



TERRIFIC TRIVIA TIDBITS

Stagecoaches. Cowboys. Boomtowns. Wild animals. Life in the Old West was a time of discovery and adventure. Folks from all over the world flocked to the buttes and plains of the American West in search of a better life, leaving legacies of opportunity, curiosity, and adventure in their wake.

Use these fun facts to start thinking about our fun theme—the Old West. These trivia tidbits can be shared during the week of VBS with the kids. Use them at arrival and dismissal times or during any downtime between rotations.

Part 1: General Information

- The US essentially doubled in size when Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Over time, there were more reasons for people to move away from eastern cities to the wide-open West.
- Talk about an unusual pet! Meriwether Lewis sent President Jefferson a live black-tailed prairie dog as a souvenir of his expedition exploring the West.
- Native hunters could bring down an adult bison with one arrow while riding a horse at full gallop! Wouldn't you like to see that in action?
- Saddle your . . . camels? Camels roamed the Southwest at one time. Originally brought from Asia and Africa in the 1850s, the US Army used them to help settle the West. They were eventually abandoned and left to roam in the deserts for years.
- In 1848, James Marshall found a few gold pebbles in a California stream. When news of his discovery spread, thousands of people who wanted to strike it rich moved to California. They were called 49ers because so many people moved west in 1849 to find gold.
- Trail mix recipe: grind up grasshoppers, mix with water and cornmeal, then pan fry. Ground grasshopper cakes—yum!
- Strange but true: There was rush hour traffic even on the way out West. So many people were traveling westward, everyone wanted to be at the front of the line because those in the back ended up eating dust that the other wagons kicked up.
- What are bison chips? They sure don't taste like potato chips. And they sure don't smell good. That's because they are the droppings from bison. Travelers on the trail used them instead of firewood since they couldn't find wood on the prairies.
- Ooh-la-la! Pioneer boys would rub butter in their hair to prepare for Saturday night dances.
- Because there weren't many trees, pioneers built sod houses—houses made from grass and mud. Sounds cozy, right?
- Who doesn't love a good steak dinner? As eastern city people developed a love for beef, demand for cattle grew. The West was the perfect place to raise cattle since it had millions of wide-open acres.
- One out of every four people in Iceland moved to the Great Plains for virtually free land.
- Ouch! Doctors and dentists were few and far between in the Old West, and many weren't trained, so lots of emergencies were handled the same way—hold 'em down and yank hard.
- The real MVP: Cowboy hats had many uses to the cowboy—protect from the sun, keep the head warm, fan campfire flames, carry water, and even feed a horse.
- Don't try this at home! Cowboys wore wool long johns at almost all times. The long johns kept them warm in winter and helped soak up sweat in the summer. They rarely took them off.
- Hold your nose! Cowboys often just burned their clothes after weeks of working and sleeping in them because of how stinky they were.
- That's a different kind of cookie! Food on the range was made by a cook called "cookie" who used a "chuck wagon" (a wagon which was made to carry water and cooking supplies).
- Talk about eerie! The West's Mojave Desert has such an unusual landscape that it was used to film scenes in *Star Trek* and *Planet of the Apes*.
- Grab your sunscreen! The Mojave Desert's Death Valley is generally thought to be the hottest place on earth, reaching temperatures of up to 134° F in the summer.
- One distinctive tree of the West is known as the Joshua tree. Legend has it that settlers named it after Joshua from the Old Testament. Would you like to have a tree named after you?



