By Mary Hooper

In the first half of the 19th Century, as a youthful United States was beginning its westward expansion, the southern and southwestern parts of Kansas were a wild, windswept, treeless place. There was little human settlement. Indians -- among them the Pawnee, Kiowa and Osage -- roamed the plains, but as nomads, following the great herds of buffalo.

Around 1850, the first non-Indians started to show up. Some were trappers, others just passing through as they headed to California to join the Gold Rush. After them came the buffalo hunters who slew

Commissary – Original Comanche Pool warehouse, post office, etc. (Collection of Phyllis Scherich.)

Cliffs – Salt Fork of the Arkansas on Merrill Ranch – Heart of Comanche Pool area. (Photo by Phyllis Scherich.)
As the Civil War waned, newcomers, mostly white settlers but also some former slaves, trickled in. Their arrival coincided with the start of the cattle trail era that would lead to the formation of the largest cattle cooperative in the U.S., the famous Comanche Cattle Pool of Kansas and Oklahoma.

For some 20 years, Phyllis Scherich has been studying, documenting and researching the history of the pool from a perfect vantage point. She and her husband, Larry “Dee” Scherich, live on and manage the Merrill Ranch, a 17,000-acre spread in Comanche County, Kansas, which was once part of the working headquarters of the Comanche Pool.

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Although the Comanche Pool lasted only a few years, from 1880 to 1885, it played a vital role in the development of cattle ranching in Kansas and Oklahoma, according to Scherich.

By the early 1870s, settlers were establishing ranches in Kansas and Oklahoma. Cowboys were regularly driving herds of wild Longhorns from Texas to railheads in Kansas, and thence to the East.

Enter Charles Colcord, whom Scherich described as a “very progressive-thinking man.”

Colcord was a horse trader who would travel down to Texas, round up wild horses and bring them to Kansas to swap for cattle. Around 1870, the horse market bottomed out, but Colcord had a sizeable herd of cattle and knew of suitable grazing lands in Barber and Comanche counties.

During those years, the remaining Indians were being offered reservations in Oklahoma and government assistance if they’d cease their roaming ways and settle down. In 1880, Indian authorities in Oklahoma closed the cattle trails through their lands, according to the anonymous author of the souvenir program for the diamond jubilee of Coldwater, KS, in 1959.

That was probably good news to ranchers in Kansas who didn’t want their herds mixing with the Texas longhorns. The ranchers also began to see the wisdom of pooling their resources, “to range their cattle as one great common herd,” in the words of Mary Einsel, author of “Kansas: The Priceless Prairie.”

The idea of establishing one great pool of cattle and related resources came from Colcord, Jesse Evans and Army Major E. B. Kirk, who was stationed at Fort Larned in Pawnee County, says Scherich. The founders of the pool, however, are generally thought to have been Evans, Wylie Payne, Richard Phillips.
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and Army Major Andrew Drumm. A headquarters for the pool was built on Jesse Evans’ ranch in southeastern Comanche County, which, after the demise of the pool became known as Evansville. Organizers built a warehouse, a commissary, a ranch house and a post office. In its heyday, 40 people lived in Evansville. The Merrill Ranch today has its headquarters in the former Evansville.

Pool organizers started out with a herd of about 26,000 head, drawn from the participating ranches. At its peak, the pool took in 84,000 “beeves,” as they were called, and ranged over 1.5 million acres in south central and western Kansas and a roughly triangular chunk of Oklahoma. Most of this land was owned by the U.S. government.

That meant free grazing to the pool members.

“There were no fences yet, and the cattle grazed on free public lands because they hadn’t been titled yet. Progressive men in Kansas City realized that if they’d buy cattle and find somebody to care for them, they could make some money,” said Scherich.
One large Kansas City firm, Evans, Hunter & Evans, bought cattle and hired cowpunchers to mind them as they fattened on public land. It was a pretty good deal.

