a drover who drives five thousand head to market loses ten per cent in weight in his hogs, and has to pay twenty thousand dollars for taking them to market . . . . so that to take [Kentucky's] stocks of hogs over land to market can fall very little short of five hundred thousand dollars annually, besides the loss of time and weight."[4]

Although Mr. Wickliffe admitted these things to be true, he nevertheless considered Kentucky's overland trade to the south to be "three fold in value the amount of trade by river."[5] He went so far as to say that while "I admit the value of our river trade, on the other hand I consider our intercourse with the south overland indispensable to us—so much so, that without it we would, in our ruinous trade elsewhere become bankrupt in a twelvemonth." Although Mr. Wickliffe in his enthusiasm may have exaggerated the importance of the overland trade somewhat, nevertheless a study of the history of the trade will show that the south was in a large measure dependent upon Kentucky for its livestock.

A complete history of Kentucky's livestock trade cannot be given, because of the insufficiency and inaccuracy of statistics dealing with it. The trade, however, like every other trade, had marked periods of fluctuation and depression, some of which can be fairly well described. Before 1814 Kentucky had already established markets in Maryland, Virginia, and the two Carolinas. After the close of the Creek War in that year, new markets were opened up in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. The planters of these states desired pork to feed their slaves and families, mules to work in their cotton fields, and both saddle and carriage horses for conveyance. All of these products Kentucky sent them by way of Nashville.

At the same time that this section of the country was opening up, the farmers of the Bluegrass began to raise livestock more extensively for another reason. The period 1815-1835 was one of depression in the tobacco industry throughout the United States. After the Napoleonic Wars, the West Indies and a number of European countries became strong competitors in the foreign tobacco markets. Farmers in the Bluegrass, finding the raising of livestock for the southern and eastern markets more profitable, converted their tobacco fields into pasture land. The amount of stock that passed through Cumberland Gap during this period seems to have increased every year or two, until in 1835 there is recorded as having passed the Gap, $1,698,812 worth of stock.[6]

Within this same period, however, there occurred two or three years of depression. This was caused by the tariff and nullification controversy. Kentucky, desiring a tariff to protect her growing hemp industry, broke away from the traditional southern policies, in retaliation for which the other southern states began to boycott Kentucky products. So hostile was public opinion in South Carolina, we find the press gleefully reporting the failure of Kentucky drovers to sell their products there. The *Camden* (S. C.) *Journal* said:

"We are pleased to hear, that a Kentucky drover, with 30 or 40 very fine horses and excellent mules has been for full ten days in Statesburg, and such is the spirit of independence and opposition to unconstitutional and inexpedient legislation, that he has not been able to sell one. . . . . Heretofore an early drove of horses and mules would have been sold out in ten days at Statesburg."[7] Georgia, as well as South Carolina, discriminated against Kentucky products, and in order to favor Tennessee citizens without being imposed upon by Kentucky traders, recommended to "our Tennessee friends, who intend to make ventures amongst us the ensuing winter, with horses, mules, or hogs, to procure from some of their members of Congress, or some other known or respectable individuals, letters certifying their citizenship, and that the articles they have for sale are the products of Tennessee"! All of these things were said and done at the very outset of the tariff controversy in 1828.

By 1831 the independent spirit of South Carolina seems to have abated somewhat. In that year a South Carolina paper stated that a great number of horses had been driven through Greenville that season, and that on one day there were twelve hundred horses and mules from Kentucky and Tennessee in that village.[8] The editor marveled how so many could be disposed of in those hard times, and conjectured that some of those so greatly opposed to buying Kentucky cattle three years before had relaxed a little. Henry Clay told this anecdote of Calhoun: that he joined in the adoption of the boycott resolution; but when he found he had to pay two prices for pork at Christmas time, he declared if that were the patriotism on which the resolutions were based, he would not conform to them. Perhaps the fact that other Carolinians had the same experience as Calhoun, accounts for the large droves of Kentucky stock in Greenville in 1831.

