

COWBOY *cookin'*

Caterer Marilyn Reynolds trades in the kitchen for a campfire

Story and photos by Allison Morgan

Today's cooks are often looking for the latest appliances, products, and methods that help make kitchen chores easier and more convenient.

Not Marilyn Reynolds. The Dickson County resident has taken her catering business in the opposite direction, giving up the comforts of the kitchen for cast-iron and campfires. With an authentically restored chuck wagon as her headquarters, this former restaurateur is using the Old West as inspiration for a new concept in crowd-pleasing cooking.

"My daddy was a fanatic about Western movies, so I grew up watching them and always thought it was a unique lifestyle," says Marilyn. "Now that I'm retired, I decided this was something I wanted to do. I'm just trying something new and preserving a piece of history in the process."



Pungent smoke punctuated with tantalizing aromas fills the air at the Dickson County Fairgrounds where Marilyn's chuck wagon outfit made its debut at the annual Old Timer's Day celebration in early May. Unlike many of the other vendors, this is no ordinary concession stand. Drawn by the unusual sight and smells, curious onlookers watch as Marilyn dons a blacksmith's apron and heat-resistant gloves to protect her from the intense fires and then starts scooping out cornmeal batter into a popping skillet of oil.

Nearby, her companion, Steve Wilson, stirs the hearty beef stew and pinto beans that are bubbling in cast-iron cauldrons while Marilyn's assistant, Vicky McMillan, tears up pieces of bread that will eventually become bread pudding, cooked in a Dutch oven with coals covering the lid to crisp the crust.

"We're doing all of this the cowboy way," Marilyn says as she turns the corn fritters to fry the other side to a golden brown. "We dig a hole, build a pit, start a fire, and cook with cast-iron pots and skillets. There are no mixers, blenders, or microwaves. We don't even have running water or electricity. I can



Marilyn Reynolds, a former Dickson County restaurant owner, fries "Corn Dodgers" over an open flame at the recent Old Timer's Day celebration in Dickson. Recalling the tradition of the Old West, Marilyn is starting a new catering business that offers authentic chuck wagon cooking. She debuted her business at the event.

cook a meal and feed as many as I need to without the conveniences of the 21st century."

In re-creating the chuck wagon experience, Marilyn is carrying on a truly American tradition that began after the Civil War, when the opening of Northern markets expanded the Western cattle industry. Ranchers would hire crews of cowboys to drive their cattle across the sparse countryside, and the chuck wagon developed out of the need for a mobile kitchen to feed the hungry men.

During these drives, the chuck wagon was the headquarters, and the cook was the king. He was the most valuable and highly paid person on the crew, not only feeding the cowboys but also serving as bar-

tender, blacksmith, barber, banker, and even doctor and dentist.

To the cowboys, food was called "chuck," and thus the wagon carrying the cooking supplies was named. The distinguishing feature on the chuck wagon was the sloping box on the rear with a hinged lid that lowered to become the cook's worktable. The box, fitted to the width of the wagon, contained shelves and drawers for holding food and utensils.

"They always carried beans, potatoes, lard, flour, cornmeal, and rice — anything that wouldn't spoil," says Marilyn. "Along the way, they would pick up fruits and vegetables from local farmers, fish in the rivers, and hunt wild game. And, of

course, beef was never in short supply. If the cowboys were lucky and the cook was in a good mood, he'd treat them to dessert, usually some type of pie made from dried fruit."

In her own chuck wagon, Marilyn's menu is as true to the trail as possible, using the same staple ingredients and her own culinary creativity. At the recent Old Timer's Day event, her offerings included Buckaroo Stew served over steamed rice, Cowboy Beans, Corn Dodgers (fritters), fried peach pies, and bread pudding — all cooked right before visitors' eyes and served with a bit of history on the side.

"We had all kinds of people watching last night while I was cooking, and I've never cooked for an audience before," says Marilyn. "It's really becoming an educational thing, too. We tell them the history of the chuck wagon and explain how you cook over a fire. People who remember cooking like this are a dying breed."

