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The COWBOY *Issue*

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FOOD & DRINK | Chef

Wagons West

Hollis resident Kent Rollins has thrown down with the Food Network's best and traveled the country feeding ranch hands at dawn. When he's home, he makes a mean cup of ramen noodles.

CHILDHOOD SNEAKINESS LED Kent Rollins to his life's calling. He grew up on a ranch near Hollis where, at the age of seven, he discovered that if he helped his mother with the cooking, he could stay out of whatever extreme weather southwestern Oklahoma had to offer on a given day. "I got to noticing that it was either a lot cooler or a lot warmer in the house, so I'd trade off with Mama every once in a while," he says. Today, Rollins and his Red River Ranch Chuck Wagon—a restored 1876 Studebaker wagon—feed tens of thousands every year, from ranch hands driving cattle across the Southwest to reunions and wedding receptions. Rollins has appeared on Food Network shows including *Throwdown with Bobby Flay* (he beat the host using his Dutch oven) and *Chopped: Grill Masters* and is a renowned cowboy poet, humorist, and performer. He and his wife Shannon will host a cooking school in southwestern Oklahoma beginning on October 30. They live on his family's land near Hollis. (580) 471-3775 or kentrollins.com.

What does a typical day as a ranch cook look like? We cook for a lot of working cowboys. We do it the old-fashioned way: We use a wagon and a team, and we put about 125 miles on that wagon making three meals a day. Our mornings start about 2:50 a.m., and we usually get to bed about 9:30 every night.

What do you miss when you're out on the ranch? A standup shower and a sit-down toilet. Those are some of the finer things in life.

What's the secret to using a Dutch oven? You need three things: practice, practice, and more practice. I tell people I'm probably not the best Dutch oven cook in the world, but I've probably had more practice than anybody. You have to think about the elements and everything Mother Nature has to throw at you. There are a lot of variables: the altitude, the wind, and the source of your fire—different woods make different heat.

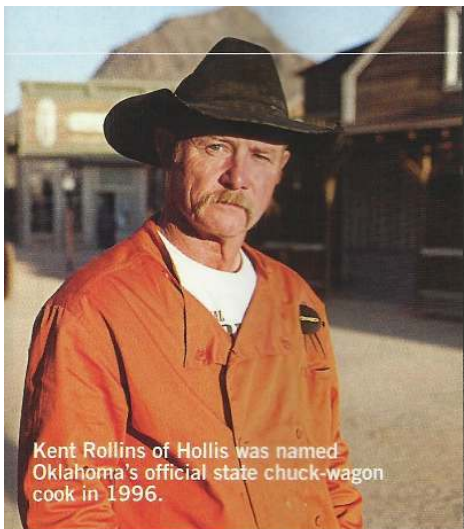
What kind of wood do you like to use? If I'm catering a meal, I have mes-

quite, because mesquite is the best wood. You can depend on it, and we're blessed with a lot of it in this part of the country.

What tools are always on your wagon? I've got an old gal that stays in the camp, and her name is Bertha. She's a 385-pound stove, and she's got a top that comes out so you can put a grill on there. She's never let me down. Years ago, a man gave me a hash knife, and it's one of those all-purpose kitchen tools: You can do anything with it.

What is one thing everyone should try from your menu? My chicken fry beat Bobby Flay, but everybody should get the dish that won my wife over, and that's the hominy and green chili casserole. I like to think I won her over with just my charm and good looks, but she said, "I've never had hominy and green chilis in my life, and I love this more than anything I've ever eaten."

What do you like to cook when you're at home? Bologna sandwiches or ramen noodles. We survived on ramen one



Kent Rollins of Hollis was named Oklahoma's official state chuck-wagon cook in 1996.

FOOD NETWORK

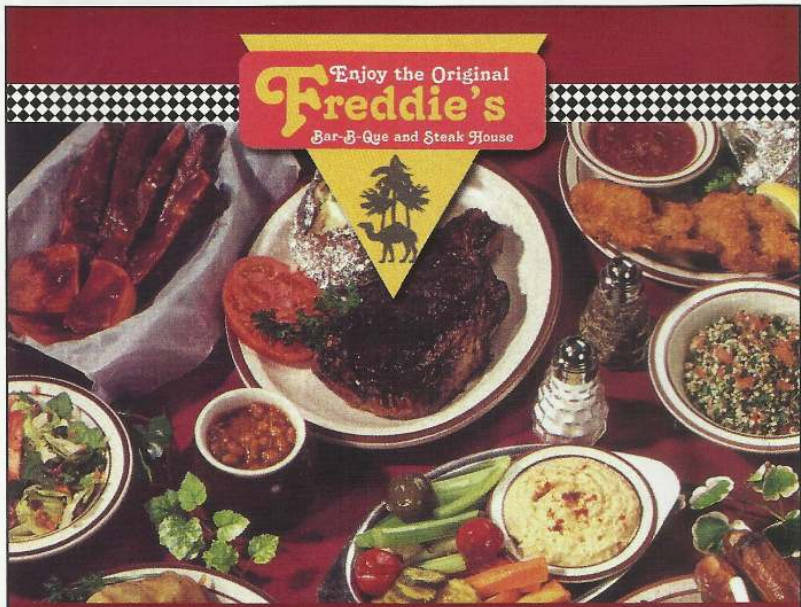
winter because we were so tired of cooking, and you can do a lot of things with it. When you cook for a living, you don't cook much at home. Right now we're doing a cookbook with Houghton Mifflin that will be out in 2015, so we have to recook everything that's going in it. We've taken food to the post office, food to the bank. Hollis isn't a real big place, but we're going to have enough to feed the whole town before we get through.

You're also known for your cowboy poetry and storytelling. How do you make a cowboy laugh? My daddy always told me to take a story that causes pain and laugh at it, because if you don't laugh at whatever you're going through in life, it's going to hurt worse. Most humorous stories have some kind of tragedy in them.

What's one thing a cowboy should never be without? The cowboys I know are not going to be without God, and they're not going to be without wide-open spaces.

Who are your heroes? My dad and the people he worked around when I was little were heroes—they stood as tall as giants. I've seen them do stuff on horseback most people couldn't imagine and stuff with a rope that looked like a magic trick. We cooked for years for General Tommy Franks, and he's a very down-to-earth, good person. I admire him a great deal. I'd love to have known Will Rogers, because he took cowboy to a whole different level.

How do you relax? I like to sit on the porch at about six o'clock in the morning with my boneheaded old beagle dog, my sweet wife Shannon, and a cup of coffee. Life doesn't get any better than that.



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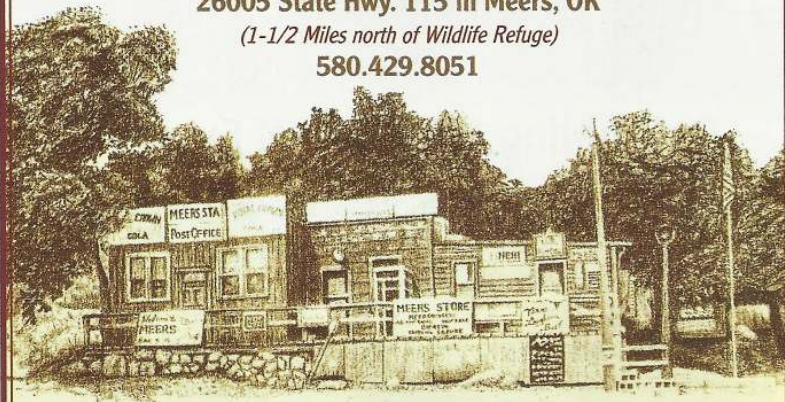
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