

HAPPENINGS

The Chuck Wagon Throw-Down

Can a Coloradan topple the Texans in Cheyenne's biggest cook-off?

BY PETER BRONSKI

THEY DON'T CALL Cheyenne Frontier Days (July 20–29) the “Daddy of ’em all” for nothing. With the world’s largest outdoor rodeo and a reconstructed Wild West town, Cheyenne is all about pioneer heritage. The festival debuted 111 years ago. But in 2000, event organizers were looking for something new, fresh, and undeniably authentic. Enter the **Chuck Wagon Cook-off**.

The annual cook-off features 10 wagons and teams that are judged in six categories: chicken-fried steak, potatoes, beans, bread, and dessert, plus authenticity of the wagon. Drawn in by the wafting smells of bread pudding and seasoned potatoes cooking over an open fire, thousands of spectators jam the walkway for Saturday’s championship cook-off. As with any good rodeo event, the winner walks away with a shiny belt buckle and a small purse of prize money.

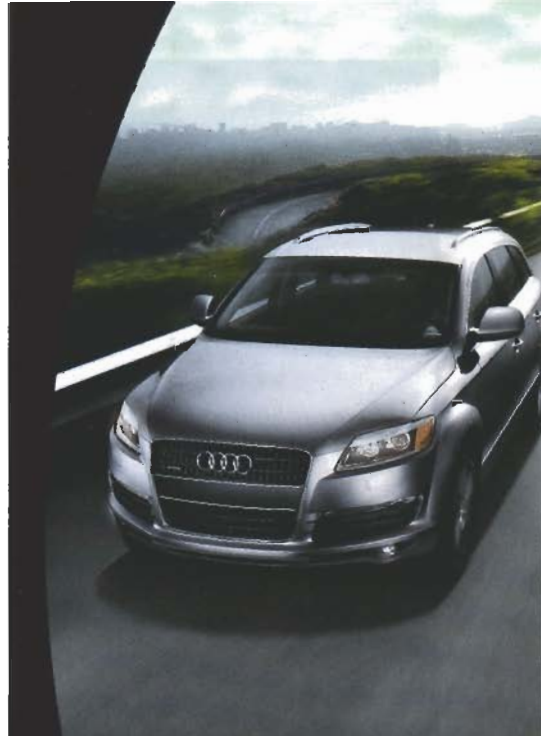
For competitors, it’s less about winning and more about heritage. The first chuck wagon is believed to have been created by Charles Goodnight, a Texas rancher, in 1866. While preparing to drive a herd of 2,000 cattle from Texas to Denver, Goodnight retrofit a double-axle covered wagon with a sloping box on the rear. The hinged lid lowered to create a worktable for the cook, and the box itself contained shelves and drawers for utensils and food. To cowboys, “chuck” was food, and thus the wagon became a chuck wagon. Good-

night’s route to Denver became known as the Goodnight-Loving Trail, also named after his partner on the drive, Oliver Loving. When the Union Pacific Railroad reached Cheyenne in 1886, the route was extended, with Cheyenne becoming the northernmost stop.

The 2007 event promises to be the cook-off of them all, with two Texas teams vying for ultimate bragging rights. Bob and Nancy Sparks, from Brownfield, Texas, and Don and Shirley Creacy, from Fritch, Texas, are each three-time winners: The Sparks and their 108-year-old wagon are reigning champs from last year, and the Creacys are veritable chuck-wagon royalty, having been featured on the Food Network four times with their 1912 John Deere wagon and Shirley’s latticed peach cobbler. Despite such credentials, this year could be anyone’s game. “You can cook your heart out, but it takes a lot of luck,” says Nancy.

Michael Garner, from Wellington, Colorado, hopes Nancy is right. After spending more than two years apprenticing with Texas teams, Garner formed Team G Bar Lazy S, which includes his wife, mother-in-law, and two aunts. They’ll make their debut this year as Colorado’s lone competitor. “We’re new to the scene,” says Garner. “But it’s really the luck of the draw with the judges and their tastes.”

For more info, visit the Cheyenne Frontier Days website, www.cfdrodeo.com ▲



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