

Cow Waddies Still Prefer Chuck Wagon Grub

Whoopie! Hop in your Flivver and Gallop
To Hollywood for Fodder that is Food



Harry Gant, organizer and president of the Chuck Wagon Trailers since the first of the semi-annual meetings of the old time cowhands in Hollywood in 1930.

By Glenn Chaffin

HOW would you like a plate of "son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack?"

Ask an old time cowhand that question and he'll answer, "Brother, lead me to it." "Son-of-a-gun" is something to eat.

And the response to the question, coupled with a cowboy's dream of turning back the pages of time for a few old range riders now spending the evening of their years in the city, led to the organization of the Chuck Wagon Trailers, a fraternity for which a slogan might be written, "playing cowboy for a day."

It is a brotherhood-of-men who assemble twice a year for the sole purpose of reliving for a few hours a scene from their yesterdays. The setting for their meeting is a replica of an old time cow camp, a chuck wagon with enough ground around it to throw a bed roll down. It has only one eligibility rule for membership—to have ridden the range as a regular hand for a reputable cow outfit before 1905. This is how the organization came into being.

The evening sun was just casting its first shadows along the "western street" on the back lot of a Hollywood motion picture studio when an old cowhand leaned over in his saddle and spoke to the rider next to him.

"I wish I had me a plate of son-of-a-gun stew," he said.

"You know, Harry," said the other puncher, "that there is one of the noblest sentiments I ever heard you express. Just the thought of it gives a feller somethin' to live for."

He paused to build a cigarette with brown paper and sack tobacco, lighted it, inhaled deeply and sighed. "But what the devil, Harry? Them days has gone forever."

THAT night Harry Gant, the long, slim-hipped rider who had first voiced an almost plaintive longing for the famous "mystery" dish of early chuck wagon days, gave serious attention to a vagrant thought which had occurred to him that afternoon.

He had seen the flicker of hope flash from the eyes of his companion rider, watched it die to hopeless resignation as he realized the futility of reaching back for the straws of life which had blown away. To him it was the symbol of days long gone. Omar, the old Persian philosopher, was right. Truly, "the moving finger writes."

But Harry had seen strange things done in pictures. They dramatized events of long ago; characters lived again from the eras of King Solomon and Napoleon. He himself had ridden through scenes depicting days on old cattle ranges as familiar to him as the back of his roping hand.

Why not? he reasoned. Why not recreate for a day an episode from that stirring chapter in western history, the days of big roundups and far flung trail herds moving north from Texas to the Powder river? The thought became father to a hope, the hope father to a definite plan. He had it! How about a chuck wagon feed for a few old cow waddies he knew were "bunkered

down" around Hollywood? Old rannihans with fingers gnarled and rope-burned, eyes dimmed with years, but hearts full of memories of the cattle West that was.

Loneliness calls to loneliness, mutual dreams of happy yesterdays cherished with the same nostalgic memories. Gant figured that if he had a hankering for a shot of "son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack" and other chuck wagon delicacies this longing was probably shared by every old cowhand in town.

He didn't know how many there were, but rounded up all the ones he knew personally and asked them to sort of pass the word around among others of their brethren. A former cowhand from the plains of Montana, Wyoming and Colorado, Gant is what is known in the range country as a "big hearted feller." He had been working in western pictures, both as a rider and as a cameraman, for a number of years. He had saved a few dollars, he confided to the few old rannies he had gathered in his circle ride from Hollywood to the Union stock yards. So how would they like to loosen their belts for a chuck wagon spread again just for old times' sake? He knew a feller who had an outfit and he himself had the dinero for the coffee, beef and beans.

How would they like it! How would a freshly branded maverick like to butt a cowhand? They went for the idea with whoops and hollers and a few yip-ees! "Harry Gant's throwin' a chuck wagon feed—everything from pit-steamed bull heads to son-of-a-gun! Say, I ain't et any since '83! Which way's the wagon?"

Gant's idea crystallized on May 17, 1930, in one of the rootin'est, tootin'est parties ever staged in the vicinity of Hollywood.

