



A new
revised and
expanded
edition of the
classic natural history
of chili con carne, with other
delectable dishes of the Southwest

A BOWL of RED

FRANK X. TOLBERT

*"A love song, a paean
of praise... the
definitive work
of chili."*

**Celestine
Sibley**

Frank X. Tolbert
A Bowl of Red

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A Bowl of Red

Being a Natural History of Chili con Carne and Other Native Foods of the Southwest, with Recipes and a Guide to Paper napkin restaurants.

Books by Frank X. Tolbert

A BOWL OF RED

DICK DOWLING AT SABINE PASS

INFORMAL HISTORY OF TEXAS (VOL. 1)

THE DAY OF SAN JACINTO

THE STAKED PLAIN

BIGAMY JONES

NEIMAN-MARCUS TEXAS

To three early delvers in “chili history,” O. Henry, E. DeGolyer, and Joe Cooper, and with the wish that they’d all lived to join the Chili Appreciation Society (International).

A Bowl of Red

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Prologue

"Cowboys today is mostly a crowd of sissies."—Cap Warren, range cook of the Waggoner Ranch

"If you do it right, grinding up them eye-watering peppers and dicing the beef, chili is lots of bother to make on the hind end of a chuck wagon," said Joseph Bailey (Cap) Warren. "Still, during cold weather I whip up a batch of chili about once every few weeks, and these new-style cowboys whine and blubber for it more often."

Cap Warren, a rangeland *cocinero* for more than fifty years, was once described by a rancher who was trying to lure him away from the Waggoner Ranch as "everything a chuck wagon cook ought to be, wrapped up in one snarling package."

When I knew him in the 1950s, Cap Warren was cooking on the almost ceaseless cattle roundups of the half-million-acre Waggoner Ranch, which sprawls over six

counties in northwestern Texas near the Red River and has its headquarters at Vernon.

Once when I was visiting with the Waggoner roundup crew I spent a whole day watching Cap Warren at his routine. The old boy became sort of bored with my presence and asked at the end of the day: "What you bird-dogging me fer?"

That morning, in early spring, Cap Warren arose from his bedroll at the usual time, four o'clock. As usual, he was in a bad humor, and for the usual reason. Mr. Warren had a low opinion of modern cowboys in general and the Waggoner Ranch punchers in particular, and the crew he was cooking for often had to listen to ill-tempered comment.

He was a tall man with the same athletic, 170-pound frame he'd had fifty years before when he quit cowboying to boss the chuck wagon. He hadn't had a haircut since spring roundup had started, and his thick white hair came down to a kind of duckbill in the back, giving him something of the look of an eighteenth-century gentleman with a powdered wig.

His "hood" (pronounced to rhyme with "rude"), or cook's assistant, was absent that morning. Normally, the hood would build the cook fires. By lantern light, Cap ignited mesquite chunks in a square iron stove. He ignored me until I asked him how present-day cowhands compared with those he'd known in the old days. He surveyed the Waggoner Ranch riders, asleep in their bedrolls under the tent which also protected the chuck wagon and the portable stove. And he said:

"Cowboys today is mostly a crowd of sissies. In the olden days we could have made camp here with nothing

but a wagon and four mules, and my Dutch oven and my frying pans and stewers in a cowhide sling under the rear axle, and fetching the bedrolls in the wagon. Then they et what I gave them and got wet when it rained.

"Now look at this danged camp with this big truck for a chuck wagon, and tons of other machinery, and this here big tent for them hands to sleep under. This don't seem like a cow camp to me. With that tent and all, it seems like we're holding a gospel camp meeting."

The Waggoner Ranch, often called the Three D, because that is the cattle brand, has twenty-one divisions, each with a line camp. That morning forty-seven cowboys were to gather cow creatures on a division called the Harts. The tent was pitched on a little rise near a windmill and line camp, actually a dwelling occupied by the line rider's family.

