

The Cowboy Hat: A Salute To The American Cowboy

by Cindy K. Roberts

On the movie set actor John Wayne ambled into the saloon, tipped his hat to the lady standing next to the bar, then ordered a whiskey from the bartender. Acting the part of a tall-old cowboy, his appearance was visibly rugged. The etched lines in his tanned face showed a map to this cowboy's younger years. The bow tied gentleman plunked, "Buffalo Gals" on the ivory keys to a crowded bar... filled with wranglers, drifters and locals. A young-bowlegged cowboy actor walked onto the set, moved his way over to the bar...bumped John Wayne; he was looking for a fight. The Duke, downing a shot of whiskey with this left hand, pushed his hat upward with his right hand, knew what the boy had in mind. Wayne bellowed in his raspy voice, "Sonny, if you're going to wear that hat, then wear it in good health." The scene continues...John Wayne tossed a silver coin onto the bar, draws his hat down, rambled out of the saloon to the street and gathered the reins to mount his horse. The young ruffian followed him. Wayne sensed there was going to be trouble, stepped up into the saddle, shifted his weight and stared at the kid. The immature cowboy had his feet spread out, sweat beading over his brow and both hands that hovered over his pistols were noticeably shaken. Wayne shouted, "Boy if you're going to shoot those pee wee irons, then do it! Otherwise, go home to your ma and drink your milk." The kid cowhand dropped his mouth slowly. Shaking his head, a disgruntled Wayne said, "I figured not." He backed his sorrel gelding away from the rail and turned him into the dusty street. Holding the reins in his left hand, The Duke tipped his hat with two fingers off his right hand...nodded to a lady standing in front of the general store. The Duke grabbed his hat, thumping his horse on the rear, spins the gelding in a complete circle while belting out, "Heeah!" The Duke galloped off into the sunset.



The cowboy hat is a long time symbol of the American Cowboy along with his horse, saddle, spurs, duster and pistol. It has a meaning that goes beyond style. It has a history of its own. This is a story about the cowboy hat, the legend behind it and what it means to those who wear it. This is a salute to the American Cowboy.

The Legend of The Stetson The Stetson marked the beginning for the cowboy hat. In 1865 the Stetson hat originated because John B. Stetson needed a hat to comfort him in the rugged outdoors. It was a time when gold fever had struck swarms of settlers and prospectors in search of their future. John B. Stetson was suffering from Tuberculosis and headed West to seek comfort for his ailing health. He was trapped in the mountains while panning for gold in Colorado. Comfort and protection were needed from howling winds and the unpredictable rain storms...and John B. Stetson made a hat. Mr. Stetson decided to manufacture and sell his hat after a mule driver paid him with a \$5 gold piece for the hat right off his head. With \$100 in his pocket John B. returned home to Philadelphia to manufacture Stetson hats. Within one year, Mr. Stetson owned the world's biggest Hat factory in Philadelphia and employed nearly 4,000 workers. The factory was putting out about 2 million Hats a year by 1906.



The "Hat of the West" otherwise known as the famous "Boss of the Plains" hat was created and manufactured by the Stetson Hat company in 1866. That hat marked the successful beginning for the John B. Stetson Hat company. Outdoor western living taught John B. that a hat had to have a wide brim to keep out the elements. It also taught him that hauling water was vital on the frontier, so he made the inside lining of his hat waterproof. The Stetson cowboy hat could double as a water bucket if needed. That is how Stetson Hats got the nickname the "10 gallon" hat even though the original never held more than a half-gallon. The crafty John B. Stetson pulled all these elements together in his design. The finished product had an unusual 6-inch high crown and a 7-inch brim. The first famous Stetson Hat had been created.

The infamous Buffalo Bill Cody proudly wore a Stetson. He was known to be a dapper dresser with a flamboyant style to match his big ego. Buffalo Bill usually wore broad-brimmed Stetson, both while performing in his Wild West Show and in his private life. John B. Stetson kept Mr. Cody well supplied with Stetson hats.



John B. Stetson led the hat industry throughout his career, creating new styles, hats that possessed fashion and function. He believed in quality and for the past 140 years, the name Stetson has been branded for its style and quality.

The cowboy hat has taken on many styles along with the help of the western film industry. Hollywood films stereotyped the Stetson hat with symbols...good for white hats and evil represented the black hat.

There is a code to the particular style, shape, and size of the cowboy hat. While it remained a universal image of the American West, subtle differences in the shade, shape size, and style provided accurate information about the cowboy's background and geographic base. With a slight adjustment to the brim and a couple of extra dents in the crown, a man could indicate that he was from the northern regions of Nevada or the rough plains of Texas, the wind-whipped ranges of the Rockies or the low deserts of New Mexico.

The cowboy hat has a code of ethics. It has a meaning that goes deeper than wearing a hat.

Tip your hat if you're a real cowboy:

- When you are walking with your friend and he says hello to a woman that he knows, but you do not.
- When a woman thanks you.
- After getting directions from a stranger, for sure if the stranger is a woman.
- When you excuse yourself to a woman.

Take off your hat:

- During the National Anthem.
- When you go into a building.
- When you are being introduced to someone, especially if it is a woman.

- When you begin a conversation, not needed if you are just saying "Hello" as you pass them.
- When attending a funeral.
- In an elevator with a lady present.
- A gentleman should always take his hat off in a restaurant unless no arrangements were made by the establishment to hang the hat or have it checked.

