

THE COWBOY RULES OF ETIQUETTE



By MIKE LAUGHLIN
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In the outback country of the West, working cowboys still follow rules of etiquette that have been handed down through generations. How do you know these rules if you haven't been exposed to cowboy culture? Mary Flitner of Diamond Trail Ranch in Greybull, Wyoming, sums it up best, "Be quiet and humble. Your cowboy skills (if you have any) will show in due time and you need not try to show them." Let's discuss a few of these codes and explain their purposes.

COWBOY CODE #1: Never touch another person's horse or tack. Cowboys don't touch or handle another man's mount. Some ranch horses are hard to handle and the riders don't want their animals disturbed by someone else. This policy also holds true when saddling and unsaddling a horse and loading or unloading a horse from the trailer. Saddles and tack are highly valued personal items that should be handled only by their owners. Sometimes the tack has repairs or riggings that must be handled in a special way. A cowboy makes his living in his saddle and an equipment failure can cause injury to him or his animal.

COWBOY CODE #2: Be ready and on time to work. Gather all your gear beforehand, and don't expect to borrow anything. Definitely don't borrow saddles, pads, spurs, or other gear unless you ask. If you're uncertain if some of your gear is appropriate, ask the ranch owner or manager especially if you're riding a ranch's horse. Also ask which bit and headstall works best on a borrowed horse.

COWBOY CODE #3: Don't bring your dogs unless you ask permission. Untrained, nonworking dogs can disturb cattle. If you're trailing a herd of cow-calf pairs, the cows will fight your dog to protect their calves. Cow dogs are helpful if their owners handle them correctly. However, most dogs can't be handled when they charge into a herd of cattle.

COWBOY CODE #4: Never ride ahead of the cow boss. The cow boss is in charge of a crew of cowboys on a ranch. He *cuts* (chooses) a string or number of horses for each cowboy. Each day he or his *jigger* (second in command) ropes the horses for each cowboy when the cowboy names his mount for the day. The cow boss decides what the cowboys will do for the day and cuts a circle for each person in a gather.

COWBOY CODE #5: Don't turn your horse's tail to a cow. It's hard to work cattle when your horse is turned away from them. You can't see to read or control what the cattle will do next.



COWBOY CODE #6: Don't ride in front of someone else. Instead, ask permission to cross in front of another rider and say, "Excuse me." Doing so helps avoid riding too closely to another horse, thus risk getting kicked or having your horse kick the other horse. Also, you might interfere with the rider's vision or tack. Plus it's not polite.

COWBOY CODE #7: Wait for a dismounted person at the gate. The rider who dismounts to open a gate should also close the gate after all riders have passed through the opening. Once the person closes the gate, he must remount his horse. If the other riders take off, his horse will try to follow the other horses, making it difficult for the rider to remount.

COWBOY CODE #8: Work cattle at a walk. Contrary to what you might see in movies, cowboys don't gallop their horses all the time. The long trot is actually the preferred gait to cover country, while the walk is the best pace to move cattle. The reason is simple, cattle lose weight when they run, and weight is worth money when the cattle are sold. Plus, cattle and some horses become excited and hard to handle when they run.

COWBOY CODE #9: Help with the cut or ride into the herd only when asked. Holding the herd for the cut is an important job. A cut is made in a herd to separate certain cattle, such as strays, heifers, steers, dry cows, bulls, etc. Allow the person in charge of making the cut to do his job without interference.

COWBOY CODE #10: Take your rope down only when asked. An animal is roped for specific reasons. Some livestock owners don't want their animals roped unless they tell you to do so.

COWBOY CODE #11: Ride up on your rope in the branding corral. After you rope a calf in the branding corral, ride up on your rope and dally. In other words, ride toward the calf and take the slack out of the rope. That way, the calf won't be on too long a rope, making it hard to handle, and it'll be restrained enough to prevent knocking over the branding pot, medicine box and ranch hands on the ground.

COWBOY CODE #12: Don't brand another man's cattle. Today, at a branding, the owner of the cattle brands the stock, or he designates a trustworthy person to do the work. This rule also applies to castrating, ear marking and vaccinating. This rule was started back when dishonest hands used their irons on calves that didn't belong to them. Don't pick up a branding iron and try to help unless you're asked. Several different irons might be in the fire and you might not know which iron goes on what animal.