The morning was tolerably windy with promise of a dust storm by midmorning. Off in the lifting darkness were the restless whistling and stamping sounds of the 325-horse remuda being brought in by the wrangler.

"Ain't many left that would make a wart on the hind cheek of a real cowpuncher," continued Cap. "Now, fellow, you stay here and don't slow-trail me. I'll be back in a few minutes." He picked up the lantern and a big butcher knife, and went off to a storage house near the line camp. He came back with a load of steaks, each about two and a half inches thick, which he'd sliced from a freshly killed beef. He had to make another trip before he had enough steaks for breakfast. Cap broiled or fried steaks for every meal after a beef had been butchered on the range.

"If I was cooking for real cowboys, I wouldn't have nothing but beef and bread and coffee this morning. Not

with this bunch here, though. They got to have their fruit juices when they get up. And they got the gall to tell the cook how they want their eggs did."

Cap went to work making sourdough biscuits. He baked two big pans of biscuits before each meal. He made them in almost magician-like swiftness.

The Waggoner Ranch has a helicopter for many chores and errands. One of the plane's jobs was to fly over heavy brush and scare wild cattle into the open. This business of herding cattle with a helicopter came to the attention of a national television program and it sent some cameramen to the spring roundup that week. The day before, when Cap was making biscuits, he said one of the cameramen had asked him to pose over his dough with a rolling pin.

"I told that fuddy-grafter I didn't have no more use for a rolling pin than a hog has for a buggy whip. I roll out my biscuits by hand and choke them off into shape in the old style. Just like my mama taught me sixty-odd years ago."

The red truck chuck wagon had many steel compartments in the back of the bed, like those in a modern kitchen. The ingate doors dropped down to make a worktable. Cap could drive a truck, yet had such nostalgia for the old mule-drawn chuck wagons that he refused to be the truck's chauffeur and one of the young cowboys had to move it for him.

In one of the steel compartments he had a crock of yeast at work, the "starter" for his sourdough biscuits. Even when he joked, Cap's unwavering pale blue eyes kept serious. He said: "I got two young bullfrogs in that crock to keep my biscuit yeasts all worked up. Used to have an old bullfrog. But he got tired."

He put on an apron made of two flour sacks before he started broiling the steaks. The iron stove glowed red and took the chill off the air. When the biscuits and the steaks were almost ready, and coffee was boiling in a black pot, the cowboys began waking up, aroused by both the lovely smells and by Cap's whining, complaining baritone.

Cap prided himself on his biscuits, even more than on his proudest entree, son-of-a-bitch stew. He said it was his talent for biscuit making that shoved him, reluctantly he claimed, into a range cook's job back in 1912.

"Before that I was a cowboy and a danged good one. Everyone in that 1912 camp was tired of the old cook's biscuits. Ever' now and again we would find a cigarette butt in a biscuit. And them things baked out so heavy you could have took and th'owed one for over a hundred yards.

"Well it was knowed in camp that Mama had made me a pretty fair hand at baking. A passel of the boys teased me one morning to make up a couple of pans of biscuits. I done it.

"After that the wagon boss put the old cook back to driving a team. And I haven't been able to get shed of this cooking job since."

By this time, the Three D cowboys were ready for breakfast. Cap cooked eggs to order, although with a good deal of blasphemy. The riders served themselves. They scraped their plates clean and stacked them in a washtub when they were through.

Just before big daylight there was a drone in the sky over the cow camp. The helicopter was coming from Zacawiesta, the main ranch headquarters, about thirty miles away. The flying machine made an easy landing on a grassy pitch near the tent. The copter's rotors made

slap-slap sounds and sent the 325-horse remuda into a state of noisy excitement.

Arriving in the plane were the ranch pilot and foreman Tony Hazlewood, a grim-faced old cowboy who had worked for the Three D since 1913. Hazlewood had fallen in love with the helicopter. From its upholstered throne, he could check on all of the ranch's half million acres in a few days. He could swiftly inspect the 2500 miles of barbed wire fence and the 500 water holes, including three large artificial lakes.

