Chapter 17

CHUCK WAGONS

Chuck wagons have become an integral part of the Western lore and legends in the history of American ranching. In reality, they became conveyances that were essential in providing greatly improved meals for those who drove herds of livestock overland to supply ready markets with beef. For decades, artists have used this *ranch kitchen on wheels* as the focus of their artistic endeavors to depict scenes that illustrated a special and often romanticized lifeway that fascinated Americans as well as people aboard.

Fred Darge was apparently drawn to painting chuck wagons as he produced a large number of works that featured a chuck wagon being utilized during ranching operations in remote locations as well as the vitally necessary part of a trail drive.

The origins of the chuck wagon have been a topic of numerous discussions and debates over the last several decades. Traditionally, since the later 1800s and the early 1900s, legendary Texas rancher Charles Goodnight has been credited with the invention sometime around 1866. However, in more recent decades and with extensive and intensive research, documents have been located that mention the use of this wagon for cattle drives from South Texas to New Orleans before the 1850s. Documentation also exists that record the use of this kind of wagon during the Civil War.

Certainly, these wagons from those earlier years were different in design as they were used for multiple purposes. One element of the Civil War era wagons was the use of an officer's desk that was installed at the backend of the wagon. Drop-down legs were added to the front cover of the desk which created a work surface that facilitated multiple purposes. This adaptation of the desk is the one most credited to Goodnight.

Charles Goodnight (born March 5, 1836, Macoupin Country, Illinois, northeast of St. Louis, Missouri and died at age 93, December 12, 1929, Phoenix, Arizona) [1] is likely the most revered and researched rancher in Texas history. The list of credits to his name are noteworthy, numerous and historically significant, especially for a man who could not read or write and was considered "functionally illiterate." His self-taught knowledge of agriculture and business were the guiding lights to his many accomplishments and successes. He also possessed that unusual gift of choosing and associating with good people and business partners.

Essayist and historian J. Frank Dobie said that Goodnight "approached greatness more nearly than any other cowman of history." He is often referred to as the "father of the Texas Panhandle." [2]

- **In 1856 he became a cattleman and served in the local militia, fighting against Comanche raiders.**

- **A year later in 1857, he joined the Texas Rangers and was credited in 1860 with leading a posse that located the Indian camp where Cynthia Parker was living with her husband, Peta Nocona. He later made a treaty with her son, Quanah Parker.**
- **At the outbreak of the Civil War, he remained in the Ranger's frontier regiment and was neither Confederate or Union. Most of his time was spent guarding farmers and ranchers against raids by Indians.**
- **At the end of the war, he became involved in the herding of feral Texas Longhorn cattle northward from West Texas to the railheads in Kansas.**
- **In 1866, he and his partner, Oliver Loving, drove their first herd of cattle southwest to the Pecos River and back northward thus skirting Comancheria along what would become known as the Goodnight-Loving Trail that extended from Belknap, Texas, to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. It was on this drive that Goodnight's new adaptation of the chuck wagon was first used.**
- **Goodnight and Loving became very close friends. Goodnight sat by Loving's bed during the two weeks it took the latter to die, and reportedly kept a photograph of Loving in his pocket long after his death, and later put a photograph on his desk. As requested by the dying Loving, Goodnight had returned his body from New Mexico to Weatherford in Parker County, Texas, for burial. In Larry McMurtry's novel *Lonesome Dove*, Gus and Call are schematic representations of Oliver Loving and Charles Goodnight, respectively.**
- **In 1876, Goodnight's keen understanding of the cattle business and the needed ecological requirements prompted him to take advantage of available grass, timber, water, and game in the establishment of the first ranch in the Palo Duro Canyon of the Texas Panhandle.**
- **The following year, 1877 Goodnight formed a partnership (the JA Ranch) with Irish investor living in New York, John G. Adair and their partnership ranch eventually covered more than 1,350,000 acres or 2,109 sections with a herd of a little over 100,000 head of cattle. Texas has always prided itself with bigness, but these numbers are over the top especially when you remember that a section is one square mile.[3]**
- **Goodnight and his wife, Molly, became interested in the native plains bison that freely roamed the Palo Duro area. They are credited with preserving these legendary animals. In fact, the JA Ranch donated a herd of the bison to the Caprock Canyons State Park located at Quitaque.[4] Although it has traditionally been promoted that this herd were descendants of the Goodnight herd, there is no known documentation to validate the generally accepted belief. Bison from the Goodnight herd were also introduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1902 and into the larger zoos and ranches across the nation.**

