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Traditions Define Cowboy Style on Montana's S Ranch

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GUY DE GALARD

A S THE SUN SLOWLY WARMS the grassland, Chris Hatch sits behind his four-up team of draft horses as it pulls a green, wood-wheeled chuckwagon. The wagon leads the way from Dave's Camp to Brown Camp on the Padlock Ranch in Wyoming, followed by the hood wagon (carrying tents and bedrolls) and a cavvy of 50 horses, strung out and flanked by cowboys.

The wagons' squeaky wheels, the whinnies of the horses and the occasional crack of a bullwhip are sounds from a different time, but this scene took place earlier this year.

After several years in retirement, the chuckwagon has returned to the Padlock Ranch. In this day and age where every cent counts, the cattle outfit decided to hitch up its teams and turn off the diesel engines, thanks to livestock manager Brian Manuel. Manuel believes that keeping this tradition alive during branding is not only cost effective, but is also a morale booster for his crew.

Convincing the ranch's upper management of this meant that Manuel's idea had to be backed by a solid financial plan. So, he and Hatch, the Gross and Redman division foreman, wrote a proposal and presented it to Padlock's chief operations manager, Tray Patterson, who supported the idea.

"We had to make sure that it was financially feasible," Patterson says. "This can't be just for show. This is a business. Branding is a necessity and is hard work. So, if we could make it more enjoyable for the employees, it was worth considering."

Last year, for the month of June, the Gross and Redman crew drove 7,381 miles, using 998 gallons of fuel that cost the ranch over \$3,300.

"We started thinking about it last summer, when the price of gas skyrocketed," says Manuel. "I knew that running a wagon during branding season, thus eliminating all the back-and-forth driving with pickups and trailers, would bring the ranch significant savings. That was the selling force."

Men who know how to harness and drive a four-horse team are becoming hard to find, but Hatch is one of them. Justin Rogers drives the hood wagon.

"The ranch already had the teams, and we had the guys who knew how to drive one," Hatch says. "That was a big factor."

Pulling out the wagon after years of inactivity required considerable planning. Manuel and his crew went to work first restoring the wagons, then rounding up everything needed. It was no easy task.

"It took us about three weeks, but we pulled it off," Manuel says.