Cowboy Hat Facts

- A good cowboy hat used to cost \$15 a hundred years ago, today the same quality hat would be around \$400 on up.
- Southern and Northern cowboys had different hats. When Texans traveled north they found that their wide-brimmed hats didn't stick on their head with all the wind. The northern hats changed to be more narrow-brimmed and usually had a hat band of leather that was tightened to keep the hat in place.
- The cowboy hat is a toned down version of the hats you see in Mexico. Cowboy hats don't have any flashy designs or shiny finishes, as cowboys got dirty and they didn't have much use for fancy designs.

Caring For Your Hat

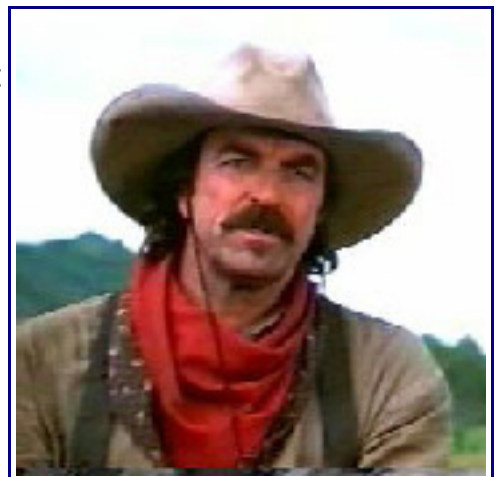
1. Putting on or taking off your western felt hat: try to always handle the hat by the front and back of the brim just next to the crown with 4 fingers. This process will help keep the crown clean and the shape neat and crisp as it was when very new. Your hands (if possible) should be washed, especially with the lighter colors such as Silver belly or Silver Sand. This step is important because we not only may wash off dirt and grime but also grease or oils that are naturally found on our skin.
2. After you take off your hat be sure and place it upside down on the crown (top). This will help in keeping the brim shape or set as it was when steamed and shaped for you. When placing your hat down in this fashion please remember to look for a relatively clean area unless of course it's now a "work" hat and deserves a good work site!
3. When your western felt hat gets dusty and needs a good quick freshening you may simply dust it off using a hat brush, a small plastic sponge or a whisk broom for the stouter western hat as opposed to a very soft, thin bodied dress hat.
4. A good quality western felt hat should never be bothered by rain or snow except in some cases acid rain can and will stain your hat. When possible a rain hat cover is always a small price to pay to keep your hat dry. They usually sell for between \$3.00 and \$5.00. But also, remember that a really

good beaver hat gets better with age. A good old fashioned rain never hurt a quality felt hat! Remember, without water your fine felt hat couldn't have been made at all!

5. If someone were to accidentally open a soft drink or beer and spray your felt hat, simply take it to a cool water faucet and let the fresh cool water in a small stream glide over the "stained surface" while using the "side end "of your index finger to quickly but softly scratch those areas. When you feel that the liquid stains should be washed out which shouldn't take more than a minute or less depending on the depth of the stain. Remember, this step is to be done before the stains are dry. Then let the hat dry naturally....do not ever use a hair dryer or any other hot air machine for it can aid in shrinkage.
6. The more care that is given to keep your felt hat dust free will lengthen it's life as a dressier western felt hat. The dust and dirt get down in the tiny crevices of the crown and brim and work against the felt when left in this manner as if there was a tiny "grinder" or piece of "pouncing paper" in there working against the fibers. It definitely shortens the life of a good felt hat as a dress western hat.
7. Technically your western hat should be worn sort of level on your head and about 1/2" above your ears. Of course, you should wear your hat however it feels the best to you.
8. The hat should fit slightly snug all around your head but not so that it hurts or gives you a headache.

What It Stands For

The Western film industry helped to transform the cowboy hat into a symbol of strength, hard work, good deeds and a way of defining outlaws. Hollywood depicted the cowboy hat to carry a message. According to the western film industry, a white Stetson was worn by the good guys and the black Stetson was worn by the bad guys. Cowboy film actors such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Sam Elliot, Kurt Russell, Val Kilmer, Kevin Costner, Keith Carradine, Sharon Stone, Robert Duvall, Tommy Lee Jones and others have made an impression with their cowboy hats to movie viewers.



Hat companies of today that market cowboy hats, offer replicas of the cowboy hats worn in recent western films by cowboy actors. The popularity of the cowboy hat has grown...creating a demand for many different hat styles. In addition, the higher end market of a quality hat company will design a

hat... made to your special order.

The Next Time You Wear Your Hat

The next time you wear your hat or step up into the saddle to ride your horse along the open trail...or arena, think of the American Cowboy of today and from the days gone by. The American Cowboy that worked hard at ranching to help place the beef on your table. The American Cowboy that chose a lifestyle so different from our own. The long days and endless nights of taking care of the herd, mending



fences, fixing trucks and tractors, hauling stock and helping a young person with their horse. The American Cowboy of today has grown into a person that shows honor and pride...he chooses to live by the Cowboy Code and The Code Of The West. He will offer his hand to a young person that may need it...to help guide them and show them a better way in today's troubled world. The American Cowboy believes in God as our creator and shows responsibility to his animals. Wear your hat with a sense of pride and remember...people near you are taking notice because you are wearing the symbol from the Wild West that helped to shape

our American history. The cowboy hat, the legend from the Wild West...a salute to the American Cowboy.

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