In chasing wild cattle from mesquite jungles, the plane could do the work of twenty-five to thirty mounted men, wagon boss G. L. Proctor said. The machine would hover over the rumps of the beasts and frighten them out of the brush, sometimes literally driving the stock to the pens.

Cap Warren, no admirer of the helicopter, said: "If this keeps up, everyone of these sockwads on this roundup is going to want to cowboy in the air, and I'll be cooking for a crowd of mechanics. They is a lot of things, I'll have to own up, that that airyplane can do, only I wouldn't want to rope nothing from it."

The pilot and the foreman were drinking Cap's powerful boiled coffee when the old cook was in the midst of some angry complaints about how the riders were leaving their "gear and plunder" scattered around the chuck wagon.

"Cowboys now got way too much tackle, anyhow," he said. "In the olden day, a puncher usually had him just one bridle, one hackamore, and one saddle. Now it takes a chip wagon to tote all the spare bridles and hackamores these fellows need. And they scatter their gear and plunder over three acres."

It was saddling-up time. Red dust blew out of eroded

gullies to the west of the camp. The punchers stood in a circle around the remuda and roped the horses of their choice in a red dirt fog, and then they saddled quickly and headed for the river bottoms to the west where there were wild horned cattle that had eluded a previous roundup.

Cap had the dishes boiling in the washtub (normally the hood would have done this chore) and he smoked his pipe and watched the saddling-up with some distaste.

"Horses ain't as wild as they used to be. I ain't seen one of them fellows th'owed in a week or more."

Mostly, the Three D cowboys listened to Cap's uncomplimentary talk without comment. A sixty-eight-year-old puncher named Harve Brothers put it this way: "Cap is a mighty fine cook. He can bullyrag me all he wants as long as he turns out wonderful biscuits, chili, and S.O.B. stew, and all the rest."

Now, though, listening to Cap carry on about the deplorable tameness of the current crop of horses in the remuda, Harve couldn't resist saying: "They is plenty of raunchy ponies in that remuda, Cap. Any time you want to do some cowboying, we got lots of horses that needs to be rode."

Bull Franklin, one of the ranch's four horse-breaking specialists, joined in the discussion: "Did you ever think, Cap, that we are doing a better job of making those old ponies polite than the horse-breakers did in your day? We usually have them acting pretty nice before the boys fall heir to them for the roundups."

This was in mid-April, and since February 4, Bull Franklin and the others had been breaking horses for the roundup.

"If you're spoiling to see folks th'owed, Cap, come down to the horse-breaking ranch when we're just starting to

educate the young ponies," said another of the horse breakers, Justin McCloskey.

Each of the cowboys had some broncs, or fresh graduates of the horse-breaking ranch, in his string for the roundup. Robert McElroy, a veteran hand, had, for example, a string of twelve "old horses" and five broncs.

McElroy, who had lived all his life on the Waggoner Ranch, came in for some left-handed praise from the cook during breakfast that morning: "You're a fair-to-middlin' cowboy, McElroy, but you ain't near the man your pappy was. Now there was a cowhand!"

McElroy explained to me that his father, the late Shinnery McElroy, had worked for the ranch from 1876 until his retirement in 1933.

"Paw strayed," said Robert McElroy. He wasn't speaking of his sire's morals; he meant that his father's main job had been searching for stray cattle wearing the Three D brand.

"Paw was sure good at working out the heavy brush country for cattle, and that's why they called him Shinnery. Before that hellycopter come along, I would have rated Paw the best at getting the old steers with the mossy horns out of the shinnery. He strayed way up in Indian Territory for the Three D in the olden days."

At breakfast, helping himself to some stewed fruit, McElroy spilled a little on the ground by the chuck wagon's ingate. Cap roared: "You people is just like a crowd of hogs. You can't lift nothing. You got to slop it out."

He continued to grumble until all the cowboys were gone on the morning's ride.

Despite the dirt and wind, spring showed on the land. The faces of the Hereford calves were incredibly white.