

In the decade of the 1960s, a livestock trader named Mr. Sam Jones used to bid on the Boss's six year-old ewes at the ranch. Mr. Sam always dressed for the sheep pen in a gray striped suit with a Masonic tie pin stuck in a red four-in hand. He brought a box of doughnuts for the hands every time. Along with the well water at the corrals, Mr. Sam called this our midmorning coffee break.

He represented buyers we knew only as the "Websters." Ol' man Webster and his sons leased the big Door Key ranch east of Angelo to winter steers to ship to Kansas in late spring. Buying old ewes seemed mundane compared to running cattle on blue grass in Kansas.

Once Mr. Sam stayed for lunch. We were batching, making bread the best that young bucks knew how to bake it. Mr. Sam avoided comment by telling of once stopping off way back via Dove Creek to Angelo horseback from down on Devil's River.

The kitchen was unlocked, as was the custom in those days. The cowboy wasn't around. Mr. Sam and his partner couldn't make the sourdough on the cabinet rise however hard they tried to mix it.

Before the oven heated in the wood stove, the cowboy came from work. His first question, Mr. Sam said, was "How'd you learn to make bread from wolf bait? That's a bit too rich with arsenic to ever make good biscuits."

Biscuits ruled lots of conversations. In high school, the first ranch my partner Dave and myself worked that served one slice of toasted town bread put us on alert. We were used to eating a half-dozen biscuits to go from four a.m. to midday. When the lady added one egg and one slice of salt pork, we knew when we'd be available to help that outfit during the labor-short days of World War II.

Uncle Goat Whiskers called biscuits "sinkers" after fishing line lead weights.

Whiskers missed the childhood lesson on "fundamental dining room diplomacy." The cook at the old ranch who made such delightful rolls would have sunk his sinker. He (the cook) once served a cowboy two near-raw eggs on a tin plate for saying his coffee was cold.

Mother baked bread the last month of her long life into the nineties. Her mother could have stopped baking bread a long time before she died and still had plenty left over. Mother and daughter in no way shared cooking skills. Grandfather cooked breakfast every morning to keep alive.

Grandmother's biscuits laid around in the stove warmers, growing bigger lumps.

The most inept pupil of all times was Uncle Goat Whiskers. It took a morning to teach him to soft boil eggs after his wife died. The egg recipe was picked because the timer utilized Whisker's northeastern engineering schooling.

His connection with logarithm tables however, raised doubts about why an egg cooked at 2500 feet altitude at the ranch took the same amount of time as one in Mertz on at say, 2300 feet. My plea that this was a cooking lesson, not a mathematics class, failed. Goat Whiskers ignored my question of how many times I was going to need a logarithm table to tally bitterweed sheep.

He'd have starved that first winter if the Mexican cowboy hadn't fed him flour tortillas and red beans. The only good judgment he showed was that he refused to eat store bread, or "wasp nest," as he called it.

Christmas of 1999, one of my neighbors at the ranch sent a card that had a recipe for sourdough mix. Directions called for boiled potato water, white flour and sugar. One yeast cake was thrown in to speed up the process. Earlier experience recalled adding one tablespoon of whole wheat to clarify the mixture.

For color, I dumped everything in Mother's crock pitcher and tied the nearest thing to a flour sack on top. The sourdough began to ferment. "The Joy of Cooking" listed plenty of biscuit and loaf bread recipes, plus one for sourdough cornbread.

My first try turned out a loaf that, instead of rising, shrunk in size. A sweet ol' lady in the dance club at her birthday declared it was the worst bread she'd tasted in her whole life. At age 95, she was safe. None of us had been around as long as that lizard tongue had lived.

Bread-making became easier. The sourdough bubbled and popped on the counter. A friend gave me a commercial mixer to speed up the process. One of my grandsons, upon tasting his first sourdough, may have broken the record at 32 biscuits in a sitting. At least he set a mark to beat at the Double Half Circle Ranch.

Instinct became a guide on when to weaken the mixture. The first time fruit flies began to dive into the cloth on the crock or gnats broke formation to dive at a dirty measuring cup meant to drain off the alcohol and replenish the potato water.

Stranded in Mertzon to recover from surgeries, dry crackers do as well as bread. My sourdough at the ranch

dried and ended in the trash. Comeback takes awhile, but
the germ still exists.