

Though the Code of the West was always unwritten, here is a “loose” list of some of the guidelines:

- Don't inquire into a person's past. Take the measure of a man for what he is today.
- Never steal another man's horse. A horse thief pays with his life.
- Defend yourself whenever necessary.
- Look out for your own.
- Remove your guns before sitting at the dining table.
- Never order anything weaker than whiskey.
- Don't make a threat without expecting dire consequences.
- Never pass anyone on the trail without saying “Howdy”.
- When approaching someone from behind, give a loud greeting before you get within shooting range.
- Don't wave at a man on a horse, as it might spook the horse. A nod is the proper greeting.
- After you pass someone on the trail, don't look back at him. It implies you don't trust him.
- Riding another man's horse without his permission is nearly as bad as making love to his wife. Never even bother another man's horse.
- Always fill your whiskey glass to the brim.
- A cowboy doesn't talk much; he saves his breath for breathing.
- No matter how weary and hungry you are after a long day in the saddle, always tend to your horse's needs before your own, and get your horse some feed before you eat.
- Cuss all you want, but only around men, horses, and cows.
- Complain about the cooking and you become the cook.
- Always drink your whiskey with your gun hand, to show your friendly intentions.
- Do not practice ingratitude.
- A cowboy is pleasant even when out of sorts. Complaining is what quitters do, and cowboys hate quitters.
- Always be courageous. Cowards aren't tolerated in any outfit worth its salt.
- A cowboy always helps someone in need, even a stranger or an enemy.
- Never try on another man's hat.
- Be hospitable to strangers. Anyone who wanders in, including an enemy, is welcome at the dinner table. The same was true for riders who joined cowboys on the range.
- Give your enemy a fighting chance.
- Never wake another man by shaking or touching him, as he might wake suddenly and shoot you.
- Real cowboys are modest. A braggart who is “all gurgles and no guts” is not tolerated.
- Be there for a friend when he needs you.
- Drinking on duty is grounds for instant dismissal and blacklisting.
- A cowboy is loyal to his “brand,” to his friends, and those he rides with.
- Never shoot an unarmed or unwarned enemy. This was also known as “the rattlesnake code”: always warn before you strike. However, if a man was being stalked, this could be ignored.
- Never shoot a woman no matter what.
- Consideration for others is central to the code, such as: Don't stir up dust around the chuck wagon, don't wake up the wrong man for herd duty, etc.
- Respect the land and the environment by not smoking in hazardous fire areas, disfiguring rocks, trees, or other natural areas.
- Honesty is absolute. Your word is your bond. A handshake is more binding than a contract.
- Live by the Golden Rule.

Compiled and edited by Kathy Weiser/Legends of America, updated April, 2017.