

COWBOYS WITH BIG HEARTS

Designed by Jason Morningstar

SET-UP

This is a game for 2-6 friends who play cowboys. These rules refer to these guys as “players”. One additional person plays the Judge and everyone else.

You will need the 54 cards that comprise the core of the game. A bag for blind draws is necessary. You’ll also need about 20 tokens in each of three colors. Tokens need to be in three distinct colors and otherwise indistinguishable. The rules reference red, white, and blue for clarity.

Divide the cards into cures, complaints, cowboys, and keepsakes. There are two additional reference cards - one outlining the sequence of play, and a medicinal effect card. Put these within easy reach of everybody.

Put an equal number of each color of token in the bag. One of each is just fine, but more is better. Put the rest of the tokens in a big common pile for now.

Decide who will play the Judge.

1. A PROMISE MADE IS A DEBT UNPAID

Read this out loud

It’s 1900, and you’re in Sunny Slope, a tent city and sanitarium north of Phoenix, Arizona Territory. The west isn’t so wild any more and, being powerful sick, you’re come here to die. Sunny Slope is paradise, there’s nothing to do but rest and take in the palliative breezes, and here you are strapping on your barking irons with a bunch of other pox-ridden, busted up wrecks. It is a puzzlement. What could compel a posse of diseased rejects on death’s front porch to saddle up for one last hard desert ride?

You don’t even know her last name. She was sick, sicker than you all, and she came to Sunny Slope a widow with three kids in tow. She didn’t have anything and you helped her out as best you could. You promised her you’d look after Nelly, Keeton, and Baby Dot. Keep ‘em safe. You all swore to it, in front of the widow, God,

each other. You watched her die at peace. Those kids are orphans, and bad as you are, you are all they got.

And then the Death Brothers rode in to Sunny Slope and took ‘em. One, two, three. You were taking in the palliative breezes at the time.

So go on, then! Rattle your daggs, you swole-hearted sons of bitches. The Death Brothers got a day’s lead, heading for Mexico. You made a promise to a dying woman, and a cowboy keeps his word or goes down trying. You’re going to get those orphans back if it’s the last thing you do. Which it will be.

THE INVALID’S LAMENT

There are three reasons your cowboy might be in Sunny Slope, and all of them involve a heart swollen with disease and ready to quit. He’s either consumptive, rheumatic, or syphilitic. Each player chooses a cowboy and puts that cowboy’s card in front of him. Each has a name, a sickness, and a quote suggesting the sort of cowboy he is.

Choose your cowboys

Make sure that each sickness is represented - if you have three players, you should have a syphilitic cowboy, a rheumatic cowboy, and a consumptive cowboy. The game is more fun this way. If you have four or more players, you’ll double up a bit, and this is fine.

THE ETIOLOGY OF MISERY

Your cowboy’s sickness manifests itself in a pile of inconvenient ways we’ll call complaints. Each cowboy has three. Choose from among the available cards. You can choose the same complaint twice if you want. A wider variety of maladies is more fun.

Choose your complaints

PRECIOUS THINGS

As a self-respecting (if dying) cowboy, your guy has a pair of old boots with soles so thin he can feel a dime through ‘em, some dusty rags you’d hesitate to call proper clothes, a wide-brimmed hat beaten shapeless by wind and rain, and a spavined, evil-minded nag barely worth riding. Beyond these, the one precious thing he’s brought to Sunny Slope says a lot about him and who he was. This keepsake can be used one last time for a substantial advantage - more on that later. Choose a thing you’ll enjoy using in interesting ways.

Choose your keepsake

THE BLACK BAG

There are nine medicines in the pharmacopoeia indicated for heart trouble. Each cure has a name, a description, *indicia* (that’s sawbones talk for “what it’s for”) and *sequelae* (“side effects”). A few that are useful for your cowboy’s particular affliction got thrown by the fistful in his raggedy pockets. Every player should pick three cure cards. Every player must have at least one cure that isn’t daily (that is, at least one urgent distress or occasional use) and preferably two. Put one token of each color on top of each cure card, a total of 9 doses. You’ll be using these throughout the game, and they are a finite resource.

Choose your cures and load up on doses

That’s it, you’re done. Now you have a sick cowboy with a useless heart.

THE CODE OF THE WEST

Courtesy And Kindness: Always help a man in need, even a stranger or enemy. Be there for a friend when he needs you. Remove your guns before sitting at the dining table. Don’t inquire into a man’s past.

Honor and Dignity: Your word is your bond. Don’t complain - quitters complain. Don’t be a coward, either. Give your enemy a fighting chance. Don’t shoot a man unarmed or unwarned, and don’t shoot a woman ever.

Personal Property: Never steal another man’s horse. Never ride another man’s horse without permission. Hell, don’t even look at another man’s horse wrong. Same goes for hats.

Follow this.

