

Chuck! Come and get it!

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A fistful of tin cups, rather than dollars, in this F.M. Sherman photograph, copyrighted 1903. It's entitled "A busy Cook" and is from the American Heritage collection at the University of Wyoming, the B. Thorpe archives.

Faded photographs adorn the two boxes on the middle shelf. The ranch is thought to be the Hugo outfit.

To repair and refuel his body, the American cowboy ate three square meals a day of beef, sourdough biscuits, and coffee. And when he was riding the range a portable kitchen followed him along.

It's hard to discover who invented the chuck wagon since anyone with a smidgeon of sense would know the tailgate of a wagon carrying grub would be the best place for a kitchen and lumping food together for seasoning, slicing, and getting ready for cooking.

But if you must have a name you couldn't go wrong with Colonel Charles Goodnight, the early cattle baron who knew you had to feed cowboys right where they worked on the trail to get any work out of 'em.

When Charlie Goodnight, accompanied by Oliver Loving, prepared to push a cattle drive over the Butterfield mail route, he bought a used government wagon, had it stripped down to the wheels and steel axle, and engaged a wagonmaker to put up a new body of the toughest wood he could find.

At the back of the wagon, he built a cabinet three feet high along the full width of the body. It was enclosed by a hinged lid and was divided into sections for storing various food items. When the hinged lid was lowered, it formed a working table with a hinged leg.

Goodnight called it a "chuck box." This was the prototype of all Western chuck wagons. Refinements came with time.

There is a flap board on the chuck box where the tin cups and plates are stored as well as the knives and forks and seasonings.

Close by are the pans, pots, and the big Dutch oven which some cooks hung from pot hooks for a musical diversion when the wagon was driven. Other wagons had a special drawer to keep the tinware from clinking. The middle drawers held the sugar, lard, beans, dried fruit, and syrup. The smaller top drawers held the spices.

Also contained was Arbuckle, almost a generic name for coffee, ground fresh every day in a grinding mill often attached to the side of the chuck box. Cornmeal, flour, salt, brown sugar, bacon, salt pork, soda, pinto beans, and a keg of sourdough bread could be typically found in a respectable chuck store.

Everything had to fit snug to prevent rattling and breaking during the drive over rough terrain.

Meat? You had it marching right alongside you. When mealtime came you lassoed a calf—they were more expendable and borrowed his choice parts—and some not so choice.

There was nothing fancy in the eatings, just good plain food and plenty of it. A cowboy liked things plain except when it came to son-of-a-gun stew. Then the sky was the limit.

Son-of-a-gun stew, or all euphemisms aside now after 80 years in the closet—son-of-a-bitch stew—was a cowboy's favorite because it relieved the monotony of constant steak and because the stew held so many legends. Variations were as colorful as the characters preparing it.

Typical stew was made of liver, cubed tongue, sweetbreads, and mountain oysters rolled in meal, fried slightly, then boiled with onions and thickened with brains and flour.

Some old time recipes remain, but there was no one best way to make this explosive stew. Historical records reveal such testaments as: "We don't usually make our stew, it just sort of accumulates . . . if you can tell what's in it, it ain't made right! And it ain't right unless it contains everything but the hide, horns and holler." One near-cowboy, not sure his constitution could stomach it, described S.O.B.: "That stuff looks so bad you'd think it'd been drawn through a sick cow."

Sourdough the cowboys loved dearly. It was made in a keg which was started with yeast before leaving the ranch. Each day the cook would put the sourdough keg in the sun or near the fire to keep it warm and fermenting. Each day he took out just enough to raise his biscuits, adding flour, salt and water both to the keg, to replace what he'd taken out, and to his batch for baking. The biscuits would be baked in a Dutch oven or a heavy covered iron pot. By replacing the dough in the keg, he could go on making the stuff for eternity.

The wagon, strong and deep and able to carry a month's provisions, was pulled by four to six horses. The cook, who was lord and master of all the supplies, drove the heavy wagon and he better know his onions in the driver's seat because it wasn't easy. Chuck wagon horses were spoiled to the job, fat, and foxy-lookin', not much good for anything else after a few years.

On roundup, the wagon moved most every day to a new camp ten or fifteen miles away where the cook got his fire going again and the victuals bubbling.

Sometimes the wagon carried extra clothing and bedding for the men, but if it was a large outfit, then there



Mexican John from the XII outfit, making pies. The photo is undated but was taken by the famed L.A. Huffman who once maintained a studio at Miles City, Mont. From the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

*Trail-drive cooks were often of Spanish heritage. In fact, "cocinero," defined by J. Frank Dobie and Ramon Adams, means ranch or trail-drive cook. The term was corrupted to coosie, coosy, cosi, cusi, cusie. Andy Adams in his 1909 work *Log of a cowboy* uses the term cusie.*

The alarm clock is set for 2:30. The spine of the book is not legible, but one word appears to be "baki—".

Some cooks of Tex-Mex background took pride in their chili-intensive assaults on the armored stomachs of the drovers they fed.

would be a bed wagon, ("hoodlum" wagon) following the chuck wagon, and a "hooligan wagon" which contained firewood and water. In treeless country and during the early days, fuel came from buffalo or cow chips which lent a particular flavor to the ambience.

The hooligan was used in prairie and desert country where such provisions were scarce and resupply difficult. This wagon was usually driven by the nighthawk, the rider who herded the saddle horses at night. He was always in a hurry to get the wagon to the next spot so he could get his sleep in the daytime.

The big spreads employed a pilot, the hand who knew the country keenly and rode ahead to pick out the best spot to cross at creeks and rivers so

the chuck wagon wouldn't get stuck or break apart.

The routes these chuck wagons followed are still visible in spots on Western ranches, ruts grooved in the land every year from the Civil War to around 1890.

