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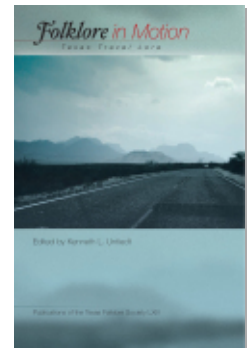
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THE GALLOPING GOURMET; OR, THE CHUCK WAGON COOK AND HIS CRAFT

by John O. West



The trail drive of the American cowboy is well known to the reading and viewing public of the entire world, thanks to the influence of television and movies and their enormous capacity for education. As is also well known, unfortunately Hollywood is not always careful with its facts—indeed, a new folklore might well be said to have developed because of the public media’s part in the passing on of information and mis-information. Such is the nature of oral transmission itself; one might recall: one old cowpoke remembers singing to the cattle to keep them calm; another points out that the average cowboy’s voice was far from soothing, and his songs might well have precipitated (rather than averted) a stampede. Of course, with the dulcet tones of Gene Autry and the Sons of the Pioneers as evidence, the popular view is of the romantic persuasion, as is much of the lore of the American cowboy.

Usually overlooked are the factual matters of the cowboy cook and his rolling kitchen. Of course, “everybody” knows that chuck wagon cooks are genially irascible—“as techy as a wagon cook” goes the old saying.¹ George “Gabby” Hayes of the Western movies of the ’40s is an excellent model; and all Western movie buffs know that a chuck wagon looks pretty much like an ordinary covered wagon with a pregnant tailgate. But that’s about as much as most folks know. The day-to-day routine of the cook gets him up hours before breakfast to rustle grub for a bunch of unruly, and often unappreciative, cowpokes. Then there is the day-long battle to keep ahead of the herd, arriving at pre-designated meal-stops with enough time to spare to put together a meal that would stick to the ribs. But all that is a largely unsung epic!

The portions that have been sung are all part of the past, recorded reminiscences of cowboys and bean-artists that have long

since gone up the Long Trail. Still, from those memories a pretty clear picture can be drawn of the lore of the chuck wagon cook. Frank S. Hastings, veteran manager of the SMS ranch, wrote that “a Ranch in its entirety is known as an ‘Outfit,’ and yet in a general way the word ‘Outfit’ suggests the wagon outfit, which does the cow-work and lives in the open from April 15th when work begins, to December 1st, when it ends.”² Thus, for three-quarters of a year the chuck wagon was home for a dozen or so cow punchers, and the cook was the center thereof. The cowhands stuck pretty close to camp: “They rarely leave the wagon a night,” says Hastings, “and as a result of close association an interchange of wit or ‘josh,’ as it is called, has sprung up. There is nothing like the chuck wagon josh in any other phase of life, and it is almost impossible to describe. . . . It is very funny, very keen and very direct.”³

Jack Thorp, Easterner-turned-cowboy who wrote *Songs of the Cowboys*,⁴ among other works, described “A Chuck Wagon Supper” for the New Mexico Federal Writers Project of WPA days. Apparently never before published, it gives a clear picture of a bygone scene:

A chuck wagon arrives at Milagro Springs. The cook, who has been driving, hollers “whoa, mule,” to the team of four which has been pulling the load. Getting off the seat he throws down the lines, and calls to the horse wrangler, who is with the *remuda* of saddle horses following the wagon, to “gobble them up,” meaning to unhitch the team and turn them into the *remuda*.

The cook now digs a pit behind the chuck wagon, so when a fire is built, wind will not blow sparks over the camp and the punchers surrounding it. The chuck wagon is always stopped with the wagon tongue facing the wind; this is done so that the fire will be protected by wagon and chuck box. The horse wrangler, with rope down, drags wood for the fire. The many rolls of bedding are thrown

off the wagon, and the cook brings forth his irons. Two of them are some four feet long, sharpened at one end, and with an eye in the other end. The third is a half-inch bar of iron some six feet long. Once he has driven the two sharpened irons into the ground above the pit, the long iron is slipped through the eyes of the two iron uprights; this completes the pot-rack, or stove. *Cosi*, as the cook is usually called—which is an abbreviation of the Spanish word *cocinero*—hangs a half dozen or so S hooks of iron, some six inches long, on the suspended bar, and to these are hooked coffeepot, stew pots, and kettles for hot water.