A SAMPLE COWBOY

I’m in a three-player game and choose Romeo Swinburne’s cowboy card. He’s a former train robber, and he’s 19. He’s also a rheumatic. For complaints, I choose fever, dyspnea, and chest pains. I put these cards in front of me.

To treat his condition he’s got White Lily *digitalis* (for urgent distress), Kickapoo Blood Renovator, and Beyer’s *Salicin* (for occasional use). I put three doses, one token of each color, on each cure card. For keepsakes, I take the barking irons. He’s a mean little dude and I’m ready to go.

2. A HAND IN THE BAG

Your cowboy is weak as a kitten. Here are the things a person in his delicate condition can do:

- Gentle physical tasks: Walk slowly. Observe quietly. Drive a carriage horse at a trot.
- Simple domestic tasks: Prepare a meal. Bathe and shave. Set a camp and tend a fire.
- Easy social tasks: Speak softly. Play cards or a piano. Write a letter.

At these things, you automatically succeed. Enjoy the moment! Anything else you want him to do - anything that involves the slightest stress, anxiety, or physical exertion - is likely to provoke his complaints and prove impossible without a little help from his medicine stash. When in doubt, ask yourself if a 90-year-old could accomplish the task without incident. The Judge’s word is final if there’s any doubt.

You can probably see that things are going to get bad, and fast, but there will be times when the whole moaning in a stupor thing is not acceptable. Your cowboy wants to be a hero! He wants to shoot his barking irons! He doesn’t want to die like a possum! That’s where the cures come in. They are some of the most dangerous, ill-advised substances on earth, but they are all you’ve got. If your cowboy wants to do something that doesn’t qualify as simple or gentle or easy, things are going to get messy. Follow the steps on the back.

IT’S A CHALLENGE

State your intention. If the Judge says it isn’t a challenge but it is possible, you succeed. If it’s your third try at the same challenge, you also succeed. Bully for you! If the Judge calls your action a challenge, the outcome is uncertain. Damnation!

Decide if you want to use a keepsake or not. If you do, hooray! You succeed! Discard the keepsake. If you aren’t using a keepsake, decide if you want to use medicine or not.

If you choose to use medicine, **take a token from one of your medicines and drop it in the bag.** Either way, fish around and **draw a token** from the bag. **Compare the color to your cowboy’s illness** to determine the outcome.

Disease	Red	White	Blue
Syphilitic	Neutral	Bad	Good
Rheumatic	Good	Neutral	Bad
Consumptive	Bad	Good	Neutral

Medicine	Good	Neutral	Bad
None	Success	Failure	2xFailure
Daily	Success	50-50	Failure
Urgent	Success	Success	2xFailure
Occasional	2xSuccess	50-50	2xFailure

Result	What Happens
2xSuccess	Choose two different options from Success.
Success	Intention happens, Remove a Complaint token, or narrate a fun perk. Return the token to the bag.
50-50	Randomize! Heads/Even=Success, Tails/Odd=Failure
Failure	Add the drawn token to a complaint, and fail at your intention.
2xFailure	As failure, then draw a second token and add it to the Complaint as well.

Roleplay the cure's sequelae.

THE BITTER TANG OF FAILURE

If you fail, you fail. You can't try again with a different medicine - whatever your intention, it is not going to happen right then. Make sure you let everyone at the table know what effect the medicine is having (is his vision blurring? Is he shitting his britches?) then go to town with the complaint in a double whammy of misery. When a complaint kicks in, it is all-consuming. Your cowboy isn't just coughing politely into your sleeve, he is on his hands and knees spitting up chunks of his diseased lungs. He isn't just tired, he's curled up in a corner moaning in a stupor, and God help him.

THIRD TIME IS A CHARM

Failing to pump water out of a well says a lot about you, and is pretty funny to the assembled onlookers, but at a certain point it becomes a little tiresome. If you are that determined to get something done, two failures at a single task is enough. Your cowboy has been ravaged by complaints at that point; the third time will always succeed.

THE TRUTH OF COWBOY GRIT

Once a cowboy has mastered a particular challenge, he need never face it again. Once he's had a challenge to see if he can ride his horse at a gallop, he can race across the desert all he pleases. This doesn't mean that he won't later face the challenge of riding his horse through a forest fire, though. It also doesn't mean another cowboy gets a free pass - although the Judge is welcome to issue free passes when it suits.

THE LAST RESORT

Each of your cowboy's keepsake serves as a memento mori of some other time and place and love and loss. You can use it, once, to do one of two things. A keepsake can be used to straight-up succeed in a challenge before a token is pulled, or to prevent the effects of a failure or double failure after the fact. In the latter case you still fail, but complaints do not increase. When the time is right, make a big show of using the keepsake in some fun way, and end the challenge with it broken, missing, or otherwise a memory of a memory.

