15 Lost Survival Tips From The Cowboys

When we think of the Wild West we often think of the old films with John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. They'd sit out under the stars, eating beans from a can and chewing tobacco or smoking a cigar.

By the way, in 1900s these cigarette packs came with a set of illustrations that depicted the hard life of a cowboy in the Wild West and a few tricks that made their life easier and a lot more enjoyable.

The frontiers people who came to the western states looking for a new life, had to be hardy folk, who had the skills to take care of themselves with little resources and scarce food availability. The cowboys who settled in the West were not good, nor bad. They were survivors.

Maybe we can all take advantage of their wisdom, and learn how to cope with a new life after SHTF.

1. His Best Friend

A cowboy's best friend is his weapon. In the old days of the West, a cowboy needed a handy weapon, one he could carry around easily and that would be multi-purpose, for controlling his cattle and protecting him from ' cattle rustlers'.

The weapon of choice of those old westerners was the Colt .45 six-shooter because they could carry it in their belt and it was easy to use.

The gun, nicknamed the 'Peacemaker', was originally designed for U.S. government service use but was also popular with ranchers too.

Life was hard in those days, if you had cattle, you had something other people wanted and you had to be prepared to protect that asset. So the Colt .45 was an essential best friend to the ranchers of the Wild West. As well as rustlers, cowboys, especially those who lived in the southwest, also had to protect their ranch, cattle and families from other hostile elements, including Native Americans.

Another weapon of choice was the Winchester model 73, also known as the gun that 'Won the Wild West'. The Winchester is a repeating arms rifle, so longer than the Colt .45. Cowboys would ride with these fastened to their saddles, ready to pull out when needed.

2. Repairing a Break

The famous American Poet, Robert Frost, in his poem ‘ Mending Wall’, said that, “good fences, make good neighbors”. In the early days of the Wild West, keeping your ranch fence intact wasn’t an issue because fences were only used within the context of a coral; the cattle roamed freely across the plains.

As land rights started to enter the arena, around the latter part of the 19th century, fences started to be erected. In 1862, homesteaders were given the right to 65 hectares of land if they agreed to live on it and improve it. As the land became broken up and given to the new homesteaders, the competition for land increased and existing ownership had to be protected.

In 1874 barbed wire was invented and ranchers used it to mark

out and protect their land. As free land became less available, the ‘Fence Cutting Wars’ started.

Homesteaders would go around cutting the barbed wire the ranchers had used to designate their land, to try and push it back into the public pot. Ranchers would have to go around the circumference of their land and fix any broken fences to retain their ownership rights.

3. Skinning a Buffalo

Buffalo ranged the North American plains in their millions before the West became fully settled. During this time buffalo were hunted by the Native Americans every part of the animal being used for something.

The hides had a multitude of uses, including, teepee covers, clothing and moccasins. The horns were used to make cups and

ladles and to form headdresses. The bones for knives, arrowheads and even dice, the fat used to make soap and to cook with and even buffalo dung could be used for fuel. The whole animal was made use of, there was little or no waste.

Once the settlers arrived they too hunted the buffalo, but they didn't make use of the animal in the same way. The new settlers mainly hunted the animal for the meat and hide. Occasionally the cowboys would use the bones for fertilizer too. But the hide was used for many purposes including making drive belts for machinery. The cowboys of old did make use of the buffalo hide, using it for clothes and bedding against the harsh winters.

Buffalo tastes good; A little like lean beef. They were such a popular food source that by the end of the 19th century, they ended up being hunted to almost extinction, with only 300 individuals in the wild by 1900 – something that has happened to many species throughout human history. The herd size of today is back up to around 500,000 across the USA and Canada. Only because they were such a useful resource, North American Buffalo was once very close to extinction.

4. Getting the Horse Thief

There are few things as iconic as a cowboy on his horse. Horses were of the utmost importance in ranching life.

Most ranchers had a herd of horses to help with the daily workings of the ranch.

On an average day you could see 3000 heads of cattle driven as much as 25 miles.

Horses were a valuable part of the ranch workforce. So if a horse was stolen, this was seen as a massive crime, certainly in the league of murder and could result in certain states in delivery of the death sentence.