The rear end of the wagon contains the chuck box, which is securely fastened to the wagon box proper. The chuck box cover, or lid, swings down on hinges, making a table for *Cosi* to mix his bread and cut his meat upon, and make anything which may suit his fancy. (There are several dishes whose names cannot be found in any dictionary, so consequently not knowing how to spell them, I omit.) There is an unwritten law that no cow puncher may ride his horse on the windward side of the chuck box or fire, or *Cosi* is liable to run him off with a pot-hook or axe. This breach of manners would be committed only by some green hand, or “cotton-picker,” as *Cosi* would probably call him. This rule is made so no trash or dirt will be stirred up and blown into the skillet.

The *cocinero*, now having his fire built, with a pot-hook in hand—an iron rod some three feet long with a hook bent in its end—lifts the heavy Dutch bake oven lid by its loop and places it on the fire, then the oven itself, and places it on top of the lid to heat. These ovens are skillet about eight inches in depth and some two feet across, generally,

but they come in all sizes, being used for baking bread and cooking meat, stew, potatoes, and so forth. The coffee pot is of galvanized iron, holding from three to five gallons, and hanging on the pot-rack full of hot coffee for whoever may pass. Sometimes a pudding is made of dried bread, raisins, sugar, water, and a little grease, also nutmeg and spices; this is placed in a Dutch oven, and cooked until the top is brown. This is the usual cow-camp meal, but if there is no beef in the wagon, beans and chili are substituted.

Then Cosi, in a huge bread pan, begins to mix his dough. After filling the pan about half-full with flour, he adds sour dough, poured out of a jar or tin bucket which is always carried along, adds salt, soda, and lard or warm grease, working all together into a dough, which presently will become second-story biscuits. After the dough has been kneaded, he covers it over, and for a few minutes lets it "raise." A quarter of beef is taken from the wagon, where it has been wrapped in canvas to keep it cool. Slices are cut off and placed in one of the Dutch ovens, into which grease—preferably tallow—has been put. The lid is laid on, and with a shovel red hot coals are placed on top. While this is cooking, another skillet is filled with sliced potatoes, and given the same treatment as the meat. Now the bread is molded into biscuits, and put into another Dutch oven. These biscuits are softer than those made with baking powder, and as each is patted out, it is dropped into hot grease and turned over. These biscuits are then put in the bake-oven, tight together until the bottom of the container is full. Now comes the success or failure of the operation. The secret is to keep the Dutch oven at just the right heat, adding or taking off the right amount of

hot coals, from underneath the oven or on top of the lid. If everything goes right, you may be assured of the best hot biscuits in the world.

Along in the evening, as the men are through with the day's roundup or drive, tired horses are turned into the *remuda*, and Cosi hollers, "Come and get it or I'll throw it out." The punchers in their chaps, boots, and spurs flock to the chuck wagon, and out of the drawer get knives, forks, and spoons, and off the lid of the chuck box take plates and cups that Cosi has laid out. They then go to the different bake ovens and fill their plates, which like the cups are made of tin; the knives, spoons, and forks are of iron or composition. Lots of banter usually passes between the punchers and Cosi, though he generally gives as good as he receives. Plates filled, the boys sit around on the different rolls of bedding, the wagon tongue, or with crossed legs either squatting on the ground or with their packs against a wagon wheel. Of course, there is no tablecloth on the chuck-box lid, but it is usually scrubbed clean enough for the purpose of eating—though no one uses it.

As the boys finish their meal, plates, cups, knives, forks, and spoons are thrown into a large dishpan placed on the ground underneath the chuck-box lid. If some luckless puncher should place his "eating tools" on top of the lid, he would be sure to be bawled out by Cosi. All the eating tools, when washed, are put on shelves or in drawers of the chuck-box, while the heavy Dutch ovens and such are put into a box bolted underneath the wagon bed at its rear end.