J. Frank Dobie (September 26, 1888 – September 18, 1964) was a widely followed American folklorist, writer, and newspaper columnist of the southwest best known for his many books depicting the richness and traditions of life in rural Texas during the days of the open range. His writing career began in 1919/1920 with articles related to Longhorn cattle, ranch life and

southwest folklore. He was also one of the select group of respected figures instrumental in saving the Texas Longhorn breed of cattle from extinction.[5]

Dobie, who personally knew Goodnight, is quoted in *Charles Goodnight: Father of the Texas Panhandle* **as having said: "I have met a lot of good men, several fine gentlemen, hordes of cunning climbers, plenty of loud braying asses and plenty of dumb oxen, but haven't lived long enough or traveled far enough to meet more than two or three men I'd call great. This is a word I will not bandy around. To me, Charles Goodnight was great-natured." [6] When the life of Charles Goodnight is carefully studied it is apparent that Goodnight should be given due credit for his extra ordinary achievements. His success at ranching is almost unequaled. Goodnight was considered to be a good and decent man by those who personally knew him.**

As noted above, the invention of the chuck wagon that was introduced by Goodnight is generally credited to him although the similar wagons were used by others decades prior to Goodnight's version. The American Chuck Wagon Association honors Goodnight with the introduction of the concept for the historic conversion of a vehicle that has become part of the folklore of the American West. A good part of this folklore is the famous Chisholm Trail that symbolized the West from 1866 to 1886.[7] It's practicality at the time was almost too good to be true. No wonder the State of Texas designated the chuck wagon as the official state vehicle on May 26, 2005. [8]

The story of the chuck wagon and the trail-blazing rancher and cattle drover Charles Goodnight begins in 1866 with the procurement of a used Army surplus ambulance, in those days, was simply another form of wagon originally manufactured by the Studebaker Wagon Company. There are many stories and opinions offered by various writers about the modified wagon procured by Goodnight. In reality, there are a number of things that research has yet to substantiate, things that seem to be just a little too perfect to sound realistic. One of the writers offered a story of seasoned bois d'arc wood being used for the original chuck box and included detailed drawings of all the modifications. [9] This seems to be just a little too convenient considering 133 years have gone by.[10] The question to be answered is does it all make sense? Like many inventions, success is achieved by trial and error and many times not immediately.

There are a number of plausible descriptions of the conversion of the Studebaker ammunition [or ambulance] wagon to a chuck wagon by Goodnight and his trail drive cook is described by Mr. Josh Hoy of the Flying W Ranch, Cedar Point, Kansas located in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas. Mr. Joy's great-great-uncle, Frank Goodnight, was Charles great-nephew. "Charles Goodnight purchased an Army surplus ammunition wagon with iron axles and had the legs of a clerk's writing desk cut off so it would fit easily in the bed of the wagon. The front of the writing desk could be folded down and used as a table for preparing meals for the cowboy crew. The rest of the space in the wagon was filled with barrels of dry goods, water barrels and bedrolls." [11] Research has revealed a number of very early undated photographs

of chuck wagons with what appears to be a clerk's desk or a similar box just as Mr. Joy has described.

There are probably numerous other stories, assumptions and ideas that are still being examined. It could go on forever. The argument is best ended at where else – Canyon, Texas.

What is considered Goodnight's "original" chuck box is on exhibit at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum at Canyon, Texas. It is built largely of cypress and pine and from re-cycled Heinz ketchup crates. These facts seem more creditable since the J A Ranch is in the Palo Duro Canyon not too far from the museum.

Goodnight's adaptation provided the trail cook with a more efficient, convenient and workable scenario for preparing meals. The finished design was so simple and practical that other cattlemen and drovers were probably thinking and asking themselves why they didn't think of that.