Although there was assuredly a decrease in the livestock trade for three or four years, Kentuckians seemed not to have let that worry them, for in reference to the boycott resolutions of South Carolina, Clay said:

"They [the South Carolinians] must have supposed us as stupid as the sires of one the descriptions of the stock [referring to mules] of which that trade consisted, if they imagined that their resolutions would affect our principles. Our drovers cracked their whips, blew their horns, and passed the Seleuda gap to other markets where better humors existed, and equal or greater profits were made."[9]

So it was during the panic of 1837: Kentucky managed to sell her stock in spite of unfavorable money conditions. During the panic year the resolution restricting branches of the Bank of Kentucky from purchasing bills, except within the state of Kentucky, was so far rescinded as to permit the Frankfort and Maysville branches to purchase bills at 90 and 120 days on North and South Carolina and Virginia, in order to enable the Kentucky drovers to carry their livestock to those markets. Likewise during the panic year 1841-1842, the amount of stock leaving the state through Cumberland Gap seems not to have decreased, for we find that the following stock passed the toll-gate in that year:[10]

2,765 horses
2,247 mules
2,406 beef cattle
54,813 hogs
718 sheep

The livestock trade was maintained in such proportions until nearly 1850. Even as late as 1864 a Kentucky business directory noted that "large numbers of horses and mules are annually driven east to the Atlantic states for sale." The decline in the trade was due in part to the improved methods of transportation on the Ohio, by way of which Kentucky had been sending livestock down the Mississippi to New Orleans.[11] The Ohio River now began to absorb more of this traffic. The river cities which were growing up began to establish packing houses, and thus to furnish a home market for livestock. Other factors in the decline of the overland trade were the increase of railroad mileage in the Ohio-Mississippi Valleys about 1853, and the consequent removal of the grain and livestock belts from the Ohio valley to the Northwest.

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Over the same roads that the livestock traveled, the wagon-loads of bacon, gunpowder, whiskey, salt, hemp, cotton, and woolen manufactures went to market. This trade may be said to have begun with 1797, the year in which the Wilderness Trail was opened as a wagon road.

One of the first articles to be exported from the state by wagon was salt. This product, which was manufactured from the earliest settlement of the state, soon became the principal article of trade of the Bluegrass region. To encourage the industry, the Virginia assembly passed a number of laws, and later the Kentucky legislature granted to manufacturers special privileges—such as low rates for land—and improved the roads over which salt had to be transported. By 1812, however, the output in this part of the state had declined, because of competition with products from the Kanawha River works.

After 1800 Clay County became the most important salt center in Kentucky. By 1846, the fifteen furnaces in that county were producing yearly 200,000 bushels of the finest quality of salt. The tributaries of the Wilderness Road were improved chiefly with the object of facilitating the transportation of salt from numerous works located in the vicinity of Manchester. Over these roads ox-drawn wagons and packhorses from Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and other sections came to Clay County for salt. "An old ledger examined by Miss Georgia Reid of Manchester, Clay County, shows that hides, furs, skeins of thread, flour, whiskey, and other commodities were traded for Clay County salt."[12]

Bacon, as well as salt, early became an important article in the wagon trade. Large road wagons, often drawn by six horses, carried this article to South Carolina and neighboring states. In the year 1828, we find the southern newspapers exhibiting the same glee over the boycotting of Kentucky bacon as they had done over the boycotting of livestock. Under date of October 4, 1828, the *Charleston Mercury* published the following extract from a letter of a South Carolinian:

"You may be, perhaps, amused to hear that some days back, a wagon from Kentucky, loaded with bacon arrived at Camden. No inducement could prevail upon the inhabitants to purchase a single pound of it. They were told they could have it at four cents, if they would take it. They would not take it upon any terms."[13] On another occasion, three Kentucky wagons, unjustly suspected of belonging to Henry Clay, were forced to sell out at a great sacrifice or return with their loads to Kentucky.

Trade in gunpowder, a Kentucky manufacture, flourished during the war of 1812. In 1810 sixty-three gunpowder mills were operating in this state. Big Bone Cave, which by 1814 was yielding 500 pounds of saltpetre a day, furnished the raw material for the gunpowder mills. During the war, and for several years previous, Mammoth Cave was also worked for saltpetre. There were, in addition, numerous saltpetre caves among the Rockcastle Hills, where great quantities of the material were manufactured during the war. We know that a great deal of this gunpowder was carried by wagon to the Atlantic states for sale, for in 1814 *Niles' Register* notes that "many loads of gunpowder are latterly brought to the states on the seaboard."

