

GARDNER COMMUNITY HOSTS CHUCKWAGON DINNER

FIRST SATURDAY IN AUGUST

By Kay Beth Faris Avery

When the summer sun shines as bright as it gets in the Sangre de Cristo foothills, hundreds of old friends from throughout the nation travel to Gardner, Colorado to reminisce about old times and enjoy pleasant camaraderie. The smells of pit roasted beef and buttered corn-on-the-cob fill the air, along with the aromas of baked beans, hot biscuits, potatoes and gravy, strong cowboy coffee, iced tea, lemonade, and homemade pies.

Annual chuckwagon dinners in the upper Huerfano River Valley boast a long tradition that began with Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving's first cattle drive in 1866. It was in this year that Goodnight invented the chuckwagon by rebuilding an army surplus Studebaker wagon. He wanted a practical portable kitchen from which a cook could feed hungry cowboys on a long journey. Goodnight, his partner, and eighteen cowhands were preparing to take two thousand Longhorn cattle from Fort Belknap in southwest Texas to Fort Sumner in northern New Mexico. It was a venture that would net \$12,000, a handsome sum in those days.

In 1867, on his second trip to Fort Sumner, Oliver Loving was attacked by a Comanche war party and fatally wounded. During the two weeks it took Loving to die from gangrene, Goodnight sat by his friend's bedside trying to supply comforting words and promising to fulfill a last request. Afterwards, Goodnight stayed true to his word. He loaded his partner's body onto a wagon and hauled it all the way back to Texas for a proper burial in the Loving family cemetery near Weatherford. Perseverance on a dangerous frontier, the death of a brave fighter, and the friendship of two honorable men—all are captured in Larry McMurtry's novel, *Lonesome Dove*, which is loosely based on the real story.

Over the next several years, Goodnight and his new partner, John Chisum, extended the trail to Denver, Colorado and Cheyenne, Wyoming. Their efforts pioneered a profitable cattle industry that continued to expand throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, farmers and ranchers throughout the United States were purchasing a half million miles of barbed wire annually, although much of southern Colorado remained open rangeland well into the twentieth century.

In 1904, ranchers on the upper Huerfano River formed the Cuerno Verde Cattle Association so they could act as a unit in protecting brands, rounding up rustlers, and lobbying government agencies. These stockmen and their hired cowboys branded calves together in the spring, drove their herds together onto the lush pastures atop Greenhorn Mountain in the early summer, and herded their steers to market together in the late fall. The association's autumn roundups often included more than 10,000 cattle and took up to six weeks to complete. Every morning and every evening during those six weeks all the riders from outfits large and small ate their meals together around the same chuckwagon.

The open range round-ups ended in the 1930s, and in 1942 the Gardner Methodist Church congregation sponsored the first "official" ChuckWagon Dinner as a fund raiser for the church. Six and a half decades later, aging church members turned over the organization of the annual event to Jan and Ray Garcia, who created a non-profit organization. Now proceeds from the dinner fund scholarships for area students and capital improvements within the entire community.

August 6, 2016, marks the 74th time that the Gardner ChuckWagon Dinner will be held in the yard behind the Methodist Church. The actual chuckwagon has been replaced with a church kitchen and a large underground roasting pit; but the corn is still boiled over an open flame in cast iron kettles and many of the makeshift picnic tables are supported by hay bales, giving the scene a genuine rustic flavor. The celebration begins at 2:00 p.m. Tickets can be purchased on site for \$10 per adult/ \$5 per child. For more details, contact Ray Garcia at ergarcia69@hotmail.com.