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The Chuck Wagon

Texas' state vehicle

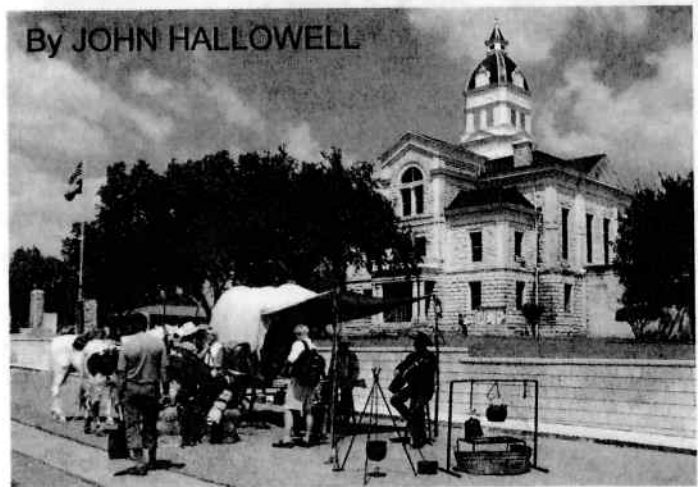
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The Chuckwagon returns



By JOHN HALLOWELL



Top photo: About 20 chuckwagons gathered for a cook-off on the banks of the Llano River during last year's Heritage Days in Llano. One of the organizers is Charlie Wendt, of Nailhead Spur (see ad on page 73) who explains his involvement very succinctly: "I've always been interested in history, and I love to eat!" In the lower photo, Kelly Scott sets up his chuckwagon in front of the Bandera County courthouse on weekends as part of Bandera's "Cowboys on Main" program. The cowboy playing the guitar is Lee Harmon.

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Some type of mobile kitchens probably existed before the Civil War, but it is a Texas rancher named Charles Goodnight who is credited with inventing the chuckwagon in 1866 for use on the long cattle drives that became the backbone of the Texas economy after the war. "Chuck" was a slang term for food, and chuckwagon food included items that were easy to preserve, such as salted meats, coffee, beans, and sourdough biscuits. Food was also gathered on the trail (chili peppers were said to be planted along the cattle trails for future use (or sprang from discards). The "cookie" was in charge of the chuckwagon, usually second only to the "trailboss" on a cattle drive. The cookie would often act not only as cook, but also barber, dentist, and banker.

The American Chuckwagon Association is an organization dedicated to the preservation of the heritage of the chuckwagon. Its members participate in chuckwagon cook-offs throughout much of the US. Through these events, the members educate the public on the history and traditions surrounding the chuckwagon.

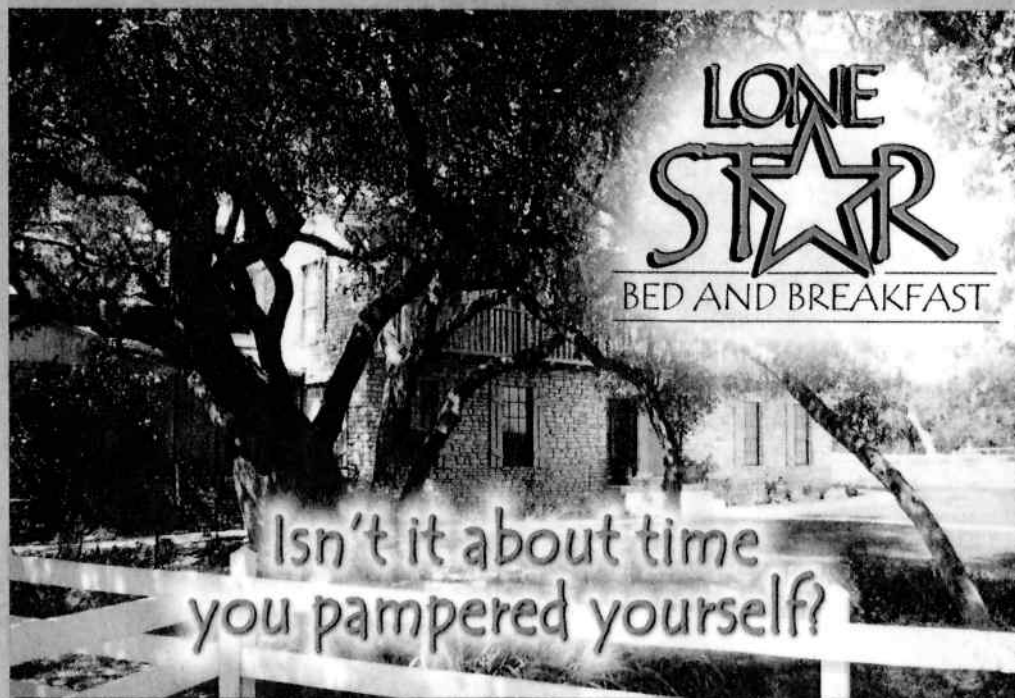
At a chuckwagon cook off, each wagon is judged on the authenticity of the wagon. Wagons must be in sound drivable condition, with equipment and construction available in the late 1800s. Contents of the chuck-box, including utensils, must also match what would have been used during the era. Wagons are also



