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2010 – Ranching on the Tallgrass Prairie (Marty White, Editor)

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Josh Hoy

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Recommended Citation

Hoy, Josh (2010). "A Brief History of the Chuck Wagon," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2010/flinthills/8>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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A Brief History of the Chuck Wagon

I am a 5th generation Flint Hills rancher. My grandfather, Kenneth Hoy, drove cattle from Texas to Kansas as a teenager, and my great-uncle, Marshal Hoy, was as famous for his sourdough biscuits as he was for the horses he raised. So it is with pride and an acute awareness of my heritage that I inform you that we Hoys are kin to Charles Goodnight, the trail-blazing rancher and inventor of the chuck wagon. It is a distant kinship, but we claim it with pride. My great-great-uncle, Frank Goodnight, was Charley's great-nephew.



The chuck wagon was an essential piece of equipment for cowboys and ranchers during the trail-driving years and the era of open range ranching. The chuck wagon served ranchers and cowboys as a mobile kitchen, hospital, office, and bank in the years before barbed wire dissected and shrank the Great Plains. The first

chuck wagon was used in 1867 on a trail drive from central Texas to New Mexico. Charles Goodnight purchased an army surplus ammunition wagon with iron axles and had the legs of a clerk's writing desk cut off so it would fit easily in the bed of the wagon. The front of the writing desk could be folded down and used as a

table for preparing meals for the cowboy crew. The rest of the space in the wagon

“Hire a better cook. I have seen more blood spilt over singed beans and burnt biscuits than anything else.”

was filled with barrels of dry goods, water barrels, and bedrolls. Before the advent of the chuck wagon, the larder was limited to what could be packed on a mule or two, and consisted mainly of salt, green coffee beans, and frijoles to boil with the beef.

Charley found it much easier to keep good help if he could feed them well. When asked by his young partner, John Adair, how to better manage a quarrelsome cow camp, Charley replied, “Hire a better cook. I have seen more blood spilt over singed beans and burnt biscuits than anything else.” The biggest change that the chuck wagon brought to a cowboy’s life was bread. Flour and cornmeal could be kept dry and in sufficient quantity to provide

some form of bread at every meal. This may not sound like much, but compared to a diet of nothing but boiled beef and beans it was luxury. With the addition of some molasses or fruit preserves, cobblers and cookies soon became a part of trail cuisine.

Today on the Flying W Ranch, my home ranch, I have an original 1882 Newton chuck wagon that went up the trail from Abilene, Texas, to The North Platte Grazing Association in North Platte, Nebraska, with a herd of cattle in 1884. The wagon is filled with butcher’s tools and hardware from my grandfather’s ranch, cast iron pots and pans from my great-uncle’s collection and my grandmother’s kitchen. I like to think that whether I am roasting a brisket in the kitchens of the Culinary Institute of America or boiling a pot of black coffee at my chuck wagon, I am paying homage to my esteemed relative Charley Goodnight, inventor of the chuck wagon.

Josh Hoy is a Flint Hills rancher and is the chef at the Flying W Ranch located in Clements, Kansas. flinthillsflyingw.com



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