That it had in it even the slightest essence of Hollywood flavor was due to the fact that the roundup took place on a piece of property a few miles northeast of the film capital known as the Providencia Rancho, but a lot more familiarly called the "Lasky ranch." It was the wild west headquarters for the old Famous Players-Lasky motion picture studios and its broad acres had furnished the backgrounds for many western thrillers.

IT DIDN'T take Gant long to realize that the few old timers he had asked to sort of pass the word around among the boys had gathered more stray punchers than he had known were west of the Pecos range. He stood at the tail board of the chuck wagon he had rented for the occasion and watched them come "foggin' up" to his party in droves. Sixty old time cowhands had somehow got wind of that chuck wagon dinner and risked life and limb through city traffic to get there in time. "Wahoo! Which way's the wagon?" For many of the bowlegged flivver "stompers" rolling along through Dark Canyon that historic question of the cow country had its first significance in more than 40 years.

The "Chuck Wagon Trailers" was born that afternoon. An association was formed, a president and a board of directors elected. The old

Cook wagon setup at one of the semi-annual get-togethers of cowhands who worked for a reputable "Cow Outfit" prior to 1905. Chuck Wagon in the background is one of the original types that used to "Take The Trail" from the Rio Grande to the Powder River.



"Scaries" are told and long yarns spied when the night meal has been finished on the plains. Good grub and a campfire and a cowhand is satisfied.

rannies were so grateful to Gant for the inspiration and generosity that prompted his getting them together that they immediately took the matter of paying for the feed—and all future feeds—right out of his hands. They took up a collection. But they elected Harry president and he has been the wagon boss of the outfit ever since.

They voted to hold a roundup spring and fall, just as they used to on the range. The membership has now topped the 500 mark, with "reps" in almost every state in the union and in several foreign countries. But the roundups have always been staged in the "back country" near Los Angeles and the active organization is still largely sponsored by men living in Southern California.

SERVING with Gant on that original board of directors were Judd Stevens, a veteran "wagon cook" from Oklahoma; Tom Johnson, a former Texan who was at that time manager of the Union stock yards in Los Angeles; J. P. "Pink" Robertson, one of the most colorful characters of the old southwest cattle country; Neal Hart, a Wyoming cowboy and one of the first of the western film stars; and William Spauld from the big O W spread in Wyoming. Gant, Hart and Spauld are the only ones of the group now living.

At that first chuck wagon feed, which was strictly an entertainment venture, the atmosphere automatically became that of a supper or evening meal. This is the time when cowhands relax, spin their "scaries," sing if they feel like it, whether they can or not (and most of them can't), brag about the bad ones they've busted and ride each other about the bad ones which "busted them." At breakfast and dinner (noon meal) eating is a serious occasion, with little time for skylarking.

Here was an occasion to gladden the heart of every old rannie present. In some cases it meant the reunion of men who had worked cattle together in the 70s and 80s and who hadn't seen each other since.

The old boys whooped and hollered, back-slapped and pumped hands and called each other salty names. "You old mosshead, take out them store teeth so's I can see the rest of yore face." "Wagh! It sure was swell! The warmer the friendships, the stronger the insults. That's cowhand affection—and so understood by all.

The menu for that first meeting—and all subsequent meetings—runs pretty true to type of old range days. Beef steak, biscuits and gravy; "pinto" beans with salt pork, fried potatoes, steamed beef and—ah-h! son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack!



"Curley" Fletcher of "Strawberry Roan" fame with Joe DeYong, cowboy artist and protégé of the late Charles M. Russell. DeYong is an honorary member of the Chuck Wagon Trailers, something like an amateur in a group of professionals.

ress brought in the steak the rannie took a look at it and told her to take it back and have it cooked until it was "done."

"She says, 'tis done."

"The old boy yells, 'done! I've seen cows hurt worse'n that git well!'"

As it was written early in this piece, the personnel of the "Trailers" is limited to actual range riding hands of more than three decades ago. But that does not mean that all its members have outlived their usefulness. Not by a wide loop. There have been and still are many noted men in the group. Some of those old rannihans really went to town in store clothes after quitting the land of flares and blue-joint.