Emma Goodwin and Phil Rodgers conduct a chuckwagon cooking class for guests at the Colbert Ranch (www.ridecolbertranch.com), near Bertram. Rodgers is president of the American Chuckwagon Association.

judged on the attire of their cooks. A typical chuckwagon cookoff is composed of 5 food categories: Meat (usually chicken-fried steak), Beans (pinto), Bread (sourdough or yeast), Dessert (usually peach cobbler), and Potatoes.

Wagons usually cook enough food for forty people. A team of judges evaluates the entries from each wagon, giving each a score. Once scores are tabulated, prizes are awarded to the top wagons.



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Everywhere we go in the Texas Hill Country, we meet Emma Goodwin and Phil Rodgers, award-winning chuckwagon cooks and tireless promoters of chuckwagon cooking. The photo at left was probably taken in Llano; the photo at right, perhaps in Blanco. We've also seen them with their chuckwagon in Boerne, Austin, Georgetown, Burnet and Bertram.

While the association holds cook-offs in ten states (as far away as Georgia, Tennessee and South Dakota), nearly half of its approximately 30 annual events are held in Texas, and four are right here in the Texas Hill Country. So it seems fitting that Texas named the chuckwagon as its official state vehicle in 2005, and also appropriate that the president of the American Chuckwagon Association is a Hill Country native.

Phil Rodgers is a former vocational ag teacher from Bertram, who entered his first cook-off at Blanco in 2003 with a chuckwagon that he had "pieced together" from an old farm wagon. With a little help from a friend who makes wonderful cobbler, he managed to take second prize overall. The "Rodgers Ranch" team was born. Emma

Goodwin is the cobbler lady; she and her two daughters (Sharon Schwartz and Carla Denison) are integral parts of the Rodgers Ranch success story. Goodwin recalls telling Rodgers before the Blanco cook-off, "I'll go and help you this time." When they took second prize, she was hooked. "She mixes the ingredients," Rodgers says. "I cook." Goodwin's cobbler has placed thirty-six times since 2003.

The old wagon has been replaced by a "real" chuckwagon Rodgers purchased in Illinois, but he still doesn't feel that his wagon is ever the best in the show. "The wagon counts (in the judging)" he says, "but we win on cooking!"

One of the biggest events on the circuit is the 20-year-old Lincoln County Cowboy

Symposium at Ruidoso, NM, which generally attracts about 25 chuckwagons. The cook-offs in Llano and Boerne are close behind, with about 20 wagons at each. Several well-attended cook-offs are held in north Texas and the Texas Panhandle. "There's a lot of good cooks up there," Rodgers explains.

Each of the cook-offs (at least around here) attracts a good crowd of hungry spectators, and the popularity of the unique "sport" is growing by leaps and bounds. If you haven't yet attended a chuckwagon cook-off, be sure to check the association's website (www.chuckwagon.org) for the event schedule, and bring your appetite to the Texas Hill Country!



