

Cowboy Clothing and Equipment

Hat Hats are worn as a shade from the sun or an umbrella from the rain. They protect the head and the back of the neck. Hat styles have changed over the years. Brims and crowns vary in height and width. Styles vary from region to region as well. Hats may have a leather chin-strap or strings with slides, known as “stampede strings,” to keep them from blowing away in the wind. A cowboy might use his hat like a bucket for gathering water or food (for the cowboy or his horse), for fanning a fire, chasing flies, and covering his face while he sleeps. Many early cowboys wore hats made by John Stetson, who started his company in 1865. Hats are often made of felt or straw. Straw hats are worn in warm weather. Felt hats were made from wool or fur.

Shirt These were long-sleeved, made of cotton for summer or wool for winter. Long sleeves protected the arms. Early shirts had a button placket at the top of the shirt. Cowboys often wore their shirts buttoned up to the neck.

Underwear Long johns or one piece underwear, covering the body from neck to ankles, were worn beneath clothing. They buttoned down the front and were worn during the day and at night.

Vest Since shirts and pants often did not have pockets, cowboys wore vests with pockets for extra storage space for tobacco and money. Vests, which were often made of wool, provided an extra layer of clothing that helped keep the cowboy warm in cold weather.

Bandanna A square piece of cloth, also called a neckerchief or face mop, that was folded in half into a triangle and tied to hang loosely around the neck. The cowboy could use the bandanna to protect his nose and mouth from dust and wipe his brow. In hot weather, he would wet the bandanna and use it to cool his neck or place it under his hat to cool his head. In case of injury or snake bite, it could be used as a bandage or a tourniquet. Bandannas originated in India and were first imported in the 1700s. Silk or cotton in solids or calico prints were popular fabrics. Bandits also used bandannas as masks.

Gloves Made of leather, these protected the cowboy’s hands from rope burns, blisters, hooves, horns and hot branding irons.

Pants These were often made of canvas or wool and were usually brown, black or tan. Pants had one small waist pocket or no pockets. Pockets were not used because cowboys found it difficult to reach items in pockets and uncomfortable to sit in a saddle all day with full pockets. Denim work pants were used, but the pants we call jeans were not created until 1873, when a patent was received by Levi Strauss and his partner for the rivets used to strengthen the pants at the pockets and other points of strain. Pants were made to fit tight at the waist, so belts were not necessary.

Chaps Leather leggings that were worn over pants for protection from rocks, branches, horns. They also helped to keep the cowboy warm in cold weather. There are several varieties of chaps. Shotgun chaps are made of leather and have narrow legs. Batwings are long chaps with wide legs. Woolies are long chaps made of Angora goat hair or sheep's wool.

Boots Cowboys preferred boots over shoes because they provided better protection from brush, stickers, and rattlesnakes. Boots were made of leather and designed for riding. The narrow toe fit through the stirrup and the high heel kept the boot from sliding forward. Boots with higher heels kept the spurs clear of the ground. Boots often have "mule ears" or leather straps on the sides that make them easier to pull on. In the 1880s, a pair of boots might cost a cowboy \$10.00 - \$25.00. This was an expensive purchase, since the cowboy only made about \$30.00 per month. Cowboys "slept with their boots on" to be able to get on their horses quickly if there was a stampede.

Oil Skin Coat This lightweight coat is also called a duster or a slicker. The coat provided protection from wind, rain, dust storms, etc. Dusters are long and are designed with a split up the back to be worn while riding. The coat was long enough to protect the rider and his horse.

Spurs Spurs are made of a piece of U shaped metal that fits around the heel of a boot. Spurs are fastened with a leather strap across the front. The spurs have a small spiked wheel or star with dull edges, called a rowel. As the cowboy touches the horse, the rowel turns, but does not injure the horse. The cowboy uses his spurs to encourage the horse to go faster.

Quirt A riding whip used to get the horse's attention. These were made of hand braided leather, rawhide, or horse hair.

Lariat A long rope, also called a reata or lasso. Lariats were first made of braided rawhide or hemp. New ropes are often stiff and need to be “broken in.” To make it easier to use a new rope, a cowboy might tie one end to his saddle horn and drag it on the ground for several days.

Saddlebags A pair of pouches hanging across the back of a horse behind the saddle used to store food, utensils, extra clothing, pistol and bullets, medical supplies, tools for repairing equipment, books, money, maps, etc. These were made of leather and were closed and fastened with leather straps and metal buckles.

Canteen A container for carrying drinking water for the cowboy and sometimes his horse. Canteens were made of metal, wood or animal skins covered with wool cloth or canvas.

Bedroll A canvas covered blanket or quilt that served as a mattress. These were usually tied to the saddle during the day or carried in the chuck wagon. Cowboys often kept extra clothes in their bedroll.

Firearms A short, light-weight rifle, also known as a carbine, might be carried on the saddle for use on the trail. The rifle would add up to 7 pounds to the saddle weight. Revolvers might be worn in a holster around the cowboy’s waist. Because ammunition was expensive, cowboys avoided using these weapons when possible. Cowboys might also carry handguns, but handguns were only accurate at short distances.

Knife A cowboy’s knife consisted of a thin, sharp-edged metal blade with a handle.

Saddle A wooden and leather seat placed on the back of a horse. Each saddle had a horn at the front that was used to tie one end of a rope. Saddles, like boots, were very expensive, costing a month’s pay or more. At night, cowboys often used them as headrests while they slept. Saddles might last as long as 30 years and may weigh as much as 40 pounds. Because cowboys might ride up to 15 hours a day, it was important that the saddle be comfortable for both the cowboy and the horse.

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