In 1796 Nathan Burrows introduced the manufacture of hemp into Kentucky. From this time on factories and ropewalks rapidly sprang up, so that by 1809 Kentucky was said to be supplying most of the baling used in the cotton country. Hemp was made into bagging and the cheaper kinds of cordage used on farms, plantations, and river boats. As early as 1808 "a Kentucky manufacturer sent three wagons to Tennessee, laden with bagging, country linen, and small bale-rope."[14] Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the hemp industry in Kentucky declined somewhat, as Missouri, her western rival, in 1860 produced almost as many yards of bagging as did Kentucky herself.

Cotton manufacturing in Kentucky developed later than hemp manufacturing. Very little cotton was grown in this state, as nearly the whole of that manufactured in Lexington was brought from Tennessee, New Orleans, or Georgia. In 1816 one manufacturer sent bale cloth to Huntsville and Winchester, Alabama, in wagons which brought back cotton. During March, 1815, a Lexington merchant sent 50,000 pounds of yarn by wagon to Baltimore. F. A. Michaux, who visited Kentucky in 1802, said that a great quantity of cotton was sent from Tennessee "by land to Kentucky where each family is supplied with it to manufacture articles for their domestic wants."

Besides trading in domestic manufactures, Kentucky merchants acted as middlemen between the eastern manufacturer and the southern consumer. This trade was mostly in cotton and woolen cloth, manufactured in Philadelphia or Baltimore. The merchandise was taken by wagon from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, Baltimore, or Wheeling, and from these points shipped down the Ohio to Maysville, Covington, or Louisville. From these cities it was distributed into the interior of the state by means of large canvas-covered vehicles, known as road wagons. As the Kentucky roads were improved, this merchandise began to be taken by wagon as "far as Knoxville which was the distributing point for the back country of the two Carolinas and Alabama." Speed states that as late as 1825 and, perhaps, later, goods in great quantities were hauled over the road from Limestone to Crab Orchard; that they were taken through Cumberland Gap into the Tennessee Valley and Alabama. He also says that "citizens of Danville, alive in 1894, could remember the passing through the town wagons covered with canvas and drawn by horses with bells on their harness."[15]

Michaux, writing in 1802, said that it was an easy thing for Kentucky merchants to make their fortunes in this trade, as they usually had a year's credit from the houses at Philadelphia and Baltimore, and, secondly, that as there were so few, they could always "fix in their favor the course of colonial produce, which they take in exchange for their goods: as, through the extreme scarcity of specie, most of these transactions are done by way of barter." The merchants, however, used "every exertion in their power to get into their possession the little specie in circulation," for "only particular articles are sold for money, or in exchange for produce the sale of which is always certain, such as the linen of the country or hemp."

Such then was the character of Kentucky's wagon trade to the South. Although we have very little information concerning this trade, we know that it must have been of considerable importance, for we find that (according to Robert Y. Hayne) anyone traveling in the mountains at that time would have seen "long lines of six-horse teams constantly employed on almost impassable roads, hauling bacon and other heavy articles to the Southern states, and returning with loads of foreign goods." Hayne prophesied that not only this wagon traffic, but also much of the driving of horses and cattle on foot over the mountains would be replaced by railroad traffic, whenever the Charleston-Cincinnati railroad should be built. Although Hayne's hopes as to this particular project were shattered, other railroads eventually made unnecessary not only Kentucky's wagon trade, but also her livestock trade with the old South.

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[1]*Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 26, p. 170.
[2]Thwaites, *Early Western Travels*, vol. IV, pp. 228-229.
[3]Verhoeff, *The Kentucky Mountains*, p. 98.
[4]Quoted in pamphlet on *Kentucky Industrial and Commercial Conference Held at Louisville, 1887*, p. 26; from Basil Duke's paper on "The Commercial and the Railroad Development of Kentucky."
[5]Ibid., p. 24.
[6]Hall, *Notes on the Western States*, p. 275.
[7]Niles' *Register*, vol. 35, p. 131.
[8]Id., vol. 41, p. 132.
[9]Colton, *Life and Times of Henry Clay*, I, p. 110.
[10]Kerr, *History of Kentucky*, vol. II, p. 742.
[11]Verhoeff, *The Kentucky Mountains*, p. 100.
[12]*The History Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 3, p. 136.
[13]Niles' *Register*, vol. 35, p. 82.
[14]Victor S. Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States*, p. 243.
[15]Speed, *The Political Club*, p. 19.