Chuck Wagon Cooking for Cowboys

by John Raven, Ph.B.

Texas and cowboys have a place in people's hearts around the world. Texas is Texas, no other description needed. A cowboy is a man or boy who works with cows or cattle. The name cowboy probably grew out of the Spanish word "caballero", meaning "horseman".

When the Spaniards came to the New World in the 1500's, they brought along cattle -- live cattle. A live cow would remain in eating condition a lot longer than one cut up into portions and stowed in the hold of a slow ship.

Naturally, over the years a few of the cows and a bull or two escaped from captivity and adapted to the conditions of the South Texas brush country. Eventually they became the famous Longhorns. They were mean, lean and could live off discarded cardboard boxes.

Long before the Civil War, residents of Texas were making cattle drives into Louisiana, especially New Orleans. This was much against the law, but a man has to feed his family. After the Civil War, the folks up north developed a preference for beef over the pigs they had been eating since they came here. The Texans, quick to realize that a few bucks could be made, started thinking about getting cows up north. There were no railroads or interstate highways, so the best way to get a cow to the railhead in Abilene, Kansas was to let her walk. Thus began the storied cattle drives.

The trail drive cowboys were just as tough as the cows they prodded along, but even a tough cowboy has to eat once in a while. The first trail drives were pretty basic affairs. Each cowboy was in charge of bringing his own breakfast, dinner and supper. The menu wasn't fancy; most of the cowboys brought some salt, some coffee and a sack of either pone or hard biscuits. If some wild game was found along the way, it did not go to waste.

When the demand for beef on the hoof grew much larger, the ranchers soon found they could attract a lot better class of cowboy if they fed them a decent fare. It was impractical for each rider to carry his own supplies, so a wagon was employed. The first wagons on the trail were just wagons that hauled the food and provided a place to haul the cowboys' bedding and associated tack.

Charles Goodnight, one of the leaders of the trail drive era is given credit for designing the chuck wagon in its present form. Mr. Goodnight added heavy-duty running gear to the wagon and built a cook's cabinet on the rear. The cabinet had many compartments for holding various things needed for cooking, as well as a fold-down door that served as the cook's work table.

The chuck wagon cook was second in command on the trail drive. In his domain, which was the wagon and a 60-foot radius around it, he was the boss, and no one crossed him. It was said that if a chuck wagon cook was not fractious, he just had not been cooking long enough.

The cooks also served as doctors, gravediggers (if their doctoring didn't take) and equipment repairmen. This could include anything from shoeing a horse to sewing up a cowboy's ripped jeans. It was not a specialized job. The cook was so important to the success of the trail drive that he was paid more than the regular cowboy, and the boss would tolerate behavior that would have sent an ordinary hand packing. When the cowboys were well fed and comfortable, they worked a lot better than they did if their needs were not satisfied. The most important thing that came from the chuck wagon and the cook was coffee. The cowboys could manage most any situation if there was enough strong, black coffee.

The first trail coffee came as green coffee beans that had to be roasted before they could be ground and made into coffee. In 1865, John and Charles Arbuckle, who were grocers in Pittsburgh, patented a process for
roasting coffee beans and treating the roasted beans with a mix of egg white and sugar to preserve freshness. The coffee made from these pre-roasted beans was an immediate success and is still available today. The usual coffee formula on the trail was one handful of ground coffee per cup of water. It was often called "six shooter coffee", as it was strong enough to float a six shooter.

Next on the list of trail essentials was a constant supply of sourdough biscuits. The cowboys preferred biscuits to bread in loaves. The cook guarded his sourdough crock zealously. It contained yeast -- a living thing that required warmth and feeding. On cold nights, the cook would sleep with his sourdough crock to keep it warm.

Beans made up a large portion of the cowboy's diet. Usually they were pinto beans, and occasionally a red bean would slip in. The beans were originally known as frijoles. Soon frijoles came to mean any beans. Beans were a favorite with all as they were cheap, easy to transport, they kept well in the dried state and were filling. The cook added a bit of salt pork to make them flavorful.

Bean cooking has not changed over the years. The night before cooking, the beans are picked through to remove any rocks or other debris. They soak overnight and then go on slow fire until they are tender. This usually took three to four hours. They could be and would be served morning, noon or night.

Given coffee, sourdough and beans, the cowboy could survive and work, but for maximum performance there had to be more in his diet.

The subject of the type and amount of meat in the cowboy's diet is open for discussion. The whole operation was centered around a couple of thousand prime beeves on the hoof. I doubt there were fresh steaks every day, but when it did occur, the killing would take place in the evening so the meat could cool in the night air. The next morning, the supply of beef would be wrapped in insulating material such as the cowboys' bedrolls to keep it cool. The next evening, it would be unwrapped and cooled again. The meat still didn't keep very well. As it began to age, it was used in stew or chili.