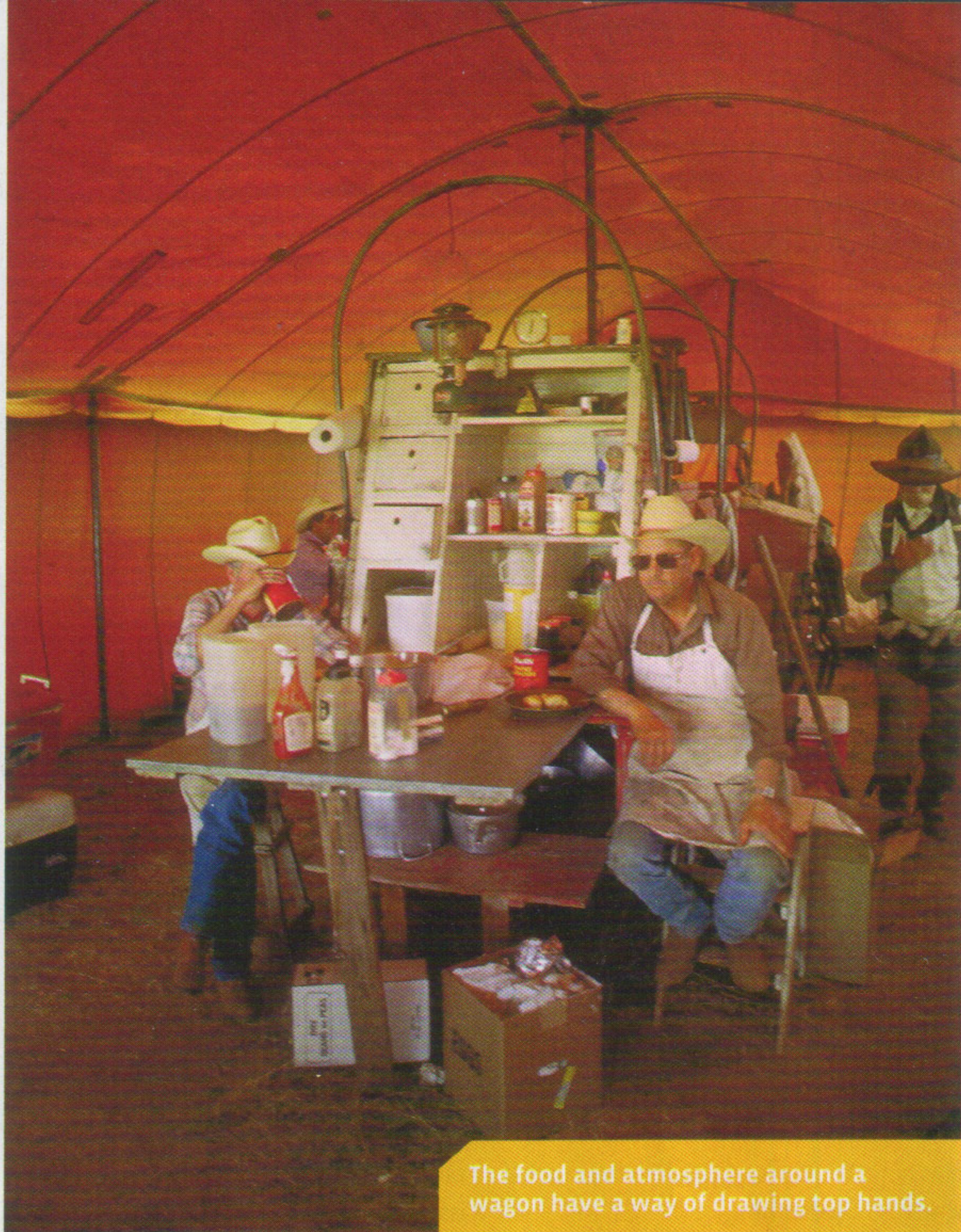
Martin Anseth, who was foreman of the Conley division on the North End from 1999 to 2002, brought the wagon out of a nine-year retirement at branding time. To him, it made sense.

"You don't have to worry about vehicles breaking down," he says. "You just trot out in the morning. You camp there with your work and your crew. And a crew that stays together, works together better."

"But running a wagon also requires good



Chris Hatch drives the Padlock chuckwagon to a new camp. The legendary ranch began using the wagon again this year.



The food and atmosphere around a wagon have a way of drawing top hands.

BOB MOORHOUSE



After setting up camp, the Padlock branding crew relaxes by the chuckwagon. The crew includes, from left, Chris Hatch, Jesse Ballantyne, Brian Manuel (kneeling), Matt Bushey, Taylor Manuel, Justin Rogers and Craig McKenzie.

GUY DE GALARD



JOHN BRASSEAU

Craig Haythorn says running a wagon saves time and creates a better working environment during branding.

planning. You can't run back to the ranch if you forgot something."

Hatch agrees that a wagon makes branding season more enjoyable. He grew up on his family's ranch, located nearby, and hired on with the Padlock more than two years ago. He now oversees the 45,000-acre Gross and Redman division.

"You don't have to go anywhere once your work is done," Hatch says. "It saves a lot of time. I'd rather get up at 5 a.m. than 2 a.m. and have to drive two hours. You get more tired because of all the driving back and forth between home and each branding site. Branding is supposed to be a fun time."

Another of the benefits of using a horse-drawn wagon became obvious to Rogers two summers ago, after a wildfire torched some of the Padlock's grasslands.

"It was so dry that we couldn't use pickups to put minerals out because of the hot mufflers, so we started using teams," Rogers says. "We'd put cakes out with a team the following spring, and minerals during the dry season. We fed again with teams last winter. This is how the idea of bringing the wagon back for branding came."

Although Manuel's crew enjoys the tradi-

tion that goes with life on the wagon, safety issues can't be ignored and require some of today's modern conveniences.

"We keep a pickup and a trailer at camp for emergency purposes," Manuel says. "We also need another vehicle to pull the panels."

