

10-1-1962

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### Recommended Citation

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<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol37/iss4/2>

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# NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

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VOL. XXXVII

OCTOBER, 1962

No. 4

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## THE GREAT NEW MEXICO CATTLE RAID—1872

By CHARLES L. KENNER\*

IN THE autumn of 1872 there occurred one of the most audacious events in New Mexico's turbulent history. John Hittson—a true Titan of the Texas cattle country<sup>1</sup>—led a slashing raid into the territory searching for cattle which the Comancheros had stolen from his native ranges. For at least six weeks Hittson's armed bands terrorized the eastern outskirts of settlement rounding up and then brazenly driving several thousand cattle northward to Colorado. The raid's unsurpassed boldness has led writers from Joseph McCoy in 1873 down to the present to comment on it, but a synthesized account has never been published. The lack of one has led to the publication of much misleading data as, for instance, an account by the talented Mari Sandoz in her popular history, *The Cattlemen*. Miss Sandoz describes two raids—the first being led by H. M. Childress in 1872 which encouraged William Hittson, the Texas cowman known as Colonel John, to try his own raid in 1873. It supposedly was carried out successfully with the aid of only "three very good men with guns."<sup>2</sup> However, there was only one raid and that was led by John Hittson with at least ninety instead of three gun-

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1. For an account of Hittson's rise to prominence see the author's "John Hittson, West Texas Cattle King," accepted for publication by *West Texas Historical Association Year Book*.

2. Mari Sandoz, *The Cattlemen from the Rio Grande Across the Far Maras* (New York: Hastings House, 1958), 215.

men present. William Hittson, John's brother and an outstanding ranchman in his own right, was not even associated with it and H. M. Childress was only a subordinate on the raid.

When he decided to lead an armed expedition into New Mexico to recapture his stolen cattle, John Hittson was preparing to meet head-on a movement that had long scourged the Texas border, the Comanchero trade in stolen cattle. The Comancheros themselves had originated innocently enough soon after the conclusion of a lasting peace between the Comanches and New Mexicans in 1786, serving as small-time purveyors of civilization to the Indians. As early as the 1820's they probably began to accept cattle along with the buffalo hides they regularly received in payment for their trade goods.<sup>3</sup> Until the outbreak of the Civil War, however, the number traded was so small as to go completely unnoticed; then the situation changed radically.

The Indians may well have been encouraged to raid Texas by some federal military officials in New Mexico hoping thus to injure the Texans' war effort;<sup>4</sup> but a more significant incentive was the decreasing buffalo population on the plains which forced the Comanches to seek a substitute staple of exchange for the Comanchero's guns, ammunition, and whiskey, upon which they had grown dependent. Regardless of what motivated the Indians, the lush Texas ranges, teeming with practically untended cattle, were completely vulnerable to their lightning-like thrusts, and evidences of their activities multiplied as the Civil War continued.

In early 1864, H. T. Ketchum, a special Indian agent, visited the winter camps of the Comanches to vaccinate them for small pox and reported that not only were they holding herds of cattle, but that they were also preparing for another raid upon Texas.<sup>5</sup> Later in the same year Lieutenant Fran-

3. In 1871 some New Mexicans said the cattle trade had been going on for over fifty years. *Santa Fe Weekly Post*, June 17, 1871.

4. "Report of Indian Agent Lorenzo Labadi," *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1867* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1868), 215.

5. "Report of H. T. Ketchum, April 10, 1864," *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1864* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865), 258.

cisco Abreu, the Federal commander at Fort Bascom in eastern New Mexico, stated that New Mexican traders were bringing in large numbers of cattle from the plains.<sup>6</sup>

Thus started, the trade was not injured by the closing of the Civil War; indeed, it was given a shot in the arm. The vengeance-minded Federals blindly stripped the border of all protection for a time, and their later half-hearted efforts to stop the Indian raiding were completely unavailing. Indicative of the raids is the report of Lorenzo Labadi, a veteran New Mexican Indian agent, who visited the Comanches trying to persuade them to stop raiding in Texas. Upon his return he reported that the Indian camps were "fairly swamped" with cattle and horses and that no less than eighteen war parties were out on raids against the Texas frontier.<sup>7</sup> Since just one band of seventy-five braves were reported to have stolen 4,100 cattle in a single week,<sup>8</sup> the damage caused by such wide-spread raiding was undoubtedly tremendous.