The better chuck wagon cooks would prepare treats for their cowboys as often as required. Sometimes the treats were just to build good relations between the wagon cook and the wranglers, and sometimes to reward a particular wrangler or wranglers for a good deed.
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Part Two

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Last month we began telling the story of how the cowboys on the big cattle drives got fed and taken care of on the long trip to the cattle buyers.

In the beginning, it was pretty much every cowboy for himself. The cowboy carried food with him on his horse. It was very simple fare, usually some hard biscuits or corn pone. And there was some coffee and salt. Everything else had to be obtained along the trail. With the invention of the chuck wagon and the employment of a traveling cook, life on the trail got a lot better. The rolling cafeteria and mobile headquarters served many purposes other than just food. The camp cook was the cowboys' den mother, too.

The cowboys had fresh beef available all the time. The problem was there was no refrigeration, and a beef produced more meat than the crew could consume before it began to get too old to eat. Another thing was the beeves were money on the hoof. The ranchers didn't care for the trail crew eating up the profits. It was said the ranchers did not like the taste of their own beef. So, they would kill a neighbor's beef when necessary, and the neighbor would do in kind. The animals selected for slaughter were not from the prime stock. The selection was made from the animals that could not keep up the pace of the drive or just weren't likely to bring a good price at the end of the drive.

The cook or his representative often traded beef with farmers or other settlers along the way for vegetables, eggs or what there was.

There was one beef dish that was unique to the American cattle drives. That was -- excuse my French -- Son of a Bitch stew. If a woman or a preacher were in camp, the stew might be called SOB. It finally became Son of a Gun stew, which was more appropriate for tame society. It was also called by the name of any person or thing that was out of favor at the time. If there was someone from a West Texas town that was out of favor, the stew might have been called "the gentleman from Odessa".

No matter the name, the stew consisted of all parts of a young calf except the hide, horns and hooves. The standard ingredients for the stew were just from the calf. The heart, liver, brains, sweetbreads, tongue, marrow gut and pieces of tenderloin made up the stew. The marrow gut is a tube that connects the two stomachs of a calf that has not been weaned. It contains a substance resembling marrow. The marrow gut is what gives the SOB stew its principal flavor. The liver was used sparingly as too much would make the stew
bitter.

SOB stew was made by putting small pieces of fatty meat in the Dutch oven and rendering the fat out of it. Next went in the heart, as it is a tough cut of meat. (All the parts were cut into small pieces.) The tongue, which had been skinned, went in next. The rest of the ingredients were added in small amounts so they could cook as they went in. (You just didn't just dump everything in the pot and go watch TV.) Water was added to the stew only when absolutely necessary. The juices of the meat were usually the only liquid required. The brains were the last to be added. Usually they were cooked separately with a little flour and then added to the pot as thickening.

People who should know say that SOB stew was popular with the trail hands as it provided vitamins that were not contained in the everyday fare of beans and biscuits. If you pay attention, your body will tell you what it needs. The cowboys would develop a craving that only SOB stew could satisfy. (One-a-Day vitamins had not yet been invented).

The most popular way to prepare everyday beef on the drive was to just fry it. Suet was rendered in the pan, and the steaks were given a coating of flour and put in the pan with the lid on and cooked well done. The old westerners did not take to rare meat.

The cook could fancy up the fried steak with a gravy. The usual gravy was water gravy or as the chefs call it, brown gravy. Flour was added to the fat and renderings in the pan and cooked until it began to brown. Water was added and the gravy was cooked until it was as thick as desired. If it was too thick, more water was added.

Occasionally the cook would take a large roast and cook it pot roast-style in a Dutch oven. If he had onions and potatoes, they would be added.

The beef available on the trail drives was mostly tough and required a long cooking time. Dishes like the pot roast and SOB stew required three to four hours to cook. The long cooking recipes were prepared when the cowboys were in camp. There was not enough time on a regular day to get it done. When moving, the cook had to prepare meals in an hour or two. That included finding wood or chips and starting a fire.

There was an occasional dessert on the trail. Fresh fruit traded for along the trail and canned peaches could be the basis for a variety of sweets. Pies or cobblers would have been the most prevalent. A biscuit with molasses would have been a quick and easy dessert.

Canned tomatoes were another cowboy treat. They went well with any meal, and a can of tomatoes could slake a thirst better than water when a puncher came in from a hot and dusty day. Often a cowboy who expected to be away from camp a day or so just took a couple of cans of tomatoes instead of a brown bag lunch.

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