Just like all similar inventions and technology, it didn't take long for the Goodnight chuck box attached to the back of the wagon to catch on with other ranchers and drovers working the various trails. The old saying, "necessity is the mother of invention" proved to be true. The necessity was getting a group of always hungry young drovers, ranging in age from 15-25 years old to sign up for a long trail drive from deep Texas to the railheads in Kansas without worrying about their meals along the trail. Prior to the chuckwagons the young drovers would have to carry their food in a sack hung from the saddle horn or in their saddle pockets. The invention and quick adaption of the chuckwagon solved this once critical problem.

When the cattle drives started in the late 1860's there was a shortage of drovers to man the trails and herd the Longhorns north. The invention of the traditional chuck wagon into a mobile kitchen gave Goodnight a recruiting advantage that was second to none, that is while it lasted. With the new chuck wagon and a good cook, he could promise the equivalent of good meals that tasted like they were home cooked. It was a selling point that was a great recruiting enhancement. [12]

After a long hard day on the trail pushing and coaxing cattle northward, what could be a better reward than a good tasting, almost, home cooked meal? Charles Goodnight was a demanding hard-working boss, but he understood and realized the value of being able to provide good edible food for his drovers. His chuck wagon paved the way for good employee relations and was always the center point of the activity of the day. It goes along with that age old saying, "an army moves on its stomach".

Once assembled, a twelve-man crew could manage a herd of 2,000 to 3,000 head. The trail boss was the ultimate authority on the trail and was paid a monthly salary of $100 to $125 often with a bonus if the drive was successful. The next highest paid person was of course the cook. He was paid a monthly salary of $60 plus. The trail hands received a salary of $25 to as high of $40 depending on skills. [13]

During the long hard trail drives the chuck wagon was always the center of activity and everyone went out of their way to be friendly with the man that made the meals. His word around the chuck wagon was law and no one attempted to question this man that made the rules. Even the trail boss let the cook operate his own fiefdom. Besides preparing meals, the cook seemed to get caught up in other miscellaneous duties.

"Chuck wagon cooks as a group had the reputation of being ill-tempered, and no wonder. Their working conditions usually left a lot to be desired. The nature of the cook's job required that he get up several hours earlier than the drovers, so he worked longer hours with less sleep. When the outfit was on the move, he had to be at the next appointed camp and have a hot meal ready on time. He was often short of fuel or water. He was constantly called upon to battle the elements – wind, rain, sand, mud, insects, and even rattlesnakes – while preparing his meals. In addition to preparing meals, Cookie also was expected to act as barber, doctor, banker, and sometimes as mediator or referee if a disturbance among the drovers arose. He was keeper of the home fires, such as they were out on the range." [14]

"The atmosphere around a chuck wagon has often been described as pleasantly barbaric, as might be expected with a group of young men far from home who were doing demanding, rough, dirty work under sometimes brutal conditions. The language was colorful and often profane." [15]

"Along with sourdough biscuits and coffee, most chuck wagon meals included beans, or frijoles, as they were often called. Beef was something that was never in short supply, and a good chuck wagon cook knew how to prepare it in many different ways. Fried steak was the most common; the cowboys never seemed to get tired of it; but pot roasts, short ribs, and stew showed up often on the menu. If Cookie had time, and he was feeling kindly toward "the boys," as he called the drovers, he would make a desert. Usually it was a two-crust pie made with apples or some other dried fruit." [16]

"A typical day's food on the trail was meat, hot bread, dried fruit and coffee for breakfast. The noon and dinner meal included roast beef, boiled potatoes, beans, brown gravy, light bread or biscuits, and coffee. Dessert included stewed dried fruit, spiced cake made without eggs or butter, and dried fruit pies. Northern drovers were more likely to get beef with their meals. Some outfits in the Southwest made do with salt pork, beans and sourdough." [17]

"As soon as the men saddled up and left, the cook washed and dried the dishes. The bed rolls were tossed into the chuck wagon or a bed wagon, (hoodlum wagon). The Dutch ovens were wrapped in burlap bags and stowed away with the pot racks in the boot. An assortment of hooks and hangers on the side of the wagon accommodated and other things that needed to be stowed away. The team was hitched to the wagon and the move to the next camp would be under way." [18] All this in a day's work. It makes one wonder why the cook wasn't paid more than the trail boss. It seems the cook had the most work. The trail boss sat on a horse all day and just kept the cattle moving in the right direction – north.