Wagon Outfits

Three other big outfits also decided to bring their wagons out of retirement after several years: the Haythorn Land and Cattle Company in Nebraska, and Swenson Ranches and Pitchfork Land and Cattle Company, both in Texas.

Use of the wagon had been discontinued at the Haythorn for 35 years until the ranch's owner, Craig Haythorn, decided to reintroduce it in 1982. Today, the Haythorn is recognized as one of the finest in keeping the traditions of Western ranching alive.

Haythorn cowboys appreciate the traditional way of doing things such as riding and roping, but they consider living out on the wagon their favorite time.

"Living out on the wagon during branding, and camping out during these three weeks, is an exciting time for all of us," Haythorn says. "It also saves time. There are less trailer

miles, and you don't have to worry about being back at a certain time. It's just a more relaxed atmosphere that appeals to most cowboys, especially the younger ones. The wagon still works for us, and I am trying to keep all this alive."

In addition to running a horse-drawn wagon during the spring branding, the ranch uses six-horse hitches to deliver feed during the winter, and to stack over 6,000 tons of hay in the summer. The ranch's affinity for draft horses has less to do with nostalgia and more with economic efficiency.

"I've never had a draft horse that wouldn't start in the morning," Haythorn says.

After working at the Padlock, Dennis Braden accepted the position of general manager at Swenson Ranches in 2005. He immediately reintroduced the wagon, which had been parked for 35 years. Because the ranch had been using calf tables, he even brought down his Padlock crew to help at the first branding.

Today, the ranch runs a horse-drawn wagon with a crew of 15 cowboys during branding. For Braden, the benefits are obvious.

"It not only saves fuel, but all your

employees are there in the morning," he says. "You don't have to round them up."

Pulling a wagon for two weeks during spring branding and for two weeks during fall works saved the ranch between \$3,000 and \$5,000 each year.

"It's important to maintain that heritage and culture, but if we can save money while doing it, that's even better," Braden says.

Beyond Economics

When Bob Moorhouse took the reins of the Pitchfork Ranch in 1986, the wagons had been collecting dust since 1970. He was determined to bring back the tradition to the 165,000-acre Texas spread, which traces its origins to 1883. Moorhouse retired two years ago.

"I was proud to pull the old wagon out of storage and to re-establish this tradition," he says. "The upper management and the stockholders were all for it because they also liked tradition. Cowboys like tradition. If they didn't, they'd be doing something else."

Manuel notes that the driving force behind a cattle operation is the cowboys who are out riding and checking grass, water and fences. That means it is to everyone's benefit to make sure they are happy at what they are doing.

"It is important to create an atmosphere of contentment among the crew," he says, "and being out with the wagon contributes to that. Someone might not be the greatest hand in the world, but if he's happy, he'll give you 200 percent every day. But if the best hand in the world isn't happy, he isn't worth much."

"Running a wagon keeps us on the employer list for prospective cowboys," Patterson adds. "We get a lot of applications from people who are drawn to this place because of the way we do things here. It's a big factor to hiring and retaining good help."

In addition, running a wagon benefits the individual without whom none of this would be possible: the horse.

"It helps us market our horse program," Braden says. "When we're out with the wagon, we do a lot of trotting. And the more we ride, the better it is for the horses."


"It's good for a horse to trot an hour or two before getting to work," adds Anseth. "The cavvy also learns how to stand on the ropes and gets used to being trailed."

Jesse Ballantyne recently joined the Padlock's South End wagon crew after working for the ranch on and off for the last 17 years.

"A good ranch gelding is a prized asset," he says. "The more you use a vehicle, the more it depreciates every day. But the more you use a horse, the more it appreciates every day. The same goes with teams."

After setting up their new camp, Hatch and his crew resume branding. When every calf they can find on that part of the ranch

is marked, they break camp again and head back to headquarters.

Running a wagon for the month of June this year saved the Padlock about \$3,000 in fuel and more than 5,600 miles of driving. Figures like that should keep wooden wheels turning on the ranch for years to come. 

Guy de Galard is a writer and photographer based in Wyoming. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.