This is the real chuck wagon and way of eating as found in New Mexico, though some Northern outfits have a different lay. From the Cimarron

River north, as far as grass grows, many outfits have quite elaborate lays. Those that have a large tent or tarp spread over the wagon and extending out on both sides are generally called by real punchers “Pullman outfits,” and old hands will tell you that they use them so that the punchers won’t get sunburned, and usually add “bless their little hearts,” also explaining, with very straight faces, that these Pullman boys usually wear white shirts, and are obliged to shave and shine their boots every morning before starting work.⁵

A photograph in *From the Pecos to the Powder* shows a chuck wagon with an iron cook-stove plus a tarpaulin shelter⁶—obviously a Pullman outfit—and a description in the same work tells how the stove is chained on behind, with poles extending behind and rawhide thongs holding the whole thing secure.⁷ The famous chuck wagon races engaged in annually at the Calgary and other Canadian rodeos began, says Cliff Claggett, in cooperative roundups when cooks actually raced to get the best locations to set up their campsites; further, in the present-day races, an outrider has to hoist a stove onto the rear of the wagon to start the race.⁸ But in chuck wagon races filmed at the Calgary Stampede for the Academy Award-winning Disney movie *Hacksaw*, the outrider loaded a trunk onto the back of the wagon, rather than a stove.⁹

The original chuck wagon, according to tradition, was created by pioneer cowman Charles Goodnight, who took a “government wagon” and had it altered, replacing the wooden axles with iron ones, and adding the chuck box at the rear.¹⁰ The chuck box was widely copied, says Ramon Adams: two to three feet deep and four feet high, it had shelves and drawers covered by the hinged lid. The inside thus resembled a kitchen cabinet, holding some supplies, pots, and simple medical nostrums—including horse liniment for man or beast. With sideboards added to the wagon bed, there was room for sacks of beans and flour, and canned goods.¹¹



Photo courtesy of Skip Clark Collection

Not to be forgotten is the “possum belly” or “cooney” (from Spanish *cuna*, cradle), where firewood was carried, or, in treeless areas, “prairie coal”—cow or buffalo chips.¹² It was simply a cowhide stretched beneath the wagon while still green, and filled with rocks to stretch it.

Of course, there was no such thing as a school for cooking for cowboys nor soldiers nor lumberjacks—they just grew. Jack Flynt remembers how his dad, Holbert W. Flynt, back about the turn of the century, got “elevated” to such a position: “They were building the old Orient railroad, down near Alpine, Texas, and Dad was a teamster, running a six-mule scraper. One day the assistant cook didn’t show, and somebody had heard Dad tell about how he had learned to barbecue goats from *his* dad—so they put Dad to work as assistant cook. Later, when the cook quit, Dad got the job. Wasn’t but about nineteen, but he handled the job for quite a while. He’d boil a hundred pound sack of potatoes at a time, in a 55 gallon drum!”¹³

That railroad crew was lucky, judging by the oft-told tale of the amateur cowboy cook. A version I picked up from a contestant at a rodeo in Odessa, Texas, in 1960 tells of the outfit whose cook had been run off by the sheriff, and no replacement was at hand. So, the foreman had the hands draw straws, and the short straw-drawer was elected cook, to serve 'til somebody complained. Well, nobody complained for a good while, and Cosi wasn't too happy in his job—so he started getting careless; but nobody dared complain, since whoever complained had to take the job himself. Finally he got desperate, and dumped a double handful of salt into the beans and served 'em up. One of the boys took a mouthful and nearly strangled. “By God,” he hollered, “them's the saltiest beans I ever et!” About then he noticed the cook starting to take off his apron. “But that's jest the way I like 'em!” he concluded.