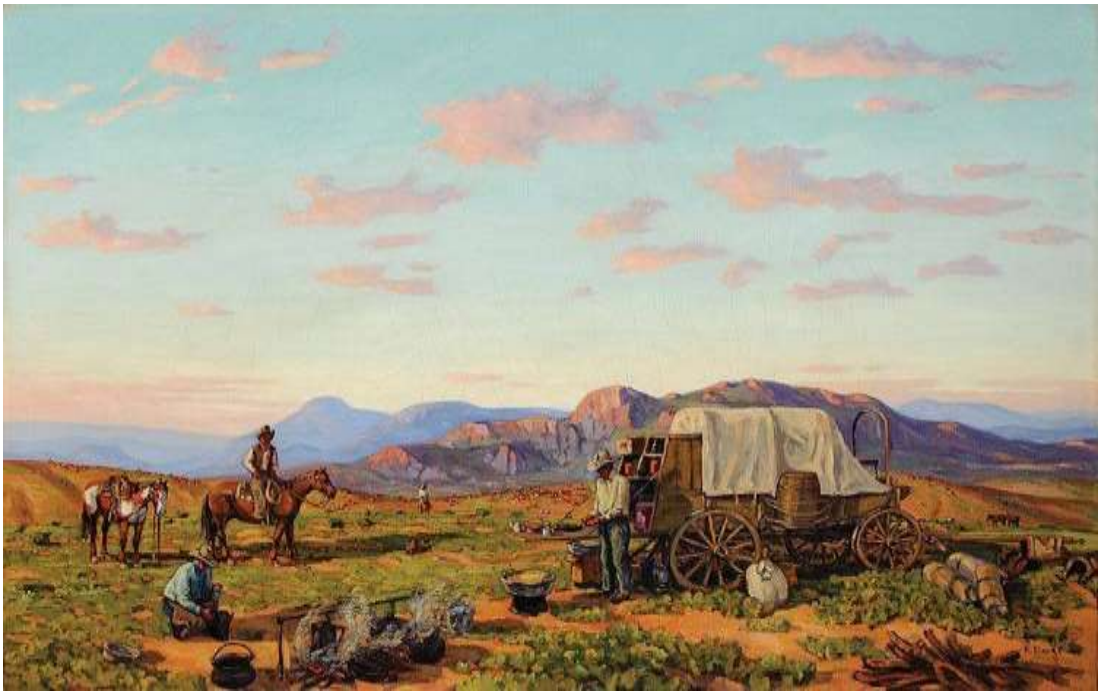
One would certainly suspect the names of the best cooks that worked the cattle drives circulated among the trail hands and they gravitated toward these special people. Like every other subject, word gets around.

Most chuck wagons had the same basic design. They were large, sturdy, four-wheeled wagons with bows across the top covered with waterproof canvas sheets. There was usually a cowhide stretched beneath the wagon bed and fastened at the corners; it was used to carry fire wood and cow chips that were used for combustible fuel. The wagons were sometimes drawn by oxen, but normally by mules because of the increased weight of the water barrels and all the other miscellaneous paraphernalia needed for a lone journey.

The most distinguishing feature of the chuck wagon has always been the sloping box on the rear with a hinged lid that when lowered became a cook's worktable as seen in Fred Darge's colorful paintings. The chuck box was fitted to the width of the wagon and contained shelves and drawers for holding assorted foods, cooking and eating utensils. Since early 17th Century England, individuals involved in the meat business referred to a lower priced part of the beef carcass as the "chuck." To the cowboy, "chuck" was food, so the box was called a chuck box and the wagon became known as a chuck wagon. "Chuck" was not the nickname of Charles Goodnight as some people have promoted.

