

Good Eats on the Range

There have been three eras of the chuck wagon in Texas — starting with the cattle drives up the Chisholm and other trails in the 1800s.

The days of the great cattle drives lasted scarcely 20 years, from about 1866 to 1886, but the chuck wagon continued to serve a useful purpose during round-up time on large ranches in the 20th Century. Today, they are increasingly a part of rodeos and Western celebrations, a nod to social and culinary heritage.

Legendary pioneer rancher Charles Goodnight is generally credited with inventing the chuck wagon as we have come to know it. Goodnight, faced with feeding his cowboys on a long cattle drive from Texas to New Mexico in 1866, rebuilt an army surplus Studebaker wagon to include several boxes with drawers and compartments for carrying whatever the cook needed to feed a bunch of hungry cowboys three times a day. The biggest of the boxes, the chuck box, bolted onto the rear of the wagon. It had a hinged cover that opened from the top to form a large table top and was supported with wooden legs.

Lately, historians have

pointed out that South Texas ranchers were using ox carts for the same purpose long before Goodnight came along, and that his design didn't vary much from the standard military setup. Even if he wasn't the inventor, Goodnight popularized it and his name will always be associated with the chuck wagon as a result.

The Studebaker wagons were smaller than the old Conestoga wagons, which is why they were the wagon-of-choice on long cattle drives. A chuck wagon had to be compact and mobile enough to allow a team of horses or mules to haul it several miles ahead of the herd in order to have a noon or evening meal ready when the cattle and cowboys arrived on the scene.

The old trail cooks were a special breed and generally a cantankerous lot. Of the many things they did not appreciate, riding a horse too close to the chuck wagon and causing dust to settle over the food and fixings was particularly onerous. So was tying your horse to a chuck wagon. Cooks were known to untie the horse and setting it running across the



TEXAS TRAILS

Clay Coppedge

prairie, riderless, as punishment. The best guess is that a cowboy never committed this offense more than once, and that cowboys who saw what happened never did it at all.

The cook had good reasons to be testy. He had the materials to make coffee, biscuits, frijoles, salt pork and maybe some fresh beef, bacon, dried fruit and molasses. With this he was expected to basically keep the cowboys alive while they were on the trail or a round-up. A limited amount and variety of canned goods arrived on the scene late in the 19th Century. The introduction of condensed canned milk was considered a godsend by the old cooks and the cowboys who relied on the cooks to keep them fed.

People today who pay good money to eat "authentic" chuck wagon food probably wouldn't be so inclined if they

ate the cattle drive fare, which consisted mostly of beans, corn bread (or sour-dough biscuits in West Texas), and coffee, usually cooked over cow chips. Cow chips were sometimes called "Babcock's coal" in reference to a prissy executive on the massive XIT ranch in Texas Panhandle.

The honorable but fastidious Colonel Babcock refused to eat anything cooked over cow chips; at least he never knowingly ate anything cooked over cow chips.

Seldom was heard an encouraging word about such modern chuck wagon staples as peach cobbler during the cattle drive era. Cobbler and main courses like chicken fried steak came along later, during the round-up era.

A functioning chuck wagon in either era was the closest thing that a cowboy had to a home either on the cattle drives or during round-ups on ranches like the Pitchfork, Spur and Four Sixes. The chuck wagon was where cowboys gathered not only to eat their grub but also to tell stories and socialize before throwing their bedrolls on the ground and going to sleep for the night. It was sort

of a rolling community center and dining hall.

After modernization and smaller ranches made the chuck wagon unnecessary, except on a few large ranches where it still serves the same purpose it always has, the old chuck wagons either fell apart or were taken apart or given to museums. Most of the ones you see today are replicas, and you usually see them at chuck wagon cook-offs and historical demonstrations.

The American Chuck Wagon Association was formed to preserve the heritage of the chuck wagon, especially its trail drive incarnation, though participants are not limited to beans, biscuits, coffee and salt pork. The association has prepared an extensive list of recommendations and specifications to be considered in judging the wagons at chuck wagon cook-offs. The cooks get a grade on the authenticity of their wagons as well as the food.

Being a little bit cranky probably doesn't count against the score too much either, unless of course the cook stampedes somebody's horse. There are dozens of cooks at the cook-offs, but the cowboys who relied on the cook only had one.