From bitter experience, John Hittson probably learned as much about the trade as anyone. In relating an account of its workings to a Denver reporter, he blamed the losses he and other cattlemen had been suffering upon three classes of people:

First and chiefest, are a set of men in New Mexico—merchants, who occupy prominent and responsible positions before the public. Next, are what are termed *Comancheros*, a low desperate class of Greasers, who are in the employ of these merchants to perform the dirty work and act as go-betweens. Then come the Indians I have spoken of. Their plan of operation is this: The merchants . . . furnish the *Comancheros* with provisions, blankets, trinkets, and other things which an Indian admires and will work for. The *Comancheros* go to the tribes with whom they are on friendly footing, being half-blooded some of them, and make known their wants—or give their

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6. Lt. Francisco Abreu to Captain Robert Cutler, October 10, 1864. *War of the Rebellion, Official Records* (Series I), vol. 34, part 4, page 422.

7. "Report of Lorenzo Labadi," *op. cit.*, 215.

8. *Weekly New Mexican* (Santa Fe), July 21, 1868.

order, as it were—for a nice herd of Texas cattle. The Indians, who live upon this business, at once start upon their thieving mission, and are not unfrequently accompanied by these Mexicans, who are, on such occasions much more savage and expert than the Indians themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Hittson undoubtedly suffered heavily from the Comanche cattle raids, but it is impossible to determine the exact number of his losses. One of his hired hands testified many years later that “the number [of Hittson’s cattle] was lessened by a fourth, or possibly a half,”<sup>10</sup> but no estimates were made by Hittson himself of his losses. Despite his reticence, the possible scope of the loss he suffered can be surmised from the claims put forward by one of his less renowned neighbors, Lewis A. Dickson, of Wise County, who reported losing an estimated \$159,750 worth of cattle and horses to the Indians between 1868 and 1873.<sup>11</sup>

After vainly urging that the Federal authorities take effective measures to protect the cattlemen by stationing “troops or well organized companies of civilians on the frontier with orders to arrest and bring to strict account all suspicious looking characters,”<sup>12</sup> Hittson decided to take matters into his own hands in the spring of 1872. He was convinced that he could find many of his stolen stock in the valleys of the Pecos and Canadian rivers in New Mexico and determined to recapture as many as possible.

Methodically he began to carry out the plan. First, he secured “powers of attorney” from “nearly two hundred” of his fellow ranchers in Texas giving him the right to represent them in the civil courts to recover their cattle as well as his own.<sup>13</sup> Next he went to Denver and “outfitted three parties—about thirty men each.” Arming them well, he sent

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9. *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), April 29, 1873.

10. Affidavit of M. L. Johnson, May 2, 1908. Indian Depredation Cases #2996, 2997, and 3000. Records of the United States Court of Claims, Washington, D. C.

11. “Indian Depredation Claims,” *House Executive Document*, 49 Cong., 1885-1886 (37 vols., Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), XXXI, No. 125, p. 134.

12. *Colorado Chieftain* (Pueblo), July 11, 1872.

13. *Ibid.*, October 17, 1872.

them south into New Mexico where he soon joined them "and obtained another strong guard" in that territory.<sup>14</sup>

To assist him on the raid, Hittson recruited as lieutenants some veteran ranchers only slightly less notable than himself. Foremost of these was James Patterson who had operated the first large ranch on the Pecos below Fort Sumner while selling beef to the Navahos at Bosque Grande immediately after the Civil War. After selling his property there to John Chisum in 1867, he ranched elsewhere in New Mexico, rather uniquely marketing his beef through his own meat market in Santa Fe. These activities together with his continuing to sell beef to the government made him one of the largest Federal income tax payers in New Mexico in both 1867 and 1868. Sometime around 1870 he moved to Colorado, and when the New Mexican newspapers spoke of him during the raid his address was given as Denver.<sup>15</sup>

One of Hittson's more colorful aides was a veteran trail driver named H. M. Childress, the son of a remarkable pioneer Methodist circuit rider in West Texas. He had established one of the earliest ranches in Coleman County, from which he drove an average 2,500 head of cattle annually to Abilene between 1867 and 1871. Instead of prospering, however, he had "recklessly squandered many thousands of dollars" and was anxious to recoup his fortunes when he met Hittson and decided to accompany him to New Mexico. From his description he would seem to have been an important addition to Hittson's forces :

He will walk boldly into death's jaws to relieve or avenge a friend; has a nerve of iron, cool and collected under fire. Is a deadly pistol shot, and does not hesitate to use one effectively when occasion requires; yet would always rather avoid a quarrel than seek one, but will not shrink from facing the most desperate characters. . . . to his enemies he presents, in anger,

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14. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 29, 1873. Other accounts place the number of Hittson's men at sixty (*Weekly New Mexican*, September 24, 1872) and one hundred fifty (*Colorado Chieftain*, October 17, 1872).