Of course it would be impossible to list even the outstanding personages in an organization of more than 500 men. Nor would it be fair to emphasize the success in after years of some and ignore those whose names are not known to the general public except that it is the very nature of a cowboy to back the "top hands" riding for his brand to the limit. Alex McLaren, secretary and treasurer of the "spread," gave me a few representative names, but warned me not to exploit them to the disadvantage of their brethren. There's no caste in the Chuck Wagon Trailers.

WILL ROGERS was a regular member and sat cross legged on the ground in the glow of a camp fire behind the chuck wagon and swapped yarns with old time punchers who never had their names in the paper and never earned more than forty a month in their lives.

A colorful figure known to all the Trailers is Tom J. Turner, old time Texan who later became a noted sheriff in Arizona. He is now an inspector at the Los Angeles stock yards, an authority on brands. They say the old boy won't leave the house even now without carrying a pistol. Frank King says somebody once asked Tom where he came from. "Who me?" answered the old straight shooting lawman. "Who, I whipped a long tail pony out of Texas." It sounded like a swell expression to me, but "whippin' a long tail pony" business. But maybe Frank just made it up.

Robert Carey, former governor of Wyoming, now a candidate for United States senator from that state, is a member. Then there is Jack Humphries of Morristown, New Jersey, an old Montana cowhand who is now vice-president of the internationally famous institution for the blind, The Seeing Eye. J. Robert Atkinson, another member from the Treasure state, long blind but still a fine horseman, is head of the Braille Institute for the blind in Los Angeles.

Eugene Manlove Rhodes, one of the best known of all writers of western fiction, was a member in good standing at the time of his death two years ago. McLaren, keeper of the spread's "tally sheet," is a world traveler, writer and mining engineer. He "tailed 'em up" in Texas, as the saying goes, and was one of the last of the pony express riders in West Texas.

FELIX McKINNEY, still pretty spry at the age of 75, is another old timer who carries a name noted in the southwestern cattle country. There was a time, the oldsters say, when the name of McKinney was better known, and perhaps more highly honored, in West Texas than the name of the president of the United States. Julius Nickels McKinney, father of Felix, was one of the early day cattle barons in the Lone Star state. He established a public school on his headquarters ranch, the first educational center in Frio county. Like his father, Felix became a famous cowman.

There are doubtless names of note galore on the roster of the Trailers, men of distinction in many walks of life, bankers, jurists, publishers and ranchers, whose "spreads" still reach to far horizons. But after all what does it matter who they are or what they represent today? They were cowhands in the yesterdays, moving herds on the long trail to Abilene, gathering cattle at the mighty roundups on the range; eating their chuck from a string of dutch ovens behind a "wagon," sleeping in rolled soogans and a tarp on the ground, with nothing above them but the stars.

Roll along, you dogies, roll along! This way's the wagon!



Frank M. King, old time cowhand and now columnist for a western cattle paper. King is also the author of "Wrangling The Past."

This is all "washed down" with gallons and gallons of coffee, boiled until it's strong enough to float a horse shoe. Fresh vegetables are welcome, but they were seldom available at old time chuck wagons. Cowhands invariably demand plenty of seasoning—salt, pepper, onions, and the longer you cook their food the better they like it. For instance, if a stew disintegrated in juicy hash from over cooking, the old timers declare, "This is plumb damn good!"

A somewhat similar concoction was introduced to the "Trailers" the second year by Nonie Leonard, an Arizona cowhand. Nonie called the dish the "Man from Odesa" and he made it in a pot or steam kettle. He included sweetbreads and a few northern punchers from Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington, who were unfamiliar with the dish, accused him of making it out of stewed horns. But you can't stump a cowboy. He'll eat anything—just so it's well done.

NONE of your rare or even medium beef for an old time cowhand. He wants 'er cooked right through the middle. Frank M. King, that salty old rannie from the plains of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona who finally "went wrong", as he expresses it, and became a writer, tells this story in his swell book, "Wrangling The Past."

A cowhand went into a restaurant in El Paso and ordered a steak, well done! When the wait-