

Not Least Of West's Wonders Is Cowboy's Table Performance

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MERTZON — In the early days of this century, shortgrass ranches and ranch economists became aware that on these often dry ranges the sole aspect of life unaffected by weather was the appetite of cowhands.

At that time the only comments on the newly discovered menace were made by an expert in chuckbox and kitchen performance who said, in effect, that the caloric intake of certain parties in the work force exceeded their interest in flanking calves or doctoring wormies by the same margin that the Eskimo's enthusiasm or lichen and whale blubber surpasses his craving for sun bathing and water polo.

The cook's words were filled with wisdom. But ranchers of the time were so distracted by hungry wolves, tax-minded politicians, and a type of dry-weather blight that activates these predators of flock and purse that they were forced to ignore the pantry problem.

So the drovers were allowed to graze at will. Notable knife-and-fork experts were developed. Scientific shortcuts to putting away groceries were invented. And such ranchers as dared take their eyes off the varmints, the legislators, or the clouds, were struck dumb by the sight of so much foodstuff disappearing so rapidly.

As time passed and it became apparent that there was a shortage of cowhands who could move with any appreciable speed unless they were headed for the chuckbox or stationed too near an ant hill, the table form of these hombres improved.

For example the oldtimer's habit of pausing to recover spilled crumbs and morsels was replaced by a steady stroke which disregarded errors until the final plate-cleaning operation. The once common, sloppy, extended-elbow biscuit lift was superseded by a highly effective straight jab. This resulted in abandonment of the right or left hand lead in favor of a super efficient ambidextrous grab that was to make second throws for a biscuit snare practically unheard of.

Meanwhile, ranchers and range economists were making further studies of the threat. They found that the sheep and cow market could be in a state of failure that threatened to put the rancher's family on stew made of boiled boot soles yet the cowhands would continue to demand out-of-state frijoles and imported corn meal as if there were a business boom that would shock Wall Street traders. When wool and mohair were so cheap that four stored clips offered less security than a sack of glass marbles, the waddies would keep on spooning sugar in their coffee as if the boss had just harvested 40 acres of sugar cane to take to the family-owned mill.

Ultimately the ranchers and scholars understood that even if grass were so short that a prairie dog couldn't live on two sections of land, the cowboys would respond to the drouth by lapping up biscuits and molasses as if their host had a one-fourth override on all the oil in Texas.

By the time this was realized, the ranch labor force had begun to disappear. Today there aren't many wranglers of any type — either the eating or working variety. What few are left, however, continue to show the same devotion to pot and platter as their predecessors. They often display a free wheeling table style quite similar to that seen in bygone years.

In a way it's a shame that cowboy's dining habits have been so little publicized and are now so rarely observed. There's a good chance that their deftness of hand and mouth could be the very thing we need to draw tourists to the shortgrass country.