The chuck wagon catering idea had been simmering in Marilyn's head for a while after health problems forced her to close her Dickson restaurants, The Vinery and Town and Country, four years ago. Only in her late 40s at the time, Marilyn had two heart attacks and two strokes within three months and had to undergo speech and physical therapy. She even lost some vision.

"After I got sick, I had to close the restaurants, but I needed a project," says Marilyn. "I just can't sit home and vegetate."

Then Marilyn saw a television program about cooking over an open fire and remembered how much she had enjoyed providing made-from-scratch meals for her now 30-year-old son, Rick, and his friends on camping trips years ago.

"They couldn't believe that you could cook more than hot dogs over a fire," laughs Marilyn. "That was always one of my favorite types of cooking. So about a year ago, I commented to Steve that I would really like to start something like this, and we visited some chuck wagon festivals and did research on what we would need to get going."

She thought finding the right wagon would be the biggest hurdle but quickly discovered what she was looking for on a farm in Maury County, where a widow was sell-

ing her late husband's equipment, including an 1885 Owensboro wagon. Marilyn and Steve bought the wagon and began authentically restoring the nearly 125-year-old antique, replacing boards, painting, building a chuck box, and stocking it with period props like lanterns, a nail keg, crates, and crocks.

In keeping true to the Old West wagons, they even attached a coffee mill to the side and added waterproof canvas tarps to keep out the wind and rain — which actually came in handy during stormy weather at the recent Old Timer's Day. Dickson Farmers Cooperative, where Marilyn shops regularly, sponsored the wagon for the event and allowed it to be displayed in the store's parking lot before activities began. Children of Co-op members and customers even rode in the wagon during the popular Old Timer's Day parade.

"What Marilyn is doing is unique, and we were glad to be part of it," says Co-op manager Paul Sullivan. "We were amazed at the interest from customers while the wagon was parked here at the store. It's nostalgic, which just seems to appeal to people these days."

Marilyn believes that interest comes from a desire for simpler times, when wide-open spaces and cowboy camaraderie ruled the range. The chuck wagon evokes those sentiments, she insists, and helps folks recall old-fashioned goodness that can get lost in today's increasingly complicated world.

"I know the economy is bad for everyone, but you can still cook beans," says Marilyn. "Beans go a long way."