15. James Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record of the Cattle Industry and the Cattlemen of Texas and the Adjacent Territory* (St. Louis: Woodward and Tierman, 1895), 313; *Daily New Mexican*, September 19, 1868, July 17, 1868, and May 19, 1869.

that peculiar characteristic of smiling demoniacally whilst he is plainly and openly maneuvering to shoot them through the heart.<sup>16</sup>

Rather strangely Childress was not mentioned by the contemporary New Mexican newspapers. Instead, they dwell at length on the accomplishments of a Hittson aide named Martin Childers, who struck terror into the hearts of the Mexicans. One is tempted to believe Martin Childers and H. M. Childress might have been the same person, and either McCoy or the New Mexican newspapers misspelled his name; however, just as there was an authentic Texas rancher named H. M. Childress, there was also one named Martin Childers who was listed as one of the leading cattlemen of northwest Texas, running 10,000 head of cattle in 1870.<sup>17</sup>

Hittson's operations in New Mexico must be pieced together from a number of separate and often conflicting fragmentary sources. He himself only stated that his men struck first at "Port Dilune" [Puerto de Luna] on the Pecos River in July, 1872. His account maddeningly (to the historian) boxed the operations of the entire summer into one terse sentence: His men combed the countryside and "in a few weeks time recovered from four to six thousand of my cattle."<sup>18</sup> Fortunately other contemporary records are not so scanty, and it is possible to fill out the details of the raid.

An unintended result of Hittson's operations was to help spoil a summer's campaigning by a hard-hitting army officer named R. S. Mackenzie. Mackenzie had painfully trailed a large herd of stolen cattle across the Staked Plains, hoping to capture the Comancheros who had taken them. Unfortunately for him, when he reached the New Mexican settlements he found that the robbers "had left . . . to escape capture by a party of citizens who were arresting cattle thieves, and tak-

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16. Joseph G. McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (Washington: The Rare Book Shop, 1932), 346.

17. John Ashton, "Texas Cattle Trade in 1870," *The Cattleman*, XXXVIII (July, 1951), 75.

18. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 29, 1873.

ing possession of stolen cattle.”<sup>19</sup> Mackenzie was only the most important of several who left brief notations of some aspect of the Hittson raid, while remaining unaware of its over-all nature.

By no means did Hittson always act in a ruthless or violent manner while in New Mexico. He was comparatively tactful with the powerful Romero family, who were both the leading ranchers and office holders of San Miguel County—holding such lucrative positions as sheriff and probate judge as virtual personal possessions. When Hittson arrived at their ranch he diplomatically offered to repurchase any stolen animals that they might have unwittingly bought. His hosts, quite happy not to force the issue with the well-armed Texans, quickly agreed to his proposal and released his cattle with fervent expressions of regret—pocketing any rancor they might have felt along with his money.<sup>20</sup>

The reasoning behind Hittson’s suave behavior is found in an agreement he and the Romeros made as part of their transaction. The Spanish *rico* agreed to keep secret the fact that he had been paid for his cattle. Thus, when the smaller Mexican ranchers saw how easily Hittson had regained his cattle from the all-powerful Romeros, they also had a resurgence of courtesy and released their “cattle with Texas brands . . . hurriedly with tactful Spanish [apologies] for the lamentable mistake.”<sup>21</sup> Not all proved so tractable, as others ran their stock into the mountains and slaughtered them for their hides rather than docilely wait for their ill-gotten fruits to be stripped from them.

Inevitably resentment towards the Anglo invaders grew as Hittson’s activities intensified and his men flaunted their contempt for the native population. At Las Vegas a delegation of townsmen petitioned Don Miguel Otero, formerly New Mexico’s delegate to the United States Congress, to use his

19. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, 1872, 151.

