



Suggestions for a Successful Cook Off

You need a large number of volunteers to have a successful cook off. Get your Chamber of Commerce or a civic club to help with the cook off. Combining your cook off with another event, like a county fair, rodeo, stock show, etc. is very helpful.

You will need sponsors for the event and for each wagon. One idea is to sell a sponsorship for each wagon. The sponsor gets one ticket to eat at that wagon for \$100 donated. Of course, you may ask for any amount you choose. There are many ways to handle sponsor money. Usually forty tickets are sold for each wagon cooking. The price of a meal ticket usually ranges for \$10 to \$20.

Put up a big billboard listing all of your sponsors. Run an ad in your local newspaper listing all of the wagons and their sponsors. Have smaller signs made up with each wagon's name on it and the sponsor's name to put in front of each wagon. These will give the sponsors recognition and help ticket holders find the wagon to which they bought a ticket.

To get wagons to come to your event you need to have \$5000-\$10,000 in prize money. You need to pay at least first, second and third places in all five food groups as well as for the most authentic wagons. Many events are paying fourth and fifth places. If you ask the wagons to cook a food, you should judge it and pay places for it. You need to pay overall prize money for the wagon that scores the highest with the wagon and food combined. Many events are now paying show-up money to each wagon. This is above the prize money.

Have the cook off advertised as much as possible. You need a good crowd in order to sell all of your tickets. When you set your date, contact ACWA (acwa@door.net or 806-637-4272) so the information about your event can be put on the ACWA website and in the Newsletter. It will also be listed in *Rope Burns* on their calendar of events for chuck wagons. Distribute information about your cook off to the wagons at cook offs being held prior to yours.

Send out your invitations to the wagons at least three months in advance of the your cook off. The ACWA will furnish you a list of their members many of whom have chuck wagons. When a wagon returns their entry, send them a letter telling them that they are entered. Include a list of motels, B & B's and RV parks. If possible get a motel to provide a block of rooms to the wagon people at a discounted rate. A map to the cook off site and lodging is very helpful and appreciated.

The cook off committee should be responsible for serving the drinks. An easy way is to serve bottled water or bottled tea. It can be iced down in a “horse trough” or in individual ice chests that you furnish.

Go to local grocery stores and wholesale food businesses and ask for donations of food and supplies. Following is what you need *per wagon* to serve forty people and the four wagon cooks chicken-fried steak:

4 lb. beans	15 lb. potatoes
1½ gallon cooking oil (no peanut oil)	4 onions
15 to 20 lb. flour (not self-rising)	1 dozen eggs
4 lb. sugar	2 lb. butter
1 gal. milk (2 gal. if serving gravy)	10 lb. meat
fruit (2 gal. canned, 3 lb. dried or 15-20 pieces of fresh fruit)	
40 to 50 lbs. of ice	
45 paper plates	45 sets of forks and knives

The water for cleanup and cooking should be near the wagons. The event can run water hoses to the wagons or have a water wagon nearby. Cooking water can be delivered in 5 gal. water bottles if the water nearby is not potable.

Volunteers need to deliver paper plates and eating utensils to each wagon the morning of the cook off. A volunteer also needs to deliver the containers for food samples. If possible, have the volunteer to stay and take tickets and pass out plates. If you have enough volunteers, ask them to volunteer to serve if needed. Youth groups, such as 4H, FFA, FHA, are a great resource for this.

Most cook offs require the wagons to send in a deposit of \$50 to \$200 when they enter. When the wagon shows up, the deposit is returned. This gives the wagon an incentive to be at the cook off and not back out. If the wagon does not show up, you cash the check and keep the money. Of course, if the wagon notifies you ahead with a legitimate excuse, the deposit is usually refunded.

Try to pick a nice grassy spot to set up the wagons. An ideal amount of space per wagon would be forty feet by sixty feet. Be sure the spot you pick is where the cooks can dig a fire pit and drive stakes for their wagon flies. A paved parking lot or asphalt area is not a good spot. Check carefully for underground water, gas, electric or telephone lines. Remember to designate a place nearby for trailer and vehicle parking. There should be restroom facilities or portable potties nearby. Trash barrels need to be placed around the area, preferably one per wagon or at a minimum one for every two wagons. These need to be emptied often. Plan for the disposal of clean-up water.

A cooks’ meeting is usually held the day before the cook off shortly after the wagon judging. This gives the wagon people a chance to ask questions and you a chance to give any special instructions. Tell the cooks in your invitation whether stoves and/or fireboxes will be allowed. At the cooks’ meeting remind the cooks of your position on this issue. Announce the time when the food will be turned in for judging. It is usually 5 to 10 minutes before serving time. You can have the cooks bring the food to a designated spot or your volunteers can pick it up. *Do not allow food to be turned in late.* Announce when you think the awards will be given. Distribute non-perishable food after the cooks’ meeting. All food may be distributed at this time.

The ticket holders should be served immediately after picking up the food for judging. Serving time should not be longer than one hour. Food cannot be safely held much longer.

Have a building or tent away from the wagons for the food judges to taste and judge the food. This needs to be away from visitors who may distract the judges. Cooks prefer blind judging or double blind judging. For blind judging have the head cook draw a letter or you assign a letter. Be sure to keep a list of these. Wagon one got letter Z, for example. Write this code on the bottom of each of wagon #1's food containers. For double blind judging tape a raffle ticket to the bottom of each container. The cook keeps one half of the ticket and the other half is left taped to the container. With double blind judging you will not know who the winners are until the awards ceremony. Three judges are needed for each food category. The ACWA has score sheets that can be shared with you for food judging.

You need to have two or three wagon judges to judge the authenticity of the wagons. These persons need to have a good knowledge of how wagons were constructed in the late 1800's or early 1900's, such as proper hardware, etc. The judges need to judge each wagon alone, not in a group. The ACWA can help you with a list of wagon judges and with wagon judging guidelines as well as score sheets. It is appropriate to pay the wagon judges and furnish them with a room for a night or two. It is a nice gesture to allow them to eat at one of the wagons without charge.

Visit the local health department. Ask about their requirements for an outdoor event. Each area is different. Be sure to ask the cooks to bring bleach and a food thermometer.

Please phone or e-mail if you need clarification or other help. We will be glad to help you in any way we can.

Nancy Sparks, administrative assistant for American Chuck Wagon Association, can be reached at
acwa@door.net or 806-637-4272.