

First, here's what a mysterious postcard from a desk drawer, postmarked McClean, Texas, August 11, 1938, says: "Dear Mitchell, We are in Amarillo, Texas tonight. We came by the Grand Canyon. It was just wonderful. Hope you are still improving. Love, Neta."

The card is addressed to Mitchell Galbraith, c/o San Joaquin Hospital, Bakersfield, California. Up on the right margin above the address is a canceled green one-cent stamp bearing the profile of Benjamin Franklin. The face of the card, titled "Noonday on a West Texas Ranch." has a tinted copy of a photo of the JA ranch wagon crew eating under a canvas shade.

Instead of quoting the title and text on the card, I'll read the small print above the writer's space. Be patient. I read slow and in italics: "*On the 453,000 acre JA ranch in the Texas Panhandle 1934. Note the branding irons behind the saddle: the barbecue pit at the left and the chuck wagon to the right.*"

Understand the postcard might come to the ranch in a second-hand book, or perhaps from my pal Toney Aid's collection of his grandfather's horde of postcards in West Plains, Missouri. Toney's grandfather collected scenes of wide national interest to ship to a German printer to make postcards to sell in his general store. The JA picture

might have been a sample, or may have fallen from one of Toney's old books.

One part is clear; the cast is eight cowboys and a cook. The saddle and branding irons in the forefront are a prop. No hand is going to last on a ranch as big as the JA if he throws his saddle down at noon with the stirrup leathers and the skirt lying flat on the ground.

Unless the crew is preparing to move, the branding iron by the saddle is also staged. One of the boys may have brought in cold irons to move camp to a new branding site. I suppose were there such a thing in those times as a waddie green enough to throw his saddle down exposing the lining and blanket to grass and sticks, he might have left the irons lying on the ground instead of putting them in the wagon bed.

Part of the puzzle is who of the eight men is the boss. The cook is the hombre wearing a salt sack or flour sack for an apron. He's easy to spot. Be a good guess the wagon boss is the one eating close to the chuckbox lid. Take an important man to stand between the chuckbox and the cook's fire. The position of owner of the JA wouldn't be stout enough to earn a man the right to eat on the chuckbox lid.

Be a lot simpler to tell you about the postcard if you had a copy in front of you, but I'll continue as best I can. The two wagons are painted green and have red wheels

like the ones the Big Boss ordered from Fayetteville, Arkansas in the 1940s to save on 30-cent a gallon gasoline.

The big stack of wood piled against the wagon holding the water barrels is hard to explain. Must be imported wood, as the Panhandle in 1934 was an open plain. Most likely the water was dipped from a tank or a water trough, the wood hauled from the breaks.

For sure, any element cowboys inhaled, ate, or drank was organic. The moss and bugs in the tanks (his bathtub and drinking water,) the mesquite and cactus thorns, rain and sleet running down shirt collars, blizzards and heat spells, wood smoke and corral dust, and all the beasts of the air and ground were natural with no artificial additives. Too, outfits like the JA fed cowboys pure food from sacks, buckets and cans. (The text mentions the barbecue pit. Camped away from the headquarters, the crew probably ate plenty of organic calves, who might have had a grandfather vaccinated for blackleg.)

Had this been a movie set, the cast would have made cheap extras. Took a mighty top hand to draw \$40 a month in 1934. Perhaps the reason only eight men are eating around the chuckwagon is that the rest of the crew might be lost off the drive on a 700-section ranch. (Better confess: This postcard is the closest contact I've ever had with the JA's. Sometimes, however, my imagination ranges larger than 700 square miles.)

Last trace of the writer on the card, "Neta," is that she said, "Will go to Seminole tomorrow and be home the next day." Don't know how the recipient, Mitchell Galbraith, survived his hospital stay in Bakersfield in 1938. Mother was good at filing and indexing letters and cards. Wish she had passed on the trait.