

Ode to Ranch Cooks

Some drunks wouldn't leave jail to work on Oregon's Island Ranch if Tonopah Marie was cooking.

By Hank Vogler

One of the most overlooked members of the ranch community is the cookhouse queen/domestic goddess/pantry princess, or “if you don’t like it, it’s a long way to the next restaurant” master chef of the ranch, also known as the ranch cook.

In the days before unemployment offices, the local sheriff in Burns, Ore., was the unemployment officer. Eldon Sitz was the sheriff for a bazillion years and he would call my granddad at six o’clock in the evening because he knew everyone would be assem-

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bled at a long rectangular table in the cookhouse at the Island Ranch. Eldon’s job was to relieve the county jail of the boys who had come to town and blown their money on the local establishments that dispensed alcohol until their poke was gone.

Vagrancy was a crime and as a general rule these fellows would be hauled into jail just before the money ran out to pay for their lodging on the county. As sobriety would “dry out” the weakened man, Eldon would call all the ranches to see who needed help. Grandma Pearl would answer the old crank phone and then announce to Grandpa Hank that it was Eldon. Some at the table would shudder. Maybe they were about to be fired. Others might pile their food high, sort of like a last supper that may need to last for a while. All seated would listen carefully to the conversation to hear who the new bunkhouse mate might be.

Grandpa would turn and look up and down the table and ask, “Who have you got?”

Eldon would inform Grandpa who was sleeping it off. If Grandpa chose someone,

Eldon would ask his future ex-tenant if he wanted to go to the Island?

In all my years, the next thing that you would hear through the phone was, “Who’s cooking?” All the local patrons of the Crossbar Hotel knew what the bunkhouse looked like by the time of year. They knew if you were haying, working cattle, farming, fixing fence, or pitching hay, and they knew what the pay was: five dollars a day in the winter, and eight dollars a day in the busy time, plus of course board and room. The one thing they had to know before any further negotiation was always who was preparing culinary delights. Once in a while, a fellow not sober enough to think straight might even blurt out a name of a cook and say, if that Tonopah Marie was cooking he wasn’t going to the Island. Sometimes the cook in question would be standing within earshot of the inflammatory comment and the fool who made it would be forever in fear that his food tasted different from everyone else’s.

There were givens about ranch cooks. They had to be fearless because a bunch of grumpy men who had survived World War II C-rations had nothing better to do than nitpick about the evening repast. Ranch cooks and chore boys were both hard to come by. Experience had taught my grandparents to walk lightly. Grandma well knew that if the cook was bad, she would be the cook until the new replacement could be found. Grandma was ever vigilant for a wasteful cook. She would be gracious as long as she could stand it, but if the wasting got bad, she would rather cook than allow the canned fruit syrup to go down the drain.

Couples were always sought after on the Island Ranch. The thought process was that they were more likely to stay if two paychecks were coming in. The problem was most husband-and-wife teams were flawed. If the man was the best cowboy, mechanic, bronco fighter, and all-around hand, his wife could not boil water without burning it. Or if she could make flambé out of cowhide, the man would take their checks and drink it all up, or have a hidden stash of Four Roses in the bolt bin in the shop, or some Sunnybrook

whiskey hidden in the manger.

Tonopah Marie was my least favorite cook. She had retired as a madam in Tonopah, Nev. She had more quirks than a chain has links. Once Big Bill Wilson and I butchered a steer and it was my job to take the heart, tongue, brains, oxtail, kidneys, stomach, sweetbreads, and other appetizers into the kitchen for further processing. I swear the stomach had been emptied, but Marie fainted at the sight of the liver. When it came to lighting the stove, she had nailed a clothespin to the end of the broom handle, into which she would insert a match so she was a way back when the gas went off.

I sat at the end of the table with all the nondescript employees. The senior members by order of importance sat closer to Old Hank, aka Grandpa. The food platters started out at the head of the table and by the time they got down the food chain, lots of mornings the eggs would be floating in bacon grease. You soon learned that hesitation or tardiness would make your belly button bang into your backbone.

Tonopah Marie’s first reaction to everything was to scream loudly and run down

You soon learned that hesitation or tardiness would make your belly button bang into your backbone.

the hall to her room at the first sight of blood or a comment about the evening fare or the sandwiches in the lunch box or, of all things, the men staying in the cookhouse for the Friday night fights on the black-and-white snow machine, aka television. A knockdown would send her into orbit. Fortunately for everyone’s gastrointestinal tract, Tonopah Marie and a combine driver ran off. The downside is they stole most of the tools in the shop. The sheriff caught them at Burns Junction. I mentioned to Grandma that they had better not let Marie cook in prison because it would constitute cruel and unusu-

al punishment for the other inmates.

New cooks always started out on a high note. The change in menu was refreshing, but, sure enough, after a while the grumblers would start mincing words about the mince-meat or the temperature of the soup or something else, as though it was their divine right to complain.

Once a new cook was hired while I was in cow camp. I returned a few days after her arrival. When I went into the bunkhouse, every man waiting for the second bell had a clean shirt on and was clean shaven, with

no interest in any of them, the cooking was no longer appetizing to the dejected, love-struck lads.

It took 36 men to hay in the old days. The slide-stack crew took eight men alone. When grain harvest started in August, the ranks expanded closer to 60 people. Summer cooks would always have a helper or two. One memorable couple, George and Georgette, was hired just before haying. I believe they followed one of Tonopah Marie's stints, so it didn't take much to hit a home run. It was the first time I had ever seen a couple both cooking.