The pool needed an army of cowhands and hundreds of horses to tend the herd in the 4,000 square miles of pool territory. It was the largest fenced range in the U.S. Cowboys lived in dugouts or sod houses on the range. There were three principal horse camps: Big Timber in Waynoka, Okla., one near the Kansas-Oklahoma border, and a third at Salt Fork, 20 miles west of Evansville. Each cowboy had two or three horses, says Scherich.

Only 12,000 acres (one newspaper said 10,000) were actu-
ally owned by the pool, much of it “proved up” by pool cowboys.

In proving up, a prospective landowner lived on land for one year in order to obtain title. The pool directors had their cowboys live on certain parcels.

“The cowboy got paid to give them the title to the land,” said Schererich. “The cowboys would prove up along the waterways. That way the pool would control the river but owned only half the land. And the pool territory is crisscrossed by lots of creeks.”

Many of the pool cowpokes were remembered fondly. One woman quoted by Einsel recalled that they liked to whoop it up a bit in Kiowa. “If they didn’t drink too much, they were not a bad lot. They just liked to cut up and dance a lot. There was the time they bought all the paper flowers the store had and gave one to every lady that passed by on the street.”

A black cowboy, Bill Hill, was a celebrated horse-breaker and snazzy dresser in high-topped boots, pinkie rings and a fancy vest. Major Drumm always arrived on the scene in a fine black surrey driven by his valet.

Charley Colcord introduced a newfangled item -- the toothbrush -- and lent it to cowboys until payday when they could buy their own.

Pool cowhands looked after cattle that belonged to ranchers who
didn’t belong to the pool and returned them to their owners after the roundup.

There was never a range war, but there were some skirmishes.

“At first the cowboys welcomed new settlers, because it meant more people who could be hired as cooks and range hands, but eventually there was friction. There were false Indian scares, grass burnings, cattle rustling to drive settlers off the range,” said Scherich.

Those tactics didn’t work. Times were changing. Civilization was encroaching on the range. People were pouring in. Counties were levying property taxes. Fencing was now required, making it difficult to drive cattle.

And then there was

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Working calves – we still “rope and drag” during spring roundup branding time – much like the pool cowboys. (Photo by Phyllis Scherich.)

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Mother Nature. A terrible winter with humongous blizzards in 1885-’86 reduced the herd from over 80,000 to a pathetic 13,000. Colcord said the cold was so severe that “the hides on cattle split open on the back and tails dropped off,” according to a
newspaper called “The Kansas Prairie Dog.”

There was one more factor in the pool’s demise, believes Scherich. The ranchers had too much of a good thing.

“They were pasturing their cattle on free land. They knew the settlers were coming in, and eventually they’d have to buy the land, so they decided to get as much good out of the land as they could. The pastures were way overstocked, and as a result, the cattle were not in as good condition to withstand the harsh winter as they might have been.”

From the tone of an item in the “Sharon News,” in June, 1886, feelings may have been mixed about the Comanche Pool:

“The Comanche County Pool, which for so many years practically controlled the county after which it was named, is now however a thing of the past. The members of this pool have been buying up ranch property in Montana until they now possess many thousands of acres of choice grazing land.”

In October of that year, the “Medicine Lodge Cresset” described a meeting of the pool’s movers and shakers at the Grand Hotel in Medicine Lodge.

“The first business considered by the Pool was the division of some 10,000 acres of land owned by that organization in Comanche and other counties. Each member will have his pro rata deeded to him.”

Eventually those acres were divided between holdings that came to be known as the Merrill Ranch and the contiguous Z-Bar Ranch in Barber County, now a buffalo ranch and preserve owned by media mogul Ted Turner.

Comanche County is still cattle country, still sparsely populated and beautiful always. If you’re deep in country on a place such as the Merrill Ranch and you look out over the rolling hills and mentally erase all evidence of human presence, you’ll see what was there millennia ago, the sky.

Some things never change.