It didn't take Fred Darge long to realize the value and utility of the chuck wagon. Every ranch he visited had one. They were a necessity of ranching even into the 1940s and later, especially in remote locations such as the Big Bend. Darge was known for painting horses, however, considering the number of pieces with chuck wagons, it could be possible that he enjoyed painting these utilitarian elements of ranch life almost as much as he liked painting horses. It is also interesting to muse that Darge was in fact, a stoic person, one that has been remembered as being somewhat of a loner. Yet, many of his paintings illustrate relationships in ordinary life of the era. The comradeship between the trail cook and others, the socializing between trail hands, the interaction of ranch hands in the corral, the cooperation of between the cowboys doing ranch chores or driving cattle, even the pieces whose titles including the word *home* – all scenarios where people connected with one another.

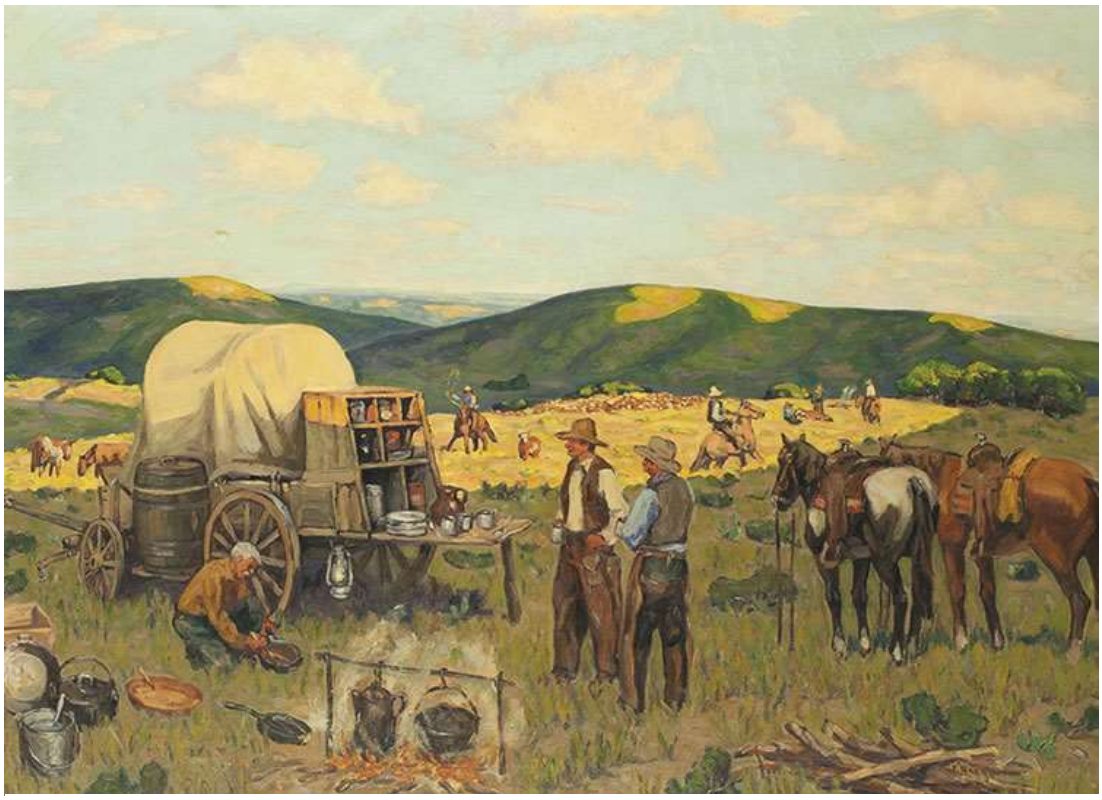
Paintings that included chuck wagons were popular with art patrons and collectors and sold well. Like all his subject matters, the chuck wagons were so real one could almost smell the aroma of thick juicy steaks being cooked on the grill. Placing the chuck wagon in the foreground always allowed him the flexibility of displaying whatever background he chose to accentuate the scene by adding whatever he thought would go well for the particular painting.