George was more of a dishwasher/broom pusher and Georgette could cook anything and make you want more. When the men would take their plates to the kitchen to be scrubbed, the compliments stacked up higher than the dirty dishes.

Each meal was prepared to outdo the last one. Like all great moments, though, they came to an end. George and Georgette evidently had no idea about the custom and culture of ranch routine. The Island generally turned out the crew on Sunday, unless feeding cattle or other daily duties needed performing. Granddad always said he had no preference about Sundays off, but he could get something done when the crew was in town.

George and Georgette had basked in the plethora of compliments all week. When the second bell rang, the chore boy, who got to milk every day, my granddad, and yours truly sat down to eat. My status at the table rose on Saturday night and Sunday as passing food to the far end of the table was impractical. The table had platters stacked high with

steak. The variety and food was endless. The only problem was that the three of us couldn't make a dent in the carefully prepared feast. Dessert was just as extravagant.

The three of us ate in silence. Flames shot out of Georgette's ears. Grandma came in from her house and mentioned something about waste and the roof fell in. The next morning I told Lester Keister, the chore boy, that I would gather the eggs and take them to the pantry in the cookhouse for cleaning and

sorting, as I didn't think the cook would kill me if I just looked down like a wounded fawn. Breakfast was being prepared by Georgette and, no surprise, it was leftovers from the night before. We had an old hand-crank grinder in the pantry. George was emptying

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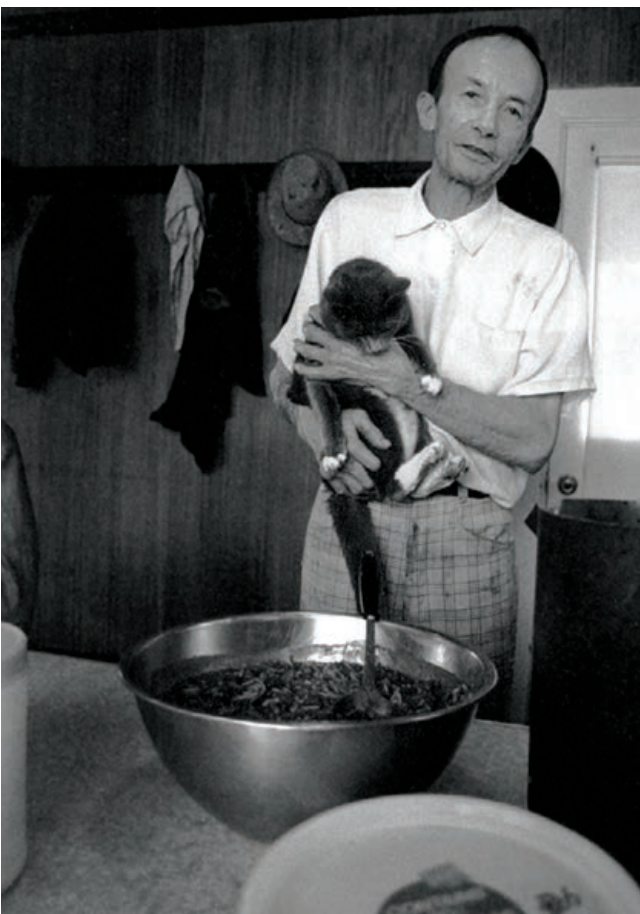
everything from the night before into the grinder: salads, fruit, mashed potatoes, beans, etc., etc. The thick paste coming out had lost all eye appeal. The term "gag a maggot" flashed through my mind.

Come Monday morning, you would never have known that the weekend crisis had taken place. Breakfast dishes were stacked and traded for lunch boxes. Off to work we go, hi ho, hi ho! By noon the lunch boxes had developed heartbeats. It was like an Alfred Hitchcock movie. The smell was breathtaking. The dog would growl at you if you tried to give him a sandwich. A crisis must be averted at all cost. I was sent on a mission to the store to get eatable food. Surely Georgette would calm down eventually.

Every morning, noon and night, like in a Frankenstein movie, George would grind leftovers into the gurgling slime bowl for the next day's lunches. Finally Grandma called heads, get over it, or get gone. George and Georgette quit. Grandma became the new interim cook and because she signed most checks, not a peep was ever heard about cooking skills.

As luck would have it, one Sunday morning as I cleaned the eggs in the pantry, a weird spooky feeling came over me. A dark shadow formed in the doorway. I looked up and I almost swallowed my tongue. There stood Tonopah Marie! ■

Hank Vogler owns a ranch in eastern Nevada. He says: "My original plan was to be Howard Hughes' only heir. My second choice was to be a freelance gynecologist. My third choice was to hand out towels in the whorehouse but I couldn't pass the physical, so I became a shepherd!" When CJ asked Hank if she could run this quote as a letter to the editor, he said, "Can't be any worse than knowing that this email is being shared by the NSA."



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The ranch cook at a northeastern Nevada buckaroo outfit often ended up in the Elko jail for celebrating too hard. On this particular day, he was considering cooking the cat.

hair neatly combed just to go to dinner. The room reeked as though a gallon jar of Aqua Velva aftershave had been broken. The last time I had seen such action was when Ed Kissinger married the lady with five kids and after a little home brew my stoic grandmother was dancing the Charleston on the table. The bell rang and it became clear what the fuss was all about. The new cook was young and attractive. In due time, when the boys in the bunkhouse found that she had