20. Interview, George E. Crammer to Edgar McMechem, May 7, 1934. MS. in Colorado Historical Museum Library, Denver, Colorado.

21. Edgar McMechem, “John Hittson, Cattle King,” *The Colorado Magazine*, XI (May, 1934), 169.



prestige and prominence on the Texans. Reluctantly Otero undertook the task and—with his two teen-age sons—went to the raider's camp where he urged their leader "to have greater regard for the property of the citizens of New Mexico."<sup>22</sup>

The Texan, remembered by young Miguel Jr.—the future territorial governor of New Mexico—as a "large, red-headed man with chin whiskers, weighing fully two hundred and twenty-five pounds," answered Otero harshly:

"These God damn greasers have been stealing our horses and cattle for the past fifty years, and we got together and thought we would come up this way and have a grand round-up, and that is why we are here. What is more we intend to take all the horses and cattle we come across and drive them back to Texas where they belong. My advice to your fellows is: Don't attempt to interfere with what we are doing unless you are looking for trouble."<sup>23</sup>

That ended the conversation.

More violent encounters between the native population and Hittson's forces have been passed down by some of the veteran settlers there. Not too unexpectedly, it was more often the American element than the Mexican that resisted. J. Evetts Haley relates that Jim Duncan, an early freighter, recalled that a rancher named Simpson asserted that the Texans were not going to take the cattle he had bought from the *Comancheros*. As the Texans jerked open the gate to the corral where the cattle were located, Simpson jumped into the opening. Undaunted, the Texans shot him down and cold-bloodedly drove the cattle out over his body.<sup>24</sup>

A similar incident concerning an Anglo rancher near Anton Chico, who had long done a thriving business in stolen cattle, was also recalled long years afterwards by an old *Comanchero*. With apparent gusto the old Mexican related

22. Miguel Otero, *My Life on the Frontier 1864-1882* (New York: Press of the Pioneers, 1935), 62.

23. *Ibid.*, 63.

24. J. Evetts Haley, "The Comanchero Trade," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (January, 1935), 173.

his tale of the inevitable clash when the Texans arrived at the Anglo's ranch in their methodical search for cattle:

The *Tejanos* recovered about fifteen hundred head of cattle with their brands but not without a fight. The cowboys hired by the *Americanos* brought out their guns and there was real war. The *Tejanos* were victorious and besides recovering their cattle, they took one of the cowboys of the *Americanos* and lynched him. They left him hanging from a pine tree close to the house.<sup>25</sup>

While the above accounts may have acquired more than a little garnishment during the many years before they were written down, at least one sensational clash between the raiders and the New Mexicans is substantiated beyond all doubt. At the little town of Loma Parada, located about twenty-five miles north of Las Vegas, the populace, led by their police chief and postmaster, Edward Seaman, decided to defend their cattle against the encroachments of the Texans. At the first they were successful for, when some of the Texans arrived on September 8, they found seven head of Hittson's cattle, but were prevented from driving them off. The next day they returned twenty strong "but found the police of the precinct awaiting them and they left." The Texans gave the villagers little time in which to celebrate their apparent victory for the next day a raiding party of sixty gunmen appeared, ready to brook no show of resistance.

Of the violent tragedy that followed, two lengthy but conflicting reports exist. According to the Mexican's official inquest,<sup>26</sup> the immediate trouble began when Julian Baca, a resident, refused to surrender two horses. He tried to run into his house to escape the Texans but "was seized from behind and pounded with pistols . . . until his body was black." A neighbor, Toribo Garcia, attracted by Señora Baca's screams that her husband was being killed, dashed into the street, gun in hand. Over-awed by the sight of the armed

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25. Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed Them Cactus* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), 60.

26. *Weekly New Mexican*, September 24, 1872.

Texans, he hastily retreated towards the protection of his home but was shot through the back by one of the raiders, dying almost instantly.

By this time Seaman had arrived at the scene with unfortunate consequences to himself. One of the Texans immediately accosted him with the remark, "What are you doing here, you d—son of a b—h," and following it up with a slashing blow with his rifle across Seaman's face, "cutting a deep gash across the cheek bone, and putting out the left eye." Delirious from the blow, Seaman unwittingly ran into the corral only to find it filled with his adversaries. When he turned to escape, he was dragged back into it by a Texan who snarled at him, "hold on you son of a b—h, we are not done with you yet." Desperately Seaman wrenched loose and stumbled towards the door of the house when he was "shot from behind, falling forward on his face—the ball entered the back part of the head and came out just above the forehead tearing away quite a large piece of the skull, and causing instant death."