Both the tradition of using substitute cooks and a host of stories arising out of it, “all of them almost too old to bear repeating,” are mentioned in *Come and Get It*.¹⁴ I have often been told the same tale—except that the extra ingredient is usually cow manure—a detail that links it with the lumberjack's story found by Barre Toelken in Maine in 1954—both as an oral tale and in the form of a ballad, where the cook-against-his-will served up what should have gotten him fired:

One by one the boys turned green,
 Their eyeballs rolled to and fro;
 Then one guy hollered as he sank to the floor
 “My God, that's moose-turd pie!
 [Shouted] Good, though!”¹⁵

Frequently, the chuck wagon cook was a stove-up cowboy who could no longer handle regular range chores, but he soon became master of his small, vital kingdom, guarding it jealously from any encroachments. Even the owner of the cattle was expected to stay out of the sixty-foot circle surrounding the wagon.¹⁶ Range etiquette required that a horseman slow his steed when nearing the cook wagon, to avoid stirring up dust—or the cook's temper. The

body of the wagon, as Jack Thorp noted, usually carried bedrolls for the hands, but the rest of the rig was the cook's domain. One old timer recalled a double killing that arose out of a cowboy's brashness:

French and a fellow named Hinton got into it over Hinton digging into the chuck box, which was against Frenchy's rule, as it was with any good cooky. They did not want the waddies messing up the chuck box. Hinton seemed to get a kick out of seeing Frenchy get riled. . . . Frenchy never refused to give any one a handout, but Hinton insisted upon helping himself. The evening that the fight took place, Hinton walked past Frenchy and dove into the chuck box. Frenchy went after Hinton with a carving-knife and Hinton drew his gun. The cooky kept going into Hinton slashing with his knife and Hinton kept backing away shooting all the while, trying to get away from the knife, but Frenchy never hesitated . . . finally he drove the knife into Hinton's breast and they both went to the ground and died a few minutes after.¹⁷

The huge coffeepot was the first item to go on the cook's fire when it was built, and generally the last to come off when breaking camp. "Around chuck wagons," says Francis Fugate, "early Westerners renewed their energies with coffee, the aromatic brew that 'quickenes the spirit, and makes the heart lightsome.' Chances are that Arbuckles' was the brand in all those coffeepots. In fact, the use of the Arbuckle Bros. coffee was so widespread that its brand name came to be synonymous with the word 'coffee'. . . ." ¹⁸ The cook (strongly supported by the cowhands) believed in making it stout: "A recipe went the rounds from ranch to ranch, confided by cooks to greenhorn hands: 'You take two pounds of Arbuckles', put in enough water to wet it down, then you boil it for two hours. After that, you throw in a horseshoe. If the shoe sinks, the coffee

ain't ready.'"¹⁹ One of the reasons the brand was so popular was the premiums used by John Arbuckle to stimulate sales—and thereby hangs a chuck cook trick: a stick of sugar candy included in each bag lightened the cook's load. "If a cook wanted the next day's supply of coffee ground, he would call out, 'Who wants the candy?' and get a rash of volunteers to turn the crank on the coffee grinder, which was inevitably fastened to the side of the chuck wagon."²⁰

One of the proofs of the existence of a folk group is a shared language—and the chuck wagon scene had its share of useful terms, far beyond those already cited herein. Jack Thorp, in a list he termed "not finished," recorded a number of these for the New Mexico Federal Writers Project:

Air tights	canned goods
Biscuit-shooter	a waitress
Chuck	food of any kind
Dough-gods	biscuits
Dough-wrangler	cook
Feed-trough	to eat at a table
Fluff-duffs	fancy food
Frijoles	beans
Gouch hooks	irons to lift the heavy lids of cooking vessels
Lick	syrup (or a salt lick) ²¹

Salt pork went by "‘sow belly,’ ‘hog side,’ ‘sow bosom,’ and ‘pig’s vest with buttons.’ Bacon was often sarcastically referred to as ‘fried chicken,’ ‘chuck wagon chicken,’ and ‘Kansas City fish.’ It was not used to a great extent, because it became rancid in the heat and anyway the cowman preferred fresh meat."²² Of course, there were names for particular dishes—son-of-a-gun stew, for example, which was also called by its more natural, less polite name. Ramon Adams says it was made of practically everything the cook had at hand, excepting "horns, hoof, and hide." And perhaps the name came from the first cowboy who tasted it, and hollered "Sono-fabitch, but that's good." But Adams also notes the tendency for