If the legal system let the ranchers down, then they would resort to forming vigilante gangs. These gangs were brutal. It was often believed that the horse rustlers were from ethnic groups like Mexican or Native American. Local men within this community would become the focus of the vigilantes who would hunt them down, taking swift action against them, including hanging.

One account near Fort Griffin in Texas tells of a vigilante group who caught a man ‘in the act’ of stealing horses. They hung him, there and then, leaving a shovel underneath the body in case someone wanted to dig a grave. The action of the ranchers in protecting their most valued resource, the horse,

was seen as natural justice.

5. A Long Shot

The Wild West cowboy had to be a marksman. His weapons were always by his side.

The weapons of choice were the Colt .45 revolver for shorter ranges and easy shooting, but for longer ranges, the Winchester was his preferred piece. The cowboy would often need to make a shot from atop a horse.

The best steeds were those that knew when to keep still, to let their rider take a clear shot.

The cowboy would use a gentle pat on the horses steer, or move his knee into the horse’s side to indicate it was time to keep very still. Then he would aim his rifle at a deer or antelope in the distance.

Antelope are one of the trickiest animals to hunt. They are common in places like Wyoming and eastern Colorado.

Antelope are hard to hunt as they have excellent vision and are well camouflaged against the flats that they wander through. It is said that if you’ve seen an antelope, it’s seen you too. The slightest movement by a hunter and the antelope

flees at up to 55 miles per hour. The cowboy's only hope of an antelope kill, is to have a steady quiet pony, a keen eye, and an accurate long shot gun, like a Winchester.

6. Cowboy Courtship

Affairs of the heart are an exciting and important part of any young person's life and cowboys are no exception.

Having a wife and partner who can play an active role in the life of the ranch is something that good cowboys seek out at some stage or other.

Courtship for cowboys was a mutual affair, if the man wasn't right, the girl would make sure he knew.

And likewise, the woman would need the necessary personality and skills to take up life on the ranch.

Often the girls would have been brought up on the ranch and so would already know the hired hands or 'cowpunchers' well and would have a good idea of who would make good husband material.

Being a cowboy wasn't just a job, it was a way of life and anyone entering that lifestyle had to be of the same mind. The dream of the cowpuncher was to acquire a ranch of their own.

Having a wife who understood how to help run that ranch was an important part of that dream.

The life of a rancher's wife was remote and often hard, as their husband built up his business and herded cattle across many miles of land. Because of this, cowboys would sometimes wait until they had established their ranch before embarking on courtship, instead bringing their new wife into a more settled ranch.

7. Evening on the Prairie

The life of a cowpuncher was hard. Often they would be outside for days, herding cattle.

They had to spend many a night sleeping in the outdoors, under the stars; no tents were used – if it rained, the cowpuncher got wet. Their camp was basic and they camped wherever they could find a suitable spot, but some would sleep in the saddle.

Cowpunchers were a hardy lot and knew what it was like to go without sleep whilst on the trail. Each person in the outfit had to guard for two hours through the night, to protect the horses and cattle against rustlers and predators.

During those two hours they would ride amongst the herd,

singing quietly to the cattle to let them know they were being watched over, the songs were gentle to prevent the herd from bolting if startled, but to let them know that the rider was there.

Sleep for the cowpuncher was intermittent and short and cowpunchers were known to rub tobacco in their eyes to keep awake. But they were good-natured folk and would hand out the cigarettes and often sing a song like ‘Little Black Bull’ for entertainment, or tell tales of their lives. They were a band of brothers who relied on each other for protection and entertainment and kinship.

8. Heading a Stampede

Cattle can be dangerous animals. The herd acts like one beast when upset. Anything can set off a bad reaction in the cattle herd, which could result in the serious injury of a cowpuncher or rancher. And in the mid to late 1800’s serious injury was to

be avoided at all costs, as modern medicine and hospitals were not available in the Wild West.

Any sudden noise or movement could spook a herd. Herds being driven to market and in unknown territory were easily made jittery. Nighttime was a dangerous time, the bark of a coyote, or a sudden thunderclap and the herd could stampede in seconds; anyone in the way of the hooves and horns would become trampled, stabbed, or kicked.