After doing away with their chief foe, the Texans raced up and down the streets, firing wildly and running off stock. When the local *alcalde* ventured into the street to protest he was callously shot through both legs. This ended the Mexican's last shred of resistance, and they helplessly huddled behind their adobe walls until finally their tormentors left the tortured town to its misery.

The Mexican was not the only side of the story; James Patterson wrote a letter to the editor of the *New Mexican*, in which he explained that the Texans were acting purely in self defense. According to him Hittson's men were at the corral where the shooting took place:

. . . demanding the cattle of the men claiming them within the enclosure, when Mr. Seaman rushed into their midst loudly calling to a party of armed followers to 'come on,' and without further warning, presented a revolver in the face of Mr. Childers with a threat of instant death. So sudden was the attack that Childers had no time to draw and defend himself. A man

from behind seeing the peril of Mr. Childers . . . shot Seaman through the head killing him instantly. The cowardly crew who were to have helped in the attack, at this moment turned and fled, leaving the ground to the Texans.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the Texan's version of the Loma Parda incident, a storm of controversy flared through the newspapers of the state as angry editors sought to turn their readers against the invaders. Bitterly the *New Mexico Union* described the Texans as coming into the area "with braggadocio, swaggering and offers of violence," complaining that "too often these blowing bullies have succeeded with their pretensions." It concluded its tirade with a rousing appeal for action:

We say no just . . . man should allow himself . . . to be trampled upon by the disgusting, cowardly pretender. The time has come when people should hold their rights in their own hands. We repeat our wonder at the submission of a wronged people. For weeks, men in bands from Texas have ranged with pistols, rifles and knives and have taken cattle where they pleased, under the pretense that they had at some time been unlawfully taken from Texas. Is there another county in the United States where the whole community would not rebel at the outrage? We say to the people, take care of your own interest. You have no safety but in your own hands.<sup>28</sup>

While this overwhelmingly represented the majority viewpoint in New Mexico, it was not the only one. The *New Mexican* in the same issue that carried an account of the tragedy was surprisingly moderate. It summed up its opinion thusly: "there is a soreness on the part of the innocent purchasers of the stock, but they cannot deny the justice of the Texan's claims."<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of the justice of the Texans' claims it is hard to excuse the brutality at Loma Parda. Hittson himself, perhaps not too proud of it, even sought to deny all connection with it. The next year he told a Denver reporter, "I had no engagement at arms with any parties, as they saw it was

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27. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1872.

28. *The New Mexico Union* (Santa Fe), October 1, 1872.

29. *Weekly New Mexican*, October 1, 1873.

useless to interpose against my outfit. The death of two men was laid to my boys, but I am positive other parties were at fault.”<sup>30</sup>

As can be concluded from the above incidents, Hittson's raid could easily have degenerated into a state of complete lawlessness. Indeed many of the New Mexicans charged that this was the case. A standard complaint was that “when they came to recover their cattle, they would drive every cow which was in their path.”<sup>31</sup> Otero made no bones about calling them out and out rustlers and made the charge that the leader of the marauders “took the proceeds of the raid and invested it in Denver, erecting one of that city's largest office buildings.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite these charges, Hittson was not a furtive character while in New Mexico and was careful to operate within the admittedly lax limits of the law. Both he and Patterson were listed as frequent guests at the Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe,<sup>33</sup> and doubtlessly visited quite openly in Las Vegas and the other leading towns of New Mexico. Finally, the New Mexicans, unable to cope with his party by force, did turn to legal means for, in Hittson's words, “some of the parties from whom I had taken my own cattle, secured indictments against me to the number of about a dozen.”<sup>34</sup> He posted bond to stay out of jail until the district court would meet the next spring. On top of this two of the area ranchers, Pribert and Kirchner by name, had obtained writs of replevin preventing their cattle from being driven from the state until the courts had decided their proper owner.<sup>35</sup>

Bad as these difficulties were, they were compounded by other sources of annoyance to Hittson which served to dis-

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30. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 29, 1873.

31. Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed Them Cactus*, 64.

32. Otero, *My Life on the Frontier*, 63. It is interesting to note in regard to this charge that in 1888 Hittson's sons-in-law did build Denver's first modern office building—Otero's account was first published some sixty years after the raid.

33. *Daily New Mexican*, July 30, 1872; August 8, 1872; August 19, 1872; September 14, 1872.

34. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 29, 1873.

35. *Daily New Mexican*, October 4, 1872.

tract his attention throughout the time he was in New Mexico. He had left his son Jesse in charge of the home ranch in Texas with instructions to send a large herd over the Pecos Trail to Colorado. This was done, but at a point on the Pecos near the Texas-New Mexico boundary a party of Apaches stole all but five of the herders' remuda. Only by borrowing a few horses from another trail outfit, that luckily was close by, did Hittson's crew reach Chisum's ranch near Fort Sumner where they could purchase more horses. When Hittson heard of the robbery, he unsuccessfully searched for the thieves and then on September 9 wrote a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at Washington, requesting compensation at a rate of one hundred fifty dollars per horse and two hundred dollars per mule, for a grand total of \$6,050.<sup>36</sup> This was the only claim for compensation he ever made, but it would be thirty years after his death before any restitution would be secured.

A more serious worry than the loss of his horses also plagued Hittson during the later summer. His brother William arrived in New Mexico with a herd of cattle and reported that Jesse had been killed by Indians.<sup>37</sup> Happily, this later proved to be only a mistaken rumor started by a cowboy who had fled the scene of an all day battle in which Jesse and eleven cowboys held off some seventy-five Comanches near the present town of Ballinger in July, 1872, although they were unable to save a herd of seven hundred cattle they had been tending.<sup>38</sup> William Hittson apparently heard the rumor about the time he left the Concho country on his trek towards the Pecos.

Even if the rumor was baseless, Hittson had good reason to be anxious about the seventeen-year-old son upon whom he had placed so much responsibility. On September 14, the *Weatherford Times* carried a report that young Hittson had

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36. John Hittson to Francis A. Walker, September 9, 1872, Indian Depredation Case #3001, Records of the United States Court of Claims, Washington, D. C.

37. *Daily New Mexican*, September 2, 1872.

38. Deposition of Sam Gholson, November 30, 1899, Indian Depredation Case #3000, Records of the United States Court of Claims, Washington, D. C.

been attacked by four Indians in Stephens County. The youth reportedly killed one of them and then escaped while the other three were carrying off their comrade's body.<sup>39</sup> Lightly indeed did the frontiersmen wear their scalps.

Worry about the happenings in Texas, coupled with the fact that his New Mexican operations were halted until the court would meet the next spring, prompted Hittson to return to Texas. He left Santa Fe on the stage on October 25 after naming James Patterson and Thomas Stockton as his representatives in charge of recovering his stolen cattle and those for whom he himself held "Powers of Attorney."<sup>40</sup> The activities of these two, however, were sharply curtailed by the legal uncertainties, and troubles steadily mounted for their subordinates.

In December Martin Childers and several others were arrested to face charges of horse stealing and murdering Seaman and Garcia. They were placed in the Las Vegas jail, the "strongest and costliest edifice of its kind" in New Mexico, but escaped within three days. The disappointed New Mexicans, suspecting bribery, imprisoned the jailor and four of the five guards on duty when the escape occurred. Then woe-fully the *New Mexican* observed that "Vigorous efforts will be made for [Childer's] recapture, but it is safe to say that he will never again be heard of in our Territory."<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile in Texas Hittson was making preparations for moving his headquarters to a ranch he owned near Deer Trail, Colorado. While working at this he received a letter from William Veale, the chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the Texas legislature, asking for a detailed statement of his experiences and findings in New Mexico. Hittson replied that he had only partly succeeded in accomplishing his purposes of putting "a stop to the Indian depredations as far as possible" and recovering his stolen property. He had "got possession of between five and six thousand head of cattle, which are now being herded in . . . Colorado, but the

39. Copied in *Galveston Daily News*, September 20, 1872.

40. *Daily New Mexican*, October 26, 1872.

