

ON TIME!

HOW THE COOK OF A "COW-CAMP" GOT HIS OWN BACK

THE cook of a cow punchers' camp is almost invariably an unshaved person with dirty overalls and an uncertain temper. Also, he is reckoned by the rest of the boys as fair game for any love of fun and practical joking that happens to be going around in the camp. And never yet was there a cow camp where this love wasn't prominent and well developed.

The resident cook of the C C C ranch down by the North Fork of the Concho river, in Texas, was a peach, a real jim-dandy, a nonsuch. He'd held the job for more years than the average "doctor" holds his for months, so you'll gather that he came mighty close to being an ideal cook. And the outfit, being an ordinary one, didn't help him any more than is usual.

Said Wild Joe one evening, supper being finished:

"Speakin' of cooks——"

"I hadn't heard it recent," interrupted Abilene Bill. "But as we ain't otherwise busy, pro-ceed, my son."

With a scornful glance at his interruptor, Wild Joe (so called because of his modest and retiring nature) continued.

"They is, accordin' to my experience, chiefly a whole lot mixed. I've met up with some as was good, a heap that was pizon bad; but bad or good, they're all shore unsafe to quarrel with. An' th' breed's plumb sensitive. Mebbe livin' next a scorehin fire most all the time makes their hides tender'n other fellers. They're shore uncertain; an' speakin' free an' large, th' only thing about 'em that ain't is that th' next'll be worse'n th' last."

Joe, having been gifted with a double dose of original sin in the matter of practical joking, his oracular pronouncement was received with due appreciation by the score

of punchers grouped around the stove; the subject was discussed with ardour and variety. For it is a topic of conversation never stale in a cow camp, the professional ability—or otherwise—of the cook being a matter of importance to all.

Substantially, Joe's contention was upheld, the criticism being fine and varied, and unaffected by the knowledge that Uncle Johnny, the resident cook, was well within earshot. But there was no malice behind the humour, for every man knew that the Carlisle Cattle Company (which meant themselves) was peculiarly fortunate in its "doctor."

Not only was Johnny a really first-class cook, but it was acknowledged that his smartness and punctuality in getting meals on the table—which matters a lot to a class of men always hungry and owning a hatred of waiting—were far beyond those of the average grub spoiler.

He was a clever old fellow, Johnny; and it was understood that an earlier stage of his career had been spent as a trooper in one of the crack British cavalry regiments. There, doubtless, he had acquired that habit of promptitude so much appreciated by his present comrades.

Presently the conversation was interrupted by the entry of Tim Maclean, foreman of the outfit.

"Say, boys," he said, finding standing place near the fire, for a December evening in Texas is liable to be chilly; "it's an early start for us to-morrow."

Ray Howitt looked up and inquired:

"Where?"

"Devil's River. There some right smart bunches of beef down along near th' water, and as it's farthest away, I reckon we'll start there first."

And Maclean moved along to the cookhouse

where Uncle Johnny, the washing up of his numerous pots and pans finished, was getting the stove fixed up ready for his morning operations.

Therein lay the secret of the cook's unfailing punctuality. He always began in advance. Maclean, watching, nodded approval.

"That's right, Johnny," he observed. "Reckon you won't have any time to give away to-morrow mornin'."

The cook looked at him with a mild surprise.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Because we're due for an early start, uncle. I'm taking th' outfit down along to Devil's River, and I mean making it bright and soon, for it's a long ride. So mind you see to it and give us breakfast right on time, for I don't want to be late. See."

Maclean, turning away, did not catch the expression that flickered into Johnny's clear brown eyes—a lot wondering and a trifle resentful. But it was gone again in an instant, and the man answered:

"That'll be all right, boss."

But the cook's feelings were hurt, and, the foreman gone, Uncle Johnny permitted himself to give vent to them.

"Four years, and I ain't never yet been once late with a meal," he muttered.

"The boss] didn't have no call to talk to me that way. Still——"

Methodically he continued his work. He filled the huge kettle and busied himself with a roasting of coffee. At last, his day's work finished, he betook himself into the big living-room, and, as was his habit, went straight to his bunk and turned back his blankets.

Turning out, as he has to do, at two o'clock

in the morning, the cook of a cow camp doesn't usually waste any time between the ending of his day's job and going to roost.

From the stove a grave voice called to him as he was removing his boots:

"Mind you ain't late in th' mornin', uncle."

Another took up the fun.