The Chuck Wagon, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, circa late 1930's, Courtesy David Dike Dine Arts 2014

The Chuck Wagon **like a number of other large Darge paintings done in the Big Bend, demonstrates his ability to combine a dramatic sky and the panoramic boldness of the Chisos Mountains in the background. What better way to accentuate the topic of the chuck wagon in the foreground and the massive herd of Hereford cattle calmly grazing behind the wagon in the distance below the mountains. The cook is dutifully at work preparing the next meal as one of two cattlemen grab a quick cup of hot coffee to help perk up an already beautiful day that Darge has captured for eternity.**

Upon careful examination of the lower right-hand corner one can see the loosely stacked bedrolls, the stack of extra firewood and a saddle blanket draped over the wagon tongue with saddles on either side. Nothing has been forgotten or left out. Darge's knowledge and attention to detail is second to none. This is the dramatic scene he saw and recorded. There is no one who has ever painted the Big Bend and its panoramic colors quite like Fred Darge.

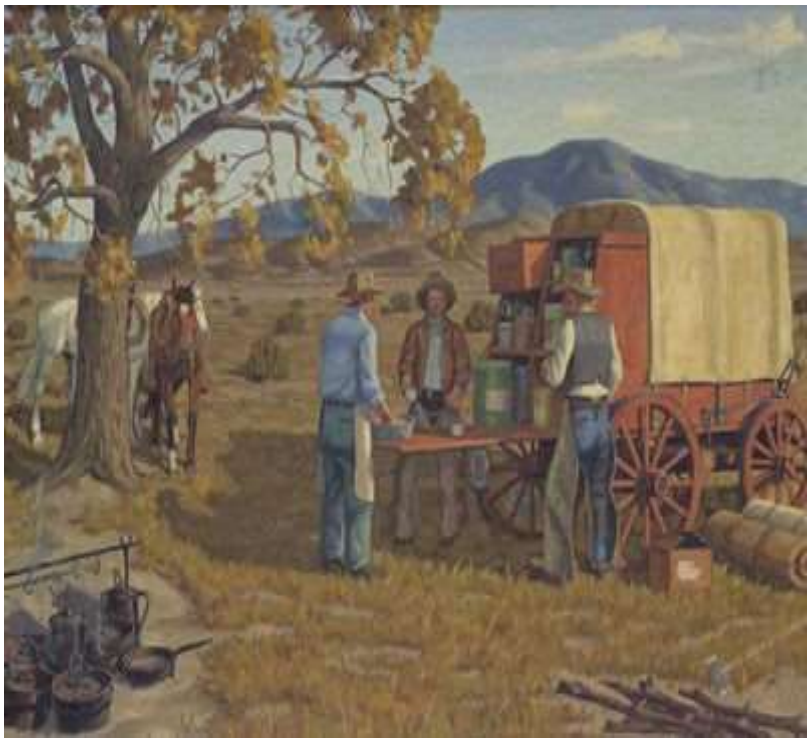


The Round Up, 24" x 32", Oil on Linen, circa late 1930's, Courtesy of Altermann Galleries 2016

With the painting, *The Round Up,* **Darge's viewers are treated to another chuck wagon scene that demonstrates the conversion of a regular ranch wagon to the special utility of a mobile kitchen on wheels. In this painstaking detailed painting viewers clearly see a first-hand view of the sloped chuck box and hinged lid that is pulled down and used by the cook for a work table. The practicality and design is startling when recalling that this painting was done in the middle to late 1930s and the chuck box was designed in 1866. There are no changes because it worked so well.**

Upon closer inspection, note how this piece is similar to *The Chuck Wagon***. The two cattlemen standing next to each other drinking coffee appear to be the same two in the both paintings. Darge changed the one man's attire to a blue shirt and added the vest. With this change, one might reasonably assume that the two coffee drinkers were the ranch owner and his foreman. Notice also the similarity of the two horses.**

Darge must have been friends with the cook because his likeness has been noted in other paintings not related to chuck wagons. Look for the man with white hair and mustache in other paintings. It just could have been Darge's way of getting a bigger scoop of cobbler when going thru the serving line. Look at Chapter 24 titled "Riders and Pack Horses."