Cowpunchers would use tricks like driving the herd into a tight grouping, making them feel more secure. They'd also sing to the herd, sad and sentimental songs, to calm them. If the herd were to panic, the skill of the herders and their horsemanship meant they were able to ride around the front of the stampeding herd, pushing them into a tight grouping again to calm them.

The men had to have stamina to do this as it may take them all night to pull the herd together again.

9. A Balky Pupil

Those old western films from the 1940s always seemed to have a horse being ‘broken in’. This method of horsemanship was prevalent throughout the Wild West. Specialist ‘horse breakers’ were employed at a fixed price to break in a horse.

The horse needed to be mature, because of the work it was expected to do, such as carry a rider for days on end. So the horse would be weaned by the ranch owners and when ready ‘broken in’. The breaking in had to be done within a week, which meant that the horse needed to be able to be ridden within about four days. The breakers were often highly skilled and were intuitive with animals and the use of the word ‘break’ in this context is perhaps over harsh at times – although less skilled handlers may have used overly heavy methods of course.

The breakers would be working on around six horses per week to make a living. More modern horse handing techniques have come

into play and the idea of a ‘horse whisperer’ is someone who can teach a horse to handle a rider without any harsh techniques, but by using systematic methods that train the horse to perform certain actions based on simple commands.

10. Outnumbered

The Wild West wasn’t called wild for nothing. It was a dangerous place. It had dangerous animals like bears and snakes to contend with. There were harsh winters and rough country to traverse. There was also a war raging between the Native Americans and the settlers. The West was seen in the 1800s as an undiscovered country, devoid of human habitation and ripe for settlement.

However, when the first settlers got there they found it was in fact the homeland of Native Americans. To try and alleviate the problem, the government formed reservations for the Native Americans. This didn’t work out well and as resources became depleted, including the near extinction of the Buffalo, the staple diet of the Native American, anger spread and the Indian Wars of the late 1800s began with conflicts such as

‘Wounded knee’ and ‘Geronimo’ now ensconced in American history.

Cowboys lived through these violent times and when they rode out with the herd they literally took their life into their own hands. Even fully armed with their trusty Winchester, a lone cowboy was easy game and the Native Americans armory, included powerful short bows to bring you down, and ball-headed war clubs and tomahawk axes to finish you off. The best way for a cowboy to protect himself during the Indian Wars was to stay in a group with other men.

11. A Lucky Bag

Food during the earlier days of the Wild West, before the railroads opened up trade, could be monotonous. Vegetables, like beans, were often out of a can, the meat variety was limited, squirrel being an alternative to the usual buffalo.

Provisions such as coffee, sugar and flour were scarce and stocked up on, when the opportunity arose.

These were the days before home freezing or even cool boxes. The cowboy and girl would need to use preservation techniques, like salting, pickling or dehydration to keep food over the winter.

Dugouts were also used to store food in. Early cowboys really had to make use of their hunter-gatherer instincts.

For fresh vegetables they would have to forage for fresh berries, wild fruit and other green edibles and roots. Herbs and acorns were also foraged for and used to liven up meals. Some folk would create a smoke house that would be used communally, the people taking advantage of it, leaving some meat or fish for the smoke house owner as payment for use.

If the cowboy had time, they could go hunting, perhaps bagging a deer or antelope. They could then add some extra pizazz to their meals and keep the rest of the meat using one of the preserving techniques.

12. Branding Calves

Cattle were valuable in the old days of the West. As they roamed pretty much freely, the rancher needed a way to recognize their own cattle from another's.

To do this they used to brand the calves. This entailed a painful exercise involving applying a hot iron to the animal's skin. The branding iron has a distinctive metal symbol at the end to represent a particular ranch.

It meant that the calves, as they grew up, retained this mark (symbol) and could freely move across the range, yet be easily identified when it was time to be taken to market.

Branding was also a useful way to protect against rustling.

Neighbors would recognize a brand and if they caught a rustler, even if it were neighbor's cattle being stolen, they would catch the rustler and 'string him up'.

Branding was a two-man job. The cowpunchers would find a mother and calf, separate them form the herd and then lasso the calf. The cowpunchers were masters at lassoing. They'd get the rope under the calves back legs and take the calf down. One man would then hold the calf, while the other quickly branded it. The process would be over quickly, the calf then released back to its waiting mother. The calf, now branded with the ranches own personal mark, would wander freely across the plains, the rancher knowing he could pick out his cattle.