HELPING A MAN IN NEED

If players want to help each other, let each of them take a crack at the challenge with the same intention. If any of them succeeds, the challenge is beaten! However, the failures are applied to everyone participating, cumulatively. It is thus possible to simultaneously succeed and be wracked by the stern penalty of failure at the same time. You may need to draw a token (or three!) from the black bag. Helping each other is a so-so idea. Three cowboys working together will almost certainly succeed, but the cost will be high - get enough sick old fools working together and add a run of bad luck, and the angel of death will be beating his leathery wings to get there on time.

SETTLING DUST-UPS

When two players want the same thing, or one opposes the other, their cowboys may fight. Play it as an individual challenge to each. If they both lose, or only one wins, there you go. If both win, the Judge notes which cowboy has the least complaint tokens, and there's your winner. Squabbling amongst yourselves is a terrible idea.

WHEN THE BLACK CAMEL KNEELS AT YOUR DOOR

Death comes quickly when any complaint exceeds two. Your cowboy finishes the action that raised it, says a few words if he's that kind of cowboy, and then dies. Best to make his actions really count, wouldn't you say? Once your cowboy has joined the celestial choir, you

join the Judge in painting scenes, playing characters, calling for challenges, asking questions, and shaping the game toward an exciting and awful conclusion. He'll be glad for the help.

SAMPLE CHALLENGES

Swinburne needs to ride a stolen horse across ten miles of rough country with Apaches in pursuit. That's not gentle, simple, or easy. I have him choke down some Kickapoo Blood Renovator, anticipating a hard ride. I toss a dose token into the bag (leaving me with a single remaining dose), mix 'em up, and draw another - a red one. Red is bad! Since Kickapoo Blood Renovator is a "daily use" medicine, that means a regular failure. I take the die and add it to Swinburne's Dyspnea. He's sucking in the air as he madly gallops across the desert, but he's getting no oxygen! After a moment he stops, falls out of his saddle, and lays on his back, gasping, until the posse catches up.

Romeo Swinburne may be sick, but he's not dead yet! He's going to bust out of jail - bully for Romeo Swinburne! Figuring this calls for something special, he chokes down a mess of Beyer's Salicin - an occasional use medicine. I drop a token from Salicin into the bag and draw another - a white one! White is good for rheumatics, and a good outcome for an occasional use medicine is a double success. Remember that dyspnea fit earlier? I throw that token back in the bag (along with the successful token I drew) and succeed in busting out of jail! Romeo rides off into the Amargosa country night shaking and dizzy and exhausted, but free.

3. JUDGMENT

One person must play the Judge, and, by extension, everyone in the world who is not a sick cowboy, including the Death Brothers. The Judge has a special power - he gets to call for challenge rolls. If he doesn't call for a challenge roll, the cowboy automatically succeeds at whatever he's trying to do. Hopefully anything the players will think up can be handled by a challenge, but don't be afraid of a flat out "no" if they get too ridiculous. The Judge is not really an adversary. His job is to tease the story out of the guys playing cowboys through a combination of colorful play, leading questions, and well-placed challenges. All the while, he should be moving the Death Brothers south, toward Mexico and God knows what.

Be colorful.

The Judge plays the world, from the wind-blown saltbush to the drunk whore to the Death Brothers themselves. As Judge you get to set the tone, play the bit parts, and paint the scene. Lay it on thick and heavy and non-stop. Bring in cool guys like the sometime-Pinkerton and sometime-murderer Tom Horn, or the Apache warrior known variously as Pindah-Lickoyee, White Eye, or Ojo Blanco. They were extending the railroad south from Phoenix about 1900. A Tucson fraud was selling stock to finance his perpetual motion machine as the Tripler Liquid Air Company. Make stuff up, or take stuff you know and add a layer of dust and fear to disguise it.

Ask leading questions.

Rely on your friends, the guys playing cowboys, to drive the narrative. Ask them open-ended questions. Use this to discover who or what the Death Brothers are, why they abducted those particular children and why they are hell-bent for Mexico. Use it to find out why these worn-out cowboys care enough to throw away their lives stopping them. What other promise did you make to the widow in secret? There's a dead woman tied to a dying horse beneath the cottonwood. You know her. Who is she? Everybody in the bar is eying you nervously - why?

Pace challenges thoughtfully.

If you do the math, each cowboy has got maybe a dozen challenges before hitting a wall of illness and failure. Keep an eye on the black bag, and pace the narrative to reach a satisfying climax after most of the cures have been used. They'll be desperate and falling apart by then. If they aren't a little fragile, they aren't ready for the final showdown with the Death Brothers. Don't go easy on them, though - if a few fall by the wayside, so much the better. And if they are smart, they might save their keepsake until the bitter end.

Change it up.

If you are playing with two or three cowboys, consider giving them four complaints and four cures for a longer game. Heck, give everybody two keepsakes to give them more mule-kicking zeal and perspicacity. Let them make up their own cowboys, rather than use the ones provided. Encourage them to make up their own keepsakes. It's your game and tweaking the numbers to suit your group is encouraged. More stuff can be found at www.bullypulpitgames.com, including fun handouts and maps.