"Like me to call you, uncle?" he was solicitously asked.

"That's all right, boys; don't you worry," he told them kindly.

In a few seconds Uncle Johnny was rolled up and snoring portentously, undisturbed by the conversation about the stove, although the talk did not continue for much longer, Maclean's warning not being forgotten.

"Reckon I'll be poundin' my ear," remarked Abilene Bill; and rose from his seat.

"Me, too," said another. One by one the punchers found their bunks, the lamp was put out, and shortly after nine o'clock the long room, dark as pitch, was filled with the snoring and heavy breathing of a score of tired sleepers.

In due time the cook roused himself, dropped his legs over the edge of the bunk, and found the floor. Dressing was not a prolonged operation, and

within two minutes of awakening, Johnny was in his cookhouse, mixing flour and water and baking-powder by the light of the tin lamp.

Easily, methodically, quickly but without any appearance of haste, the old man worked, the glowing stove rapidly approaching the condition fit to deal with the huge panful of sliced steak waiting to hand. He quietly



Armed with an iron spoon and tin plate, he began the deafening clamour that announced that breakfast was ready.

hummed a tune as he worked, evidence that the foreman's interference—as he deemed it—of the night before hadn't disastrously affected his spirits or good humour.

During intervals of attending to the oven and frying-pan, he set out the long table in the big room with its load of ironware. Now and again he glanced at the tin-cased clock on a shelf in his sanctum, and seemed satisfied. In due course the beef was fried, the coffee ready, the bread cooked. Again he eyed the clock.

"Boss can't say I ain't on time," he told himself with evident satisfaction.

Going into the big room, he lighted the lamp, and armed with an iron spoon and tin plate, began the infernal clamour that announced breakfast was ready.

The response was prompt. From every bunk a puncher rolled out without loss of time. Boots were pulled on, blankets rolled up, and those with a fancy that way made a hasty toilet with a bucket of water and a rough towel. By the time the cook had the smoking dishes on the table every man was in his place.

Followed a busy time. Every man ate as though life depended upon rapidity of consumption. Conversation was at a discount, cowmen having no use for the theory that the taking of food should be accompanied with bright and cheerful conversation. Jaws were too hard at work for chat of any kind. Between living-room and cookhouse Uncle Johnny moved quickly, bringing along fresh supplies.

Jeff Hancock, whose turn it was to fetch the horses from the corral, was first to quit. Out he went, and the rest, as their appetites were satisfied, got up, rolled cigarettes, and gathered about the lighted stove until the arrival of their ponies.

Five minutes passed, and Tim Maclean began to grow restive.

"Jeff Hancock's slow this mawnin'," he growled, lighting a second cigarette.

The others thought the same, but said little. Now and again a few curt, low-voiced words might be heard. Still the horse wrangler did not put in appearance, and the foreman's irritation grew into evident annoyance.

Behind the idle group, too occupied with his own work to give them any attention, Uncle Johnny, whistling softly to himself, was clearing the table.

Maclean's annoyance was finding outlet in cuss words, and he was on the point of sending out a man to find what had become of Hancock when the door was thrown open, and that puncher stepped into the room.

"Queer thing," he cried shortly. "Too dark t' see any hosses, much less catch 'em." And he looked back at the foreman's angry eyes with equal anger.

"It shore is dark," admitted a puncher from by the window. "Don't wonder."

The foreman swung about, scowling ferociously, and all eyes were turned upon the cook. Going to the door, he had opened it, and was looking out curiously.

"What d'ye mean?" demanded Maclean savagely.

Uncle Johnny looked at him serenely, but on his way to the cookhouse made no answer. In an instant, however, he was back again.

"Reckon breakfast was early enough, eh, boss?" he asked the foreman.

And he set down on the table the tin-cased clock he had brought back with him—the only timepiece the whole outfit owned.

And everyone looked at the clock, the hands of which indicated almost midnight.

"Like dinner early, too?" questioned Johnny, with a perfectly straight face.

And then he made a swift break for the doorway, through which he darted fleetly, and disappeared, followed by a yell and, half a second later, by a roaring mob of bamboozled cowpunchers, the joke played upon them at last plain to their eyes. The foreman headed the crowd.

When they returned from their long chase—Uncle Johnny was fleet of foot and the darkness helped—the prisoner in their midst, good humour had overcome their anger, and Tim Maclean was the first to admit that this time it was the cook who had scored.

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