A chuck wagon was headquarters of a cattle drive, a command post where everything important was discussed and decided. The cowboys depended on the chuck wagon to be there when hunger time came, and it always was, just like clockwork, steaming and a-boiling in the distance like a home beacon on the range. Any good foreman knew this and took care to hire only a cook that could lay it on the line on time. And any shift in the weather, duststorm, blizzard, rain or

lightning made no never-mind because that cook was at his post despite hardships.

To a working cowboy it was his home on the roundup and however fagged or despondent he was at his work, or life, he always felt a comfort coming back to the wagon and camp. Here was fresh hot grub and a bunch of compatible cowpokes to offer solace. Here he could bed down and smoke and josh with his kind. It's been said a greenhorn had only to drop his reins on his horse, and he would take him home to the chuckwagon.

never touched the ground, but lay between his knee and only the cup was put on the ground near one knee.

He rose the same way, never using a hand to help but sort of unwinding like a rusty spring. Even the grizzled old-timers whose arthritic legs rebelled, followed the procedure. That's the practiced cowboy way of doing it.

When he dropped to squat, he was often eating before he hit the ground—or else someone might say grace.

No one dallied at the midday meal. They ate heartily and quickly since no

some hadn't had their first. It was right good character the cowboys had and not because some wore pistols, but because their daddy taught them so. No daddy wanted a snot for a son. An outlaw he could be, but not a snot.

When a Dutch oven lid was lifted, no neighbor-loving cowboy would set it on the dirt, and no one stirred up dust while the pot was open. Cowboys riding in for mealtime took care as they approached against the wind so no dust flew onto anyone's plate. When he took a skillet off the fire pit, he'd put it back so it would stay hot for others.



Entitled "Bread and Cactus", it's a 1903 scene captured by F.M. Sherman. Prickly pear can be seen growing at the cook's right. The drover standing behind him appears to have second thoughts over "Cookie's" potato and prickly pear au gratin. From the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

The table ranged from the wagon dropleaf to the pot at the fire and in a wide circle around it and all the cowboy's laps.

The cowpoke first set to the chuck box where all the silverware and seasonings were stored, then to skillets and Dutch ovens sunk in the ground in hot ashes to keep the food warm.

There was a ritual as to how a cowboy sat down to eat. While balancing his plate in one hand and the cup in another, he crossed both feet, bent his knees and came down to rest on the flat of his boots. The plate

one wanted to be disgraced by being the last one to finish. During the evening, you might linger over the fixings, mopping up the gravy with the bread. Make no mistake, cowboys ate neat. They didn't bolt their food, they just ate less at lunch time, especially if there were two shifts.

There was a good share of etiquette at range "tables" even if all the pokes kept their hat and chaps, pistols, and spurs on. No one pushed at the kettles and no one crowded, and if there is just a small offering for dessert, no one went for second helpings while

Will James said in "All in a Day's Riding," that when a cowboy gets up for a second cup of coffee—"while he's helping himself, another rider hollers 'man at the pot' the rider up has to pass the coffee around to all of them that wants it before he sits down again. Every man considers the other through every meal and will do all he can to be as much of a hand at that as he does at roping or riding."

There is as Will James said, "unmapped rules of range table etiquette".

When one young waddy working with his Dad for the first time, walked over for a second helping of stewed apples, his father was soon beside him with the words, "There's others, son," and the boy dropped the spoon right quick.

When strangers rode up—downwind to prevent dust blowing into the cookings—someone would usually say, "Howdy podner, light." Which in cowboyese meant to get down, grab a dish, and help yourself.

As mentioned, no one lingered over chow. Funny how cowboys took more pride in filling their role as a good, hard-working cowboy than just filling their gut. In fifteen minutes, a cowboy would be on his feet and roping another horse to ride out again.

After chow, everyone cleaned his plate by throwing the leftovers far from camp for wildlife to feed on. His cup was emptied and utensils gathered and all put in the washing pen called a "wreck tub" beneath the dropleaf table.

Mealtime was sometimes a fizzle what with rain, sleet, or snow blowing



This is labelled "The Mess Wagon", possibly a carryover from military terminology. It's thought to be a Kirkland photo from the Agnes Wright Spring Collection and the American Heritage Center.

The pot lid on the ground is either a violation of chuck wagon etiquette or is a Dutch oven buried in the earth and surrounded by coals, a method some cooks favored for certain dishes.

through your eatings and cooling the steak from plate to your mouth. And rainwater in the gravy made your stomach ache with anger and your coffee thinned to dishwater. Still, the whole chuck wagon area was the only home a cowboy had on the range, and he took it in stride. What was important that he show he was a man and could take any emergency Nature or another man threw at him. When it poured too hard to make a fire, the men ate beef jerky.

Nothing rolled a cowboy out of his bedroll in the morning faster than cuddling snakes than the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee, woodsmoke, and sizzling steak and sourdough biscuits even if that was the fare for a hundred meals in a row on the range.

If he was lucky, he might get flapjacks one morning with home-made syrup that tasted suspiciously like last night's gravy laced with a little sugar.

Every morning after breakfast when the chuck wagon had been reloaded and the cattle herded together, the cook loaded up his chuck wagon and set out for the afternoon camping site. He had a hot meal ready by the time the waddies came in.

At night, the cook slept under the wagon to keep the dew off his hot nose and to intercept pantry prowlers.

The cook had other duties too. He was barber, dentist, doctor, even preacher and burying man when

gunfights or a stampede broke out. After all, if he could fix son-of-a-bitch stew, he could fix anything. Even paving the way to a cowboy's eternal reward.

The trail drives ended about 1890 and the chuck wagons were stored in musty barns where they often fell victim to mold and neglect. Some have been preserved and placed in the few Western museums, anxious to safeguard an important heritage.

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