Postcard courtesy of Skip Clark Collection

an outfit to call the dish by the name of some enemy—“a subtle way of calling him names which one dared not do to his face.”²³

The good chuck wagon cook learned to make do with whatever he had. A mixture of sorghum and bacon grease was a substitute for butter, for example,²⁴ and it was a mighty poor cook who couldn’t spice up the usual menu, which was always strong on “meat and whistle-berries [beans].”²⁵ Dried apples and raisins were staples on many wagons, and they served to make pies—one item cowboys dearly loved. Cosi would roll out his dough with a beer bottle, put it in a greased pie pan and add the previously stewed fruit, then cover it with another layer of dough—with the steam escaping through the outfit’s brand cut in the crust!²⁶ “Spotted pup”—raisin and rice pudding—did pretty well, especially with sugar and cream (when it was available), but as a steady diet it could produce mutiny!²⁷ “Some cooks were expert at making vinegar pies,” reports Ramon Adams, concocted of a combination of vinegar, water, fat, and flour, all turned onto a layer of dough in a pie pan, and then covered, cobbler style, with criss-crossed strips of dough and baked.²⁸ And then there was “pooch”—tomatoes, stewed with

left-over biscuits and a little sugar—that cowboys enjoyed as much as dessert.²⁹ Rather than pack a lunch, a hand would carry a can or two of tomatoes to tide him over if he was going to be gone over the meal hour; they served as both food and drink.³⁰

Another side of the grouchy cook—the very one who died defending his turf in the story above—is presented by John Baker:

The belly-cheater on the Holt outfit was a fellow called Frenchy, a top cooky. He was one of them fellows that took enjoyment out of satisfying the waddies' tapeworm. Frenchy was always pulling some tricks on us waddies and we enjoyed his tricks, because he always made up for the tricks by extra efforts in cooking some dish we hankered after. He could make some of the best puddings I ever shoved into my mouth. One day at supper we were all about done eating and Frenchy said: "If you dam skunks wait a second I'll give you some pudding. It is a little late getting done." Of course we all waited and he pulled a beauty out of the oven. We all dived into it and took big gobs into our mouths. We then started to make funny faces. What he had done was to use salt instead of sugar when he made it and that pudding tasted like hell. We all began to sputter and spit to clean our mouths. He then pulled a good pudding on us and that sure was a peach. We had forgot that the day was April 1. He would use red pepper on us in some dishes we hankered after, also cotton in biscuits, but we knew something extra was coming up to follow.³¹

The cowboys often cussed the chuck and the cook, and called him names like Vinegar Jim, and Biliious Bill, and Dirty Dave—not to mention some less polite handles.³² But on a dry drive, when the cowboys were working the clock around to keep the steers

moving north, the cook kept open house all night long, with food and Arbuckles' to keep the waddies going; he knew that hardship was easier to bear if the hands were well fed.³³ And on more normal nights, when the cook had put a lighted lantern on the tip of the wagon tongue to guide the night crews back to the outfit, and pointed it towards the North Star to provide bearings for the next day's drive,³⁴ it was easy to remember that the wagon was home, and the chuck wagon cook—ugly and irascible though he might be—was in some ways the heart and soul of the outfit. Jack Thorp said a bunch when he wrote, “when it came to serving up ample and good-tasting food under unfavorable conditions, I never saw anybody to beat the average cow-camp cook.”³⁵ Without him the roundup, the trail drive, and the cattle industry could never have been—and even with the distortions of fact that Hollywood provides, his lore lingers on, relic of a bygone day.