41. *Ibid.*, December 28, 1872 and January 5, 1873.

above were recovered at enormous expense, nearly equal to the value of the property recovered." In relation to a plea for state protection "without which these thieving depredations will continue so long as there is cattle or horses on our frontier," Hittson estimated the number of cattle driven from Texas and disposed of by the Comancheros during the previous twenty years was one hundred thousand head.<sup>42</sup>

Even while Hittson was quietly working on his ranch in Texas, colorful accounts of his recent raid extolling his successes and virtues spread rapidly over the country. Speaking of reports, the *Rocky Mountain News* stated: "John Hittson's operations against the border thieves seem to have attracted general attention; and our bold, honest and wealthy stockman has gained a national reputation by the effectiveness of his operations and its entire lack of 'red tape!'"<sup>43</sup>

A particularly vivid report was published in the *New York Evening Post* under the striking headline: "Cattle Jack—A modern Hercules to the Rescue!" Described by the Colorado papers as "descriptive, spicy, and entertaining," the story outlined Hittson's exploits: He "scatters his spies over [New Mexico] and hears of thousands of cattle with the marks he is seeking, 'drops upon' their present owner, and . . . says: 'You have got my cattle and those of my friends; I have come after them, and propose to take them with me.'"<sup>44</sup>

Not even the courts were able to bother the Hittson of the reports: "He attends the sittings with his men and the judge's eyes are opened so that he knows good from evil immediately and every animal is forthcoming." The article concluded with the prediction that Hittson was likely to recover a million dollars worth of property, and "let us hope he receives a handsome part for his own."

Unconcerned with the grandiloquent descriptions of his

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42. *The Daily Statesman* (Austin), February 2, 1873. In contrast to this Charles Goodnight stated 300,000 had been run off during the Civil War alone. Haley, *Charles Goodnight*, 138.

43. *Rocky Mountain News*, January 5, 1873.

44. Copied in *Colorado Chieftain*, January 16, 1873.



successes and attributes, Hittson returned to Las Vegas in March for the meeting of the district court. According to his own statement only one case was actually tried. When it resulted in a verdict favoring him, the district attorney dropped the remainder of the cases.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately the court records were apparently destroyed in a subsequent fire so his account cannot be amplified.

The results of Hittson's New Mexico raid have been distorted. It has been generally accepted by writers that he recovered eighteen thousand cattle and that he sold them for the benefit of the original owners.<sup>46</sup> Hittson in April of 1873, however, stated, "I recovered between five and six thousand cattle that had been stolen from myself and immediate neighbors,—worth between \$60,000 and \$70,000,—and we have them still in our possession."<sup>47</sup> There is no indication how much, if any, the Texans who granted Hittson "Powers of Attorney" benefitted from the raid.

It is also difficult to gauge the effect it had upon the suppression of the *Comanchero* cattle trade with the Indians. Certainly the market for stolen cattle in New Mexico would have been hurt if it was established that the original owners could reclaim their stock there. Hittson's efforts, however, did not end the trade. It would be the forcing of the Indians onto reservations, the killing of their buffalo, and the relentless patrolling of the plains, not the actions of individual cowmen, that would do that.

According to Miguel Otero, an unintended outcome of the Hittson raid was an increase in race antagonism between the native New Mexicans and the Texans. He stated that the raid

. . . revealed that hostile and vengeful feeling displayed by the Texans which produced acts of lawlessness calculated to make the name "Tejano" a hated word among the New Mexicans. It is said that mothers were in the habit of censuring their

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45. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 29, 1873.

46. McMechem, "John Hittson, Cattle King," *Colorado Magazine*, XI, 169; Walter Prescott Webb, editor, *The Handbook of Texas*, (2 vols., Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1951), I, 818; McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade*, 345.

47. *Rocky Mountain News*, April 29, 1873.

children with the dire threat: "If you are not good, I'll give you to the Tejanos, who are coming back."<sup>48</sup>

It is difficult to arrive at definite conclusions on Hittson's raid. In the absence of absolute information on his motives, a number of interpretations could be placed on his actions. He might be considered a rancher trying to make the frontier a safer place to live, a hard-pressed cowman lashing out against his enemies furiously and blindly, or—as the New Mexicans seemed to think—a ruthless villain out to make as much profit as possible from an unfortunate situation. Whatever the case, it was an interesting, unique, and little-noticed episode in the history of the southwestern frontier.

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48. Otero, *My Life on the Frontier*, 63.