- A slow starter: The saguaro cactus generally grows just one inch tall in the first decade of its life. Despite this, it eventually grows to be among the tallest of cacti, with the largest recorded saguaro reaching 78 feet tall!
- Arizona's Monument Valley is home to iconic (easily recognized) rock formations that were popularized by Western movies of the 1930s. The valley boasts buttes that reach up to 1,000 feet above the desert floor. Rock climbing, anyone?
- Ever wanted to time travel? The city of Tombstone, Arizona, is like an Old West town frozen in time, boasting attractions such as stagecoach rides, a gold mine, gunfight reenactments, and plenty of Old West hotels and restaurants to enjoy.
- Heard the phrase "get out of Dodge"? Dodge City, Kansas, was known for being a dangerous place to live in the late 1800s. The phrase "get out of Dodge" was popularized in the Western show *Gunslinger*, in which a lawman told outlaws to move on or "get out of Dodge."
- Giddyup! The pony express began in 1860 and carried mail between Missouri and California—that's about 2,000 miles! Riders worked in a relay and rode over 75 miles each day by changing horses every 15 miles.
- In the short 19 months that the pony express was in business, it carried about 35,000 pieces of mail and only lost one bag of mail. That's a pretty good record!
- Would you apply for the job? Pony express riders had to be really light so that horses could travel faster. Often, young teens (even as young as 11 years old) were hired.
- Why did the pony express end after just 19 months? The transcontinental telegraph line was completed. Now people could send messages that would immediately be received.
- The transcontinental railroad was built by two companies, one working from east to west and the other working from west to east. They met in the middle and completed the rail line by nailing a final golden spike into the railway. Ta-da!
- Building the railroad was dangerous work. Workers had to use dynamite to make tunnels, build high bridges, work in mountains with snow and cold, and bake in the heat of deserts.
- What a relief: the transcontinental railway allowed the journey west, which took six months by wagon, to take only four days!
- Do you like horses, adventure, and sharing the good news of Jesus? You could have been a circuit rider in the Old West, although it wasn't easy. Preachers traveled many miles on horseback from town to town and back (a "circuit"), battling illness, animal attacks, and unfriendly encounters.
- Out with the old and in with the new! There were three main factors that ended the Old West way of life: the telegraph, which made communication easier; the transcontinental railroad, which made traveling easier; and barbed wire, which made less wide-open space to roam and a tamer "Wild West."

Part 2: Animals of the West

- Cougars don't roar but actually scream. Yikes!
- Watch out! A cougar can jump up to 18 feet vertically (up) from a sitting position.
- Wolves have scent glands between their toes that give out a unique smell. If a wolf goes missing from a pack, other wolves can sniff out the missing wolf's unique scent to find it. How . . . sweet?
- Aroooo! A wolf can hear a pack's howl from up to 10 miles away.
- Did you know the American bison is the largest land mammal on the North American continent? A full-grown male can weigh over 2,000 pounds, stand over 6 feet tall at its shoulders, and can be nearly 12 feet long from head to tail.
- Hunting frenzy! Early American settlers nearly drove the bison into extinction, taking its population from over 50 million to about 500. After being put on the endangered species list, the bison population has grown to over 500,000 today.
- How . . . talented? A grizzly bear can smell a dead animal up to 18 miles away.
- Mama grizzlies are extremely protective of their babies. They've been known to attack with unbelievable speed and power when their babies are threatened, even sacrificing their lives to save their cubs.
- If all else fails, run! When threatened, a horse's primary way to protect itself is by running away. Yet a single kick from a horse can kill a cougar. That's why cougars ambush herds of horses.



- Nimble-footed: God gave horses special feet that, despite their size, give horses an extraordinary ability to make their way over steep, rocky ground.
- The Gila monster has one of the most painful bites known to humans. When it bites, the Gila monster tends to latch on and chew as it releases more venom through grooves in its teeth. Ouch!
- Stand guard! Prairie dog burrows are ingeniously built with mounds at each entrance to prevent flooding; listening chambers near each exit so predators can be heard; and many exits for a quick escape in case a rattlesnake enters the burrow. Prairie dogs even station lookouts throughout the day to watch for enemies above ground.
- The largest recorded prairie dog burrow covered 25,000 square miles. That's bigger than the state of West Virginia!
- During the winter months, rattlesnakes group together to keep warm. Dens containing roughly 1,000 rattlesnakes have been discovered. Would you want to be the person to discover that den?
- Beep! Beep! Roadrunners aren't great at flying (they tire easily), but they can run fast—for a bird. They dash up to 20 miles per hour, compared to the average man who can run about 8 miles per hour.
- Watch out! The Texas longhorn, a breed of cattle, has horns that can span more than 10 feet across!
- Smelly business: great horned owls have a terrible sense of smell, which allows them to hunt and eat skunks without a problem.
- Scorpions are venomous and can be dangerous, but they also glow in the dark under ultraviolet light. Now that's a sight to see.