ENDNOTES

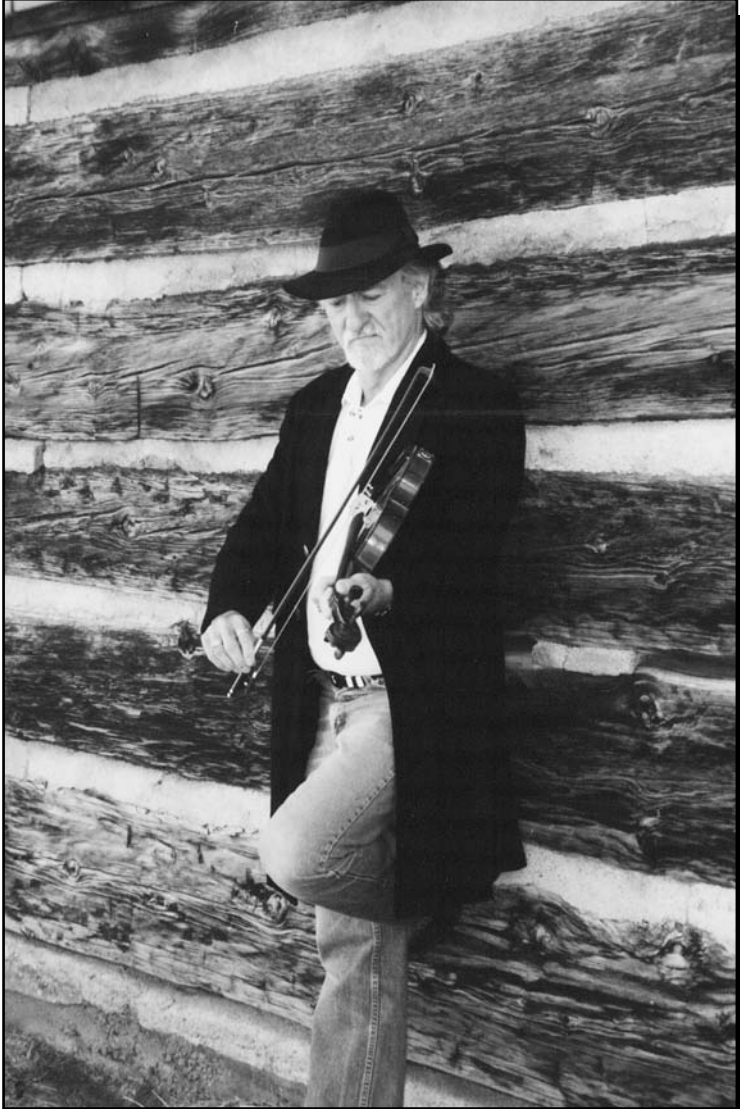
1. Ramon F. Adams. *Come and Get It: The Story of the Old Cowboy Cook*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952. 5.
2. Frank S. Hastings. “Some Glimpses into Ranch Life.” History of Grazing in Texas, Division VI, Part A, Steps Toward Stability and Conservation, Texas Writers Project, Barker History Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Unpaginated.
3. Ibid.
4. N. Howard Thorp. *Songs of the Cowboys*. Estancia, New Mexico: News Print Shop, 1908.
5. N. Howard Thorp. “A Chuck Wagon Supper.” File 5, Division 4, Folio 3, Folder 5, New Mexico Writers Projects, History Library, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, New Mexico. (The bread, raisin, and sugar pudding is essentially *capirotada*, a traditional Mexican delicacy served during Lent; Lucina L. Fischer, interview with the author, El Paso, Texas, 12 December 1984.)
6. Bob Kennon, as told to Ramon W. Adams. *From the Pecos to the Powder: A Cowboy's Autobiography*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965. 36.
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11. Adams. 12–13.
12. Ibid. 14–15.
13. Jack Flynt. Interview with the author, El Paso, Texas, 23 November, 1984.
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26. Adams. 103–104.
27. Kennon/Adams. 87.
28. Adams. 105.
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31. Baker. 26855.
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33. Andy Adams. *The Log of a Cowboy: A Narrative of the Old Trail Days*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903, 1931. 60.
34. Ramon Adams. 154.
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W.C. Jameson