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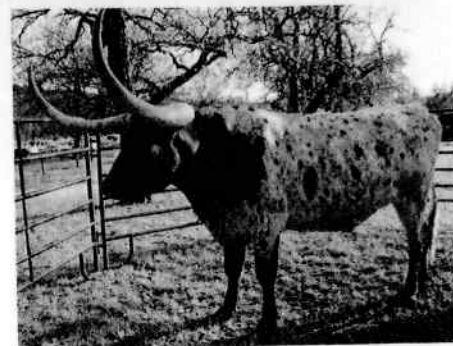
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The Menard Chamber of Commerce sponsored an "Around the Campfire on the Great Western Trail" event April 25, featuring a delicious chuckwagon dinner (of course!) cooked by the Sealy Chuckwagon group (above), from Fort McKavett and desserts by the Lone Star Dutch Oven Society. Author Dan Willis (right) helped entertain the crowd of close to 300 with his good-humored cowboy stories and poetry. The longhorn at lower right did its part to provide authentic "cattle drive" atmosphere at the Stock Pens Crossing Park, where more than a century ago, cattle crossed the San Saba River on their way to northern markets. The event was part of a larger effort to have the Great Western Trail designated by Congress as a National Historic Trail.



Jim Bowie Days • September 12

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Entertainment at the Around the Campfire event featured the Gillette Brothers, Guy & Pipp, from the famous Camp Street Café and Store in Crockett, Texas. Guests included Soren Junghanns and Sonja Scharf (below), all the way from Germany.



Photos by Terra Rhodes
www.terrarahodesphoto.photorelect.com

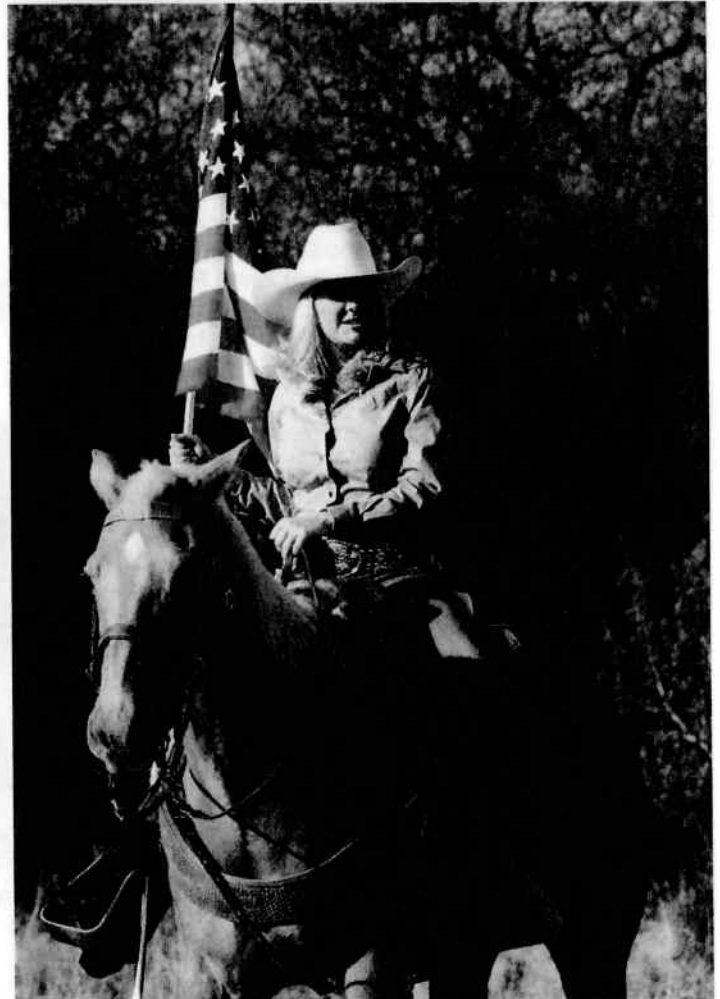
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Paige Blanek presented the colors at Menard's "Around the Campfire on the Great Western Trail" event this spring.