13. Rounding Up

The task of rounding up, that is bringing together perhaps thousands of cattle was a mammoth one and needed highly skilled men to do that work.

In the early days of the Wild West, early Texan settlers would hire 'Vaqueros' who were skilled horseman, used to driving wild cattle to market.

The Vaqueros had strength, agility and they understood how cattle moved and could be controlled. The settlers soon learned the ways of the Vaqueros and became just as skilled in the management and rounding up of large herds of cattle.

Texas had a large number of cattle after the American Civil War and these cattle were sold at higher prices in places that had a scarcity of meats such as those in eastern and northern states. Between 1865-1880 there were around 10 million cattle herded by cowboys in Texas up to Kansas.

This was a major feat and cowboy and his horse had work together as one seamless entity. This meant that the horses too, had to be highly trained as the cowboy relied totally on their working to his commands.

Most drives had around 18 cowboys working them and a herd of horses. Cowboys often had several steers that would be used throughout the round up, as the drives were long and arduous and horses needed to rest up.

14 Queen of the Ranch

Cowboys in the Wild West revered good, strong women. A woman, who accompanied her husband on the long arduous trip to settle land, had to be as hardy as her husband.

Times were tough; food was monotonous and often scarce and poverty the order of the day. We've all heard of 'Calamity Jane' the frontierswoman and scout, but most women of the Wild West led much simpler lives.

They came from all sorts of backgrounds and levels of

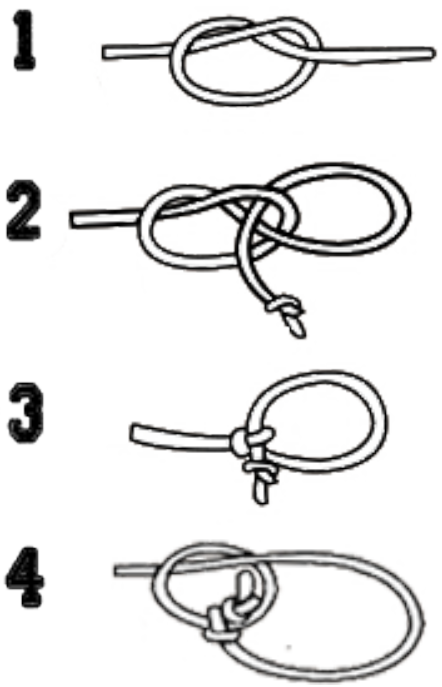
education. Women of the Wild West had to learn quickly how to survive and they were taught to ride from being a young girl. Many stories are told about the women who blazed the trail to the West along with their husbands, fathers and brothers.

These women soon learned how to make the most of scraps of food, when the meat ran out, they'd make soup from the bones and left over scraps. The women would also be the gatherers and occasionally the hunters too, of small animals, like mice and rabbits.

The women of the West as well as being the persons who cleaned and cooked, were also doctor and nurse. They would use homemade remedies to treat wounds and cope with fevers. Willow bark was used for infections and headaches; poultices were used to treat wounds, and sulfur and molasses for stomachache. The women of the West were an integral part of its development, keeping the menfolk and children fed and healthy.

15. How The Cowboys Tied Their Lasso

Lasso is a word of Spanish origin, but the Westerner called it a "rope" and the people in Southwest called it a "reata". There is a good reason why every cowboy carried one at his saddle. Roping cattle was a daily business. It was generally 40 feet long, which was the most practical size for an average size man. Lassos were previously manufactured by using hemp or rawhide.



Rawhide was snipped into strips and then half-tanned with the hair. The knot is so easy that once you learn it you'll never forget it.

The illustration is pretty self-explanatory. First you need to make a loop about 1 food from the end of the rope. At the end of the rope tie a simple knot. Then pass this knot through one of the loops and tighten the lasso as you can see in image 3. Pull the other end of the rope through the new loop and there you have it.

Life in the saddlebag meant survival of the fittest. Cowboys lived rugged lives, and lessons were learnt the hard way. This is your time to learn their lessons, but you have the chance to do it the easy way.

This article has been written for Survivopedia by ***Claude Davis*** *from* ***Ask a Prepper****.*

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