

Social centers are important to our lives

Man is a social animal. Social centers, therefore, are important to the lives and well-being of mankind.

One of the earliest social centers of the West came, out of necessity, in the form of the chuck wagon. It came with the great organized roundups on the unfenced plains and prairies, where it became one of the most important institutions of the era.

More than just a place to feed the cattleman and his cowboys, it turned out to be the social center of the working outfit while men carried out the duties of the roundup crew.

To the riders, it meant a warm-up fire, dry clothes, shelter for bedrolls and personal belongings, and camaraderie complete with conversations, music and songs, occasional arguments, and jokes of various colors. Of course, the most important thing furnished to the cowboy was his chuck — the unpoetic name he gave to food.

Cattlemen knew they could not be slackish with food; they had to line the cowboy's ribs well to get him to do his best for the cause. The chuck wagon, when well loaded, represented an important index of good management.

Men were comfortable around the chuck wagon and nearby campfire. They could be themselves among individuals who understood their language and rode the same range.

In their crude surroundings, the men were characteristically boister-

ous. There they developed the terse, crisp, clear-cut language of the range, laid firm hands on that language and squeezed the juice out of it.

Usefulness of the chuck wagon faded away as fences stretched across open prairies and other rangelands. Semiannual roundups took on much smaller proportions.

The ranch bunkhouse and cook shack teamed up to replace the chuck wagon. These two buildings, especially the bunkhouse, became the social center of the working outfit.

Most cowboys gave the big house (where the boss and his family lived) a wide berth, and when forced to approach, did so with hat in hand. They felt at ease in and around the bunkhouse since it had few, if any, female visitors.

As time passed, the sun-tanned, grin-wrinkled, gravel-voiced, boot-footed, leather-aproned, comparatively cantankerous male cook disappeared. The female cook, who replaced him, found soft-spoken, downright bashful punchers showing much reserve of manner.

The reserve fell away in the association of the cowboys with each other



Center Stage

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in the bunkhouse.

More or less, sadly, times change. His social centers change as a man lives his life and circumstances bring about new needs and experiences.

At some point, the cowboy is compelled to trade out his saddle and occupy a chair more suitable to his physical requirements.

The cry of the camp cook, "Grub-pile, come a-runnin', you rannies," and the familiar call of the ranch cook, "Grab 'er, boys, or I'll throw 'er out," are heard only in the ghostly memories of the few left who experienced life on a working cattle ranch big enough to employ the strong, young race known as cowboys.

These days I occupy, from time to time, the soft chair at the dining room reception desk in the Sheridan Senior Center. There, I welcome folks mostly past 60 years old to the dining room, help them check in, sell lunch tickets, and keep an eye on people and happenings.

From that vantage point, I see a true social center.

The most obvious purpose of the dining room with attached kitchen is to provide food and a place to partake of it. This room, by design, allows dining in a relaxed atmosphere and encourages fellowship of friends, old and new.

Thus, it differs from the old ranch cook shack where cooks and dishwashers expected diners to, "Swaller, and git out."

The dining room is open all day every day, and I see a lot of kindness and compassion taking place there. Staff and volunteers take their jobs seriously whether filling a coffee cup or carrying a meal tray to someone who appreciates help.

To the participants, this social center means, in addition to food, entertainment, recreation such as card games and dominoes, exercise, instructional classes, and camaraderie complete with discussion of news, exchange of memories, occasional arguments, and jokes of various colors.

Duane Portwood is an accomplished writer and cowboy poet who has been volunteering his time and talent at the Sheridan Senior Center for over two years.

Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.