650 Words.

America Eats

Colorado
1941

COWBOY FOOD

Every body knows that a cowboy must eat and that he is through necessity limited to a small variety of dishes because he is so far from "nowhere" that luxuries are out of the question.

"The cook, who is a sailor, never learned to cook. To suit the local taste he makes feeble efforts at the peppery Spanish methods. Butter and milk are, of course, unknown on this ranch, as they are on all the ranches of the genuine cattle range, although thousands of cows are all about. There is no historical record of any such event as a cowboy being asked to milk a cow, nor is it likely that anything so improbable ever happened, for had it occured, the cowboy must surely have evidenced his feelings over such a request in a manner interesting enough to be preserved among the traditions of the range.

"At table each man takes off his "gun," this being one of the little courtesies of the land, but no one removes his hat of deliberate intention. "The furniture of the kitchen is simple, the dishes mostly of tin or ironstone china.

"The ranch house here is an edifice entirely distinct in type, the ~~abode~~ adobe, typical dwelling of the Spanish Southwest. Never was human habitation more nicely adapted than this to the necessities of the country which produced it. No heat can penetrate these walls, more than three feet thick, of the sun-dried native brick or "'dobe'" The building is exactly the color of the surrounding earth, and stands square and flat topped, like a great box thrown upon the ground....Within the 'dobe it is always cool, for it is a peculiarity of this climate that the heat is felt only when one is exposed directly to the sun."

"The interior of this ranch house is rather attractive, with its walls whitewashed with gypsum, its deep window embrasures, and its hard dirt floor swept clean, as though it were made of wood."

"A second building, also of ~~abode~~ adobe, stands at a little distance from the main ranch house, and this serves as general quarters for the men as well as for kitchen and dining hall."

"The cook, of course, is the first one up about the camp, and he "makes the breakfast" in his own room. The toilet of the cowpuncher is simple, and, after he had kicked off his blankets, it is but a few moments before he is at the table eating his plateful of beef or bacon and beans. The meal does not last long, and those which follow it later in the day are much the same. The city club man is fond of wild game as an adjunct to a good dinner. The "granger" sets oysters and ice cream as the highest possible luxuries of life. The cowboy thinks of fresh green vegetables in his epicurean dreams, and he longs for the indigestible pies of civilization. Any pure cowpuncher would sell his birthright for half a dozen pies. The cow cook can not make actual pies, only leathery imitations encasing stewed dried apples. One remembers very well a certain Christmas dinner in a little far-away Western plains town which cost two men twenty-five dollars, and which consisted of some badly cooked beef, one can of oysters, a frosted cake, and five green onions, the latter obtained from somewhere by a hothouse miracle. This dinner was voted a very extraordinary and successful affair. The men at the ranch house are not adverse to an occasional change in their diet, and fresh game is appreciated. Deer, antelope, wild turkey, and

sometimes smaller game often appeared on the menu of the ranch in the old days, but big game is scarce now over most of the range, and small game has rarely had much attention from the cowboys, who, as a rule, do not do a great deal of hunting."[1]

When out on range duty -- with the chuck wagon -- were pork, bacon, jerked beef, beans, and "sour dough." The last mentioned, although known throughout the West as "cowboy bread," really is of Eastern origin and was introduced to the Rocky Mountain frontier by hunters, trappers, and gold seekers from beyond the Mississippi.

Its recipe is short: two cups of flour, two teaspoons of sugar, and one teaspoon of salt. Mixed with water to form a creamy batter, and with the addition of a tablespoonful of vinegar, the mess is set in the sun or near a fire to sour. It is never to be used until it has soured for at least two days. Old timers insist that the longer it is allowed to set the better it is. The dough should be kept constantly covered, and never allowed to grow cold.

Pancakes can be made of sour dough by adding the following ingredients:

2 tablespoons molasses
1 teaspoon of salt
½ teaspoon soda.

The dough, for either bread or pancakes, was "improved" by tossing back any scraps of the last meal into the original mass.[2]

1. E. Hough, Story of the Cowboy, 22-25; 204-205.

2. Data from Robert Pfanner, Colorado Writers' Project.