

Becky Conway - Chuckwagon

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The delegation of Chinese is visiting Kansas. They are having dinner with state dignitaries. Is this some formal meal at a fancy Kansas City restaurant? No, it is an authentic chuckwagon meal, prepared by historic re-enactors from rural Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Becky and John Conway are the historic re-enactors who provided this meal. Becky works for the annual Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, and John is an electrician and working cowboy. But on weekends, they become what they call the Rafter JB Chuck Wagon Crew.

The Conways live in eastern Cowley County. In 1990, a friend invited them to go to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City where a chuckwagon cooking competition happened to be underway. “We met Red Steagall’s chuckwagon crew, and they were so nice to us,” Becky said. The Conways got hooked on this unique enterprise.

“We have a natural love of history,” Becky said. “We grew up in cow country, in the southern Flint Hills, so this was a good fit.” Chuckwagon cooking was a unique way of capturing and experiencing this history.

Becky and John traveled to Texas several years to help out with Red Steagall’s chuckwagons, and his crew encouraged them to try a chuckwagon cooking competition on their own. The Conways started experimenting and cooking for neighbors.

In 1993, the Conways bought a historic wagon from a neighbor whose grandfather had bought it when it was brand new in 1910. “Technically, we’re the second owners,” Becky said with a smile. Wouldn’t that make an interesting ad? “For sale: One used vehicle, on second owner, 113 years old.” Wow.

This vehicle was an authentic Cooper wagon. Becky and John added a chuck box of antique wood. Using their cattle brand as the name, they started taking the Rafter JB wagon to festivals, historic re-enactments, and chuckwagon cooking competitions.

What is a chuckwagon cooking competition? It’s about food, but especially about historic accuracy. “We are judged on three things,” Becky said: “Number one, the condition and authenticity of the wagon; number two, the camp and clothing; and number three, the food.” Typically each crew is given the same ingredients and asked to prepare them.

So John and Becky set up their camps, wear period clothing, and prepare food in the classic manner using wood coals and dutch ovens over campfires. The Conways have won many competitions through the years. The prize money essentially covers their costs. “It’s the braggin’ rights (that are important),” Becky said with a smile.

Most weekends from March to November, the Conways will be competing or simply demonstrating chuckwagon cooking at gatherings or festivals.

“It’s a labor of love,” Becky said. “Everything we prepare is from scratch.” Beef, beans, and biscuits are typically on the menu, along with desserts like vinegar pie and buttermilk pie.

“We look for recipes that are common for the period and common for the people,” Becky said.

Family and history are important to them. “My granddaughter has been rolling biscuits with me since I had to bring a box for her to stand on,” Becky said. The Conways value carrying these traditions on to future generations.

Becky and John do chuckwagon meals for neighboring ranches during fall roundup. “One day it struck me that I was fourth generation and this rancher was also fourth generation, and now our kids were doing this too,” Becky said. “That’s why we do this,” she said. “We don’t have a lot of money, but we sure are rich.”

The Conways have been called upon to provide these historic re-enactments for many groups, such as delegations from China, Russia, Hungary, and France. “We were told that we ended up being their highlight,” Becky said. That’s pretty impressive for some historic re-enactors from the rural community of Cambridge, Kansas, population 102 people. Now, that’s rural.

It's time to leave this delegation of Chinese, who are enjoying an authentic chuckwagon supper prepared by historic reenactors from rural Kansas. We salute Becky and John Conway for making a difference by preserving and sharing this history. They are providing their guests a taste of the old west.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.