



On the trail with “Cookie”

During the long trail drives of the nineteenth century, the chuckwagon was the headquarters of every cattle outfit on the range. Not only did the cowboys eat their meals there, it was their social center and recreational spot. It was a natural gathering place to exchange tall tales, listen to music, or reflect on the day’s activities.

While the cowboy was away from home (wherever home happened to be), the chuckwagon was his only known address—that proverbial “home on the range.” And if the chuckwagon was their home, the chuckwagon cook, “Cookie,” was the king. He ruled the wagon with an absolute hand. Because the morale of the men and the smooth functioning of the camp rested on his shoulders, Cookie’s authority went unquestioned. Even the wagon boss walked softly whenever he came near the chuckwagon cook.

*Below: Charles Belden, Pitchfork Ranch photo, ca. 1915.
Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming USA. PN.67.29*



Wagon cooks, as a group, had the reputation of being ill-tempered—and no wonder. Their working conditions left much to be desired. They rose earlier than anyone to cook breakfast; they rode ahead of the cattle drive to make sure a hot meal was ready on time at the end of the day; and they were often short of fuel or water. While they prepared meals, they might battle the elements: wind, rain, sand, dirt, mud, insects, and even rattlesnakes. Cookie wore many hats on the trail including barber, doctor, banker, and sometimes referee if a disturbance cropped up among the cowboys.

Some have described the chuckwagon as pleasantly barbaric—as might be expected with a group of men far from home who were doing rough, dirty work under sometimes brutal conditions. Even though their language was colorful and often profane, there were, however, definite rules of behavior expected around the chuckwagon. Most were unwritten laws that even the greenest of cowhands could understand. For example, riders approaching the campsite always stayed downwind from the chuckwagon so that they didn’t cause dust to blow into the food. They were to refrain from tying horses to the chuckwagon wheel or hobble them too close to camp. Cowboys looking for warmth never crowded around the cook’s fire, and there was no scuffling about of kicking up billows of dust around the chuckwagon while meals were being prepared.

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