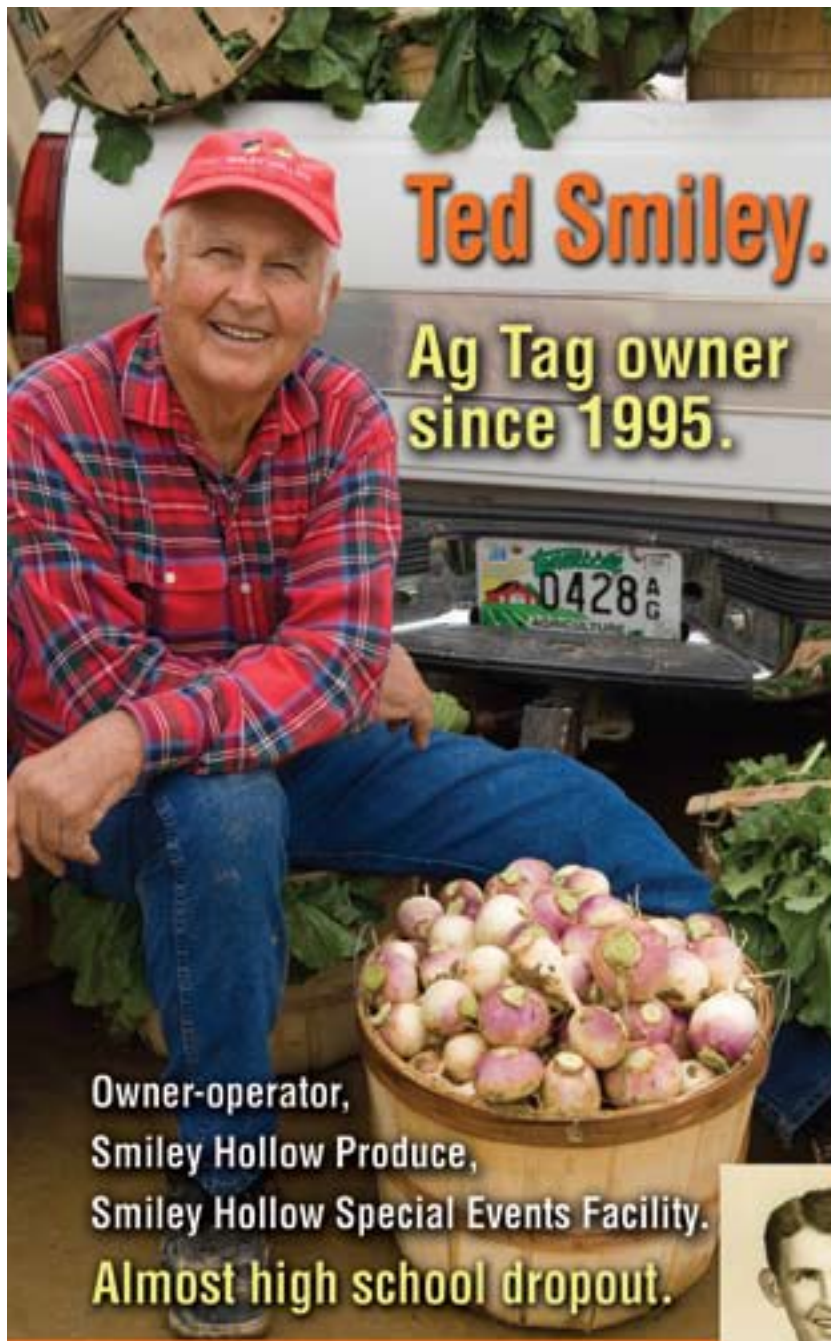
Although the excitement surrounding her chuck wagon has already led to several other catering jobs, Marilyn says the promise of added income isn't the real reason she started the project. For her, the venture is an adventure with meaning well beyond the money.

"Somebody asked me, 'Why are you doing this?'" says Marilyn. "I said, 'Because I enjoy it.' God let me live through two heart attacks, two strokes, diabetes, and lots of other things. I'm just happy to be alive. You've got to have a niche in life, a reason to get up in the morning. This is something to look forward to and an opportunity to give back. If I can educate one person and pass on a little bit of our past, then I've accomplished something."

For more information about Marilyn Reynolds' authentic chuck wagon cooking, contact her at 615-522-7045.



LEFT: The headquarters for Marilyn's catering venture is this 1885 Owensboro wagon found on a farm in Maury County. She and her companion, Steve Wilson, restored the old wagon and added the chuck box, which was used in the cowboy days to store food and cooking supplies. Dickson Farmers Cooperative sponsored the wagon for Old Timer's Day. RIGHT: A popular choice on Marilyn's menu is "Cowboy Beans," slow-cooked in a cast-iron pot and seasoned with onion and ham.



**Owner-operator,
Smiley Hollow Produce,
Smiley Hollow Special Events Facility.
Almost high school dropout.**

"I had a little trouble my freshman year of high school and decided I'd just drop out.

I'd been home about a week when my FFA advisor showed up at our farm. I can still show you the spot behind the old house where he dragged me out of our hog pen and told me I was coming back to school.

He spent a lot of time with me after that; the other boys teased me about being his "project", but I did graduate.

I like to think that what I learned in vocational agriculture and in FFA made it possible for me to keep this farm in the family all these years, and for my children and grandchildren to farm with me and build these farm businesses. Everything we've been able to do with this place is because of what my FFA advisor first did for me.

That's why I keep Ag Tags on my vehicles. I know the money I spend goes back to farm youth organizations like FFA. I want to be sure that, just in case there's somebody else out there like me, there's somebody out there like my FFA advisor to make a difference in that child's life."



Greenbrier High School Senior
Ted Smiley, 1954



Greenbrier High School FFA Advisor
James R. Whitlow, 1954

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