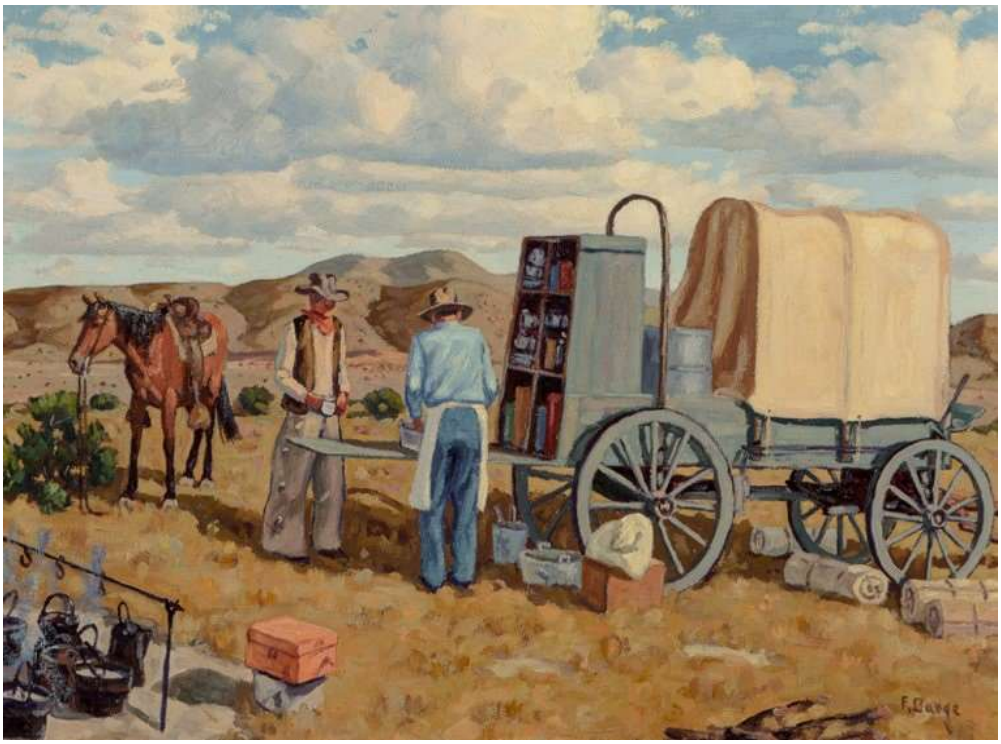


Chuck Wagon No. 9, 25” x 30", Oil on Canvas, Courtesy David Dike Fine

Chuck Wagon No. 9 **has a physical difference to the first two paintings. The hoops that hold the white canvas above the bed of the wagon are not as rounded or high as are normally seen. The wagon also appears to be shorter than the usual chuck wagon, but the height of the bottom of the wagon bed seems to be normal. Unfortunately, the geographic location has not been identified. It appears to be mid-day or later and painted in the beginning of the fall season.**

The *No. 9* in the title of the painting is the first time a number like this has been associated with a particular type of painting. This would indicate paintings of chuck wagon scenes were popular sellers and Darge did multiple numbers to satisfy demand. Most of the chuck wagon paintings appear to have been done in the Big Bend area.

Notice the height of the chuck box. In both paintings the boxes appear taller on these two wagons because the wagons are smaller than the normal ranch wagon. The higher the chuck box, the longer the pull-down table. Doug Hansen, with Hansen Wheel and Wagon Shop in Letcher, South Dakota, one of the largest builders and dealers of antique wagons and parts in the country indicated that at one time there were over 1,000 wagon makers.[19]



At the Chuck Wagon, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Collection of Dr. and Mrs. J. Sloan Leonard

At the Chuck Wagon **and** *Chuck Wagon* **both appear to be wagons that are being used locally on a ranch for a round up rather than a trail drive. Overall both wagons appear to be smaller because of the items missing like a cow hide under the bed for fire wood and the water barrel in the wagon rather than mounted on the side with other useable paraphernalia. They both have bed rolls but it does not appear they will be away from the headquarters for long. The smaller bedrolls indicate summer "soogans" rather than winter which would have had more blankets.**